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**WORK-BASED LEARNING IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION: THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE IDENTITIES OF WORK-BASED LEARNERS ON UNIVERSITY BASED PROGRAMMES**

**Author**: Ruth Hamilton (CQSW, BA, MSc, PhD) – Department of Social Work, Education and Community Wellbeing, Northumbria University, England

Email: [ruth.hamilton@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:ruth.hamilton@northumbria.ac.uk)

**WORK-BASED LEARNING IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION: THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE IDENTITIES OF WORK-BASED LEARNERS ON UNIVERSITY BASED PROGRAMMES**

**Abstract**

This article explores the experiences of work-based learners undertaking social work degrees in the UK. The article is based on research of work-based learners on undergraduate social work degrees based in two universities, a local face-to-face university and a national distance learning university. Based on narrative inquiry methods for data collection, the article presents two case studies from the wider study which provide narratives of ‘becoming’ and ‘being’ a student. Drawing on identity theory (Stryker, 2008) the article analyses how identity is an important concept in understanding the challenges and opportunities for this group of students on their journeys into and through higher education. The paper concludes by considering the implications for current provision of social work education.

**Keywords**: ‘work-based learning’; ‘social work education’; ‘student identity’; ‘structural symbolic interactionism’

**Introduction**

Work-based learning in social work education in the UK has a long tradition (Dunworth, 2007; Harris, Manthorpe & Hussein, 2008; Manthorpe, Harris & Hussein, 2011). Recent government initiatives have seen a revitalisation of this approach for qualifying programmes with the graduate schemes of Step Up, Front Line and Think Ahead being rolled out and a graduate social work apprenticeship currently being developed. All of the programmes are based within local authorities initiating a move away from university based provision. The mixed economy of social work qualifying programmes that is emerging offers choices between work-based or campus-based programmes at graduate or undergraduate levels. Recent developments have also signalled the reconfiguration of governance in social work education between local authorities and higher education institutions (HEIs) with regional Teaching Partnerships introduced in some parts of the country giving further prominence to the role of local authorities. As the landscape of social work education is shifting, the student experience of different models of work-based learning requires further scrutiny. This article presents two case studies of individual student journeys. The data is based on research that focused on undergraduate work-based learning provision based within two HEIs delivering qualifying social work education for students within the North East of England and Cumbria. Each social work degree offered a different model of delivery, one face-to-face and one distance learning. These work-based distance learning programmes echo some of the features found in the new raft of qualifying programmes with students undertaking a social work degree whilst still employed by a social work/social care agency. The aim of the research was to gain an understanding of students’ perceptions of the challenges and opportunities that these qualifying programmes presented on their journey of ‘becoming’ and ‘being’ a student whilst simultaneously straddling a variety of domains – occupational, educational and domestic.

This article is underpinned by a theoretical approach based on structural symbolic interactionism, in particular the work of Stryker on identity theory, where the importance attached to identity and role in ‘identity change processes’ (Stryker, 2008, p. 21) is central to understanding the meanings work-based learners attribute to their journeys into and through higher education (HE). Identity has been the focus of a large number of studies from various academic disciplines including philosophy, anthropology, psychology and sociology.  Theories are generally conceptualised on the basis of ‘*biological characteristics, psychological dispositions and socio-cultural positions*’ (Vignoles, Schwartz & Luyckx 2011, p. 2) and are interested in understandings of identity in terms of category or process. Yon (2000) argues that this distinction is significant because ‘category’ implies that identity is fixed and ‘process’ implies it is an emergent construction.

The sociological social psychological theoretical perspective of structural symbolic interactionism and identity theory (Stryker, 2008) draws from both the disciplines of psychology and sociology giving a particular prominence to the way in which social structures shape experience, with structures being ‘*embodied in everyday language and interaction behaviors*’ (Stryker, 1995, p. 327). This perspective highlights how experience is shaped through multiple and shifting identities and ‘identity change processes’ affected by broader social structures within which experience occurs (Stryker, 2008). Structural symbolic interactionism is based on the premise that society is comprised of groups and institutions producing patterned interactions and role relationships that have a capacity to reproduce creating durable social systems and structures. Stryker (2008) conceptualises *roles* as a set of expectations and norms attached to particular positions and performed through interactions with others. Stryker also argues that *identities* tied to these roles are the internalisation of these role expectations and form the basis of how people understand who they are (2008). In a modern society people have multifaceted lives with multiple roles and shifting and complex identities (Simon, 2003; Stryker, 2008). From this theoretical perspective, roles as well as identities were highlighted in all participants’ narratives of experiences of HE and were a key issue in relation to their experiences of ‘becoming’ and ‘being’ a student.

