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Title: Left behind: Exploring how mainstream social work students see themselves compared to the “best and brightest”

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Abstract

Over the past ten years, fast-track social work qualifying training routes have been introduced and rapidly expanded in England. These programmes justify their existence through rhetoric that implies their students are superior to other students, and therefore require special privilege – the “best and brightest”. When evaluating fast-tracks, the approach taken largely ignores their broader public impact, including how they impact on the majority of social work students who continue to qualify through mainstream university social work education. This exploratory study seeks to gain an understanding of the impact that these changes have had on mainstream social work students, and in particular how these students see themselves in relation to fast-track students. Based on the principles of democratic evaluation, brief and anonymous questionnaires were sent to all postgraduate social work students at two universities in England. The findings suggest that while mainstream students do not generally perceive themselves as being inferior future practitioners, they do recognise the financial and symbolic inequity they are subjected to, in particular as a result of their qualifying courses receiving significantly less financial support. Findings related to

participants' reasoning for not applying to fast-tracks, and how views differ based on demographics, are also explored.

Keywords: fast-track education, social work, democratic evaluation, best and brightest, elitism.

Introduction

Over the past ten years, fast-track social work qualifying training routes (fast-tracks), have gradually been introduced and expanded in England. Previously social work education in England was dominated by three year undergraduate degrees and two year postgraduate programmes, undertaken within universities (mainstreams). The first fast-track, Step up to Social Work (Step Up), was established in 2010 and focused on children and family social work (Children's Workforce Development Council, 2010). Since then two additional fast-tracks have been introduced and received government endorsement and funding: Frontline, also focusing on children and family social work (MacAlister et al., 2012), and Think Ahead, focusing on mental health social work (Clifton & Thorley, 2014). Fast-track programmes are all at postgraduate level and involve social workers qualifying in just over a year, receiving disproportionately large financial support to do so. A key selling point of fast-tracks is that they claim to attract the "best and brightest" or "talented individuals" in a way that other programmes cannot (Hanley, 2019a). There are important differences between the various fast-track programmes. For example, while Step Up and Frontline both focus on social work with children and families, Step Up is not subject to the same controversial influence from private management consultancies as Frontline (SocialWhatNow, 2020). However, together fast-tracks represent an ideological movement in social work education that warrants collective analysis (Hanley, 2019b)

The point has been made that the very existence of fast-tracks, which ostensibly siphon off superior students to a route that is faster and better supported, inherently problematizes the majority of students and practitioners who do not qualify through these routes, implying some level of deficit within them, and suggesting they are not worthy of similar investment (Gore et al., 2016). In relation to social work fast-tracks, Murphy (2016) has suggested this amounts to the creation of an elite "officer class" of social workers (p.279). These points become all the more prescient when it is recognised that social workers qualifying through fast-tracks are more likely to be

white, male, middle class, not have a disability and not have caring responsibilities (Hanley, 2019a). Drawing on the work of Kushner (2017) and the principles of democratic evaluation, this article presents the findings of an exploratory study looking at the impact that these changes have had on students who remain on mainstreams, and in particular how they perceive themselves in relation to fast-track students.

Good Social Worker?

In the proposal report for Frontline, the authors suggest, “a number of reviews and academic studies have identified the expertise and attributes that are required to make a good social worker” (MacAlister et al., 2012, p.16). While a list of qualities is then provided, including being compassionate and collaborative, the overwhelming message from the report is that prior academic attainment is the key measure for predicting a good social worker, in particular focusing on those who attended particularly selective universities. Similar sentiments are expressed in subsequent reports written by proponents of fast-tracks (for example, Clifton and Thorley, 2014; Narey, 2014). However, rather than presenting an objective measure for what makes a good social worker, reports of this nature tend to perpetuate negative discourses around social work students, masking the fact that these issues are far from settled (Hanley, 2019b). There is limited evidence that a strong academic background should be the central focus of social work student recruitment, and there are in fact several studies where concerns have been raised that social workers selected for their academic background can struggle with building relationships and showing empathy (Bogo et al., 2006; Dillon, 2007). Prior academic achievement is not even necessarily an indication of future academic potential in social work, and Jones (2006) found that students who accessed social work qualifying education through access routes (those without traditional academic credentials) were achieving to the same academic standard as other students by the end of their second year studying. Notably, the ability of fast-tracks to even select students with markedly better prior academic achievement is starting to be called into question, and Frontline have recently had to lower their entry criteria in response to failures to meet their contractual obligations around recruitment (Turner & Blackwell, 2019).

