

RAE2001: OVERVIEW REPORT ON UOA41 SOCIAL WORK

Assessment Process

In the 2001 RAE, the Social Work UoA received a total of 30 submissions compared with 32 in 1996. The total number of staff submitted to the UoA for assessment in 2001 was 413, compared with 423 in 1996.

The submissions were assessed by a joint Panel, which covered both Social Work (UoA 41) and Social Policy and Administration (UoA 40). As indicated in its published statement of assessment criteria, the Panel assessed the quality of research presented in the round, but attached the greatest importance to the quality of cited research output.

All submissions were read by all members of the Panel, who provided independent preliminary ratings in every case. For each submission, two members of the Panel were designated as 'lead members' on the basis of their expertise in the principal research areas covered by the submission, and were responsible for leading the Panel's discussion at the main assessment meeting. In all cases, the Panel member not based in a higher education institution commented, in particular, on evidence of engagement with research users.

The Panel was broadly constituted in recognition of the multidisciplinary nature of the subjects, but it also appointed a number of special advisors to assist it in its work. Social Work submissions were referred, where appropriate, to the Panel's advisors for Criminology, Disability, Gerontology and Health.

All of the submissions provisionally rated 5 and 5*, together with a sample of those rated 4, were submitted to the Panel's non-UK advisors. The Panel found their responses helpful in confirming its own assessment of international excellence.

Overall, the 2001 RAE revealed a significant improvement in the quality of Social Work research. A total of 27% of submissions were rated 5 or 5*, compared with 16% in 1996. At the other end of the rating scale, just 3% of submissions were assessed as being in the two lowest rating categories in 2001 (1 and 2) compared with 22% in 1996.

A profile of research

There is evidence of investment in Social Work research, which seems to have borne fruit. There is evidence of increased activity, good attempts to work with a range of interest groups locally and nationally as well as some real areas of strength. The context of Social Work research has also changed, especially with a growing emphasis on evidence-based policy and practice. These trends have influenced the shape and direction of research in the subject.

Over time, there have been some changes in the form and content of the Social Work subject area. There have been changes in its boundaries (in relation to Social Policy and to cognate subjects) and there have been changes in the methodological approaches commonly adopted. Publications have been targeted at both prestigious academic

audiences and service user groups as well. Researchers have produced findings which have been used by government and community bodies. They have shown a capacity to work in partnership with relevant bodies outside the university environment. There is evidence of international involvement and recognition and of collaborative research projects with colleagues and programmes in other countries.

While there appears to have been some coming together of Social Policy and Administration and Social Work, observable differences remain. While some panel members could see little difference between the work submitted to the two separate units of assessment overall, a significant number of other panel members disagreed and felt strongly that different criteria for each subject area would be appropriate in future. The non-UK based advisors commented that there were real differences between Social Policy and Social Work research traditions in the UK.

The focus of current research

In Social Work, themes fell into the following eight broad categories, arranged in rough order of prominence:-

1 Children, youth and families

2 Social work practice

3 Health and social care

4 Theory and methodology

5 Race and diversity in social work

6 Criminal justice

7 Social justice

8 Organisation studies

A continuing key strength of UK Social Work research has been the focus on children and families. There has been a significant growth in attention to questions of theory and methodology.

It is evident that key themes are shared between Social Policy and Social Work but there are differences in focus as well as methodologies. Research in Social Policy appears to look more to broader institutional arrangements, to theoretical work and to cross-national, comparative approaches while research in Social Work appears to focus more on social processes and groups.

Some key specialisms located in Social Work, such as Gerontology or Studies in Addiction, may link closely to subject areas outside social science.

Key trends

Social Work submissions now cover a wider field than heretofore. Some changes are observable, for example borrowing from or linking with other subjects like Psychology. The result is that research is changing its shape and looking less like traditional social work. There appears to be less research being carried out on what used to be seen as core topics.

Strengths

Research in Social Work has matured intellectually and includes both theoretical and empirical work. More attention is being paid to user involvement. Qualitative research is a growing strength and includes, for example, use of case studies, ethnological work, document analysis and participant observation as well as thematic analysis of free flowing interviews. These methods are used in a number of new and emerging bodies of work - especially with regard to issues of sexuality, abuse, and violence.

Commendable examples of work

Examples of commendable work include:-

- ? Work on new areas, some not necessarily popular with funders, for example work on sexuality.
- ? Work on locating social work and the delivery of social services within a broader social policy context.
- ? Methodological work on the problems of involving service users who are 'hard to reach' or have difficulty in taking part in a traditional interview.
- ? Evaluations which make use of qualitative approaches and sophisticated statistical techniques.
- ? Increasing attention to the potential of systematic reviews.
- ? Creative approaches to ensuring that work is used in legislation, in the guidance issued by government bodies, by social services departments, by the profession, in teaching material and by the independent sector.

Some institutions, although not as many as might be desirable, showed evidence of investing in the future through support for contract research staff and support for newer entrants to the profession. There was, for example, evidence of support in the form of mentoring and reduced teaching loads.

Weaknesses

There was less attention to social work in the field of mental health than might have been expected. There was a paucity of quantitative analysis, particularly that combined with qualitative approaches. Quantitative work, while sometimes of very high quality, is rare and not always good when found. Exciting practice developments are not always well described and are often written up with too little regard to method.

Research environments

The way research has developed has been influenced by its setting. Good Social Work research is carried out in diverse institutional environments - traditional university departments, research centres and inter-disciplinary schools, in old and new universities. There is a notably diverse range of institutional arrangements within which research is being carried out. There appears also to be a general trend to organise work in named research centres but also to organise in smaller, more flexible clusters within these. There is evidence of extensive networking between Social Work departments and between specific departments and wider groupings of practitioners, government agencies and other relevant bodies. This complex pattern of linkages is a distinctive feature of Social Work research, which connects it directly to training and practice.

Funding for research is drawn from a wide range of sources including, as well as research councils, government departments, charities and international bodies. There is a notable and valuable link between Social Work departments and their local social work and social care agencies, service users and research users.

There appear to be several different ways in which the research endeavour is managed. For example:- whether departments have central government core funding for research centres or not; whether research staff are involved in teaching or not; the extent of involvement in undergraduate and post-graduate teaching; work loads; and the presence or not of sabbatical entitlements. All these influence the quantity and quality of research activity in a department.

Conclusions

Social Work research is carried out in a challenging context which also offers opportunities. It has built successfully on the platform of the 1996 RAE and considerably expanded its focus. While there has been improvement overall, there is some evidence of strength in those institutions which have specialised and have grown over time. Particularly marked improvements have taken place in some institutions which have specialised in sub-areas of the discipline or particular methodological approaches. These developments have led to real achievements: the development of new areas of study; new methods of research; and new theoretical understanding.