# Social work's new 'non-traditional' students? Learning from the experiences of our younger students

## Abstract:

This paper begins by locating the (controversial) removal of the 'minimum age at qualification' regulation in 2003 within the context of wider changes occurring within social work education and the social work profession. This is followed by a report of a small scale exploratory study designed to gather data regarding the experiences of younger students within one undergraduate qualifying programme. The data are then discussed in relation to literature from within social work and allied disciplines in order to consider themes such as 'identity', 'othering' and 'recognition'. It is suggested from data gathered during this project that although the gates to social work education have now been opened more widely to school leaving students, they have in effect become social work's new 'non-traditional' students and in some cases, inclusion is experienced as partial rather than complete. A discussion of the implications for further research as well as teaching, learning and group process issues on professional programmes concludes this paper.

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## Introduction

This paper examines the experiences of students who were under the age of 21 at the time of admission to one undergraduate qualifying social work programme in southern England. With the first cohorts of new degree students graduating in recent years, what can we learn from the experiences of these students in relation to teaching, learning, support and recruitment issues and how can we make sense of their experiences of professional education? Through teaching and tutoring roles, I had become aware that some of our younger students reported difficult experiences that related directly to their age. My concern was that although younger students had been admitted to our programmes, little had been done to explore their *possibly* different needs, nor to actively draw upon the strengths they bring to the programme, in contrast to previous efforts to understand the pedagogic, personal and professional needs of the 'non-traditional' 'mature' learners who have in fact become 'traditional' within social work education in the UK. This paper begins by locating the issues examined within the relevant policy and professional contexts before reporting upon the study. The later sections of the paper examine the findings of the study in the light of relevant literature and theoretical perspectives concerning the formation of identities, group relationships and processes as well as the implications for current social work education.

**Policy background**

The requirement that the DipSW (the qualifying award prior to the introduction of the degrees in 2003) should be awarded only to those who had reached the age of 22 (CCETSW, 1991: p36) resulted in an almost universal translation by universities into a minimum entry age of 21, with the exception of a small number of institutions who had historically offered a 4 year degree level route to qualification. As Hussein *et al* (2008) note, the DipSW had been seen as removing barriers to entry and progression in Higher Education (HE) associated traditionally with mature learners in a context in which 'widening participation' gained increasing policy and practice importance (see Dillon, 2007 for a fuller account).

It is clear from the promotional information associated with the qualifying degrees in social work introduced in 2003 that the intention was to broaden the pool of applicants for social work training. Indeed, in 2001, John Hutton, a Labour Party Member of Parliament involved in the work of the Department of Health, identified the need for social work to be 'seen by young people as an attractive career choice' (DH, 27/3/01). This comment arose in part out of concerns reagrding the ageing nature of the social work workforce (Becker & Niechial, 2004). Indeed, the need for social work to be seen in this way, not just for younger applicants, was clear from the many research initiatives commissioned by the Department of Health (DH) prior to the introduction of the degrees: The falling rates of application to social work courses (Eborall & Garmeson, 2001:

p78); concerns about vacancy rates in a period of increased demand for social work services, and concerns about the effectiveness of the DipSW qualification (Eborall & Garmeson, 2001:p8) fuelled research into the possible explanations and informed the planning of the subsequent reforms. The parallels with recent and ongoing consultations and planning of further reforms via the Social Work Reform Board (England) are clear, with many of the same debates and issues being raised, including the re-statement of the need for a focus upon the recruitment of 'high calibre applicants'  (see author's own, 2010 and Social Work Reform Board, 2010 p44).

Since the introduction of the degrees, increases in applications for social work programmes have been significant with an associated increase in the number of younger students entering social work training (UCAS statistics, 2010). Whilst the proportion of younger students on programmes varies significantly, on the programme at my own university, the proportions increased from 1/9th of the student cohort in 2003 to 1/3rd in 2005 and subsequent years.

| Subject line (JACS) | Social Work (L5), 2003 | | 2008 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Age (4 categories) | ALL APPLICANTS | ALL ACCEPTS | ALL APPLICANTS | ALL ACCEPTS |
| 20 and under | 1078 | 934 (87%) | 3886 (up by 360% since 2003) | 2541 (65%) |
| 21 to 24 | 617 | 448 (73%) | 2381 (up by 385%) | 1582 (66%) |
| 25 to 39 | 1414 | 1074 (76%) | 4551 (up by 322%) | 2980 (65%) |
| 40 and over | 518 | 395 (76%) | 1632 (up by 315%) | 1078 (66%) |
| Total | 3627 | 2851 (79%) | 12450 (up by 343%) | 8181 (66%) |