As part of a literature review looking at post-qualifying education for social workers, Pearce et al. (2015) found that there was no consistent measurement of quality in relation to social work practice. This has not stopped ongoing attempts to quantify and

measure the quality of social work and social work student practice in England, most notably using metrics derived from motivational interviewing (Domakin, 2019; Forrester et al., 2019). While these researchers take significant efforts to justify their measurement models, they also start with preconceived notions about what aspects of the social work role are worth targeting and what outcomes were worth measuring. Significantly, there are also a number of English studies looking at service user perspectives on what makes a good social worker, and these tend to highlight very different areas than those discussed above, for example, continuity of worker (Wilberforce et al., 2019), being on their side (Manthorpe et al., 2008), being a friend (Beresford et al., 2008) and trust (Cossar et al., 2016). In research with children involved with statutory services, Stabler et al. (2020) found that there was no archetypal good social worker, and that similar social workers were experienced very differently by different children.

There are of course other perspectives that have not been referenced here, including the views of practitioners, students, managers, regulators, the public, politicians, and the media, all of whom are liable to give divergent and sometimes contradictory accounts of what makes a good social worker and how this should be measured. There are also likely to be varying international perspectives, although it is noteworthy that a recent study from Hong Kong exploring the perceptions of service users from both adult and children's services found that they also raised points around social workers' willingness to be an ally and building friendship-like relationships (Kam, 2019). As a result this uncertain picture, Cornish (2011) suggests that social work is actually characterised more by not-knowing than knowing, and that we should therefore be more focused on negative capabilities, including areas like open-mindedness, attentiveness to diversity and suspension of the ego. Unfortunately, irrespective of these discussions and debates, in practice what is most likely to be the measure of a good social worker is an ability to meet the needs of IT systems and managerial targets, in particular case throughput (Wilkins and Antonopoulou, 2018; Harris, 2019). Based on this analysis, rather than focusing on quantifying what makes a good social worker, or whether fast-track social workers or mainstream social workers will be superior, as has been attempted elsewhere (Maxwell et al., 2016; Dartington Social Research Unit (DSRU), 2017), this research instead focused on the perceptions of students, in line with the principles of democratic evaluation.

Democratic Evaluation

Democratic evaluation is an inclusive approach to evaluation that advocates for public programmes to be evaluated within the sphere of public valuing (a democratic concern) rather than positioning public valuing within the activities of these programmes (a partial concern) (Kushner, 2017). The need for democratic evaluation in programmes that are new or innovative is particularly significant, as they create conflicts of value, strong and contradictory reactions, tend to be highly politicised and there is usually limited agreement around the relevant information required for decision making (Norris, 2015). Democratic evaluation therefore requires evaluators to look beyond restrictive metrics or outcome targets, and instead consider the broader public impact that public programmes have, as well as their own role in the evaluative process. There is an increasing acknowledgement in the social work literature that policy decisions are being made with a distinct lack of democratic evaluation, usually involving a small group of actors with special access making politically, financially, personally and/or ideologically motivated choices in highly opaque ways (Tunstall, 2019; Jones, 2019; Purcell, 2020). In these circumstances, the judgement of whether a programme has merit becomes a political question, and merit needs to be interpreted in relation to who is professing it, and their potential motivations. As Kushner (2017) identifies, “not infrequently, the action has been decided upon and evaluation is commissioned to guide it or, simply, to legitimate it with an evidence base” (p.6).

This can also be seen in the evaluations of fast-tracks that have been carried out up to this point, which tend to be either commissioned by the government (Smith et al., 2013; Baginsky and Teague, 2013; Baginsky and Manthorpe, 2014; Maxwell et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2018; Scourfield et al., 2020), the fast-track organisation itself (Smith et al., 2019) or by a partner organisations (DSRU, 2017). Despite regularly identifying serious deficits with fast-tracks, these evaluations all conclude with relatively positive judgements on the merits and potential of fast-tracks. Taking a recent example, the 2019 evaluation of Think Ahead raises serious concerns relating to the programme, including higher than average student stress, out of touch teaching, low attainment rates, the rushed nature of the programme, concerns about retention, a lack of support for those with additional needs, organisational and coordination failures, poor student attendance, the mismanagement of service user involvement, students feeling they had been mis-sold an idealised version of social work, and

problems with the student unit model (Smith et al., 2019). However, the evaluators are clear that they do not see these issues as relating to the model of training, but most issues are explained away as relating to the infancy of the programme, and the need for some “fine tuning” (p.43). The evaluation also places substantial blame for the deficits on placement providers, rather than the programme, failing to adequately acknowledge that one of the central justifications for Think Ahead was a promise of providing higher quality placements (Clifton and Thorley, 2014).