**Work-based Learning in Higher Education and Social Work Education**

In the past four decades the HE policy context in the UK has resulted in the scope and aims of HE changing from an elite and compact system to one that needed to diversify to meet the demands of mass education (Boud & Solomon, 2001; Leitch, 2006; Merrill, 2012). This new landscape, or ‘*repositioning of the academy*’ (Boud and Solomon, 2001, p. 23) meant a refocusing of programme provision with the role of HE moving from ‘*nurturer of knowledge*’ (Daniels & Brooker, 2014, p. 66) to a skills provider, ‘*closing the gap between education, training and employment*’ (Neary, 2002, p. 1). This became a means of growing the economy and making the UK more globally competitive(Thunborg, Bron & Edstrom, 2013). With a focus on the economic market Copnell (2010) suggests that the power to define skills need was then placed in the hands of employers. A focus of government initiatives in the 1990s encouraged the development of strategies between HEIs and employers to cross ‘*the cultural bridge between learning and work*’ (Nixon, Smith, Stafford & Camm, 2006, p. 5), a relationship that continues to evolve.

Social work education itself has been the subject of sustained scrutiny by government and governing bodies following growing concern about the standards and suitability of the recruitment and education of social workers contributing to the publication of a broad range of reports over the last decade (Berry-Lound, Tate & Greatbatch, 2016; Croisdale-Appleby, 2014; GSCC*,* 2009; Harris et al, 2008; ; Maxwell et al, 2016; Narey, 2014; Social Work Reform Board, 2010; Smith, Stepanova, Venn, Carpenter, & Patsios, 2018). Recent changes have included the introduction of fast track graduate schemes located within some local authorities beginning with Step-Up to Social Work in 2010, followed by Frontline in 2014 and finally Think Ahead in 2016 with recruits completing their social work qualification in 14 months as opposed to two years for university based programmes. The emphasis in these graduate schemes is on recruiting academically high performing graduates (with a minimum 2:1 qualification). The new graduate schemes signal a move away from widening participation initiatives in social work education that generally have included more participants with non-traditional qualifications than is usually evident in a HE student population.

Following a government reform of apprenticeships further provision in the form of degree level apprenticeships in social work are also currently being developed (Skills for Care, 2018) which would provide yet another avenue for qualifying as a social worker via a work-based learning route and provide participating local authorities with an opportunity to raise funds through the apprenticeship levy. In addition to the development of new routes, delivery and governance of existing social work programmes is being revisited in the form of Teaching Partnerships following two reports published in 2014 by Narey and Croisdale-Appleby. Teaching Partnerships constitute a radical restructuring of the governance of social work education that positions local authorities as the lead partner in regional collaborative arrangements between local authorities and HEIs. The key drivers are focused on attracting more able students, strengthening the curricula and improving the quality of social work practice. Currently the government measure of ‘more able students’ is linked to academic qualifications whereas universities tend to seek a broader set of skills including both academic and practice skills mapped against the requirements of the Professional Capabilities Framework (British Association of Social Workers, 2017).

Flint and Jones (2011) argue that the new dynamic between HEIs and local authority partners is more likely to engage people in the process of learning rather than alienate them. However, the type of learning engaged in requires further scrutiny to determine whether removing social work education from its position within HEIs means that practitioners become focused more on technocratic learning (Dominelli, 1996) than critical and radical thinking. Preston-Shoot suggested that social work education risks losing its criticality placing it in danger of being reduced to no more than preparation for practice (2000).

