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## article

# The 'quality' of social work students in England: a genealogy of discourse 2002–18

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Students entering university-based social work qualifying education are increasingly constructed in policy as lacking in quality. This article presents a genealogy of discourse examining major reports and policy documents in England from 2002 to 2018 in order to understand how the dominant discourse around these students has changed since the introduction of the social work degree as the minimum qualification for practice. Key findings from the genealogy are that the quality of students has increasingly been described in negative terms, and this is linked in the discourse to a lack of employer involvement and the poor public perception of the profession. Fast-track social work qualifying programmes are presented as the self-evident answer to these issues within this discursive formation. However, it is ultimately shown that the current discursive direction may actually be leading to a self-fulfilling prophecy that deters students from joining the social work profession through any qualifying route.

**key words** social work education • genealogy of discourse • student quality • policy  
• fast-track education

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## Introduction

Despite years of constant reform in English social work education, government reports and policy documents continue to make habitual claims that the quality of social work qualifying education is poor, with a persistent thread of criticism being aimed at the quality of entrants applying to and being accepting onto qualifying courses (Holmstrom, 2014). For example, one of the three pillars of what are being described as 'the widest reaching reforms to children's social care and social work in a generation' is 'bringing the best into the profession' (DfE, 2016a: 4–5). If the widest-reaching reforms of a generation are to be predicated on the acceptance that the current quality of applicants entering social work courses is inadequate, then it

is reasonable to assume that this is based on well-established and settled evidence, rather than a taken-for-granted assumption based on the perpetuation of discursive formations over time. This article utilises Foucault's (1972) genealogical method to explore whether this is the case, tracing how the discourse around the recruitment of social work students has developed in major reports and policy documents in England since the social work degree was introduced as the minimum qualification for practice (DH, 2002).

The importance of the term 'genealogy', as opposed to history, is that history can be seen to imply a level of progress, an assumption that does not exist when presenting a genealogical record (Foucault, 1972). Similarly, there should be no assumption of progress in relation to social work education, and a recent Policy Exchange report came to the conclusion that 'the long-term outlook for the social work workforce is bleak' (Holmes et al, 2016: 6). The goal of a genealogy is not directed towards the cultivation of knowledge as its primary objective, but rather directed towards the generation of critique (Hook, 2007). In that regard, this genealogy presents some of the self-evident beliefs that have come to dominate the discourse around social work education, showing that they are perpetuated through persistent and repetitive discursive statements in government policy and reports, rather than firm evidence. Even more concerning, this genealogy demonstrates that the current changes being implemented to remedy some of the perceived deficits in social work education and the quality of applicants have the potential to be self-fulfilling in nature, creating the very circumstances that they are ostensibly trying to alleviate.

## Methodology

Anais (2013: 125) defines the methodology of the genealogy of discourse as a 'process concerned with telling the story of how a set of discursive and non-discursive practices come into being and interact to form a set of political, economic, moral, cultural and social institutions which define the limits of acceptable speaking, knowing and acting'. The genealogical method is used to disrupt this common-sense knowledge, in particular, around power relations and those who are responsible for shaping discourse and the resultant perceptions of truth (Foucault, 1977). Through this, a genealogical inquiry attempts to find errors, false appraisals and faulty calculations, and to demonstrate how these 'gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us' (Foucault, 1977: 146). This, in turn, creates a 'breach of self-evidence', disrupting these commonplace assumptions through being confronted with their history (Anderson, 2018: 462). Within discourses, the dominant discourse on a particular subject is the most prominent and powerful discursive formation, usually predicated on repetition by authority (Fairclough, 2001). It is this dominant discourse that is the focus of this genealogy.

Therefore, the goal of this genealogy is not to expose the actual quality of social work students entering qualifying programmes across time, or even to come to a determination as to what constitutes quality for the purposes of social work student selection, but instead to show that it is possible to problematise many of the taken-for-granted assumptions and beliefs in this area that persist today and are highly influential in guiding policy. The central research question was therefore: how has the dominant discourse changed, if at all, since 2002 in considering the quality of entrants onto social work qualifying training? A secondary research question considered was: what

impact has this discourse had on the way in which contemporary issues and reforms in social work education are constructed?