The concerns raised in the evaluation are contrasted throughout with reference to the largely undefined “potential” of Think Ahead, which is left unquestioned, and a final conclusion that the programme is “worthy of continued support and further development” (p.14). This conclusion can then be reported by proponents of fast-tracks, alongside either limited or no mention of the serious deficits that were also identified. This can be seen in the 2020 Chief Social Worker for Adults’ annual report, where that quoted conclusion alone was reported, with no associated acknowledgement or analysis of the litany of concerns also raised, or the wider debates surrounding fast-tracks (Leddra and Harvey, 2020).

Being able to point to “official” evaluations, either as ongoing or concluded, is very valuable to those trying to implement new public programmes, including keeping critics occupied as they wait for the results, discouraging or delaying more penetrating scrutiny, signalling a willingness to learn, buying time for the programme to become established, and controlling how the evaluation occurs, when the results are released, and who undertakes it (Kushner, 2017). These evaluations also rarely engage with the wider public concerns and academic debates surrounding fast-tracks, and when they do it is done briefly or in passing. Looking again at the Think Ahead evaluation, Smith et al. (2019) only briefly raise the fact that fast-track students are considered elite, and this consideration is limited to how to support the fast-track students to manage the expectations that come with this, rather than the potential impact that this has on the profession overall, or on those students left behind. The lack of democratic evaluation around fast-tracks can also be seen in the increasing reliance on whistle-blowers, journalists and freedom of information requests to raise serious concerns that were unreported in these evaluation reports (for example, Turner & Blackwell, 2019; Turner, 2020).

This analysis suggests that the evaluations that we have seen up to this point fit more within the description of an autocratic evaluation, or a conditional service that is provided to government agencies, with the goal of providing outside validation for a policy (MacDonald, 1987). There is a danger in these types of evaluations that the evaluators themselves become co-opted into the change they are evaluating, either consciously or subconsciously being motivated by the fact that a positive evaluation is likely to lead to further funding to undertake future evaluations (Kushner, 2017). This can be seen played out in the evaluations of fast-tracks, where the same researchers have been successively appointed to undertake different, but similar, evaluations (Smith et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2019). This can also be seen in the use of the Children's Social Care Research and Development Centre (CASCADE), who were commissioned to undertake an evaluation of the Frontline pilot (Maxwell et al., 2016), and subsequently an additional project looking at the retention rates of graduates from Step Up and Frontline (Scourfield et al., 2020). Notably, following the initial (and largely positive) Frontline evaluation, CASCADE were also chosen to be a research partner of the publically funded What Works Centre for Children's Social Care, an organisation that has been linked ideologically and politically to fast-track education (Tunstall, 2019; Jones, 2019; Purcell, 2020). Furthermore, the current director of CASCADE was also the first academic director of Frontline (Roberts, 2015). While these evaluators are likely acting in good faith undertaking these evaluations, it certainly seems worth asking whether it would be more democratic for these evaluations to be undertaken by alternative organisations or individuals who are less likely to be influenced by the potential for future funding and their close personal and professional connections.

Kushner (2017) notes, "it is a democratic right for participants to be represented in their own terms and not just held accountable for generic performance indicators" (p.76). However, in the evaluations discussed above, there tends to be either no input from mainstream social work students (Smith et al., 2013; Baginsky and Teague, 2013; Baginsky and Manthorpe, 2014; Scourfield et al., 2020) or their input is restricted to the generation of comparative data through quantitative surveys or assessment elements (Maxwell et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2019). In a rare exception, Smith et al. (2018), in their longitudinal evaluation of Step Up graduates, included feedback from mainstream students; however this was restricted to discussions around career

trajectories, and the data collection took place several years after they had graduated (Smith et al., 2018). In contrast, Step Up students have had several government commissioned evaluations dedicated specifically to their views and perspectives (Baginsky and Teague, 2013; Baginsky and Manthorpe, 2013). This pattern of ignoring or marginalising the perspectives of students on mainstreams can be considered an extension of the ideology behind fast-tracks that are founded on principles that some students are more worthy and important than others.