Work-based learning however, is not a new development but has a long tradition in social work education. For programmes positioned within universities the time spent in classroom based activities and on placement is carefully balanced creating what Nixon described as a shared domain of learning (2006). Furthermore, there has been a tradition of providing specially designed work-based learning routes for unqualified staff in the social work workforce through ‘Grow Your Own’ schemes (Dunworth, 2007; Harris et al, 2008; Manthorpe et al, 2011). These original work-based learning schemes have been used variably by social work organisations as a mode of developing their social work workforce and have traditionally been sought after due to their ability to meet a range of stakeholder needs. For local employers when employees return to work as qualified social workers they come with previous organisational and situational experience and can ‘hit the ground running’ (Harris et al, 2008). For social work programmes the requirement for placements can be resourced by employers and programmes also benefit from the practice experience which work-based learners ‘bring to the table’ acting as building blocks for their own learning and enhancing the learning of other students. Work-based learning routes can also meet the needs of the students themselves providing security of tenure and maintaining a salary whilst undertaking the degree as well as access to financial support for fees. This enables students to continue to meet other commitments including financial and/or familial commitments. For some participants in this study work-based learning routes were, they stated, their only option of entering HE and/or undertaking a social work degree.

**Method**

***Sample***

This article is based on a small scale study focused on two work-based learning undergraduate social work degrees accessed by students living in the North East of England and Cumbria. Ethical approval was applied for from both universities and granted. Of the 115 students/graduates invited to participate, 20 chose to take part including 12 from the distance learning university and 8 from the face-to-face university. Participants were from the first year of study through to the first year of qualified practice and included 15 women and 5 men with an age range of 31 – 50 years. Over two thirds of the group did not have first degrees.

Both degree programmes offered different student experiences. Participants undertaking the national distance learning programme could complete this on either a full-time or part-time basis. The programme was a combination of distance learning and attendance at occasional workshops with students being based for the majority of the programme in their place of work. The local face-to-face university programme was campus based with year one undertaken on a part-time attendance basis with other work-based learners whilst students remained in their place of work. Entry into year two meant becoming full-time students and merging with a much larger full-time group.

***Data Collection and Analysis***

Data was collected using a narrative inquiry approach (Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2013; Elliott, 2005; Phoenix & Sparkes, 2008) via focus groups (3) and individual interviews (35) with some participants being interviewed on two occasions. The focus groups and interviews provided opportunities for participants to share their lived and told experiences of HE and the challenges and opportunities of both ‘becoming’ and ‘being’ a student. A thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) was conducted of the whole data set resulting in three overarching themes being identified:

* Factors influencing the decision to undertake a social work degree via a work-based learning route
* The challenges and opportunities of the educational journey for work-based learners
* Managing multiple identities whilst being a student

This article is based on some of the data from this study in the form of two case studies (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Gillham, 2010; Mitchell, 1984; Yin, 2014) to illustrate how the themes coalesce in individual narratives of experience. Whilst case studies have traditionally been regarded as weak (Yin, 2014) due to the lack of potential for generalisability, they allow for the integrity of the participant’s narrative to be maintained and the participant’s voice to be heard (Spector-Mersel, 2010). Flyvbjerg argues that case studies offer a closeness ‘*to real-life situations and its multiple wealth of details ... important for the nuanced view of reality*’ (2006, p. 223). The two case studies selected for this article provide particularly compelling narratives of student experience providing ‘telling case(s)’ (Mitchell, 1984) of what ‘becoming’ and ‘being’ a student means.

**Case study 1. Morag’s Story – ‘*To new people I was just a family support worker*’**

Morag was 40 years of age and had 25 years of experience in social care when she was seconded onto the work-based learning route of the social work degree at the local face-to-face university. Her narrative of experience relating to her decision to undertake the degree drew upon familial, educational and occupational factors over a period of three decades prior to starting the programme. When asked what factors influenced her decision to undertake the work-based learning route into social work education Morag provided a family background based upon social class and working class trades ‘*we are a typical working class family … Everybody else seems to be pretty hands on with painters and decorators and things like that*’. Entering HE at the age of 40, and as the ‘first in the family’ to gain a degree, university brought with it an opportunity for Morag to acquire status, ‘*the first person to get a degree in the family is a massive thing*’.

Marriage at the age of 18 had halted Morag’s continuation in education. At times domestic responsibilities had been a barrier to further participation although university had remained an aspiration. When education was perceived by Morag as accessible, defined by her ability to maintain family responsibilities, she engaged with it, ‘*so I literally drop the kids off at school and then run over the road to College*’. When her children were young, participation was unsustainable with her stating that she, ‘*couldn’t afford to continue academically ... because I had the kids and we just bought a house*’. For many years Morag apportioned primacy to her family commitments with familial and financial risks continuing to be barriers to further development, ‘*so for years and years I’ve sort of put it off and put it off*’ although university remained an enduring aspiration.