The genealogical enquiry focused primarily on government reports and policy documents in England in order to identify the dominant discourse that has shaped perceptions of knowledge in this area. However, recognising the plurality of contemporary governmentality and the impact that different power structures can have in generating the dominant discourse (Foucault, 2007), non-governmental reports that can be confidently shown to have a significant contribution to the dominant discourse were also included, for example, the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) proposals for the Frontline and Think Ahead programmes that now form a key part of the national policy on social work student recruitment (MacAlister et al, 2012; Clifton and Thorley, 2014). A number of major government reports and policy documents were reviewed but not included because they lacked specific reference to the quality of social work student applicants (for example, DH, 2010; QAA, 2016; DfE, 2018). The genealogy explored texts between 2002 and 2018, and a full list of the 37 texts included is outlined in Table 1. The start date for the genealogy, 2002, was specifically chosen by the researcher as the year that the government committed to the social work degree as the minimum

**Table 1: List of reports**

Name of report	Year	Organisation/author
<i>Requirements for social work training</i>	2002	Department of Health
<i>Every child matters</i>	2003	Department for Education and Skills
<i>The gateways to the professions report</i>	2005	Department for Education and Skills/Langlands, A.
<i>Options for excellence: Building the social care workforce of the future</i>	2006	Department for Education and Skills and Department of Health
<i>Social work education in England: Listening, learning, shaping</i>	2007	General Social Care Council
<i>Care matters: Time for change</i>	2007	Department for Education and Skills
<i>The children's plan: Building brighter futures</i>	2007	Department for Children, Schools and Families
<i>Building brighter futures: Next steps for the children's workforce</i>	2008	Department for Children, Schools and Families
<i>Raising standards: Social work education in England 2007-08</i>	2009	General Social Care Council
<i>The protection of children in England: A progress report</i>	2009	Laming, H.
<i>Building a safe confident future: The final report of the Social Work Task Force</i>	2009	Social Work Task Force
<i>Training of children and families social workers</i>	2009	House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Select Committee
<i>Building a safe and confident future: One year on: Progress report from the Social Work Reform Board</i>	2010	Social Work Reform Board

Table 1: Continued

Name of report	Year	Organisation/author
<i>Raising standards: Social work education in England 2008–09</i>	2010	General Social Care Council
<i>Invitation to tender and specification: Evaluation of CWDC's Step Up to Social Work programme</i>	2010	Children's Workforce Development Council
<i>The Munro review of child protection: Final report: A child centred system</i>	2011	Department for Education/ Munro, E.
<i>Regulating social work education (2001–12)</i>	2012	General Social Care Council
<i>An introduction to the qualifying standards and professional social work education</i>	2012	The College of Social Work
<i>Frontline: Improving the children's social work profession</i>	2012	Institute for Public Policy Research/MacAlister, J. et al
<i>Think Ahead: Meeting the workforce challenges in mental health social work</i>	2014	Institute for Public Policy Research/Clifton, J. and Thorley, C.
<i>Making the education of social workers consistently effective</i>	2014	Narey, M.
<i>Re-visioning social work education: An independent review</i>	2014	Croisdale-Appleby, D.
<i>Taking forward Professor Croisdale-Appleby's review of social work education</i>	2014	Department of Health
<i>Annual report by the Chief Social Worker for Adults: One year on</i>	2014	Chief Social Worker for Adults/ Lyn Romeo
<i>Interim report by the Chief Social Worker for Adults</i>	2015	Chief Social Worker for Adults/ Lyn Romeo
<i>Social work reform: Third report of session 2016–17</i>	2016a	House of Commons Education Committee
<i>Social work reform: Government response to the committee's third report of session 2016–17</i>	2016b	House of Commons Education Committee
<i>Putting children first: Delivering our vision for excellent children's social care</i>	2016a	Department for Education
<i>Children's social care reform: A vision for change</i>	2016b	Department for Education
<i>The five year forward view for mental health</i>	2016	Mental Health Task Force
<i>Department of Health strategic statement for social work with adults in England 2016–2020</i>	2016	Department of Health
<i>Regulating social workers: Policy statement</i>	2016	Department for Education and Department of Health
<i>Annual report by the Chief Social Worker for Adults</i>	2016	Chief Social Worker for Adults/ Lyn Romeo
<i>Annual report by the Chief Social Worker for Adults</i>	2017	Chief Social Worker for Adults/ Lyn Romeo
<i>Confidence in practice: Child and family social work assessment and accreditation system: Government consultation response</i>	2017	Department for Education
<i>Chief Social Worker for Adults annual report</i>	2018	Chief Social Worker for Adults/ Lyn Romeo
<i>The 2018 refresh of the professional capabilities framework</i>	2018	British Association of Social Work

