

# Earning and learning: the influence of secondment on retention rates in part-time social work qualifying education in England

Jo Moriarty<sup>1</sup>, Jill Manthorpe<sup>2</sup>, and Shereen Hussein<sup>3</sup>

**Summary:** Although there is widespread interest in social work education, very little of this has focused on the position of part-time students. This study reports on retention rates among social work students registering for part-time study between 1995-1998 in England, since this time-span is one where student characteristics were collected and can be anonymously linked to data about their chosen programme of study. It shows that students supported by employers were less likely to withdraw before completing their studies. However, access to secondment was differential with students with disabilities appearing to be less likely to be seconded or sponsored. The implications of these findings are discussed in light of new and sometimes controversial routes to social work qualifications in England.

**Keywords:** social work; higher education; part-time education; student retention; professional qualification; secondment; workforce planning

1. Research Fellow, King's College London, Social Care Workforce Research Unit
2. Professor of Social Work, King's College London, Social Care Workforce Research Unit
3. Principal Research Fellow (Chair), King's College London, Social Care Workforce Research Unit

**Address for correspondence:** Jo Moriarty, Research Fellow and Deputy Director, King's College London, Social Care Workforce Research Unit, Strand, London WC2R 2LS. jo.moriarty@kcl.ac.uk

**Acknowledgements and disclaimer:**

We are grateful to the General Social Care Council for having provided the data on which this article is based and for the help of Bharat Chauhan, Helen Wenman, John Barker and Fran Wiles, and for their advice and support. The Social Care Workforce Research Unit receives funding from the Department of Health Policy Research Programme. The views expressed here are those of the authors and not the Department of Health.

**Date of first (online) publication:**

## **Introduction**

Student retention is a priority across the whole of the higher education sector. In overall terms, the numbers of students starting, but not completing, higher education courses creates costs for the individual, the institution, and society. Where retention rates are linked to social diversity, this has implications for social justice and equality of opportunity. These concerns are reflected in the longstanding concern with improving student retention rates (National Audit Office, 2001, National Audit Office, 2007, Thomas, 2012) and the inclusion of the rates at which first year students continue into a second year in higher education and projected outcomes for student cohorts among the performance indicators in higher education published annually by the Higher Education Statistics Authority (HESA). In addition, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation funded a four-year programme aimed at identifying good practice within individual universities to share good practice across the sector (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2012).

Despite all this, comparatively little attention has focused on examining retention among part-time students. In this article, we use the changes currently being proposed in social work education in England (Croisdale-Appleby, 2014, Narey, 2014) and emerging (Baginsky & Manthorpe, 2014) and proposed new models for delivering social work qualifying education (MacAlister et al., 2012, Clifton & Thorley, 2014) to highlight the need for greater understanding of the factors supporting retention among students and part-time ones in particular. The number of graduates who have studied part-time is generally recognised as being a success story of UK higher education yet there have been dramatic declines in the number of part-time students on undergraduate courses (Universities UK, 2013). The article presents an opportunity to analyse retention rates among a small group of part-time students, namely those studying for a professional qualification in social work, in England. It is based upon secondary analysis of data collected by the General Social Care Council (GSCC), a non-departmental body responsible for regulating social work in England (2001-12), which collected information on all students starting and completing social work programmes in England. This is one of the few sources of data about part-time students and, while it is historical, represents a complete and highly reliable data set.

When compared with other professional groups, such as nursing or teaching, social work constitutes a comparatively small occupational grouping. At the time that the data presented here were collected there were around 90,000 registered social workers in England (General Social Care Council, 2007) compared with almost 521,000 nurses (Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2005, p. 4) and 538,000 teachers (General Teaching Council for England, 2006, p. 5). However, part-time social work students represented the largest share of those enrolled on part-time undergraduate certificates or diplomas in England (Ramsden, 2006,

p. 34). Social work experiences therefore may offer insights for the sector as a whole.

This paper begins by discussing some of the methodological reasons for the difficulties in measuring progression and retention among part-time students. It then explains the background to the comparatively high number of students studying social work on a part-time basis during the timeframe of this study and compares the characteristics of full-time and part-time social work students. The central part of the paper presents results from two sets of analyses. The first analysis examined the probability of withdrawal from a social work programme, showing that this was least likely to happen among those students who were seconded by an employer. The second analysis considered whether some students were more likely to be seconded than others. These data indicated regional variations in the existence of secondment, suggesting that employers at the time were most likely to use secondment as a way of dealing with local recruitment difficulties.