The financial risks of undertaking the degree led her to adopt a more strategic approach to work in order to maximise the opportunities for a secondment. When she was made redundant from a care role she undertook agency work and eventually found a position in an organisation that seconded permanent staff onto the social work degree, ‘*I hung on and hung on in an agency position until a permanent position came up*’. The multiplicity of roles in occupational, educational and domestic domains created conflict and tension that needed to be managed, ‘*I did keep everything separate. If I was here (university) I was a student if I was at home I wasn’t or I might be for two hours later on in the evening*’. Here Morag describes a process of attempting to keep roles and resulting identities contained within contexts and compartmentalised with salience given to one identity determined by context. By reinforcing the boundaries that separated these Morag hoped to manage the tensions and potential for conflict in order to maintain the status quo at home to ‘*lessen the impact (of being a student) on everybody else*’ but at a personal cost. In an attempt not to appear distracted from domestic and familial roles, Morag insulated them from the demands of her student role and became a ‘hidden learner’ (Lillis, 2001) but this strategy proved stressful, ‘*They’re like, ‘oh well, we knew you’d do it’. I said ‘yeah, because you haven’t seen the stressful bits you haven’t seen any struggle because I’ve done it all on my own*’.

The possession of a formal qualification offered Morag more status within the workforce. Whilst she had already acquired status in her workplace this was bestowed upon her as a result of her extensive experience in her role, ‘*I had status within the office but that was through experience and people knowing me but to new people I was just a family support worker*’. As she approached 40 she was very aware of young newly qualified social workers having a more privileged position within her workplace. Morag portrayed experience and qualification as opposing commodities and believed a ‘qualifications premium’ (Watts and Waraker, 2008, p. 106) dichotomised the workforce, ‘*I’ve always sort of felt it that they’re the ‘qualifieds*’ *and I’m the ‘unqualified’ of the group*’. Status was also relational for Morag and her motivation to undertake the degree was fuelled by her position within the workforce hierarchy, ‘*doing the degree was always about becoming a social worker and getting that status within the office … because I wanted to be like everybody else’*. When walking into her office as a qualified professional her sense of achievement and transformation was keenly felt, ‘*I can remember thinking … ‘I’m actually the same as you now*’’.

This case study illustrates the challenges Morag experienced in undertaking the social work degree and the difficult choices she had to make, a journey that was marked with narratives of discord between aspirations and opportunities. With resilience and perseverance Morag, as a non-traditional student eventually secured a place at university through a work-based learning route giving her the opportunity to challenge existing identities. This identity change process however, was ongoing for Morag.

The second case study explores the overarching theme of the challenges and opportunities of Laura’s educational journey.

**Case study 2. Laura’s Story - *‘It has mammothly changed my self-esteem’***

Laura was 35 years of age with five years of experience in social care when she began the social work programme at the national distance learning university. Her educational journey in HE was initially shaped by her negative experiences of school, ‘*I came out of school with not many qualifications at all and thought academically I am not up to this*’. Consequently, she was cautious and apprehensive about undertaking further education. Whilst she had established a secure professional identity, university was a context that symbolised struggle and posed risks to her self-esteem. The work-based learning route on the degree offered a point of access into HE and the modular structure presented an opportunity to have some control over the journey, ‘*I’ll pay for this, see how I go, if I’m up to it academically then I’ll cross the next bridge. It kind of went from there*’. Meeting the academic requirements was a ‘turning point’ (O’Shea, 2014, p. 140) for Laura, ‘*it has mammothly changed my self-esteem*’.

Laura initially found the return to education challenging identifying a new set of skills that she needed to develop to be able to manage the academic requirements of the programme successfully, ‘*revision was something I just didn’t think I could do, a foreign concept to me*’. Laura overcame these challenges and passed her first exam which contributed to a growing academic confidence, ‘*I never thought I would get through it let alone get marks I am pleased with*’. In turn this impacted on her sense of integration within HE and the legitimacy of her emerging student identity. Whilst on placement Laura recognised the impact of her newly acquired academic skills, ‘*I can now use those skills to produce good reports*’. Placements offered further opportunities for development as a practitioner. Based on her experience as a work-based learner, Laura talked about her deepening understanding of the relevance of theory to practice, ‘*you might not know what the theories are behind it but you’ve got those key skills*’. Developing academic confidence and knowledge of theories as a student signalled a transition in Laura’s professional identity, ‘*I started to feel like a real social worker now ’cos I know stuff*’.