Age categories of applicants to social work programmes 2003 compared to 2008, http://search1.ucas.co.uk/fandf00/index6.html [Accessed 13/4/10]

**The Study**

The empirical study reported here examined the experiences of younger students on the qualifying undergraduate programme at the university where I am based. The study aimed to describe and evaluate the experiences of those who joined the programme immediately or soon after leaving school or college and to highlight any themes for further consideration in relation to recruitment and social work education. In particular, the study aimed to examine issues of identity and identification within the student group as well as in relation to academic and professional experiences and to examine the extent to which these students may have different needs, and bring different strengths, to those more traditionally recruited to social work programmes.

**Ethical considerations:**

Ethical approval was obtained from both universities at which our students are registered. In addition, consent to participate in the project was 'informed' by writing to all students clarifying aims, confidentiality (and the limits to this), and anonymity during reporting and analysis phases, as well as the uses to which this research would be put and the right to withdraw at any point. Research supervision was utilised to examine complex issues concerning 'insider research' and my relationship to the students as their programme director and tutor to some students.

**Methods**

Systematic literature searches utilised advanced 'Boolean' searches, initially searching for literature exploring age in social work training/education and then expanding the search to include other professions. Searching electronic sources via 'EBSCO' and databases such as 'ASSIA' , 'Scopus' and 'ERIC' produced very few references. None dealt with the experiences of younger students in social work education or in other professions *per se*, although a small number referred to particular schemes and evaluations within health professions and more related to the experiences of mature students within social work and other professional education programmes.

The primary research for this article involved surveying the experiences of younger students through focus groups and postal questionnaires. Secondary, smaller scale surveys of practice assessors (n=15) and tutors (n=6) who had worked with younger students, and mature student's views (n=12) took place later in the research process to follow up themes raised by younger students, but are referred to here only in passing and will be reported upon in more detail in later work..

Focus groups were selected as the initial method in the early phases of this project given the unique opportunity they offer to explore, in a dynamic and participatory manner (Shaw, 1996:p158), key issues, dilemmas and themes and to gather a variety of perspectives (Catterall and MacClaran, 1997:p1). Two focus

groups were held with a total of 10 students attending from a possible 23 with invitees being selected purposively from the student cohorts given the age criterion for inclusion. Themes drawn from tutorial work and informal conversations with the younger students were shared with the participants for each group to consider, in any order, and with the explanation that these were not intended to limit discussion.

The questionnaire phase of the research utilised non-standardised, Likert style rating scales along with more open response questions with areas of questioning designed following evaluation of the focus group discussions. Following piloting, questionnaires were distributed by post to all 23 students who met the inclusion criteria (those under 21 at the point of admission to the degree), with assurances of anonymity once received. Using postal questionnaires at the end of the academic year was somewhat 'risky' but the response rate of 83% after one reminder exceeded that expected (Robson, 2002:p232), possibly validating this area of enquiry.

16 of the 19 questionnaires returned contained large amounts of additional qualitative comments. Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS (v11), although sample size and limited quantitative information resulted in only basic (descriptive) analyses being conducted. Qualitative data were analysed thematically following a two stage 'coding' and data reduction process similar to that described by Miles and Huberman (1994). In addition, the examination of

exceptional cases enabled the testing of emergent explanations and

relationships between data.

## 3.  Research findings

Findings from the questionnaire phase of the research are presented here more

fully than those arising from the focus groups, reflecting the way in which focus

groups guided the subsequent research design, rather than being the main

research tool themselves. Where direct references are made to questionnaire

respondents, they are identified by 'R' (younger students) or 'M' (mature

students) followed by a number. Focus group discussions are referred to simply

as having taken place in FG1 or FG2 in order to ensure anonymity.

**Respondent characteristics**

Of the young women completing the questionnaire (all participants were female

as there were no male students within these cohorts in the relevant age group),

58% came from within the local area, and 53% had lived in university managed

accommodation during their first year. Participants in each focus group referred

to their academic achievement, particularly in their first year, being lower than

they had expected given their previous academic attainment (the entry

requirement for this programme is particularly high). Indeed, the end of year one

grade average[1] for the younger students was 57% as opposed to 61% for the

'mature' students. Although the predictive qualities of end of year one results on

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[1] Obtained from internal monitoring statistics that record average grades for each stage of progression for each student

a programme such as this may be debateable, understanding the possible contributory factors to this apparent and certainly *perceived* underachievement will be important to improving the experiences of future younger students.