Taken together, these findings have a renewed timeliness in the context of the government's objective to reform social work education and to develop new routes to professional qualification through the Step Up to Social Work (Baginsky & Manthorpe, 2014) and the Frontline (MacAlister et al., 2012) and Think Ahead (Clifton & Thorley, 2014) initiatives, both based on the Teach First model (Allen & Allnutt, 2013). While these routes are employer led, they are also part-time in the nature of the trainees' engagement with academic qualification programmes and universities.

## **Background**

### **Measuring progression and retention among part-time students**

It is accepted that it is more difficult to measure part-time student progression and achievement rates than those of full-time students (Boorman et al., 2006, National Audit Office, 2007). To enable part-time students to adapt and optimise their studies to suit their personal circumstances, many part-time programme providers have avoided declaring fixed end dates in a way that full-time programmes are required to do. Part-time programmes also span a wide range of educational qualifications, ranging from stand-alone modules to postgraduate research degrees. Even so, retention rates for part-time students are generally assumed to be lower than those for their full-time counterparts, with one estimate indicating that almost half leave without having achieved a qualification (National Audit Office, 2007, p. 22).

Nevertheless, caution is needed when comparing retention rates across full-time and part-time students. Firstly, there is a risk of presenting the two forms of study as equally available alternatives to all students. For some of those who cannot afford

to give up paid work and those with family or caring responsibilities (Callender et al., 2006), the alternative to studying part-time is likely to be not studying at all (Boorman et al., 2006).

Secondly, at the other extreme, similarities between part-time and full-time students may be ignored. There has been a tendency among some researchers to equate part-time students with non-traditional or mature students and to portray them as ‘jugglers’ (Dyk, 1987) or ‘balancers’ (Timmins & Nicholl, 2005). While many part-time students may be new entrants who have missed out on earlier opportunities to enter higher education (Bowl, 2001), others include school leavers and those on postgraduate courses (Boorman et al., 2006, Ramsden, 2006). Equally, full-time students may also have commitments beyond their academic studies which increasingly involve part-time paid employment (Callender & Kemp, 2000, Broadbridge & Swanson, 2005, Curtis, 2005).

A third difficulty stems from the need to make decisions about which students should be the focus of inquiry. Some researchers (for example, Davies & Elias, 2003, Johnes & McNabb, 2004) focus just on those leaving higher education without completing their studies. Others argue that these data fail to take account of those who re-enter higher education successfully at a later date (Quinn et al., 2005). Given that students report a number of reasons why they have chosen, or been asked, to leave (National Audit Office, 2001, Arulampalam et al., 2004, National Audit Office, 2007) is it better to make comparisons between all students who leave higher education early, for whatever reason, or to make distinctions between different types of withdrawal (Peelo & Wareham, 2002)? As this article shows, there is potential to include all students in analyses but also to maintain a distinction between the larger numbers who choose to leave and those leaving for reasons of academic failure.

### **Shortage of studies looking at part-time students**

With limited exceptions (Yorke & Longden, 2008a, Yorke & Longden, 2008b), and perhaps because of the difficulties described above, few studies of retention have focused on part-time students. Thus, while there is now a growing body of evidence on improving student progression and retention (Yorke & Longden, 2004, Gorard et al., 2006, Zepke et al., 2006), many of the initiatives described are concerned with retention rates among school leavers entering full-time study.

However, it has become clear that retention is differential, with some students, such as those enrolling on less academically high status courses (Bradley & Lenton, 2007) or non-traditional students (Davies & Elias, 2003), being more likely to leave. Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Yorke & Thomas, 2003, Johnes & McNabb, 2004, Houston et al., 2007) and students with disabilities (Gorard et al., 2006) also tend to have lower rates of retention. The relationship between ethnicity and retention is more complex with differing results being reported across different

ethnic groups and different subjects (Connor et al., 2004, Stevenson, 2012).

Research on student retention and progression has also shown how universities can achieve improvements by creating more supportive learning environments, such as providing integrated student services (Yorke & Thomas, 2003, Gorard et al., 2006), thus representing a move away from factors relating to characteristics of individual students and more towards identifying the type of institutional assistance that may enable them to succeed (Thomas, 2002, Yorke, 2004). However, despite its longstanding interest in different models of adult learning and a commitment to addressing issues of disadvantage, social work in the UK has, with some exceptions (Hussein et al., 2008, Hussein et al., 2009), rarely attempted to quantify retention rates or to undertake empirical research as to whether and why differences exist (Green Lister, 2003, Moriarty et al., 2009, Bernard et al., 2013, Fletcher et al., 2013).