Methodology

This research seeks to partially remedy the democratic deficits in fast-track evaluations through examining the views of mainstream social work students. The research sought to answer the following questions:

- What are the perceptions of mainstream students of fast-track students?
- What are the perceptions of mainstream students of themselves in light of the proliferation of fast-tracks?
- What can be learned about these perceptions through comparing them with demographic information?
- What does this tell us about contemporary reform in social work education?

Ethical approval was obtained from one of the sample universities' research ethics boards. The decision to frame this research as an exploratory study was made because this is a topic area that has not been explored previously, and to develop initial findings and evidence that can be built upon and shape future research and evaluations (Stebbins, 2001). Therefore, this study does not claim to be generalizable, but rather provides necessary insights into the potential impact that the introduction of fast-tracks has had on the wider student population in social work education. The sample for this study was made up of current postgraduate social work students who were not obtaining their qualification through a fast-track. Undergraduate social work students were excluded from the sample to ensure any themes raised related to the difference between routes, rather than levels (all fast-track programmes are at postgraduate level). No other inclusion or exclusion criteria were applied. Researcher contacts were utilised in order to distribute the questionnaire to all postgraduate social work students at two different universities, both based in the south of England, one in London. A link to an online and anonymous questionnaire was sent to all potential

participants at these universities. Using university contacts was chosen as the approach to avoid the maleficence that could occur if the questionnaire was distributed to participants in another way, for example through social media.

The exploratory nature of this study meant that questionnaires were based on both open and closed questions presented in an integrated way (Stebbins, 2001). The quantitative data collection included some basic demographic information. Participants were asked to provide details of their age, gender, ethnicity and social class. As part of prioritising the views of the participants, the decision was made to allow participants to self-report their social class as either working class, middle class, upper class or don't know, and no definition of social class was provided. However, acknowledgement needs to be made that when asked about their social class, people are frequently inaccurate, including one study finding that 47% of middle class individuals in Britain self-identified as working class (British Social Attitudes Survey, 2016). Participants were also asked about their previous engagement and interactions with fast-tracks. If participants were found to have no prior knowledge of fast-tracks, then the questionnaire ceased after that question, preventing those with no knowledge of these other qualifying routes from making determinations of the students on these programmes.

A decision was made for participants to compare themselves to fast-track students based on the nine domains of the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) for social work (British Association of Social Work (BASW), 2018). The nine domains are: professionalism, values and ethics, diversity and equality, rights, justice and economic wellbeing, knowledge, critical reflection and analysis, skills and interventions, contexts and organisations and professional leadership. As opposed to other national standards that have been used to assess social work students and practitioners, the PCF domains are considered to be relatively holistic and integrated in how they characterise social work (Higgins et al., 2016). However, as was outlined above, there remains no clear evidence of what makes a good social worker, and standards of this nature are always a product of their time and context (Gordon & Dunworth, 2017). Therefore, no attempt will be made here to measure the PCFs beyond the views of individual participants, and the use of the PCFs is instead justified based on simplicity and practicality: the domains are introduced to students upon entry to a qualifying social work course, ensuring familiarity, and they also cover all stages of a social

worker's career, meaning any valuation based on these encapsulates a valuation of the potential of a social worker throughout their career (BASW, 2018).

Data collection utilised Likert scaling questions, asking participants whether they think fast-track students will perform better as social workers than students on their cohort in relation to the nine PCF domains. Participants were also asked a general question on a similar Likert scale about whether, overall, they believed that students on their cohorts would be better social workers than fast-track students. Participants were then asked to expand in open text formats on why they had responded as they had. A final open question was also included asking participants what they saw as the main differences between students on their cohorts and students on fast-track cohorts. This questions was asked in purely qualitative terms because there was a strong desire from the researcher not to lead participants (ie. through indicating potential differences). The qualitative sections of the questionnaires were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) model of thematic analysis.

There are some important limitations to this study that need to be acknowledged. The demographic data based on ethnicity was not broken down beyond BAME and white. This was done for the sake of simplicity in analysing the findings, and to allow comparisons with the ethnicity data provided elsewhere (Skills for Care, 2019). However, this reductionist approach would not be chosen again by the researcher. There was also a missed opportunity to collect data on participants with a disability. The Likert scales that were utilised could have asked for a direct comparison between students on each programme, rather than asking if they believe they will be better social workers, where a disagreement could mean either that one group will be better, or that they will be both be equal, leading to a lack of clarity. Considering the importance of participant views in democratic evaluation, it could also be considered a limitation that a survey was used instead of undertaking face-to-face interviews (Kushner, 2017). However, this decision was made to facilitate a greater number of voices and perspectives to be heard, as well as to more clearly protect anonymity of the participants.

