



ISSUES FOR MEN'S PROGRESSION ON ENGLISH SOCIAL WORK HONOURS AND POSTGRADUATE DEGREE COURSES

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**Title: ISSUES FOR MEN’S PROGRESSION ON ENGLISH SOCIAL WORK
HONOURS AND POSTGRADUATE DEGREE COURSES**

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Abstract:

This paper outlines the current knowledge base for men's experiences of **studying social work in the UK**. Given the relatively limited knowledge of these experiences, this paper also examines the findings from other literatures in order to inform this study, including nursing and primary school teaching educational literature. Men progress more poorly than women in social work, nursing and primary school teaching courses, and in other national contexts. This paper also explores the educational experience of men in education and higher education more generally. The findings of a regression analysis are presented here. This analysis was conducted with secondary data from the GSCC of student progression on **under- and postgraduate** social work courses in England between 2006 – 2011. Some potential reasons for these progression issues are identified from the related literatures and from the wider educational literature. Also indicated are some areas for further study to support a more diverse, representational profession and workforce.

Keywords: social work education, gender, men, progression, regression analysis

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Introduction

Men's Progression in Social Work Education

Research into the progression rates of social work students in the UK has shown consistently that men have poorer progression rates than women, even when managing the data for other variable effects such as ethnicity, disability and prior educational attainment (Hussein, Moriarty, & Manthorpe, 2005, 2009; 2006, 2008; Moriarty et al., 2009). These progression problems are usually compiled into several broad categories: deferral, referral, withdrawal and failure. This paper defines these terms as: deferral is a student suspension of studies for a period of time, with an expectation to return; referral is when a student has not passed a particular element, or portion of a course (usually offered a further opportunity to complete and pass this element); withdrawal is a full withdrawal from a course; and failure is being removed from a course because of poor academic performance. **Men have also been seen** to fail their placements more frequently than their women student colleagues (Furness, 2012).

Whilst the studies above have shown progression issues for men than women in social work education, the *experience* of these men is less well explored. Lloyd & Degenhardt (1996) and Cree (2001) have written about student men's experiences, and there are more recent small-scale qualitative studies by Furness (2012) and Parker and Crabtree (2014). These studies have all been local, single-university studies, with very small samples. Whilst they are informative, their findings would benefit from a wider, national sample. They do describe concern for male students, with calls for closer examination of the progression and experiential issues. Other groups have students have been examined with more depth. Social work students with disabilities and **lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students** have been examined (C. Bernard, Fairtlough, Fletche, & Ahmet, 2011), and other writers have explored the progression of ethnic minority students (Claudia Bernard, Fairtlough, Fletcher, & Ahmet, 2013; Hussein et al., 2005, 2006).

These issues are not only a British problem. There are concerns noted by the US Center for Workforce Studies (2006), a research arm of the National Association of Social

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3 Workers. The Australian Association of Social Work and Welfare Educators
4 (AASWWE) developed a mentoring programme to improve men's retention, noting the
5 progression problems (Gibbons et al., 2007). Other scholars have noted that men are in a
6 significant minority in Australian social work during their training and when employed
7 (Noble & Pease, 2011).
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14 There have been recent requests for more men in social work in the UK, which require an
15 increase in men **students studying social work** (Ashcroft, 2014). There has been a recent
16 call (Matthews, 2014) by the head of Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
17 (UCAS)ⁱ to increase the number of men in social work as well as related, women-
18 majorityⁱⁱ, occupations such as nursing and primary school education. **These suggest a**
19 **heightened awareness of the gendered social work workforce, and desire to address the**
20 **difference to a more representative workforce.**
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28 *Learning from Primary Teaching and Nursing Education*

