Project aims and research questions

Enhance conceptual, methodological, and empirical understandings of the distinctive nature of social work research and its contribution to human services policy and practice.

- What is the scope and quality of social work research in the human service fields of child protection, aged care and disability in Australia?
- What are the strengths and limitations of this body of research?
- What is the impact of social work research on human services delivery in the selected fields?
- What strategies can advance social work and human service research productivity, uptake and impact in Australia?

Project stages

- Stage 1: Mapping & assessing scope of social work research, inc.
  - Scoping reviews in 3 fields: ageing, disability, child protection
  - Comparative analyses between Australia & UK, and between social work, criminology, & social policy
  - Assessment of ARC-funded social work research

- Stage 2: Investigating research impact
  - Impact case studies developed: 4 in each field
  - Research Impact Forum: held in November: academic, research end user, industry perspectives on case studies & pathways to impact
  - Development of a ‘how to’ guide for social work researchers to maximise impact

- Stage 3: Research end user study
  - Interviews with up to 75 research end users (up to 25 in each field), inc. policy makers, managers, practitioners
  - Focus on understanding of social work research, particularly how it is used & its impact

- Stage 4: Strategies to advance innovation
  - Leading researcher study: interviews with 20 leading researchers – ideas for research training & capacity building, research production, links with practice
  - Development of an ‘Agenda for Australian Social Work Research’: strategy for improving capacity, international links, pathways to innovation

Some findings from scoping reviews

- Examined Australian social work research articles in 3 fields: focused on quantity, nature & range of the publications/studies
- Common criteria: approx. 10 year timeframe, at least 1 author social work qualified, journal articles, in English
- Many authors with just 1 publication in that field in the timeframe of the reviews
- High level of interdisciplinarity
- High level of publication in international journals
- Many publications in non-social work journals
- Much research on social issues (nature of social problems, marginalised groups, lived experiences) policy development, program delivery, but not a lot specifically on social work practice
- Not much service user engagement in research processes – e.g. design & delivery
- But much research had a ‘client focus’ – e.g. perspectives via qual research/surveys
Disability

- 124 SW papers between 2007 to 2015, average 13.8 p.a. & growing
- 3 authors accounted for 63.0% with most authors only publishing once.
- Most articles were published by interdisciplinary journals and 79.0% were authored by a multidisciplinary team.
- Research tended to be descriptive – dominant topics were health and wellbeing (n=34: 21.4%) community and civic participation (n=28: 22.6%).
- Gender, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, rural and remote issues and use of participatory methods are gaps.

Key messages for disability field

- Multidisciplinary teams is a plus
- Social work disability research makes a distinctive contribution; it is contextualised in service systems or policy, has a focus on community and civic participation and social relationships
- Perhaps need to make the social work connection explicit, in order to enhance SW research visibility and application in practice and education.

Australian social work research compared

- ERA 2012, ERA 2015, REF 2014: Within Australia, social work research quality rated well compared to criminology and policy & administration.
- SW productivity per FTE slightly lower; policy & administration generated around double the income.
- Most SW research funding from government and industry, about 20% Aust competitive grants (compared to 50% for crim)
- 30% of Australian submissions compared to 70% of UK submissions achieved a rating of excellent or world leading.
- Adding impact measures to Australia’s research assessment criteria likely to benefit social work.

Impact

What has changed as a result of the research – instrumental – conceptual – capacity

Public policy
- Influence on policy, influence or debate
- Changes to public policy, legislation, or regulations.
- Improved understanding or reframing of a problem leading to new strategies.
- Priority shifts in expenditure profiles or quantifiable reallocation of non-profit or public budgets.
- Improved community awareness of a social problem, based on research.

Impact on human service organisations or service delivery:
- Decisions by a human service organisation or industry body informed by research.
- Training programs have been developed or amended based on research.
- Clinical tools or practice guidelines developed or amended based on research.
- Improved understanding or reframing of problem leads to new services
- Take-up and use of new or improved service delivery products, practices or processes that aim to improve client or community experience or outcomes.