**Pre-course experience**

In relation to pre-university experiences, the majority of these students came direct from school or college (68%) and of those studying A-levels prior to applying to university, 58% studied a wide range of traditional academic A-level subjects, with a further 37% combining those traditional A-levels with either the single (equivalent to one A-level) or the double (equivalent to two A-levels) Health and Social Care (H&SC), vocational A-level (AVCE). Cross tabulations exploring the relationship between end of year one marks and having studied H&SC AVCE suggest that more students (6 out of 7) obtained marks of 55% or over compared to only 8 out of 12 of those who had not taken this subject. However, as these analyses are based upon a relatively small sample, they must be regarded with a degree of caution.

When considering the extent to which their previous studies had prepared them for the social work degree, 15 of the 19 students highlighted the importance of *content* of these previous studies - many mentioning H&SC, with psychology and sociology also being cited. However, just under 50% also identified process-related factors (n=9) including learning styles, timekeeping and essay deadlines. A relatively small number (n=4) highlighted academic confidence and confidence

in relation to group presentations as being helpful in preparing them for this particular.

In terms of how students' expectations compared to their experiences once on the programme, only one respondent felt that the course had been less time-intensive than expected with 6 reporting it to be at the same level (across all three year groups) and 12 of the 19 reporting it to be 'more' or 'much more' time intensive than anticipated. This supports the findings of research carried out by Cooke and Leckey (1999) and Laing *et al* (2008) where the focus was upon 'mature' learners. The **emotional impact of the course** had been a concern raised both within the focus group discussions but also by practitioners. Whilst two of the younger students (both at the top end of the age range) reported that the emotional impact of the course was less than they had expected, the majority (63%) felt that the emotional impact had been 'more' or 'much more' than anticipated and this is approximately 20% higher than that reported by the 'mature' students asked the same question. This has potential implications for both student support and information provided prior to application and enrolment, although further research may be able to identify whether this also applies to 'mature' students who move from different career backgrounds into social work education (i.e. those deemed to posses 'life' experience but not relevant work experience).

One of the themes identified from the focus group discussion was the *assumption* that younger students did not have relevant previous work or life experiences. Indeed, in much social work education literature, there is a primacy placed upon the value of 'experience' (Christie and Weeks, 1998). In response to a question about how much relevant experience they had prior to starting the course (with 'relevant' left undefined and no specification concerning how to calculate 'months' in relation to part-time experience), only 1 respondent stated that they had no experience at all and only 4 reported having less than 6 months relevant previous experience.

| | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Previous relevant experience | 19 | 0 | 60 | 12.9 | 14.391 |

**Table 2 – Months of relevant experience prior to starting degree**

The mean of 12.9 months for the younger students shown in table 2 compares with an average of 37 months experience for those older students returning questionnaires. Although the nature of the experiences deemed 'relevant' prior to study may vary and may be limited to part-time hours, this does suggest that students may have initially regarded themselves as bringing significant levels of previous experience and yet having arrived, many report a sense of lacking such experience and the experience they have being disregarded by others (R16). The implications of this as a challenge to existing identity and self-perception and the processes of positioning within the student group are significant and so far unacknowledged in social work literature. For younger students arriving with a sense that they do have a degree of relevant experienced to then join a student

group where other students may have (or claim to have) a greater amount of relevant experience (regardless of the quality of experience), the reconsideration of their own experiences and where they 'fit' within the group may be significant. This is further exacerbated, according to many respondents when university staff encouraged students to think back to 'all their previous experience'. Suddenly students who previously felt secure in their skills and experience came to see the experience of others as more directly relevant and saw this as being 'preferred' by staff.