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30 Because there is not much known about the experience of social work student men, it
31 seems helpful (though less preferred) to seek corroboratory information from other,
32 related, fields. **Previous studies exploring the experience of men on social work courses**
33 **have not used this literature with depth, resulting in a restricted view of possible reasons**
34 **for the consistent disparity in progression.** Professions that have a numerical majority of
35 women (*i.e.* social work, nursing, primary school teaching) are often grouped together to
36 ascertain **similarities across the professions of men** who undertake 'women's work'
37 (Williams, 1991; Simpson, 2009).
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44 The social work profession has specific characteristics that create an identity different to
45 both nursing and teaching. Central to this identity is a commitment to social justice
46 (BASW, 2012). Social work also has a commitment to equality in general (IFSW, 2000;
47 TCSW, 2012), and gender equality particularly (IFSW, 2004; United Nations, 1994).
48 These commitments **suggest that the gender** disparity in progression for social work
49 **encourages an interest** in the causes. With these caveats in mind, there is still knowledge
50 to be inferred from these fields.
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3 These related fields have a more developed understanding of the experience of qualified
4 men, and of men students. Social work could draw from these more developed fields
5 some possible reasons for the poorer progression rates for men on social work courses.
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7 Because the field of study within social work is less developed, there may be benefits in
8 drawing upon these fields to make inferences about the experience of social work
9 students. There is a wider literature in both nursing and teacher training exploring the
10 experience of men studying to join the profession.
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17 This wider literature suggests similar progression issues for men studying to become
18 nurses and primary school teachers. British research into nursing student retention finds
19 progression problems for men students (Muldoon & Reilly 2003; Anionwu et al. 2005;
20 Mulholland et al. 2008; Pryjmachuk et al. 2008) with similar findings in other Western
21 countries (Robertson, Canary, Orr, Herberg, & Rutledge, 2010; Stott, 2004, 2007).
22 Similar issues have been found for men undertaking initial teacher training to become
23 primary school teachers (Cunningham & Watson, 2002; Drudy, Martin, Woods, &
24 O'Flynn, 2005; Mills, Martino, & Lingard, 2004; Szwed, 2010), with concerns also noted
25 in other Western contexts (Cunningham & Watson, 2002; Drudy et al., 2005; Mills et al.,
26 2004). These professions show a richer tradition of both identifying progression issues
27 for men and also investigating the qualitative experience of men studying to join the
28 profession. These qualitative studies suggest a number of issues for men studying to
29 become a nurse or a primary school teacher that are not experienced by women. They
30 show that these men experience questions about the reason a man would choose this
31 profession because of its relatively lower status, as well as concerns of homosexuality or
32 sexual predation (Dyck, Oliffe, Phinney, & Garrett, 2009; Weaver-Hightower, 2011).
33 Research has found experiences of 'knock-backs' and 'identity bruises' (Foster &
34 Newman, 2005) on the way to becoming a teacher, these are suggested as issues with
35 identity feeling under pressure from friends and family. These men also experience
36 scathing commentary by friends, family and the wider public (Weaver-Hightower, 2011).
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Men and Boys in Education

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3 A further explanation for these progression problems may be men's educational
4 performance prior to university, with Machin and McNally (2005) suggesting that boys
5 have done progressively worse than girls in GCSEs since 1969. These findings are
6 corroborated elsewhere (Burgess et al. 2004; Younger et al 2005b; Connolly 2006), with
7 Burgess et al (2004) suggesting that the gender gap in performance is consistent even
8 when analysed in a number of various ways. In essence, in the UK, boys do not progress
9 as well as girls in primary and secondary school, regardless of their class or ethnic
10 background. Because previous educational experience is a strong indicator of
11 performance in university, these experiences could be impacting upon men's progression
12 when they study university (including social work).
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23 In addition to the childhood educational experience, men may also have poorer study
24 patterns than women when they are in university. This may appear unsurprising as
25 women often enter higher education with better study skills than men. Men spend less
26 time on average than women studying (Saunders & Woodfield 1999; McGivney 2003),
27 which likely has an impact upon their progression rates. Of particular interest for men
28 studying social work is that men are significantly *more* likely to leave when on courses
29 with high proportions of women (*i.e. social work*), and to leave for different reasons
30 (such as needing to combine work and education, or concerns that there wouldn't be a
31 'good-enough' job after graduating). One study found that 'the percentage of male
32 leavers was highest in programs where women made up more than 75% of the students'
33 (Severiens and ten Dam, 2012, p. 461). Interestingly, women on courses with a high
34 percentage of men are actually *less* likely to drop out than women on courses where they
35 are in the minority (Johnes and McNabb, 2004). Men have been found to progress better
36 on courses that are traditionally the arena for men (Leman and Mann, 1999; McGivney,
37 2003).
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53 *Potential Reasons for Poorer Progression of Men in Social Work*