qualification for practice, marking a significant moment in social work education that will be discussed in more detail in the following section (DH, 2002). This allows for a genealogical investigation that targets the lifespan of the current qualification for social work.

## Genealogy of discourse

### *The social work degree*

Around the turn of the century, several reports raised concerns about the difficulties in recruiting social work students, and recommended that a social work degree should be the new minimum qualification for practice (DH, 1998; JM Consulting, 1999; TOPSS England, 2000). As part of the wide-ranging reforms that followed these reports, *Requirements for social work training* (DH, 2002) was produced, the first section of which related to the recruitment of students onto social work programmes. It was outlined that higher education institutions (HEIs) needed to 'satisfy themselves that all entrants have the capability to meet the required standards by the end of their training and that they possess appropriate personal and intellectual qualities to be social workers' (DH, 2002: 2). The discourse here, in particular, the usage of the phrase 'satisfy themselves', shows that the policy placed significant faith in the role of the HEIs as gatekeepers in making these decisions, a point that has been acknowledged elsewhere (Orme et al, 2009). However, there is also a specific requirement to involve other stakeholders, such as employers, in the process of recruiting students, implying that they add some value to the recruitment process that would otherwise be lost.

That same year, the government produced the policy document *Every child matters* (DfES, 2003). The focus of *Every child matters* was on the reform of child services more generally; however, it did make some significant contributions in shaping the discourse on social work student recruitment. For example, some of the developing discourse around making working in this area 'a more attractive career option' through 'more flexible and attractive training routes into social work' is apparent (DfES, 2003: 83). Significantly, this report also introduces the concept of needing 'high-calibre' individuals in order to meet the needs of children and families, showing that this was an area of consideration long before the degree was fully evaluated or even introduced (DfES, 2003: 88). However, there is also a recognition of the value of the new degree and the changes that it is making 'to increase the competence to practice of those completing social work training' (DfES, 2003: 87).

A couple of years after *Every child matters* was introduced, the *Gateways to the professions report*, better known as the Langlands (2005) report, was completed at the request of the then Secretary of State for Education and Skills, with the explicit remit of looking at the paths that individuals take to joining various professions. While this report does look at a variety of professions, social work is a key focus throughout, and several significant discursive formations are evident in the report, including that 'a key obstacle to recruiting social workers is a lack of public understanding about what they do' (Langlands, 2005: 62). However, Langlands (2005) also recognises a steady rise in student enrolment onto social work programmes, showing encouraging progress since the degree was implemented.

The following year, the government produced *Options for excellence* (DfES and DH, 2006). One of the key achievements acknowledged in this report is 'an improved status

for the social care workforce through a new three-year social work degree course' (DfES and DH, 2006: 3). This appraisal is juxtaposed alongside later analysis focused on the public image problem that continues to impact on social work recruitment. Building on the statistics outlined in Langlands (2005), this report discusses increased recruitment onto social work degree programmes as a 'success to date' (DfES and DH, 2006: 4). Despite these mostly positive reports on the degree, this report continued to perpetuate the discourse of an 'option for the longer term' being to look at 'promoting flexible entry routes to social work' (DfES and DH, 2006: 37).

Around this same time, the General Social Care Council (GSCC) was becoming more established in its role as regulator of social workers and social work students. *Listening, learning, shaping* (GSCC, 2007) was one of the first major reports produced by the GSCC, and focused specifically on social work education. Like the workforce development reports that were discussed earlier, this report was substantially positive about the recruitment onto the social work degree, describing it as 'buoyant' (GSCC, 2007: 46). Alongside this, it is also stated that 'annual monitoring information suggests that social work employers are generally positive about their involvement in social work education and training' (GSCC, 2007: 35). Therefore, it can be concluded that while there were some ongoing concerns about the social work profession's public image, the discourse surrounding the recruitment of social work students at this time was predominantly positive.