Initially lacking in confidence as a student, Laura found that digital forums on the programme offered opportunities to engage in a learning environment that was less threatening than traditional face-to-face mediums, ‘*I liked the forums because you could sort of hide as well behind the laptop and test the water and nothing was too stupid ... Maybe in a lecture I wouldn’t have put my hand up and said, ‘I don’t understand*’. Digital forums enabled her to develop confidence whilst minimising risks and avoiding feeling exposed and vulnerable. Once she had gained in confidence Laura became a more visible member of peer groups. They proved to be a vital source of support with Laura describing other members as being, ‘*100% in your boat and, you know, when it’s sinking sometimes they paddle*’. Membership of this ‘learning community’ (Lave & Wenger, 1991:29) was in the main conducted via digital forums but also embedded by attendance at occasional face-to-face workshops. The learning community reinforced a social identity for Laura with the educational journey becoming a shared experience which was mutually understood, ‘*the only person who knows what it’s like to be doing the … social work degree is somebody else putting in the same amount of work as you*’.

The educational journey for Laura was a notably significant experience, ‘*It’s just been such a big part of my life*’ presenting a variety of challenges and opportunities. The challenges for Laura were managed by a range of factors including the renegotiation of roles and responsibilities at home and the support of other students when the challenges felt overwhelming. As a period of transition for Laura, university had a profound impact on her personally.

**Discussion**

For both Morag and Laura identity was key to shaping their decision to undertake the degree and then again as learners within higher education. Furthermore, balancing the multiplicity of identities (as a worker, a student, a mother, a wife) also characterised their journey of ‘becoming’ and ‘being’ a student. This was reflected in the wider study where identity was a key factor in all participants’ journeys into and through HE. For these work-based learners the context of HE presented new opportunities and challenges and a process of identity change (Stryker, 2008).

For Laura and Morag undertaking the social work degree meant adapting to a new context and accommodating the new role of student which, as Watts and Waraker argue, requires ‘*some measure of identity change*’ (208, p. 107). The university context was considered remote and alien due to prior educational experiences which for Laura had resulted in a negative learner identity. A return to education meant ‘*returning to a site with past associations of marginalisation and truncated progress*’ (Warmington, 2002, p. 584). These experiences had served to reinforce the concept of university as an elitist educational provision with Laura experiencing ‘imposter phenomenon’ (Chapman, 2012-13; Clance & Imes, 1978) accompanied by a heightened sense of vulnerability and fear of exposure as ‘not being good enough’. Whilst striving to gain credibility as a ‘qualified’ practitioner, these work-based learners risked losing credibility by failure to achieve.

Laura like others in the wider study had undertaken occupational qualifications which were used as a gauge of potential success in HE and used to calculate risks. Acquiring the academic skills required for HE marked a transition with success in academic assessments also signaling a transition or ‘turning point’ (O’Shea, 2014, p. 140). Whilst HE was also perceived by both Morag and Laura as an opportunity for personal development, a significant factor in undertaking the social work degree, for Laura like other students in the wider study, the opportunity to go to university also meant a re-evaluation of her capabilities and identity as a ‘learner’. In this way university was portrayed as a transformative experience with it acting as a context for identity construction.

Entering HE required a repositioning of identities in a number of ways as straddling a number of domains added to the complexity of the student experience. For Morag, like other participants in the study, the conflict between identities of a ‘student’ and a ‘worker’ was evident within her work place in her substantive posts and also when on placements within her organisation. Interactions with colleagues foregrounded her identity as a ‘worker’ with the marginalisation of her student status meaning that she was often expected to return to her ‘worker’ role whilst on placement. For Morag, like others, this sometimes involved the prioritisation of workload over student requirements resulting in what she perceived as unreasonable expectations in terms of workload and leading to resentment. When interactions with colleagues meant that her ‘student’ and/or ‘learner’ identities were recognised, this was highly valued. This was particularly so when recognition of her ‘student’ identity was accompanied by the resourcing of it such as a reduced ‘student caseload’, opportunities for reflection and study time which all reinforced a student identity and transition from ‘a worker’ to ‘a student’ in university. Identity theory proposes that identities are formed when people are assigned positions as social objects by others and then internalise that designation (Stryker, 2008). When others such as colleagues failed to assign a new position of ‘student’ this impeded the development of a student identity despite efforts to renegotiate these positions with managers and colleagues.