54 Specific to social work, nursing and primary school teaching, *these courses* may have
55 gendered pedagogic environments that are not gender-neutral or -inclusive. Some writers
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3 have suggested that the courses have a **feminised** climate making it more problematic for
4 men to engage with the content or its presentation (Williams, 1992, 1995; Stott, 2004;
5 Dyck, et al., 2009; Bell-Scriber, 2008; Weaver-Hightower, 2011). **The gendered nature of**
6 **this environment may require students to engage in ways linked with femininity; for**
7 **example, Weaver-Hightower (2011, pp. 105–106) found that men student teachers**
8 **struggled with some tasks that required ‘artistic’ and ‘teacherly flair’, which they found**
9 **incompatible with being a man.** We know that the teaching styles used by educators on
10 social work programmes have been found to be profoundly gendered (Bailey & Cox,
11 1993; Lloyd & Degenhardt, 1996; see also Crawley, 1983).
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21 In addition to a gendered environment, students of women-majority occupations (WMO)
22 often report feelings of isolation. These men state that they feel as if they are alone, even
23 though they are surrounded by other students that are women (Weaver-Hightower, 2011).
24 This feeling of isolation may prevent them from feeling able to engage in the course
25 fully. Men students may be isolated by the educators on their course (Stott, 2004, p. 91),
26 or feel that they need to engage with other men to feel able to engage (Smedley &
27 Pepperell, 2000; Williams, 1995). This sense of isolation, and seeking to gain the support
28 from other men, might create difficulties in engaging in the academic environment.
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37 A **more pressing** concern for men studying to join a WMO is the subject of caring and
38 touching, **which is often conflated by the students into the same issue** (Foster & Newman,
39 2005; Hansen & Mulholland, 2005; Harding *et al.*, 2008; Weaver-Hightower, 2011).
40 Students have reported being concerned about the caring aspects of the profession,
41 suggesting that **expressing affection for or touching a service user** raises concerns about
42 sexual predation. These concerns for sexual predation may be felt most strongly for men
43 when touching a **patient, student or service user** or showing affection. Some people in the
44 students’ life (friends, family or acquaintances) **may be** concerned with a man’s desire to
45 work with children or vulnerable people. These concerns **suggest concerns** that men
46 studying these occupations are either gay (Evans, 2002; Hicks, 2001; Perry & Cree,
47 2003) or paedophiles (Harding *et al.*, 2008; Sikes, Sikes, & Piper, 2010), both of which
48 bring significant social repercussions. There are less vituperative beliefs held by many
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3 students that women have a greater aptitude for WMO than men (Cree, 2001; Okraimec,
4 1994). These concerns about sexual predation or homosexuality can seem all pervasive to
5 the student when studying a WMO course (Foster & Newman, 2005), and are not well
6 explored in the current social work literature.
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10 11 12 13 14 **The Study**

15 *Data*

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17 Using a FOI request to the GSCC (the former regulating body for social workⁱⁱⁱ),
18 quantitative progression data was obtained for 38 038 students from academic years
19 2006/7 – 2010/11, with men comprising only 15.3% of the total population. This data
20 includes full time, part time, and distance learning (as identified by the programme),
21 undergraduate and postgraduate social work courses in England. It contains the
22 progression information for all students on these social work courses in England. Each
23 student had a reference point for each year attending university, and had a single outcome
24 that was passed, deferred, failed, referred or withdrawn.
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32 33 *Methods*