### *The discourse shifts*

The dominant discourse around continued improvement in social work education started to change gradually in 2007. For example, *Care matters* (DfES, 2007: 127) outlines a need to review the degree programme to make sure that it equips social workers with the knowledge and skills to work 'in a modern children's workforce'. Similar to previous reports, it is also discussed that there is a need to improve the public image to ensure that social work is an 'attractive career choice', as well as a need to 'explore new initial training routes for social work' (DfES, 2007: 128). This shifting discourse towards a less optimistic appraisal of students entering social work education is also seen later that year in *The children's plan* (DCSF, 2007: 27), which makes a commitment to 'embark on a major, national, targeted marketing and communications campaign to encourage more people, and people from a wider range of professional backgrounds, to consider entering children's social work'. Alongside *Care matters* (DfES, 2007), *The children's plan* represented a clear shift in discourse towards constructing workforce planning for social work as insufficient. This is despite other reports at the time painting a substantially more positive picture of social work student recruitment (DfES and DH, 2006; GSCC, 2007). In a follow-up report to *The children's plan* the following year (DCSF, 2008: 21), the discourse around the need for change and improvement in the social work workforce continued, and was used to rationalise a £73 million investment in reforms that included looking at piloting fast-track routes into social work, offering accelerated entry and progression, and focusing on 'high achieving graduates'.

As part of a Foucauldian genealogical approach, it is important to recognise that while the dominant discourse is produced and reproduced through these types of texts, this discourse is also interacting with wider public debates and discourses, and this broader influence needs to be accounted for (Orgad, 2009). Therefore, it is pertinent

to acknowledge the wider discourse on social work at this time, a discourse that was dominated by the media, political and public outcry following the death of 'Baby P' in 2007 (Jones, 2014). This context could help to explain the sudden departure from the positive discourse that had been developing around social work student recruitment. A strong indication of the impact of this wider context can be seen in how the discourse changed in GSCC reports from 2007 to 2012, a change that will now be addressed.

The 2007 GSCC report on social work education in England that was referenced earlier (GSCC, 2007) presented a positive outlook for recruitment into qualifying courses. Even in the *Raising standards* report (GSCC, 2009: 6), with a name that evokes a discourse of deficit, the GSCC remains mostly positive about the calibre of students entering qualifying training, in particular, recognising the successes that social work has had in attracting 'students from non-traditional academic backgrounds and developing support for them to achieve'. The report goes on to describe the criteria for selection onto social work degree programmes as 'rigorous' (GSCC, 2009: 2). It is rather surprising, then, that by the time the follow-up report to this text came out in 2010, the discourse had become substantially more negative towards the quality of students entering social work programmes (GSCC, 2010). However, before moving on to that report, it is essential to look at two reports that were produced in the interim: the Laming (2009) report and the report of the Social Work Task Force (SWTF, 2009).

The Laming (2009) report into child protection was undeniably completed in the midst of the media, political and public outcry following the revelations of the 'Baby P' case (Jones, 2014), with Lord Laming (2009: 7) himself acknowledging the 'tight timescales' imposed by the political climate. One of the recommendations of this report was that there was a need to 'immediately address the inadequacy of the training and supply of frontline social workers' (Laming, 2009: 5). Similarly negative discourse about initial training for social work is perpetuated throughout this report, and the improvements in social work training that have been acknowledged in most of the reports up to this point are discounted expeditiously with a statement that 'whilst there have been significant improvements in some parts of the children's workforce, these have focused primarily on universal services, particularly education, and have not yet reached social workers' (Laming, 2009: 44).