### **Varying importance of part-time study in social work education**

The majority of part-time students in higher education identify vocational reasons for studying, for example to change career or to achieve promotion (Ramsden, 2006). While many of these already hold a professional qualification and are undertaking continuing professional development (CPD), they also include a minority of those on professional qualifying programmes.

Between 1991-2003, the professional qualification in social work was the Diploma in Social Work (DipSW) (Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work, 1991), awarded by the GSCC and its predecessor, the Central Council for Training and Education in Social Work (CCETSW). As in teaching, students could gain the professional qualification, either at first degree or postgraduate level. As well as traditional college based courses, some distance learning programmes were available, primarily through the Open University. Students completing DipSW programmes achieved a first degree or postgraduate award as well as the DipSW.

Many DipSW routes offered the opportunity to study part-time. Their availability was undoubtedly influenced by the popularity of social work among people seeking a career change in later life (Balloch et al., 1999, CRG Research Ltd, 2005) and who wished to study part-time because of familial or financial commitments. The early interest among social work educators in learning lessons from North America on the delivery of part-time professional education facilitated this (Everett, 1989, Everett, 1990). However, possibly the single most important reason was employers' pressure on higher education institutions (HEIs) to provide employment or work-based study routes. From the 1970s, it was the practice among local councils (the major employer of social work staff in England) to second unqualified staff to undertake a social work professional qualification. Employers were responsible for paying students' fees and they, in turn, continued in paid employment negotiating time off for study. It was also customary for students to undertake to remain with the seconding organisation for

a set period once they have completed their studies. However, in recent years, there has been increasing interest in recruiting new graduates to undertake a social work qualification rather than to sponsor staff from within their existing workforce in acquiring this qualification (Hussein et al., 2010, Manthorpe et al., 2011, MacAlister et al., 2012, Baginsky & Manthorpe, 2014, Clifton & Thorley, 2014). These latter initiatives, while sharing similarities in terms of the involvement of employers and the integration of part-time study with relevant paid employment present a slightly different model in which the emphasis is on academic potential, the so-called 'brightest and the best', compared with earlier initiatives that often recruited from people who felt let down by their experiences while at school.

Students who wished to study social work part-time faced other disadvantages. Following the DH decision in 2001 that social work should be an all-graduate profession, universities devoted most of their early efforts to developing full-time programmes. The social work bursary, an incentive to increase applications for social work, was, for the first few years, only available to those studying full-time (Moriarty et al., 2012). In 2009-2010, fewer than 10 per cent of enrolments on social work qualifying programmes were part-time students (General Social Care Council, 2011) compared with 16 per cent a decade earlier (Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work, 2000).

## Methods

### Study population

Every student on a programme leading to a professional qualification in social work in England used to be required to enrol with the GSCC. The current regulator, the Health and Care Professions Council, has chosen not to make this a requirement, although it runs a transitional student suitability scheme. In 2005, the GSCC asked us to investigate progression rates among DipSW students in England. It provided anonymised data on students enrolling on a social work programme from 1995-1998. The dataset included the following anonymised information on students provided by GSCC:

- gender;
- date of birth;
- ethnicity;
- financial support;
- highest level of previous educational attainment; and
- whether they defined themselves as having a disability.
- type of programme they were following (other undergraduate, undergraduate

or postgraduate);

- name of the HEI at which they were studying;
- date on which they began their studies;
- date on which they were awarded the DipSW or other 'outcome' data, namely the dates on which they withdrew or failed; and
- delays caused by the need to re-sit an examination, resubmit an assignment or other piece of coursework, or repeat a practice placement. The GSCC described these as 'referrals'. They also recorded 'deferrals', defined as instances where students temporarily suspend their studies for illness or other reasons.

As information that would allow individual students to be identified was not provided, ethical approval was not required for this study.

### **Data considerations**

Secondary datasets avoid the costs of primary data collection and include large numbers of cases, often indeed the whole population under study. However, they impose limitations in terms of the information that has been recorded (Shaw, 2005). The GSCC collected data on student funding and previous educational attainment from students but did not record them the same way as HESA. In addition, it did not collect data on students' socio-economic status nor sought information on any personal characteristics that theoretically might be influential, such as determination or commitment. These are what Arulampalam and colleagues call 'unobservable characteristics' (2007, p. 393).