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35 Multinomial logistic regression was used to investigate the association between gender,
36 progression outcomes, and to determine the impact of the other variables. These other
37 demographic variables included: age; year of attendance; ethnicity; disability; previous
38 educational qualification; course type (undergraduate or postgraduate); and attendance
39 route (full-time, part-time, distance learning). A student receiving 'Passed' was
40 considered as the 'reference' category, and the association between gender and the other
41 outcomes (deferral, failure, referral, withdrawal) were also examined.
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48 The analysis was performed in two stages. Firstly, the separate association between
49 demographic and the progression outcome was examined (using univariable analysis).
50 Secondly, the inter-related impacts of the different variables upon progression were
51 assessed using multivariable analysis. This method has the advantage that the effect of
52 each demographic upon the outcome is adjusted for the effects of each of the other
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3 demographics. This enables us to determine how much ethnicity, gender or disability are
4 related to progression. For this study, the results for gender have been highlighted.
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9 This method has been used in previous progression studies for social work students
10 (Hussein et al., 2009, 2006, 2008), allowing the findings to represent a number of
11 variables that may have an impact upon progression. These previous studies did not have
12 gender as their primary focus, however, and so were presented with a number of
13 additional variables as well.
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17 18 19 *Results*

20 21 *Descriptive results*

22 Table 1 shows that in each of the progression issues (failed, deferred, referred, withdrew),
23 men had higher numbers than women. There is also a large disparity in enrolment, with
24 men only 15.3% of the population. When the progression findings are examined more
25 closely using a multivariate analysis (Table 2), they suggest a more starkly gendered
26 presentation. The size of each variable is presented the form of odds ratios (fuller
27 statistical details can be found at the end of the paper). These give the odds of each
28 variable relative to the odds of passing relative to each of the progression categories. This
29 multivariate analysis manages the impact of the other variables to determine the effect of
30 gender upon progression. For instance, when comparing groups of students, is a man
31 more likely to fail than a woman, irrespective of the other variables such as disability,
32 ethnicity and age? It is important to note that odds ratio can at times overestimate the size
33 of effect, which requires additional analysis to more accurately explain the findings.
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46 These odds ratios show that the chances of a man deferring were 15% greater; the odds of
47 withdrawal were almost 50% greater; and most concerning, the odds of failure were 60%
48 greater for men. Men's chances of referring had a slight gendered difference, but after
49 adjusting for the effects of other variables this difference was not statistically significant.
50 This analysis shows that men on social work courses in England between 2006 and 2011
51 were more likely to defer, withdraw, and fail than women. It also shows that whilst the
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3 difference for referral is not as significant, that men were referred in greater proportion
4 than women on social work courses.
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12 Discussion

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17 These findings are consistent with previous studies (2009, 2006), suggesting that men do
18 not progress as well as women on social work courses. In particular, the most significant
19 results arise with the categories of withdrawal and failure. These are concerning because
20 withdrawal and failure are the two categories with greater finality for student progression.
21 Referral and deferral suggest a potential of returning or continuing with the social work
22 course, withdrawal and failure both suggest that the student will not be continuing (or
23 attempting to continue).
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32 The literature suggests that many men may experience issues when studying to join
33 WMO. Unfortunately, much of this knowledge is drawn from outside social work
34 literature. The previous studies concentrating on men in social work (Cree, 1996, 2001;
35 Parker & Crabtree, 2014) are either small local studies or before the move to degree
36 requirement. The literature cited above from nursing and teaching education can help us
37 think about the possible underlying reasons for the progression issues seen here. Feeling
38 isolated, a gendered educational environment, poorer study habits, or gendered
39 expectations about the profession may intermingle to inhibit men from engaging with
40 social work education as freely as women. Social work education may be a microcosm of
41 the wider societal experience, with some specific experiences, from which we can learn
42 about the way that we view men and women, and their engagement in the public sphere
43 of work. What is needed is a more in-depth understanding of men's progression issues,
44 the reasons for them choosing social work as a profession, and a discussion about
45 whether social work wants or needs more men. This understanding can only be generated
46 by a more qualitative examination of men's progression, and a wider discussion in the
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3 profession about whether the rates of men entering social work are a concern. There are
4 indications that there is current attention on the numbers of men in the profession of
5 social work (Ashcroft, 2014; Fischl, 2013; Phillips & Cree, 2014), but not a developed
6 understanding of the complicated reasons for men to join, or the reasons for their
7 progression issues.
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14 It is clear from the previous studies, and the current findings, that our understanding of
15 the situation is less than clear, and warrants further study. In particular what is needed are
16 larger qualitative studies gathering men's experiences of studying social work, as our
17 quantitative understanding has been reliably shown that men do not progress as well as
18 women in social work education. What is missing is a clear indication of what men say
19 might be the reasons for these progression issues. What is also needed is a better
20 understanding of the ways that we can work to resolve these issues. If we wish for a more
21 representative profession, then the issues seen here may be one way to begin adjusting
22 this.
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33 **Conclusion**