The final report of the SWTF (2009: 4) produced that same year perpetuated this negative discourse further, with Moira Gibb, the Chair of the SWTF, stating in the foreword that there 'needs to be collaboration on addressing the poor image of the social work profession, which as it stands now is preventing good people from seeking to join the profession'. While the public image of social work was previously recognised as an issue, the statements around this had never so overtly specified that this was preventing good people from entering qualifying degree programmes, bringing with it significant implications for how the students entering social work at the time, as well as those already qualified and practising, were to be perceived. Throughout, the report indicates the types of applicants who would be preferred, using adjectives including 'high quality', 'confident', 'competent' and 'high calibre'. When these terms are juxtaposed alongside the calls for 'a new regime for testing and interviewing ... so that all students are of a high calibre' (SWTF, 2009: 7), the message is strongly implied that these are the characteristics that are lacking in current students and social workers. The noted deficits in these areas are then used to justify a policy direction that, in reflecting on the discourse outlined in previous reports in

this genealogy, was on the policy agenda for some time by stating that ‘we believe that government should review funding arrangements to provide incentives for high quality entrants to the social work profession’ (SWTF, 2009: 27).

In its follow-up report to *Raising standards*, the GSCC (2010) did not take the opportunity to contradict the findings of the Laming (2009) report and the SWTF (2009) report, which both presented a very different picture of social work recruitment than the GSCC (2009) had outlined the previous year. Instead, this new GSCC report ‘welcomes’ these reports and the recommendations, seeing them ‘as the start of a new era for social work’ that will ‘deliver a better trained, supported, rewarded and confident workforce’ (GSCC, 2010: 2). Building on this shift in discourse, by 2012, the GSCC had seemingly fully adopted the conviction that the students entering social work programmes were of poor quality, noting in a review of the degree from inception to 2012 that ‘concerns about the calibre of individuals studying to become social workers have regularly been raised during the lifetime of the GSCC’ (GSCC, 2012: 26), a statement that seems to disregard or contradict the mostly positive data and conclusions that were outlined in earlier reports (GSCC, 2007, 2009).

As a direct result of the recommendations of the SWTF, and the proposals of the follow-up *Social Work Reform Board* (2010) report, the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) was launched in 2012, which outlines the capabilities that social workers need to be able to display at all stages of their careers, including at the point of entry to training (TCSW, 2012). Of significance to this genealogy, for the first time, the PCF specifically outlined several domains to focus on when assessing potential students entering qualifying training for social work, domains that remain relatively unchanged today (BASW, 2018). These changes were met with minimal critical engagement or consideration of their longer-term implications (Taylor and Bogo, 2014). This shows the power inherent in the dominant discourse, and is also illustrated by their uncritical acceptance in the high-profile Munro (2011: 97) report before the capabilities were even finalised, where it is stated in relation to student recruitment that the new capabilities ‘should drive excellence in practice by helping recruit the right people’.

### *The discourse of fast tracks*

Despite a *House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Select Committee* (2009: 4) report that same year finding that ‘there is little scope for routinely compressing the content of the social work degrees into a shorter, “fast track” package’, in July 2009, then Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families Ed Balls announced the government’s intention to commission a new on-the-job training route for social work (Smith et al, 2013). This led to the Step Up to Social Work programme, an 18-month employer-led master’s programme, which had among its stated objectives to ‘increase the quality of social workers entering the profession’ and to ‘put the employer in the driving seat for the full process of recruitment, selection and training’ (CWDC, 2010: 5). The programme was implemented rapidly, going from being announced to commencement in one year, launching in September 2010 (Smith et al, 2013). The gradual development of the discursive formation presenting these types of alternative models of training as required was integral in creating the environment where this programme could be instituted so quickly. Through repetition by authority, the dominant discourse had become firmly established here: students were not of the right quality; employers were not involved enough; and fast-track social work programmes were a remedy for these issues.

A number of reports by the IPPR think tank were particularly significant in the rapid expansion of this dominant discourse in the years that followed. The first report proposed the Frontline programme, and this programme set out to 'provide work-based training for high-potential new recruits' and to 'help to attract the best people into one of Britain's toughest professions' (MacAlister et al, 2012: 2). Unlike previous reports, specific indications of what is meant by high-calibre recruits are outlined in this report, referencing students from Russell Group universities, and specifically Oxford and Cambridge, as the archetypal students that social work programmes should be courting. A specific concern is raised around the lack of students recruited onto postgraduate social work programmes who went to a 'top university' (MacAlister et al, 2012: 8). In isolation from the dominant discourse of the day, this text comes across as particularly confrontational in how it conceptualises social work education, including recruits onto social work qualifying courses, to the extent that one of the authors, Josh MacAlister, would later reflect that 'there were significant words and language used in that report which weren't very helpful' (Stevenson, 2018). However, when looked at alongside the genealogy of discourse that has been presented here thus far, it can be understood how a report of this nature was not only produced, but enthusiastically accepted and provided with substantial financial investment (DfE, 2013).

