SOCIAL WORK
at Edinburgh University | KNOWLEDGE INTO ACTION SINCE 1918

CENTENARY RESEARCH NOTES 2

Women in the Academy: A Case Study of Social Work Education in Scotland

INTRODUCTION

This project begins with the realisation that women in the academy fare less well than men across *all* disciplines: they are less likely to be promoted, they earn less pay, and that are much less likely to become professors. But what about women in a traditionally female-centred discipline such as social work? How does their experience mirror or contrast with this global picture? And what lessons can be learned (positive and negative) that might inform policy and practice in higher education in the future?

BACKGROUND

This project will use social work education in Scotland as a case study through which to explore the experiences of women in what has conventionally been a female-dominated environment, in academic and practice arenas alike. The first task will be to undertake a literature review of relevant policy and research documents. Demographic data will be gathered from the Heads of Social Work and an online survey will be sent to all current academics in social work education – we had originally thought to target women only, but realised that this would not tell the whole story, so we changed our plans. Interviews will be conducted with up to 20 women in social work education; this will include those who currently hold or have held a leadership role the last 10 years in HEIs. The findings will be of interest to government and research bodies (including the Equality Challenge Unit and the Royal Society of Scotland). They will be highly relevant to universities in Scotland and across the world as they seek to address gender inequalities in higher education.

THE PROJECT

Aim: To build new knowledge about gender in the academy by using a case-study of women in social work education in Scotland.

Objectives:

1) To gather statistical and demographic data on women academics in social work in Scotland, and to locate these within the wider context of the academy and the social work profession.
2) To gather qualitative evidence about the experiences of women in social work education in Scotland, locating this within wider research literature on gender norms, patriarchal structures, caring responsibilities, and neoliberalism in the academy.
3) To identify what has helped and hindered social work academic women's participation and progression in higher education.
4) To offer strategies (individual and collective) that might improve the position of women across the academy in the future.

Research questions:

1) What is the position of academic women now on social work education in universities in Scotland? Are some positions more likely to be held by men/women?
2) How far is this reflective of the norms and realities of the academy? Again, are there some positions that are more likely to be held by men/women?

3) How far is this reflective of the norms and realities of the social work profession? Is social work a 'women's profession' and what does this mean in practice?

4) How do academic women themselves experienced being and working in the social work academy in Scotland? (What are the challenges? How do they feel that promotion practices support or inhibit women? How does caring impact differentially on women and men? What about their successes and failures? Lessons learned? Strategies employed, individual and/or collective?)

5) How should the findings be understood analytically, and what might the implications be, for social work education and for the academic community more broadly?

Methodology:

We are delighted to report that the Carnegie Trust has decided to fund this research study, to be carried out between 1st April 2017 and 31st March 2018.

- This project will use a case-study approach; SWE in Scotland as the case study.
- The first task will be to undertake a literature review of relevant policy and research documents.
- Demographic data will then be gathered from the Heads of Social Work at the HEIs; information will also be sought from Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) and HESA.
- An online survey will be sent to all social work academics; this will include closed and open-ended questions.
- Interviews will be conducted with up to 20 women in social work education.
- Data will be analysed using SPSS and thematic analysis (using an applied grounded theory approach, with themes emerging from interviews and wider literature).
- Findings will be disseminated through formal mechanisms (writing and reports) and informal means (website, Twitter, blogs).

Professor Viv Cree, The University of Edinburgh, revised 19 June 2017