Findings

Demographic Information

The questionnaire was sent to a total of 133 postgraduate social work students across two universities, and received 60 responses, representing a 45.11% response rate. This response rate could be considered low, being less than 50%; however, Nulty (2008) found that in higher education settings, where students are constantly bombarded with requests for feedback and evaluations, the average survey response rate was in fact 33%, with higher numbers only achieved when students were provided with substantial incentives.

83.3% of participants described themselves as female and 16.7% male. This is broadly in line with the demographics of social work postgraduate education, where 84% and 16% of students describe themselves as female and male respectively (Skills for Care, 2019). Exactly two thirds of participants described themselves as being Black Asian or Ethnic Minority (BAME), with the other third describing themselves as white. This is significantly different to the wider social work postgraduate student population, where 64% of participants are white, and 36% are BAME (Skills for Care, 2019). This can potentially be explained by one of the sample universities being located in London, where the general population are more likely to be BAME (Office for National Statistics, 2011). Concerns have been raised about the low number of BAME students on fast-tracks (Hanley, 2019a), and so this demographic disparity can be seen as an opportunity to provide these students with a voice on how they experience this disproportionality. Therefore, while not being representative, from a democratic evaluation perspective being able to capture a student population that was two thirds BAME could also be considered to be a strength. Of the participants who identified with a particular class, 37 (61.7%) described themselves as working class, 15 (25%) as middle class, and 8 (13.3%) stated that they didn't know. Participants were also asked to put themselves into one of five age groups. 45% of participants stated that they were between the ages of 20-30, 30% aged 31-40, 15% aged 41-50 and 10% aged 51-60. No participants declared that they were in the 60+ demographic.

Knowledge and Engagement with Fast-Tracks

A full breakdown of the fast-tracks that participants had heard of and applied for is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Engagement with Fast-Tracks

| Route | Heard of | Applied for |
|-------------|------------|-------------|
| Frontline | 41 (68.3%) | 15 (25%) |
| Think Ahead | 30 (50%) | 7 (11.7%) |
| Step Up | 46 (76.7%) | 8 (13.3%) |
| None | 11 (18.3%) | 39 (65%) |

Most participants had heard of at least one fast-track, with only 11 stating they had not heard of any. Of the participants who described themselves as middle class, one third had applied for at least one fast-track, and 20% had never heard of fast-tracks. These numbers are only slightly above those who described themselves as working class, of whom 32.4% applied for a fast-track, and 18.9% stated that they had never heard of fast-tracks. There were significant disparities based on other demographics, however. 50% of the participants describing themselves as white had applied for a fast-track, compared to just 27.5% of BAME participants. BAME participants were also substantially less likely to have heard of fast-tracks, with 25% having not heard of any, compared to only 5% of white participants. A similar correlation can be seen in looking at gender, with 50% of male participants having applied for a fast-track, compared to only 32% of female participants. Only 1 male participant (10%) had not heard of any fast-track programme, compared to 20% of female participants. Unsurprisingly based on these demographics, all white male participants had heard of fast-tracks, and two thirds had applied to them. From an age group perspective, 37.04% of participants from ages 20-30 had applied for a fast-track, compared to 44.44% from ages 31-40, 22.22% from 41-50 and 33.33% from ages 51-60.

The 39 participants who didn't apply for any fast-track were asked to expand on why they had not. The most prominent themes related to: personal choice, organisational context and lack of awareness.

Personal Choice

This theme related to when participants made a conscious decision not to apply to a fast-track, based on their own preference. For example, one participant stated they "didn't want to restrict myself to work with particular service users (children/mental health)". Another participant made reference to their passion about "human rights and

social justice”, areas they expected to be less prominent in fast-tracks. Compared to the large number of participants who stated that they had made a personal choice as a reason for not applying for fast-track programmes, only four participants explicitly stated that they didn’t apply for these courses due to not being qualified enough. This suggests that entry criteria may not be as important in determining the recruitment on to fast-tracks as other factors, including how they use marketing and the model they employ.