The second IPPR report of interest to this genealogy proposed a similar programme to Frontline for mental health social workers, dubbed Think Ahead (Clifton and Thorley, 2014). This report was specifically commissioned by the Department of Health to look at the feasibility of a fast-track mental health social work training scheme, and in the foreword, the then Minister of State for Care and Support states unambiguously that 'we need to do more to attract the best and the brightest into the profession' (Clifton and Thorley, 2014: 1). While not as critical in tone about current social work students and practitioners as the Frontline report had been (MacAlister et al, 2012), many of the same discursive formations were utilised, including the lack of quality in students being evidenced by the low numbers from a 'selective university' (Clifton and Thorley, 2014: 3) and the need to attract 'talented people' (Clifton and Thorley, 2014: 24). Similar to Frontline, the Think Ahead proposal garnered immediate government support, both in statements of support and financial incentives, and was launched in March 2015 (Think Ahead, 2017).

### *Croisdale-Appleby (2014) and Narey (2014)*

At the same time as the discourse around fast-track social work qualifying was taking hold through these influential reports, two separate reports into social work education were commissioned by the government, Croisdale-Appleby (2014) and Narey (2014). While, to a large extent, these reports repeated the discourse that had been built up to this point, they did play a significant role in perpetuating the discursive formations around the quality of students entering the profession and the role of fast tracks in alleviating these issues. Narey (2014), in particular, was highly critical towards the calibre of students entering social work training. He utilised evidence gathered in private interviews to paint a picture of current social work student recruits that was very much in line with the dominant discourse, for example, stating that 'I did not speak to a single employer who said that he or she was always satisfied with the calibre of students entering social work study' (Narey, 2014: 14), a statement that sets out an impossibly high

standard for graduates in any profession. [Narey \(2014: 15\)](#) also makes reference to ‘Russell Group Universities’ as the gold standard for student recruitment, stating that unlike social work programmes, they would never allow a student to study ‘with such indifferent grades’. It is clear, however, that this criticism is aimed at university-based programmes, and not the new fast-track schemes. [Narey \(2014\)](#) describes a joint meeting of newly qualified social workers from Step Up and from university programmes, stating that the difference in potential was ‘troublingly stark’ ([Narey, 2014: 30](#)). Interestingly, the successes of social work programmes in relation to the diversity of the student population are cast here as a negative, with [Narey \(2014: 16\)](#) stating that social work may carry too much of the ‘burden’ of widening participation initiatives.

The [House of Commons Education Committee \(2016a\)](#) would later reflect back and recognise that while the [Narey \(2014\)](#) report was generally criticised by the social work profession, [Croisdale-Appleby’s \(2014: 14\)](#) was ‘warmly welcomed by the sector’. Similar accounts of the response from the profession to these reports have been outlined elsewhere ([Jones, 2019](#)). However, any positivity at the time is only relative to the discourse that was seen elsewhere, and when compared to the discourse in earlier reports in this genealogy, it is clear that the message being perpetuated by [Croisdale-Appleby \(2014: 21\)](#) is still very strongly focused on ‘concerns about the calibre of some students’. In presenting the fast-track programmes as a potential solution to these concerns, [Croisdale-Appleby \(2014: 27\)](#), despite a more nuanced consideration of some of the potential unintended consequences, ultimately throws his support behind fast tracks, stating that ‘provided the courses themselves are rigorously assessed as being fit for purpose, the inclusion of additional numbers of proven high calibre entrants to the qualification process can only be of potential value in enhancing quality in the profession’. It was also clear from the government response to this report that it was this final conclusion that was most significant to how this report was to be interpreted, and rather than addressing the concerns about the unintended consequences of these programmes, the Croisdale-Appleby report was used as just one additional piece of evidence to promote Frontline, Think Ahead and Step Up, as well as ‘the ambition to recruit the best and brightest into social work’ ([DH, 2014: 9](#)).

