Retention and Success in Social Work Education

Joyce Lishman
## Contents

Introduction ................................................................................................................. 3

General issues affecting retention and success in higher education .............................. 3

Context ........................................................................................................................... 4

Requirements for success ............................................................................................. 4

Reasons for failing students in social work education .................................................. 5

Strategies for improving retention and success in social work education ...................... 5

Conclusion and a brief example of remedial action ....................................................... 6

References ...................................................................................................................... 6
Introduction

I shall first consider the general issues in Higher Education: what helps retention and success? Here I will draw heavily on experience from Wales (Thomas and Jamieson Ball, 2011).

I shall then explore retention and success in social work education, using it as an exemplar for the social care and health professions. I draw on my experience as a Head of a large and diverse Social Work School in the North of Scotland, providing full time undergraduate and post graduate courses and distance learning courses in generic social work and residential child care. I note an irony. In a previous request from the Higher Education Academy I spoke at a conference entitled Failing to Fail. The irony reflects a tension in social work education between requirements for ensuring and improving retention and success and ensuring we fail students who are professionally incompetent or dangerous. This is a more general issue for professional education.

General issues affecting retention and success in higher education

The Welsh report (Thomas and Jamieson-Ball, 2011) identifies a number of complications in reporting retention and success, for example:

- United Kingdom non continuation performance indicators apply only to full time individuals
- completion of year programme data do not address progression to the following year.

These issues of measurement are highly relevant to social work education where real success is completing an honours degree which is the professional qualification and where it may be achieved by full time, undergraduate, post graduate, and distance learning and employment routes. The welcome diversity does lead to problems in measuring retention.

In general why do students leave Higher Education? Reasons include financial issues, personal circumstances, and poor preparation for a course in Higher Education. What factors help a student to progress? Thomas and Jamieson Ball (2011) identify the following:

- pre entry engagement and information
- induction
- social engagement
- social and financial support.

Yorke and Longden (2008) also stress the importance of institutional commitment. If the institution as a whole does not provide committed student support in the form, for example, of financial and housing advice and disability services, this can adversely affect student experience even if teaching and learning is viewed very positively. Car parking and catering can also affect student experience! A further major critical factor (Jones and Thomas, 2005) is about enhancing student engagement and belonging. This involves both institutional management and all staff having a commitment to the students’ experience of learning, development and general welfare.

In social work education, as in all health and social care courses, the professional context is an essential part of higher education. Social work departments in higher education need to be outward-facing in relation to agency partners and their professional qualifying body and also inward-facing in relation to their individual institution and Higher Education agendas as a whole.
Context

So what is the context for social work education? It involves adherence to professional codes of conduct and ethics for staff and students (for example by the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC)). It involves meeting professional outcome requirements (in Scotland, Standards in Social Work Education) which incorporate the Benchmark statement for social work and the National Occupational Standards. It requires the involvement of service users in social work education in selection, teaching and assessment. It involves working closely in partnership with employers to provide education which meets their requirements for the workforce. It involves the recognition in decisions affecting retention and success about the potential vulnerability of service users with whom students will work on qualification. It also involves detailed assessment of skills in work-based placements as well as assessment in the University.

This context requires social work education to address retention and success but also to fail some students for professional reasons. I start with requirements for success and then identify reasons for failing students.

Requirements for success

Retention and success in social work education begins with careful selection. Some qualities and potential skills required for entry to social work need to be:

- appropriate values and ethics
- empathy and potential capacity to develop mutual understanding with service users
- emotional resilience (and how do we assess that?)
- oral communication
- written English
- a broad understanding of the context of social work
- an understanding of why an applicant is choosing social work as a career.

So, students entering a social work course have been selected on the basis that they have demonstrated these qualities. Service users will have been involved in this selection process. Students then need to develop these initial qualities to demonstrate a complex mix of values, knowledge, critical thinking and skills.

What are the criteria for successful completion of a social work degree? In Scotland, meeting the Standards in Social Work Education is what is required. A summary is necessary because the requirements are many! My précis is:

- continuing ability to demonstrate the requirements for selection including enhanced values and ethics, empathy and emotional resilience and a capacity for building relationships
- awareness of use of self
- critical thinking and analysis
- reflection on practice
- application of theory to practice and evidence based practice
- sophisticated use of a repertoire of skills set out in the requirements for social work in all the countries of the U.K.
- a balanced approach to risk
- an ability to use authority appropriately
- an understanding of the organisational and social policy environment and its application to practice
- a knowledge of the law and its legal context
- a wish to continue professional development with a commitment to intellectual curiosity.
Reasons for failing students in social work education

Why might we need to fail students? Reasons include:
- a lack of ability to form relationships
- a lack of ability to show empathy.