Organisational Context

Concerns were also raised by participants about the organisational approaches that fast-tracks utilise. Several students raised concerns about the fast-track model, including one participant stating they “don't think it's a good idea to fast-track such an important subject as social work, where so much research, skill development and understanding in such a complex area is needed”. Linked to this point, several participants raised concerns about their ability to practically engage with the requirements of fast-tracks. One participant explicitly stated that they “couldn’t afford to go into residential for 5 to 6 weeks away from family”, alluding to the summer institutes that are obligatory for students on Frontline and Think Ahead courses. Other participants stated that they were “too occupied” or “too busy” to be able to undertake the onerous application process. Research has shown that it takes significant financial and social capital to apply to selective higher education courses, in particular when the chance of rejection is high (Isopahkala-Bouret, 2020). This suggests that despite the large financial incentives these programmes offer, they are still likely to disproportionately attract students who have this social and economic capital.

Lack of Awareness

The most common reason for not applying was that the participants didn’t know about the programmes at the time, or they had a misperception about them that led them not to apply. This included several participants who stated that they applied late or missed the deadline, and others who stated that they just didn’t know about fast-tracks before starting their mainstream course. There were also participants who didn’t apply due to misperceptions about fast-tracks, including that they didn’t think they would be fully qualified, and that they didn’t know there was an adult focused fast-track. This further

suggests that the marketing of fast-tracks may not be reaching or targeting all populations equally.

Comparison with Fast-Tracks

This section will examine the data gathered from participants in relation to how they perceive fast-track students. After the 11 participants who had not heard of any fast-track programme were excluded, the remaining participants were asked to provide their opinion on whether fast-track students would perform better as social workers in relation to the 9 PCF domains (BASW, 2018). The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Fast-track students will perform better throughout their careers in relation to (domain):

| Domain | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|--|----------------|---------|-----------|-----------|-------------------|
| Professionalism | 3(6.1%) | 3(6.1%) | 21(42.9%) | 14(28.6%) | 8(16.3%) |
| Values and Ethics | 1(2%) | 0(0%) | 21(42.9%) | 15(30.6%) | 12(24.5%) |
| Diversity and Equality | 1(2%) | 0(0%) | 23(46.9%) | 12(24.5%) | 13(26.5%) |
| Rights, Justice and Economic Wellbeing | 1(2%) | 1(2%) | 22(44.9%) | 14(28.6%) | 11(22.4%) |
| Knowledge | 3(6.1%) | 1(2%) | 19(38.8%) | 12(24.5%) | 14(28.6%) |
| Critical Reflection and Analysis | 1(2%) | 3(6.1%) | 20(40.8%) | 12(24.5%) | 13(26.5%) |
| Skills and Interventions | 4(8.2%) | 4(8.2%) | 20(40.8%) | 13(26.5%) | 8(16.3%) |
| Contexts and Organizations | 5(10.2%) | 4(8.2%) | 18(36.7%) | 15(30.6%) | 7(14.3%) |

| | | | | | |
|-------------------------|---------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| Professional Leadership | 4(8.2%) | 9(18.4%) | 18(36.7) | 9(18.4%) | 9(18.4%) |
|-------------------------|---------|----------|----------|----------|----------|

The largest percentage of participants for every question responded in the neutral, potentially indicating a large level of uncertainty about what particular differences in ability fast-track students are supposed to have compared to the participants in this study. This is also in line with the research presented above showing there is general lack of certainty about what makes a good social worker. On every metric participants were more likely to disagree or strongly disagree than agree or strongly agree that fast-track students would perform better than them as social workers in that area. The three responses that participants were most likely to agree or strongly agree that fast-track students would perform better were skills and interventions, contexts and organisations, and in particular professional leadership. However, even within these metrics more participants disagreed or strongly disagreed. The areas that were rated least favourably for fast-track students were diversity and equality, and values and ethics, both with only a single participant agreeing or strongly agreeing that fast-track students are likely to perform better.

In the follow up question, participants were asked to compare themselves to fast-track students more generally, and the results of this are outlined in table 3.

Table 3: Overall students on my programme will be better social workers than fast-track students?

| Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|----------------|-----------|-----------|----------|-------------------|
| 6(12.2%) | 12(24.5%) | 17(34.7%) | 8(16.3%) | 6(12.2%) |

Again here more participants chose to give a neutral response than any of the other options; however, more participants felt able to give a non-neutral answer on this question than any of the PCF domain questions. This could stem from the subjective nature of what makes a good social worker, and each participant may have their own conception of this that they do not necessarily see represented in the PCF domains. Interestingly 36.73% of participants either agreed or strongly agreed that their cohort

would perform better as social workers throughout their careers, suggesting that these participants do not internalise the discourse around them not being the “best and brightest”. However, 28.6% of participants either disagreed or strongly disagreed that their cohort would perform better than fast-track students, suggesting that there is still a significant percentage of students who may internalise these perceived deficits.