### **Analytical approach**

Full-time and part-time students cannot be treated together for the purposes of looking at progression and retention so we have reported our findings for full-time students separately (Hussein et al, 2008; Hussein et al, 2009). HEIs were divided into 1) pre-1992 and 2) post-1992 universities and further and higher education colleges because completion rates for all students are generally higher in pre-1992 universities (National Audit Office, 2007, p. 19) but better for part-time students taught in colleges of further and higher education (National Audit Office, 2007, p. 20).

The main measurement adopted in this study of part-time students' retention was the proportion of students who withdrew from a DipSW programme. Just one per cent (n=12) of 1263 part-time or distance learning students were reported to have failed. For reasons of clarity, we chose to retain the distinction between students who withdrew and students who left for reasons of academic failure. Nevertheless, we do acknowledge that had the numbers been higher, it might have been more

appropriate to examine this group in more detail.

We also considered looking at the length of time taken to achieve a DipSW but rejected this as we had no information on whether some students' progression had been accelerated by obtaining credits from previous educational or vocational learning.

## Results

### Background characteristics

In England, 1,263 students were registered for the DipSW through part-time and distance routes between 1995-1998 compared with 10,891 full-time students. As there were only 40 undergraduate and 14 postgraduate part-time students, this paper focuses on the 1,209 part-time or distance and 6,388 full-time students undertaking a combined DipSW/DipHE.

Table 1 compares full-time and part-time students in terms of their demographic characteristics, previous educational attainment, and source of financial support. It shows that, while their demographic and educational backgrounds were very similar, their financial support differed considerably. The differences between 'secondment' and 'sponsorship' are not always clear-cut but, in general, employers of seconded students pay both for their study time and their fees whereas sponsored students receive help only with their fees. In Table 1, the 'other' category was a portmanteau term used by the GSCC but at this time is likely to have mainly consisted of very small numbers of students whose fees had been waived, generally because they were living on social security benefits (Callender & Kemp, 2000). The small numbers of international students is unsurprising. The UK was late in implementing a European Union (EU) directive that entry to regulated professions (that is, those professions subject by legal, regulatory or administrative provisions to the possession of a specific qualification) should be preceded by three years of study at degree level. Holders of a DipSW qualification could not practise as a social worker either in other EU states (Lyons, 2002) nor in North America or Australasia (Payne, 2005, Green, 2006).

Eighty-six per cent of part-time students were college-based (n=1,038) and 14 per cent (n=171) were registered on distance learning courses. We have not reported separately on part-time and distance students because at this time almost all distance students were studying through the Open University and this could have caused difficulties with confidentiality. The only statistically significant difference between the two groups was that slightly fewer people from minority ethnic backgrounds studied by distance learning (9 per cent versus 15 per cent for white students,  $\pi=-0.65$ , Cramer's  $V=0.65$ ,  $p=0.02$ ).

Table 1 overleaf shows that full-time and part-time students were broadly similar



in terms of their demographic characteristics and previous educational attainment. The chief differences were in their source of funding – with part-time students more likely to be seconded or self-funding and in the university at which they studied. More part-time students studied at a pre-1992 university. This is interesting in the context of concerns expressed by advocates of the Frontline (MacAlister et al., 2012) and Think Ahead (Clifton & Thorley, 2014) initiatives that not enough social work graduates have studied at Russell Group universities.

### **Part-time students' progression**

GSCC data revealed that 81 per cent (n=984) of part-time students were awarded a DipSW, one per cent (n=12) were reported to have failed, and 12 per cent (n=141) had withdrawn. This meant that in five per cent of cases (n=72) there was no final information by the end of 2004 (the last date for which the GSCC provided information), although it was between 7-9 years since these students had begun their studies. These progression rates are slightly lower than those for full-time other undergraduate students from the same cohorts, 87 per cent of whom were awarded a DipSW, three per cent failed and six per cent withdrew (Hussein et al., 2008). Not surprisingly, on average, part-time students took longer, a mean time of three years (range 1.3-7.9 years, SD 10.8), to achieve a DipSW when compared with the two academic years that most took to complete a full-time combined DipSW/DipHE.

### **Risk of withdrawal**

Table 2 shows the factors that were associated with withdrawal. As with all multivariate models, logistic regression distinguishes between the effects of each factor after controlling for all the other risk factors. However, its advantage in analysing these sorts of data is that it does not make any assumptions about the independent variables, such as whether they are interval data or whether they are normally distributed. The results of the analysis are presented in the form of odds ratios (OR).