### *Contemporary discourse*

In considering more contemporary reports, it becomes apparent that the discourse around student calibre being poor, and the potential for fast-track programmes to remedy this, has only become more enshrined. An example of how strong this dominant discourse has become can be seen in the few examples of when it is challenged. For example, the [House of Commons Education Committee \(2016a\)](#) raised concerns that despite insufficient evidence of the impact that they can have, the government has become too dependent on fast-track social work programmes. The government response to this report did not address this criticism at all, instead redoubling their commitment, stating that ‘we anticipate that by 2018 around 30% of new child and family social workers will come from fast-track routes, and up to 40% by 2020’ ([House of Commons Education Committee, 2016b: 6](#)).

This discourse has also been maintained in contemporary policy documents through regular and uncritical reference to the findings of previous reports that have been outlined here. For example, in *A vision for change* (DfE, 2016b: 5), plans for children's social care reform are outlined, and the Croisdale-Appleby (2014) and Narey (2014) reports are cited as evidence of the 'need to continue to bring the best and brightest people into social work'. That same year, the *Putting children first* (DfE, 2016a) report was produced to give more detail on what this vision would look like in practice. Again, specific reference is made to several earlier reports, including Munro (2011), Croisdale-Appleby (2014) and Narey (2014), to present the conclusion that those entering the profession are lacking in calibre, and that universities were not sufficiently responsive to the 'voice of the employer' (DfE, 2016a: 19). The promotion of fast tracks as the preferred qualifying route is also addressed unproblematically in recent policy documents addressing the new regulator (DfE and DH, 2016) and the proposed accreditation system (DfE, 2017).

This dominant discourse is most clearly seen in relation to social work with children; however, these discursive formations are increasingly being adopted in relation to adults as well, in particular, in relation to mental health social work. For example, the government's five-year mental health plan (MHTF, 2016) calls for an increase in the number of places on Think Ahead programmes. Alongside this recommendation, there is not a single mention of traditional university routes into social work. This uncritical acceptance of Think Ahead is further seen in the annual reports produced by the Chief Social Worker for Adults, where the programme is habitually promoted as integral to student recruitment (Romeo, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018), and the value of Think Ahead is explicitly stated to be its ability to bring 'bright' (Romeo, 2014: 18), 'high-potential' (Romeo, 2016: 20) and 'outstanding' (Romeo, 2017: 11) students into mental health social work. Furthermore, in the Department of Health's strategic paper on adult social work, Think Ahead is outlined as a key part of the department's plan for the profession from 2016 to 2020, ambitiously backing Think Ahead students to 'create future leaders of the profession, who can meet our goal of delivering parity of esteem between mental and physical health' (DH, 2016: 3).

## Discussion

This genealogy has shown the impact that the repetition of the dominant discourse, perpetuated through government reports and policy documents, can have on how issues are conceptualised and the resultant chosen routes of reform. There are four principal findings:

- 1 *The dominant discourse since 2002 has consistently presented employer involvement in social work student selection as self-evidently positive.* This has been unchallenged in the dominant discourse and remains a key factor in guiding contemporary reform.
- 2 *The dominant discourse since 2002 has gradually shifted from positive statements about student recruitment to concerns about the quality of students opting to enter and being accepted onto social work qualifying courses.* While a number of terms are used to describe the types of students who would be preferable, including 'talented',

- 'bright' and 'high calibre', most recently, this has shifted towards a focus on students from 'top universities', 'selective universities' and 'Russell Group graduates'.
- 3 *The dominant discourse has established the public perception of social work as a key contributing factor preventing these better students entering qualifying training.* Similar to the need for employer involvement, this has also been a key factor cited in justifying reform.
  - 4 *The dominant discourse is now firmly that fast-track programmes are self-evidently the answer to the major issues facing recruitment into the profession.* They provide a seemingly common-sense answer to the issues of student calibre, employer involvement and public perception.

The findings of this genealogy are not presented to object to the current dominant discourse, or to object to the policy direction that this dominant discourse has led to. Instead, the goal of this genealogy is to challenge the assumptions that have established this dominant discourse, showing that they are based not on settled knowledge, but instead on the repetition and proliferation of discursive formations that present a single construction of the current issues facing the profession. This discursive direction was only one of many possible directions; as was shown in many of the earlier reports presented in this genealogy, the discourse around social work student recruitment was, at times, substantially more positive. It is therefore worth considering the impact that a more positive discursive direction, focusing on the successes of the degree programme, positive employment figures and the leading role that social work programmes have had in relation to widening participation, could have had on social work student quality.