In terms of any link between emotional impact of the course and prior relevant experience, it does not appear from the data that there is any such direct relationship, despite this being a current concern for the Social Work Reform Board. Clearly, with a larger sample, more detailed statistical analyses would be able to examine the relationship in more detail. As the table below indicates, those students with less that 6 months experience were just as likely to report that the emotional impact had been 'the same as expected' as those with more experience. The 2 students with 2 or more years of experience reported the impact being either 'more' or 'much more'.  Indeed, the assumption that prior experience is a sound indicator in progression and achievement is debated in much of the admissions related literature (see author's own, 2008a &b). Although General Social Care Council (GSCC, 2009) statistics for student progression indicate that younger students fail to complete degrees (as with nursing students, Mulholland et al, 2008) more than other age groups, it is not clear whether this

reflects students being unprepared for the degree or the reflects students being

frustrated by their experiences as a minority group. Such statistics also fail to

differentiate between the academically stronger students and those who may

have lower levels of prior academic attainment.

**prev.relexp * emotional impact Crosstabulation**

Count

| | | emotional impact | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | less | more | much more | same | Total |
| prev.relexp | 0 | | | 1 | | 1 |
| | 1 | | | | 1 | 1 |
| | 2 | | 1 | | | 1 |
| | 3 | | 1 | | | 1 |
| | 6 | | 3 | | 1 | 4 |
| | 7 | 1 | | | | 1 |
| | 8 | | 1 | | 1 | 2 |
| | 12 | | 3 | | | 3 |
| | 18 | 1 | | | 1 | 2 |
| | 24 | | 1 | | | 1 |
| | 36 | | | | 1 | 1 |
| | 60 | | | 1 | | 1 |
| Total | | 2 | 10 | 2 | 5 | 19 |

**Table 3: Cross-tabulation: months previous experience with level of emotional impact**

**Experiences during the degree programme**

Although one third of the 'mature' student respondents reported having 'not

noticed' age differences within the student group, all of the younger students

stated that they had been 'aware' of their younger age on the course. 10 of the

19 stated that they had been aware of their relatively young age 'a great deal'. When asked when this had been most apparent, 15 referred to small group work (Problem Based Learning sessions) being the time when they had become most aware of the extent of other students' experience. The issue of 'experience' and what is meant by this and 'valued' here is complex. Comments on questionnaires referred to both perceived and stated views expressed to these younger students during their studies:

*"I think sometimes the other students discounted the experience of younger students"* (R22);

*"Sometimes when I was the only younger student in the group I'd feel my opinion was less adequate that the others' due to my lack of life experience"* and *"in the small group work I often didn't feel able to share my views even though sometimes my ideas were 'fresher.'"* (R16)

Another student referred to constantly feeling "*a need to catch up with older students – we are seen as lacking their experience*" (R11).  One student went further and reported comments that she *was "too confident for her age"* within small group work (R03).  Three students mentioned essay deadlines with one comment being that "*Older students assumed I would do better (with assignments) due to coming from college and this was a big pressure on me*" (R21). Indeed these students went on to say that they have lied about their assignment grades to other students because of the pressure they feel to perform particularly well in comparison to other students. Such comments suggest that the pressures experienced by the younger students on the social work programme are far from insignificant.

Whilst only three of the 19 younger respondents referred to having regular caring responsibilities (unlike the 'mature' students where 2/3rds of those responding reported having caring responsibilities), all but one needed to work in order to manage financially. 6 of the 19 reported not working during term time but given my on-going role with the majority of these students as Programme Director, it is likely these reported hours should be regarded as conservative accounts of the amount of time they are spending in paid employment.

| | N | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| VACATION WORK | 19 | 0 | 55 | 31.53 | 14.073 |
| TERM WORK | 19 | 0 | 20 | 8.00 | 6.394 |

**Table 5 - amount of paid work in hours carried out by students in term and vacation times**

Although the average of 8 hours per week employment may seem relatively low, we need to remember that the majority of these students were also on placement 4 or 5 days each week.

**'Difference'**

All students reported being aware of the differences between their experience as social work students and students from other disciplines, with 14 of the 19 being aware of these differences a 'great deal'. Areas of difference identified included attendance and workload (n=14); the stressful nature and emotional impact of SW study/placements (n=5) and the responsibility, professionalism required (n=3) as well as some mentioning the impact of continuous assessment. In

addition, some commented upon the impact the additional time/attendance has upon their ability to socialise and make new friends, especially given the tendency for many students to go out midweek when this is usually cheaper, and thus affecting their ability to build support networks across the campus.