These are clear reasons and we could say they should have been picked up in selection or preparation for practice. Further reasons include:
- a lack of ability to use authority appropriately with relevance to their practice, policy and legal setting
- an inability to maintain clear professional boundaries in their relationships with service users (for the SSSC in Scotland this is a relatively common reason for considering complaints).

Strategies for improving retention and success in social work education

How can we match these to the more general issues identified by Thomas and Jamieson Ball (2011)?

I shall start with the importance of institutional support. Is the institution committed to student access and retention including wider access, support for disabled students, support for students with financial problems and support for academic staff and resource allocation since time spent by academic staff in supporting and enabling students is expensive?

I have outlined criteria for selection for social work students. If we start with their entry to university they need to have a clear and shared understanding of the professional codes of conduct they must adhere to and the university and professional requirements and outcomes they must meet. They also need to be familiar with the support services that are available to them, for example learning support for dyslexia, financial information and counselling. In particular direct entry and many wider access students need to be very clear about potential available support.

A major component of helping the retention and success of students is institutional but it is also helped by academic and administrative staff in academic departments and by fellow students. How in social work do we achieve this? Social work education has a tradition of personal tutoring. A tutor is allocated to a student from Day 1 to be their mentor and to ensure that they understand the need to meet professional standards: the professional tutor’s role involves support, inducting students into the profession and its code of conduct and helping them integrate learning from a variety of modules in social science and social work and apply that knowledge to social work practice, for example by practice-based learning tuition online as well as in group tutorials. The professional tutor also helps with preparation for practice and entry into assessed work placements, setting up learning agreements about professional outcomes to be achieved. If a practice assessment is of a failing student, the personal tutor is not there as student advocate but has to ensure professional standards are met, due process is followed and the assessment is fair.

In relation to the wider social engagement retention agenda, social work students are provided with considerable opportunities in their learning experience. Normal learning opportunities in social sciences include online applied interacting, seminars, group work with shared presentations and student led debates. In social work students are also provided with considerable opportunities for social engagement. Indeed this is a major part of their professional education. Normal learning activities in social work education include seminars and active participation in knowledge-based teaching in social sciences, social policy and law as well as very intensive skills and application of knowledge (for example in relation to human growth and development). E-learning and problem-based learning are also crucial, as are individual tutorials where individual professional development can be supported and monitored.
Skills training and the involvement of service users further engage students in learning and the purpose of social work education, as do practice placements with their rigorous assessment (these are up to 100 days of a student’s degree). Here the student has to apply skills and knowledge drawn from higher education to working effectively directly with service users, as well as being required to meet the professional competence requirements.

Conclusion and a brief example of remedial action

I hope I have conveyed that retention and success is not simple. If a student does not meet professional requirements and is potentially risky or dangerous to service users he or she must fail. What about an equivalent student in engineering where there might be anxieties about future safety? Engineering departments must have similar tensions in meeting requirements in relation to retention and success?

How do we help students to succeed? I have talked about institutional support including disability support, and social work support including group work and personal tutorials. All of these types of support are expensive for universities.

So I give a brief example from a School which normally had high retention and success rates. One year a fifth of our social work intake disappeared or did not complete Year 1! What did we do? We worried! It was extremely unusual in a School which normally had a high retention and satisfaction rates. Our University expected 90-95% retention per year. We also investigated! Each student who left had individual reasons for doing so: health, finance and personal and not dissatisfaction with the course.

We also reflected carefully on what might have happened, even if unwittingly, in the School to reduce dramatically our normal retention and success rate. The School had just moved to open plan accommodation. Rather than knock on a door a student had to ring a member of staff in open plan accommodation to come out and meet up. Unfortunately the telephone system to do this was not installed at the beginning of term or until two months later. Staff found open plan accommodation problematic and the staff student engagement on which we had prided ourselves failed.

How did we learn and improve? We asked all the students who had left why and they gave individual reasons. The telephone access was installed. Most importantly we instituted School changes with improved induction, better earlier contact with personal tutors and better induction support for direct entry students. It seems simple remedial action but it appeared to work.

References