Looking at how demographics may have influenced responses, participants that were more likely to either agree or strongly agree that their cohort will be better social workers than fast-track students included those who were white, working class, female and aged 31-40, although the differences between some demographics were minor and the numbers in some of these groupings were particularly small, meaning any correlations could be chance. These findings are outlined in Tables 4 and 5.

Table 4: Overall students on my programme will be better social workers than fast-track students? (Demographic)

| Demographic | Total | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|---------------|-------|----------------|-----------|------------|------------|-------------------|
| Working Class | 30 | 5 (16.7%) | 7 (23.3%) | 9 (30%) | 8 (26.7%) | 1 (3%) |
| Middle Class | 12 | 1 (8.3%) | 3 (25%) | 6 (50%) | 0 (0%) | 2 (16.7%) |
| BAME | 30 | 3 (10%) | 6 (20%) | 12 (40%) | 5 (16.67%) | 4 (13.33%) |
| White | 19 | 3 (15.8%) | 6 (31.6%) | 5 (26.3%) | 3 (15.8%) | 2 (10.5%) |
| Male | 9 | 0 (0%) | 2 (22.2%) | 2 (22.2%) | 2 (22.2%) | 3 (33.3%) |
| Female | 40 | 6 (15%) | 10 (25%) | 15 (37.5%) | 6 (15%) | 3 (7.5%) |

Table 5: Overall students on my programme will be better social workers than fast-track students? (Age)

| Age | Total | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|-------|-------|----------------|----------|-----------|----------|-------------------|
| 20-30 | 21 | 2 (9.5%) | 4 (19%) | 8 (38%) | 5 (24%) | 2 (9.5%) |
| 31-40 | 15 | 3 (20%) | 7(46.7%) | 2 (13.3%) | 1 (6.7%) | 2 (13.33%) |
| 41-50 | 7 | 1 (14.3%) | 0 (0%) | 4 (57.1%) | 0 (0%) | 2 (28.6%) |
| 51-60 | 5 | 0 (0%) | 1 (20%) | 3 (60%) | 1 (20%) | 0 (0%) |

The data were then analysed in relation to the previous interactions that participants have had with fast-track programmes. Table 6 presents these findings, showing that participants who were on placement with fast-track students were more likely to agree or strongly agree that their cohort would make better social workers. This suggests that when students get to know and work alongside fast-track students, some of the mystique that is built up in the discourse about these students may be stripped away.

Table 6: Overall students on my programme will be better social workers than fast-track students? (Interaction)

| | Total | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|----------------|-------|----------------|-----------|------------|-----------|-------------------|
| Interaction | 14 | 1 (7.14%) | 6 (42.9%) | 4 (28.6%) | 2 (14.3%) | 1 (7.1%) |
| No Interaction | 34 | 5 (14.7%) | 6 (17.6%) | 13 (38.2%) | 6 (17.6%) | 4 (11.8%) |

It was also interesting to look at the data based on whether participants had applied to a fast-track, and as outlined in Table 7. This suggests those who previously applied to fast-tracks were less likely to be positive about their present cohort, suggesting their rejection from fast-tracks had not necessarily tarnished their view of these programmes.

Table 7: Overall students on my programme will be better social workers than fast-track students? (Application)

| | Total | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|--------------|-------|----------------|-----------|------------|-----------|-------------------|
| Applied | 21 | 0 (0%) | 5 (23.8%) | 7 (33.3%) | 4 (19%) | 5 (23.9%) |
| Didn't Apply | 28 | 6 (17.8%) | 7 (25%) | 10 (35.7%) | 4 (14.3%) | 1 (3.6%) |

Qualitative Responses

Within the remaining qualitative questions, several key themes emerged: lack of diversity, elitism and financial advantage.

Lack of Diversity

An important theme in many of the responses related to a lack of diversity on fast-tracks. Some participants were explicit in raising these concerns, for example:

Looking at the pictures posted by Frontline each year, with their new cohort, I see a predominately white dominated picture. The students I met while on placement and not only, who were on Frontline, were all white British and most male white British in their late 20s early 30s.