11 of the 19 students mentioned that they are seen differently now by their friends and/or family. One comments that *"they seem to think I'm capable of taking more responsibility now – not always a good thing for me" (*R02) with several more referring to being expected to take more responsibility for themselves or others in family and also social settings. One commented that *"they seem to think I'm more mature and will even come to me first for advice, even if not social work related*" (R22) and *"I found this really difficult…when I go out clubbing, everyone knows I'm doing social work and so if someone has spilt up or whatever, I'm labelled as the one to sort it out and help them whilst the rest of them carry on being care-free and enjoying themselves"* (FG1)

**Experience of age discrimination**
Worryingly, 63% of the respondents had experienced **overt and explicitly negative comments or reactions** associated directly with their age. Of those returning questionnaires, 42% reported experiences involving fellow students, 25% from shadowing staff; 33% from placement professionals and 5% from service users/carers. Although no student identified 'university staff' as the source of their negative experience, it is important to consider the possible impact of my presence and my role in the research in influencing responses.

Comments in relation to practice learning experiences were more common, including:

*"The manager of my second placement was very condescending, always reminding me that I lacked experience due to my age which is rubbish"* (R21)

and:

*"professionals were constantly saying I did well on placement even though I was so young! I mean, imagine if they had said that I did well for a girl!"* (R 23)

Another student though, commented that:

*"I was very lucky with my practice assessors that they didn't seem worried that I was a younger student, although they did tell me that other practice assessors were very negative"* (R23).

One of the recurring themes emerging from both focus group and questionnaire analysis is the 'deficit' approach embedded in these experiences and the impact of this upon a student's self confidence. Of the 'mature' students returning their questionnaires, 66% were aware of younger students having explicitly negative experiences from a range of sources, and this would seem to confirm the scale of this phenomena.

**Strengths and perceptions**

In terms of the **strengths** that the respondents felt that younger students brought to the programme, a factor that focus group participants felt had been largely ignored, the table below summarises the factors identified.

| Strength identified: | Number of U21 students identifying this: | Number of 'mature' students identifying this in relation to younger students: |
|---|---|---|
| Academic confidence | 16 (84%) | 5 (56%) |
| IT skills/confidence | 14 (74%) | 5 (56%) |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Energy | 14  (74%) | 4  (44%) |
| Fun | 10  (53%) | 2  (22%) |
| Life experience | 9 | 1 |
| Commitment to work tasks | 7 | 0 |
| Organisational skills | 6 | 1 |
| Subject Knowledge | 4 | 2 |

**Table 6: strengths brought by U21s identified by younger students and mature students**

14 of the 19 younger respondents felt that they brought to the programme 'IT skills or confidence' plus 'energy', with even more identifying 'academic confidence'. Interestingly, just under half felt that they bring life experience when the 'lack' of such experience had been raised during focus groups (not necessarily by the same respondents) as an area of potential difficulty and was highlighted as a deficit by mature students and practice assessors. Other strengths suggested by respondents included 'enthusiasm' (n=3); 'fresh outlook/ideas' (n=4) with these respondents suggesting that they may be 'less cynical' and 'more open to different perspectives or approaches'. The 'mature' students surveyed largely concurred with the ranking of these strengths associated with the younger students for the first 3 or 4 factors, but did not highlight life experience, organisational skills or commitment to work tasks in the same proportions. The intra-group implications of these issues are likely to be significant and the power issues relating to difference and contextually sanctioned prioritisation of some characteristics over others (experience or increased age in this case) are clearly articulated by D'Cruz (2007). The ambiguous social positioning of young people within contemporary society contributes some interesting issues to these dynamics as well as to the processes of professional identity formation for our younger students.

Given the significance of *student perception* in the focus group discussions,

questionnaires asked respondents to select up to 3 words or phrases to

**describe how they *thought* university staff** might describe younger students.:

| word/phrase | number of times mentioned |
|---|---|
| Energetic | 7 |
| Bright/academically strong | 5 |
| Inexperienced | 5 |
| Interested/keen to learn | 4 |
| Impressionable/moldable | 3 |
| Fresh minded/open | 3 |
| Fun | 3 |
| Uncommitted | 3 |
| Lots to learn/naïve | 2 |
| Motivated | 2 |
| Committed | 2 |

**Table 8: Student perception of how university staff see them**

It is interesting to note the predominance of 'positive' adjectives identified,

although clearly interpreting meaning from questionnaire responses may contain

a degree on inaccuracy. Within many responses, apparently contradictory

combinations of terms were used, reflecting the complex issues operating here.