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35 This article has explored some previous studies which discussed progression of men on
36 pre-qualifying social work courses. Whilst these are helpful to provide context, they have
37 not engaged with the wider education literature with enough depth to suggest potential
38 reasons for these progression issues. In addition, these previous studies have not used the
39 findings from related professional courses (such as nursing and primary school teaching)
40 in order to explore the issue.
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48 Data obtained from the GSCC was analysed using logistic regression, which found men
49 were more likely to fail, withdraw and defer than women on social work courses in
50 England, and a gendered component for referral. Women have better progression, even
51 when managing data for other demographic variables collected (such as ethnicity, age,
52 disability, previous educational attainment and mode of study). Progression issues for
53 men have been noted in a number of previous studies focusing on progression more
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3 generally (2009, 2006), as well as in countries other than the UK (Center for Workforce
4 Studies, 2006; Gibbons et al., 2007; Noble & Pease, 2011).
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9 These concerns have only been explored qualitatively in very restricted settings (Cree,
10 2001; Furness, 2012; Parker & Crabtree, 2014), with a small number of men. More
11 understanding of this situation is needed if the social work profession suggests that it
12 should represent the diversity of society. If a more diverse social work profession is
13 desired, including men (Ashcroft, 2014), then the experiences and perspectives of men
14 students should be gathered to inform the debate and planning for the profession.
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15 ⁱ UCAS is the UK governmental admissions service for students applying to post-16
16 education and universities.

17 ⁱⁱ The phrase 'women-majority' is used decidedly here (instead of 'female-
18 dominated' or 'traditionally female'), because while women are more numerous in
19 these occupations, they do not predominate in positions of authority, power or
20 financial reward (Pringle 1995; Christie 1998; see also McPhail 2004 for an
21 exposition of the use of terminology in this context).
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24 ⁱⁱⁱ In July 2012, the GSCC was dissolved and regulation of the profession in England
25 and Wales moved to the Health Professions Council, renamed as the Health and Care
26 Professions Council (HCPC).
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Table 1 Progression results of students by gender for years 2006/7 -2010/11

Variable	Women		Men		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Passed	18,866	58.6	3,122	53.5	21,988	57.8
Deferral	3,420	10.6	667	11.4	4087	13.5
Failure	710	2.2	174	3.0	884	2.3
Referral	5,272	16.4	981	16.8	6253	16.4
Withdrawal	3,938	12.2	888	15.2	4826	12.7
Total	32,206	84.7	5832	15.3	38,038	100

Table 2 Uni- and Multi-variable regression analysis, managing for alternative variables (age; year of attendance; ethnicity; disability; previous educational qualification; course type; and attendance route)

Variable	Category	Univariable		Multivariable	
		Odds Ratio (95% CI)	P-value	Odds Ratio (95% CI)	P-value
Deferral	Women	1	<0.001	1	0.02
	Men	1.18 (1.08, 1.29)		1.15 (1.02, 1.29)	
Failure	Women	1	<0.001	1	<0.001
	Men	1.48 (1.25, 1.76)		1.60 (1.28, 2.01)	
Referral	Women	1	<0.001	1	0.06
	Men	1.12 (1.04, 1.22)		1.11 (0.99, 1.23)	
Withdrawal	Women	1	<0.001	1	<0.001
	Men	1.36 (1.26, 1.48)		1.47 (1.32, 1.65)	