In contrast to results from other studies on retention (Hall, 2001, National Audit Office, 2001, Davies & Elias, 2003), Table 3 shows that, older students, students with disabilities, and students with lower levels of previous educational attainment did not have higher rates of withdrawal. Another way in which these results differed from those reported elsewhere was the lack of variation in withdrawal rates between students at different types of HEI (National Audit Office, 2001, National Audit Office, 2007). However, students from a Black and minority ethnic group were more likely to withdraw, albeit with a lower level of significance and with a confidence limit approaching 1 (1.09).

The finding that students whose progression had been delayed, for instance by

Table 1  
Distribution of part-time and full-time DipSW students on 'other' undergraduate (DipHE)  
DipSW programmes by demographic, educational, funding, and place of study cha

	Part-time students		Full-time students	
	%*	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
<i>Gender</i>				
Men	27	324	25	1592
Women	73	883	75	4789
<i>Age at registration</i>				
20-29	21	251	12	747
30-39	48	581	47	2983
40-49	28	339	33	2081
50-59	3	38	9	577
<i>Ethnicity</i>				
White	80	954	78	4913
Black and minority ethnic group	20	236	22	1417
<i>Self reported disability</i>				
No disability	90	974	90	5175
Any disability	10	114	10	609
<i>Highest previous educational attainment</i>				
GCSE or below	12	146	13	800
NVQ3 or NVQ4	3	34	3	188
'A' levels or equivalent	29	354	29	1845
Other diplomas/certificates	25	297	23	1477
Degree	30	367	32	1988
<i>Financial support</i>				
Grant	1	15	68	4347
Secondment	36	430	13	823
Sponsorship	16	192	2	135
Self funding	26	303	6	379
Other	21	244	10	615
International student	<1	3	<1	12
<i>Type of HEI</i>				
Pre-1992 university	30	357	15	977
Post-1992 university	47	572	61	3909
HE/FE College	23	280	24	1502
<i>Council area in which HEI located</i>				
Metropolitan and unitary	43	522	52	3311
County Council	57	687	48	3077
<i>Enrolment cohort</i>				
1995-96	21	250	38.2	2441
1996-97	34	409	32.5	2075
1997-98	46	550	29.3	1872
Total	100	1209	100	6388

\*Percentages may not total 100 due to rounding.

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Table 2

Results from logistic regression testing the probability of withdrawal among all students starting part-time DipSW/DipHE programmes in England between 1995-1998

Variables in model	Sig	Odds ratio	95% CI	
			Lower	Upper
<i>Gender</i> (reference category: Men)				
Women	0.367	0.845	0.586	1.218
<i>Age at registration</i>				
	0.210	1.015	0.992	1.039
<i>Ethnicity</i> (reference category: White)				
Black and minority ethnic group	0.018	1.660	1.091	2.527
<i>Self reported disability</i> (reference category: No disability)				
Defines self as having disability	0.432	1.226	0.737	2.040
<i>Highest previous educational attainment</i> (reference category: Up to NVQ 4)				
'A' levels or diplomas	0.933			
Degree	0.997	0.999	0.613	1.628
	0.802	1.069	0.634	1.805
<i>Financial support</i> (reference category: Grant, other, self-funding)				
Sponsored	0.001			
Seconded	0.371	0.790	0.471	1.325
	0.000	0.441	0.291	0.669
<i>Type of HEI</i> (reference category: Pre-1992 university)				
Post-1992 university	0.119			
FE/HE College	0.509	1.206	0.692	2.101
	0.072	1.718	0.953	3.097
<i>Enrolment cohort</i> (reference category: 1995-96)				
1996-97	0.143			
	0.789	1.068	0.665	1.716
1997-98	0.093	1.475	0.931	2.321
<i>Study mode</i> (reference category: Part-time)				
Distance	0.244	1.506	0.756	3.001
<i>Progression delays</i> (reference category: None)				
Ever referred or deferred	0.010	0.407	0.206	0.807
Constant	0.000	0.101		

1047 cases included in the analysis; method=enter; Nagelkerke R<sup>2</sup>=0.065; Hosmer-Lemeshow test: X<sup>2</sup>=12.373, df=8, p=0.135; Omnibus test: X<sup>2</sup>=41.187, p=0.000.