In a similar manner, the students were asked to identify up to three words to

summarise what they thought 'mature' students might think of the younger

students:

| word/phrase | number of times mentioned |
|---|---|
| Inexperienced/lack experience | 9 |
| Immature/naïve | 9 |
| Party a lot/ socialising | 6 |
| Care-free/no responsibilities | 5 |
| Fun | 5 |
| Friendly/supportive | 3 |
| Lazy/slackers | 3 |
| Academic/good with essays | 3 |
| School-kids | 2 |

| | |
|---|---|
| ICT experts | 2 |
| Creative | 2 |

**Table 9: Student perception of how mature students see them**

Phrases chosen were markedly less positive than those selected in relation to perceived staff attitudes. This reflects the responses from the younger students that although the majority felt that staff viewed younger students 'positively' or 'very positively', mature students were thought to view younger students in a much more 'negative' way. It is interesting to note that this perception does not relate particularly closely to the descriptions given by mature students in their own responses. In these, mature students were much more likely to describe younger students as 'energetic or vibrant' (65%) followed by 'clever/academic' with 'naïve' and 'lacking commitment' accepting, ranked lower in their responses. It is important to note here the crucial role that perception of how others view us affects our sense of self as the work by Houston (2008) on 'recognition' and 'misrecognition' illustrates.

When asked to consider **how experiences of younger students could be improved** within the programme itself, there was unanimous agreement that

greater practice assessor and agency awareness for both shadowing experiences and placements would help ease this process and much agreement about the value of a voluntary peer support group for younger students. However, questions about how explicitly age differences should be addressed within the whole year group were less easily agreed upon. Although the majority stated that they would welcome a more explicit exploration of such differences, highlighting mutual and complimentary strengths, and suggested that their own experiences could be utilised more fully, others were concerned that this would create unnecessary divisions and speculated that maybe it was best to ignore age differences as far as possible. This had been the source of lively debate in FG2 and is reflected in some of the comments on returned questionnaires.

## 4. Discussion of findings

In terms of **pre-entry and transition** issues, the lack of preparedness for the realities of social work education and the impact of the particularities of professional training was clear from many of my respondents. Knox's research (2005), amongst others, highlights the benefits to 'non-traditional' mature entrants of an introductory and preparatory module prior to enrolling upon the degree programme. From the responses of our younger students, this benefit may be more widely applied to all students whether prior to the programme or during the foundational bridging modules offered within many courses, particularly if accessed universally rather attempting to target particular groups of students thus perpetuating the deficit approach. However, as Lowe and Cook

(2003) remind us, the importance of induction being seen as a process rather than a one-off event is pertinent here. Taylor's (1997) preference for the use of the term of 'orientation' over that of 'induction' is also helpful in signifying the nature of what is required within professional programmes of learning and have suggest that we should see orientation to professional learning as something rather more ongoing than is usually the case.  Although concerns about readiness for HE learning are not limited to those studying on professional programmes, the concerns are even more heightened here given the previous reliance upon 'experience' and a relative downplaying of academic attainment. In addition, the DH (2002) requirement that our recruitment strategies should ensure we admit students who represent the communities with which they work, plus the particular value base of social work surely means that the experiences of these younger student within social work education are of concern.

Possibly more complex are the **learning and teaching implications** arising from this study.  Understandably, the existing literature exploring the issues of working with 'difference' within social work programmes in relation to teaching and learning needs and strategies (Taylor, 1997; Thompson, 1997; Bowl, 2001) has focused upon the identified needs and strengths of 'mature' students, often without the 'standard' (by wider HE standards) qualifications, but bringing an abundance of practice and life experience. Baxter and Britton (2001) highlight the significant risks associated with 'letting go' of previous identities and roles for 'mature' learners, demonstrating that transition to HE, despite being aspired to, is

not always entirely positive in terms of identity and identification, and other writers emphasise the pedagogic importance of working explicitly with the life and work experiences 'mature' learners bring.

It is not my intention to suggest that this focus has been mis-placed, but to highlight how social work's newer entrants have been admitted into this context. It is hardly surprising within this context that so many of the younger students reported feeling that they were 'lacking' and needing to 'catch up'. Within our programme, it was they who were left feeling 'non-standard' and 'deficient' in terms of their lack of experience – the 'gold standard' of social work education as much as A-levels (rather than less traditional qualifications) have been regarded within the rest of HE.