The significance of assigned positions was also evident in Morag’s description of the dichotomy in her work place featuring ‘the qualifieds’ and ‘the unqualifieds’, also identified by other participants in the wider study, highlighting the relational and interactional features of identity that are key to identity theory (Stryker, 2008; Stryker & Burke, 2000). Perceptions of her own identity in relation to others created both formal and informal divides in the workforce. Being positioned in the group of ‘unqualifieds’ was found by Morag to be uncomfortable and undermining. Morag believed that her work was at least equal to the standards demonstrated by her qualified colleagues, reinforcing the concept of a false dichotomy between the two groups of staff. This emphasised the aspirational quality of the social work degree with the qualification offering people like Morag the opportunity to change their ‘unqualified’ identity and create parity with their colleagues thereby attracting the more privileged status.

When straddling domestic and educational domains, time poverty was considered a particular risk and was a more consistent feature in the wider study of women’s rather than men’s experiences. All of the women in the study who had children foregrounded the needs of their children (both dependent and living independently) and like Morag signalled tensions in their attempts to maintain a status quo at home. This supports the argument put forward by Watts & Waraker (2008) who suggested that students did not want to disrupt other roles. Beck states that women students lead a double life where ‘*the family rhythm’* (1992, p. 132)continues alongside other conflicting domains with at times incompatible commitments. Morag managed this conflict by separating her role as a student from her family life and concealing her studies from her children and husband. For fear of appearing distracted from domestic and familial roles and relationships Morag became a ‘*hidden learner*’, echoing the findings of Lillis (2001) that women conceal their studies to avoid household tensions. This strategy resulted in feelings of isolation and compounded the feelings of guilt at becoming a student.

The data highlights the complexity of identity with work-based learners straddling occupational, educational and domestic domains resulting in identity being fluid and complex rather than fixed and stable. Structural symbolic interactionism and identity theory provides a framework within which this complexity can be understood. Work-based learners in the study like Laura and Morag regularly experienced ‘*identity change processes*’ (Stryker, 2008, p. 21) to facilitate movement across educational, occupational and domestic domains. Salience, central to identity theory, is a key notion here. Stryker suggests that role choice is ‘*a consequence of identity salience*’ (2008, p. 20). Commitment to identities, mediated through affective and interactional factors such as those identified by Morag at home and at work, both facilitates and impedes the movement between roles with the salience of a particular identity at a given time being affected by contextual and relational factors.

Echoing structural symbolic interactionism, the data underlines the significance of context to identity, with identity being embedded in varying social contexts and shaped by structural influences and patterns of social construction. The data shows how traces of these ‘patterns of large social structures’, relating in particular to Laura and Morag’s social backgrounds are lived out. The data also reveals how social structures impact on opportunities and constraints in relation to participation in HE.

**Conclusion**

The revival of work-based learning routes in social work education requires a review of the delivery of social work education and the role of various stakeholders. At the same time it is important to understand how students experience the educational journey into and through HE in order that education providers can broaden participation in social work education to reflect local populations (Langlands, 2005; Smith et al, 2013). This involves developing understanding of the structural factors that impede and facilitate this journey, including the impact on individual identities, not just at the point of access but throughout students’ participation in social work education.

Social work is based upon values of social justice, equality and empowerment, values that are also fundamental to widening participation in HE (Jones, 2006). Work-based learning routes have traditionally provided an example of how widening participation can be achieved offering unqualified practitioners an opportunity for both qualified status and access to HE. However, work-based learning programmes in social work are increasingly focused on graduate entrants which Smith et al (2018) argue risks exclusivity and “has implications both in terms of limiting the potential pool from which proficient social workers can be recruited; and for building in unintended forms of institutional discrimination” (2018, p. 66). This study showed that work-based learning programmes can offer a unique opportunity for more diverse groups of potential students who have already experienced barriers to HE. Social work education provision should be vigorously promoting the core values of social justice, equality and empowerment and have programmes that enable people with diverse subjectivities and backgrounds to participate thereby recruiting from a broader pool of people to the profession (Smith et al, 2018). It therefore remains vital that we continue to develop our understandings of ‘non-traditional students’ including those who are work-based learners and learn from their experiences of social work education.

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