Engagement

“interaction between researchers and research end-users outside of academia, for the mutually beneficial transfer of knowledge, technologies, methods or resources”

Not the same but likely to be a pathway to impact
- Research funding (public sector or industry
- In-kind support for research
- Appointments to government advisory boards
- Contributions to human service organisations boards, committees, advocacy groups
- Advice to/consultation community groups, professional bodies, government.
- Submissions to public inquiries on industry-research related issues
- Presentations, seminars, lectures and workshops for human service organisations,
- Research reports for industry bodies – government and nongovernment
- Use of media/social media to communicate research
- Co-designing and collaborating on research events, symposia etc
- Mentoring external research partners – HDR internships
- Awards from industry for research or research activities
Development of 12 impact case studies

- Focused on engagement activities & (non-academic) impact of a program of research
- Selected on basis of most productive researchers (by journal publication) identified in scoping reviews
- Based on interviews with the researchers & other data sources
- Formatted with common template, inc.
  - Context – background/rationale for the research program
  - Research projects underpinning impact
  - Research outputs (i.e. academic publications)
  - Approach to impact
  - Impacts on public policy & legislation; human service organisations & service delivery; wellbeing of service users/communities
  - Engagement activities
  - Research income

Activity: case study examples

- Join a small group: child protection; disability; ageing and aged care
- Read through the case study
- Discuss in the small group:
  - What were the main (non-academic) impacts of the research?
  - How long did it take for impacts to be noticeable and lasting?
  - How did the researchers achieve these impacts? (e.g. engagement activities)
  - How were (or could) the impacts be verified?
  - What challenges did the researchers face in pursuing impact?
  - What are some lessons for future researchers based on this case study?
- Feedback in larger group on lessons for future researchers
- Discussion in larger group:
  - What research infrastructure is needed to facilitate research impact?
  - What would you like to see in a 'how to' guide for social work researchers?

Reflections

- All types of (good) research are useful - into social issues, organisational practices not only those framed as evidence-based practice
  - Inform policies, program design and implementation.
  - Innovative ways of working in the human services.
  - Extend the evidence base for interventions.
  - Strengthen professional foundations for practice impact and advocacy.
- Recognise different ways of operationalising ‘social work research’ & the limitations
- Theory development is vital! e.g., critical reflection requires theory.
- We need to understand how to ensure research can inform policies, program design & implementation – how research can facilitate innovation
- Research links universities to practice and wider human service sectors
- Research is crucial to place of social work in universities

Publications


Ageing & Aged Care

- Between 2007 and 2014 the average publications was consistent but low at 14.4 papers per year, with most (65.7%) only publishing once in this field.
- High interdisciplinary collaboration – most social work researchers published in a multidisciplinary team (89.8%) and in non social work journals (84.9%).
- High proportion (70%) of articles published in international journals.
- Main research topics were health (24.1%) and elder abuse (15.7%).
- A minority (24.1%) discussed social work specifically or included social workers as participants.
- A smaller minority (14.8%) involved older people in ‘additional’ research activities.

(Hughes, Bigby & Tilbury, 2016)
**Key messages for ageing & aged care field**

- Interdisciplinarity is high and a clear strength of social work research in this field.
- But is social work research becoming co-opted by health focus?
- Need more research examining the diversity and complexity of social work with older people and its outcomes.
- Need to increase involvement of older people in research.
- Need to increase funding base and support early career researchers.
- How to build the profile of ‘gerontological social work’ in Australia?

**Child Protection**

- 2007-2014 (7.5 year period) 255 papers with Australian SW authors, average 35 papers per annum
- 68% of authors published only once during the period; 15 authors published 6 or more (around 1 per annum).
- Australian researchers are not parochial – 40% of publications were in international journals (mostly child welfare journals rather than SW).
- Most common topics were out of home care and child protection systems (topics reflect most frequent authors).
- 47% non-empirical, 33% qualitative, 10% quantitative, 10% mixed methods.
  
  *(Tilbury, Hughes, Bigby & Osmond, 2017)*

**Key messages for child protection field**

- Large number of researchers is a plus, but once-only publishers is concerning – need to develop SW research careers.
- Sustained programs of research indicate depth and focus.
- Research has international significance.
- How to increase visibility of SW research base, given SW is a leading profession in the field.

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