This represents a mirror image of the difficulties encountered by 'mature' students within HE as described by Thompson (1997) and Bowl (2001). The deskilling process reported by many older entrants to HE, is reflected in the experiences of many of these younger, academically well qualified new social work students. For these younger students, they had previously enjoyed academic success and with only one exception, they saw themselves as possessing relevant experience. Subsequently, they struggled with the lower than anticipated marks they obtained and with a process of learning (e.g. PBL) that seemingly gave priority to 'experience'.

Eraut (1994:p15) identifies different types of knowledge required within professional learning. As Taylor (1997) suggests, for many younger students, familiarity may be greater with 'propositional' knowledge than personal or process knowledge. Certainly the unfamiliarity of many of the younger respondents with the more experiential modes of learning may have contributed to the stresses they reported experiencing during PBL based work, particularly if they also felt 'lacking' in the experience of many of the mature students, whether this was how they felt about their experience before PBL work or emerged from this process. The important role of containment of individual and group emotions (Bion, cited in Taylor, 1997: p83) is clear within this context when anxieties about both content and process of learning may lead to extreme and damaging individual and group responses. Indeed, as one 'mature' student respondent so aptly commented:

*"I was so worried myself about not being able to keep up with the written work that I may have over-played the 'experience' card. To be honest, before now, I hadn't really thought about how younger students might have felt. I was too caught up with my own sense of inadequacy."* (M09)

Younger students within social work programmes are actively engaged in a series of negotiated processes regarding the development of their personal, professional, and educational identities. They are simultaneously seen as, and expected to be, 'care-free' students exploring their independence and early adulthood and yet also required to demonstrate acceptably professional standards of behaviour and practice. Equally, the somewhat ambiguous positioning of young people in general within contemporary society is an

important consideration here. In a sense, these younger students could be regarded as inhabiting two 'different and conflicting worlds' as much as mature learners experiencing this for other reasons (Baxter and Britton, 2001: 97). The extent to which this may lead to the sense of self becoming 'fractured' (Stevens, 2003) is unclear, but worthy of further exploration. In addition, the ripple effect of changes to the identity of our younger students in relation to other areas of their lives was clear from the responses regarding how they came to be viewed by others.

Woodward (1997) reminds us of the importance of seeing identity as not oppositional to, but dependent upon, difference. Indeed, as Treacher (2006) comments, our 'self' and the 'other' are inter-dependent and are 'subject' and 'object' in relation to one another. This highlights the active nature of the process of identity formation and how this necessarily involves differentiating 'self' from 'other'. In times of stress or anxiety, these identifications will be all the more powerful. An examination of Treacher's work in relation to 'othering' provides helpful insights in relation to working with these processes. As she notes, the context in which identity and 'othering' processes are occurring are key as what is valued and powerful in one context may be marginalised in another. Our academically high-achieving younger students may be more 'standard' and more 'insiders' within most HE departments. However, within social work education, might they become 'outsiders', marginalised and seen as being 'deficient' in respect of experience? In order to 'survive', Treacher warns of the dangers in

denying or losing part of one's 'self' in order to gain 'insider status'. Could this contribute to understanding the difficulties reported by younger students in terms of how they had 'sacrificed' their social lives or even found themselves being related to differently outside of the programme, because of the demands the programme placed upon them? Could this result potentially, in younger students being 'outsiders' both within the programme and within the wider student community, leading to the isolation reported by some respondents? The irony of this in a profession committed to challenging oppression and exclusion is clear.

## 5. Reflections, recommendations and concluding remarks

In this concluding section I reflect briefly upon the strengths and weaknesses of this study before outlining recommendations for further areas of research and pedagogic issues. This paper has highlighted the extent of difficulties experienced by many of our younger students, summarised by the respondent who stated that: "*the pressure of trying to meet the expectations of staff, fellow students and practice assessors whether those expectations are real or imagined …*" (R03) had been substantial, especially when combined with the other pressures referred to in previous sections of this paper. There are accounts of quantifiable pressures (work commitments arising from financial need) and also of those resulting from perceptions of others' expectations or views. From the data gathered, a picture very different from the 'care-free' image of HE students,

has emerged. The 'illuminative' approach taken here has served to highlight some key issues requiring further exploration within social work education.