This point is even more pertinent when it is considered that the current discursive direction based around poor-quality students could, in fact, be deterring people from joining the social work profession, thereby becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. [Jones \(2019: 77\)](#) raises concerns that 'the government's funding and marketing preference for Frontline and other fast track social work training will undermine the two and three year degree programmes provided by universities'. Evidence of this has already started to be seen, and [Baginsky and Manthorpe \(2015\)](#) found that some Step Up students were dissuaded from traditional programmes due to the negative public perception of these routes. This can also be seen in Frontline's (2018) self-reported figures, where it is stated that of their 2018 cohort, 70 per cent had not considered other routes into the profession, showing that for these students, Frontline was the only perceived acceptable route into social work. Linked to these issues, [Moriarty and Manthorpe \(2018\)](#) cite evidence that a two-tiered system of education in social work is starting to develop and that social work educators increasingly question the viability of social work education outside of these fast-track programmes, as well as pointing to the closure of several programmes in recent years. Similarly, in a recent study of university-based social work academics, [Cleary \(2018\)](#) found a general tone of fatalism, with participants expressing a collective fear for the future of social work education in universities.

The perpetuation of this discursive direction may even create a situation where the perceived high-calibre graduates are less inclined to enter social work, including through a fast-track programme. [Gore et al \(2016\)](#), in examining similar discourse around fast-track programmes aimed at teachers in Australia, present a counter-narrative which suggests that the negative discourse can reduce the status of the profession to the point that it deters the best and brightest who may have wanted to

apply through any route. In light of the genealogy that has been presented here, it is certainly worth considering the application of this counter-narrative to contemporary social work education in England. If the persistent discursive message from the government is that social work as a profession lacks prestige, and that the calibre of applicants is insufficient, then this has the potential to dissuade students from joining any qualifying social work programme, as well as problematising those individuals currently working as social workers.

### Conclusion

Power is not merely a tool, but instead something that happens, and 'blindly accepting concepts as both common sense and natural is also an exercise of power' (Lewis, 2016: 329). Therefore, it can be considered that the perpetuation of the assumptions inherent in the dominant discourse that has been presented here is an exercise in power, and one that has been highly successful in guiding policy in this area over the past ten years. Cerna (2013) describes a policy direction based on path dependence as one where the policy commitment is so substantial that the political and financial costs of turning back render these non-options. Fast-track social work training schemes continue to enjoy overwhelming cross-party support and are now an integral part of social work education (Maxwell et al, 2016; Jones, 2019). Therefore, in considering fast-track social work programmes, it is apt to contemplate if we are down the path of no return, and whether it is now inevitable that this approach to social work education will become the dominant model. However, it is also worth recognising the historic fragility of political support for particular social work education routes and models, and whether if chinks or scandals start to present themselves in relation to these new fast-track programmes, or their graduates, commitment and support will similarly wane. One thing that the recent perpetuation of fast-track social work programmes does show is that it is possible to generate substantial political and financial support for social work education under certain circumstances. It would therefore be prudent to explore how to harness this support across social work education more broadly. Shifting the discourse towards one that is more positive around the achievements of all social work education would be a fundamental first step in generating this change.

There are some important limitations in this genealogy that need to be considered. Despite the large number of texts and potential texts that were reviewed, this genealogy presents only a snapshot of a specific period of 17 years, while the issues discussed here have been deliberated for a much longer period across the history of social work education. A key limitation of Foucauldian genealogies is that they tend to be based on selective readings of historical records, which casts doubt on both their historical and intellectual validity (Mollenhauer, 2014). It therefore has to be acknowledged that some reports or discourses may have been inadvertently misrepresented or omitted. Furthermore, any selective reading or inclusion could have also been influenced by the author's current position as a lecturer in a university social work team. There are important areas of discourse that were consciously excluded, including the discourse around service user involvement in student selection. This discourse was excluded because it has not been nearly as dominant in its consistency and policy influence as other discourses, for example, that of employer involvement. However, this does not change the fact that the genealogical representation that has been presented here is missing these elements.

### Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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