This lack of diversity was also seen as a potential weakness of fast-tracks that could lead fast-track students to be less committed to the profession:

When you know hardship and you survive it, you are better equipped to stay in this profession when things don't go as planned. You have the relatable real life experience that you bring to the table when you sit down and talk to your service user. I would argue that from the diversity and life experience of my cohort, many have lived through discrimination, oppression, poverty, all prevalent issues for the service users we strive to support.

Notably this aligns with the finding presented above that showed participants rated fast-track students particularly negatively in relation to diversity and equality.

Elitism

Another common theme related to the status of fast-track students as elite and privileged. One participant identified this elitism in their interactions with fast-track students:

I felt that the fast track students had this aura around them, they seemed more relaxed. Frontline portrays its graduates as saviours who will change social work, so I wonder what role is assigned to postgraduate students in this archetypal dynamic.

Participants were also aware of the practical advantages that fast-track students experience, making reference to their guaranteed statutory placements and assessed and supported year in employment positions, their leadership training, and their career development opportunities. Several participants suggested that fast-track students are likely to be future leaders, linking this to the personalities that fast-tracks are likely to attract. This correlates to the finding above where participants graded fast-track students' professional leadership domain higher than any other.

It is important to note that despite these practical advantages, many participants saw advantages in the content of their mainstream programmes, specifically around "social justice", "theory and values", "research skills" and "anti-oppressive practice". One participant suggested that "the practicality of fast track works best if the student plans to stay in that job role and excel there, but having a greater academic base of knowledge may be more useful if a student plans to move between areas". This can be seen borne out in a recent reports of both Frontline (Scourfield et al., 2020) and Think Ahead (Smith et al., 2019), where fast-track students reported struggling in applying the narrow models they are taught with varied service users and in new practice environments. The generic approach to social work education on mainstreams was also highlighted as an advantage by several students, in particular the benefits of being able to make "an informed decisions" about specialising, rather than having to choose prior to starting a course.

Financial Disparities

The most common theme related to the large financial incentives that fast-track students receive that are not available to the participants. Of the participants who raised this theme, most stated the financial disparities in a matter of fact way "fast track students get paid" or "bursary for all students". However, other participants considered the implications of this difference in more depth. One participant stated "I have paid my tuition so I value my money and hard work; I have not got the degree for free". There was a notable tone of frustration in some of the responses when discussing this

financial inequity, including one participant who responded in all capital letters (the only response they gave all in capitals): 'FAST TRACK STUDENTS ARE STUDYING FOR FREE'. Several participants outlined the personal challenges and difficulties they have faced as a result of this financial disparity, as demonstrated in the following quotes from three different participants:

We only got a means tested NHS funds and partially covered fees, but still need to contribute to our fees. So most of us work alongside the course in different roles, mostly part-time or night shifts.

The fast track students get paid! ... Whereas I am dreading to know how I am going to manage financially whilst on a full time, unpaid placement.

Having this lived experience of struggling to pull through gives you a better understanding of the lives of the people you work with, and I feel this is the biggest difference.

Conclusion

The findings presented here suggest a democratic deficit in relation to the current approaches to evaluating fast-tracks. There are some worrying findings related to how and why social work students in England are being segregated into different routes. As was outlined above, there is no consistent measure by which to determine what makes a good social worker. In addition, the majority of the participants in this study do not see fast-track students as more likely to be better social workers than them. However, despite this, fast-track students experience a number of advantages, both financial and situational. Therefore, this disparity needs to be understood as a perpetuation of the student segregation that is engrained at all levels of the English education system, where discrimination, exclusion, elitism and the preservation of privilege are deemed acceptable in order to cultivate a singular vision of talent (Reay, 2017). This perpetuation of advantage and disadvantage should not be considered as an unintended consequence of fast-tracks, but instead a central feature of their ideological roots. This can be seen most egregiously in the proposals for Frontline and Think Ahead, both of which criticised the financial support provided to mainstream social work students, while at the same time endorsing that their students should receive financial support several times greater (MacAlister et al., 2012; Clifton & Thorley, 2014). This has led to a system where, despite the shorter duration and

private industry backing, it costs substantially more public investment to qualify a student through a fast-track (Cutmore & Roger, 2016). As an implication for social work educational reform, it is noteworthy that participants in this study were highly cognisant of the financial and symbolic inequity to which they were being subjected, and some expressed anger about this. We need to consider the impact this is having on these students and future practitioners. It is also noteworthy that many participants had strong opinions about the benefits of their mainstream programmes and cohorts, and mainstream programmes should consider how to build upon this finding in advocating for equity in social work education in England.

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