However, the weaknesses of the project are also apparent. Although the participation rate by eligible students was high, collecting data relating to additional cohorts, would facilitate a more thorough exploration of these issues. In addition, this would enable comparisons to be made between the experiences of younger students in earlier cohorts on the degree and those entering programmes several years later when younger students participating in social work education is no longer a 'new' phenomena. One of the difficulties of this study has been the failure to differentiate satisfactorily within age categories of students. Indeed, the 'mature' and 'school leaver' divide at 21 is a somewhat arbitrary uncritical use of these classifications may serve to polarise more than is the case in reality. Larger samples would allow more careful examination of the respondents 'at the margins' in this respect. Additionally, further research could usefully explore the potential of engagement in the research process itself to contribute positively or negatively to experiences.

Clear recommendations emerge from the students' responses concerning the ways in which experience of younger students, once admitted to the programme, could be improved. Younger students suggested that an informal peer support group could be established, in line with opportunities historically provided for other students in minority groups. In addition, students and practice assessors

commented upon the need to work constructively with placement providers to share the positive and challenging feedback of student regarding their experiences and to share the almost unanimously positive feedback of practice assessors who had experienced working with one of our younger students. With respect to preparation for placement, and our teaching generally, younger students identified the need for social work educators to become more inclusive in their use of language and their assumptions. Younger students highlighted the constant injunctions to 'remember all the experience you have of being in a work place' as being challenging for them to relate to and resulted in one student introducing herself to a practice assessor saying she had previously 'done nothing' when this was far from being the case. Similarly, considering the way in which we may (sometimes unconsciously) prioritise experience based knowledge over academic knowledge, and over willingness to learn, through the approaches we take to teaching, learning and assessment, and the language of the classroom, may be helpful.  Possibly most important however, is the need to recognise the tangible and perceived pressures experienced by our younger students. Locating this recognition within our knowledge of the dilemmas concerning group dynamics and working with 'difference' in a creative, explicit and valuing and yet safe manner is a perpetual and complex challenge, but seemingly essential if we are to minimise more damaging processes and consequences.

In addition to more practical considerations emerging form this research are conclusions of a more conceptual nature. Within HE, students have tended to labelled as either 'traditional' or 'non-traditional' and previous writers have highlighted the difficulties associated with this. I have argued here that within social work education, it is seemingly our younger students who are deemed 'non-traditional' both within social work and within the wider HEI context. This is not necessarily a result of deliberate exclusionary practices, but nevertheless requires attention. Much of the existing literature regarding the experiences of mature learners in HE can be used to understand the experiences of younger students within social work education. In addition, significant insights can be drawn from work regarding identity theory and identity politics. In particular, the notion that one of any binary pair (e.g. 'traditional'/'non-traditional; experienced/inexperienced) will be seen as normative, and associated with a privileged or preferred status (D'Cruz, 2007:p38) with the 'other' being marginalised out of necessity in order for the status-quo to remain, is significant here. Indeed, the use of the prefix 'non' in relation to 'traditional' here suggests that something is lacking (Penuel, 1995:p348) and also serves as a reminder of the dialogic nature of self/other identification. It is here that the role of negation is significant in distancing one student from another and the role that this has in intra-group dynamics, particularly in times of stress is worthy of further consideration.  As Penuel argues, it may be important to allow for opportunities to engage in:

> …different kinds of dialogic encounters with others and with ourselves.

By describing more what we and other …..groups are and do, rather than what we aren't and don't do, these encounters will perhaps become more affirming and fair (1995:p356).

The experiences reported by many of the younger respondents in this study point to their 'partial' inclusion within social work education. Although this may result from ambivalence, or worse, following the decision that younger students should no longer be prevented from entering social work programmes, the challenge now would seem to be to further understand their particular needs and experiences, the challenges they face and the strengths they bring to the learning group, in the same way as has previously been done in relation to mature entrants. Indeed, the critical role of strengths-based practice is familiar to many of us and elucidated particularly clearly by Houston (2008:p13). Many of the experiences reported by students resonate with Bowl's account of the 'symbolic violence' done to the self-concept of older non-traditional students (2001: p153). Complex issues concerning how to work effectively with 'difference' of a new and additional dimension require further examination. As Treacher argues, it will not be sufficient to call for 'tolerance' as:

Tolerance as an injunction drains difficulty. It leaves unanswered a whole set of issues … tolerance and gratitude always involve power relations and unspoken demands for the other to be grateful that they have been recognised … the other is kept in their place and [those] in power remain precisely there… (2006:p31)

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