Table 3  
Results of logistic regression model testing probability of being seconded or sponsored

Variables in model	Sig	Odds ratio	95% CI	
			Lower	Upper
<i>Gender</i>	0.379	0.864	0.624	1.196
<i>Age at registration</i>	0.036	1.022	1.001	1.044
<i>Ethnicity</i>	0.175	0.756	0.505	1.132
<i>Self reported disability</i>	0.003	0.462	0.279	0.766
<i>Highest previous educational attainment</i> (reference category: Up to NVQ 4)	0.346			
'A' levels or diplomas	0.161	1.209	0.754	1.939
Degree	0.432	1.209	0.754	1.939
<i>Type of HEI</i> (reference category: Pre-1992 university)	0.000			
Post-1992 university	0.000	0.155	0.085	0.281
FE/HE College	0.011	0.473	0.265	0.844
<i>Enrolment cohort</i> (reference category: 1995-96)				
1996-97	0.534	1.131	0.767	1.666
1997-98	0.531	1.130	0.771	1.656
<i>Region</i> (reference category: East Midlands)	0.000			
East of England	0.900	1.042	0.548	1.981
London	0.023	2.791	1.154	6.776
North East	0.979	1.035	0.080	13.342
North West	0.000	0.141	0.053	0.370
West Midlands	0.396	1.362	0.691	2.542
South East	0.622	0.833	0.404	1.718
Yorkshire and the Humber	0.061	2.686	0.954	7.561
South West	0.031	2.125	1.069	4.224
<i>Council area in which HEI located</i>				
Metropolitan and unitary				
County Council	0.527	0.783	0.368	1.668
<i>Constant</i>	0.566	1.483		

900 cases included in the analysis; method=enter; Nagelkerke  $R^2=0.225$ ; Hosmer–Lemeshow test:  $X^2=4.5$ ,  $df=8$ ,  $p=0.805$ ; Omnibus test:  $X^2=165.9$ ,  $p=0.000$ .

repeating a piece or coursework, examination, or practice placement or who had temporarily withdrawn from their studies, were less likely to withdraw initially seems counter-intuitive. One explanation that could be advanced is that these occurrences were a way of focusing institutional support on students who were experiencing difficulties. However, the single most significant factor in reducing the odds of withdrawal was if the student had been seconded by an employer; the odds of withdrawal among seconded students were reduced by more than half compared with their counterparts who were not supported by an employer (odds ratio .441).

### **Probability of being seconded or sponsored**

Given that these results suggested that seconded students were at a greater advantage than those who were not, the next step was to see whether some students were more likely to be supported by an employer than others. The results from a logistic regression testing the probability of students being seconded or sponsored versus the probability of being funded by any other source were set out in Table 3. It excluded Open University (OU) students, partly because the support of an employer is an entry requirement for this part-time distance learning social work course and partly because we had no knowledge of where OU students lived. For reasons of space, we have omitted the reference categories for dichotomous variables, as they are the same as those in Table 3. The mean age of seconded and sponsored students was 37.1 years (SD 7.2) compared with students funded by any other source whose mean age was 35.6 (SD 7.2) (data not in Tables for reasons of space). Table 4 shows that seconded students were older and were less likely to have defined themselves as having a disability. Table 3 also shows that when compared with pre-1992 universities, other types of HEI were much less likely to have seconded or sponsored students. This is probably explained by a small number of pre-1992 universities running bespoke programmes solely for seconded or sponsored students. However, the most striking finding in Table 3 is the strong regional difference in secondment and sponsorship. In London where shortages of qualified social workers were most pronounced (Eborall, 2005), the odds of students from the region being seconded were almost three times more than the reference category, East Midlands. Increased use of secondment was also notable in the South West which employs proportionally more people in health and social work than in the rest of the country (South West Observatory, 2006). By contrast, in the North West, where social work salaries are comparatively high compared with average earnings in the region and where unemployment is greater, the use of secondment onto part-time programmes was less evident.

## Discussion

This study has provided new information about a number of trends in part-time social work education in England in the late 1990s. Compared with other part-time students (National Audit Office 2007), retention rates were high and while progression rates were slightly lower than those for full-time students, the difference was comparatively small, suggesting that part-time study then offered an important route to professional qualification. In this context, the lack of differential withdrawal rates among older students, students with disabilities, or those with lower levels of previous educational attainment should be seen as reflecting well on social work educators who are responsible for teaching very diverse groups of students. However, the finding that students from BME groups were more likely to withdraw may be one of the 'unobservable characteristics' (Arulampalam et al. 2007) that emerge from this analysis. They may have had higher levels of family responsibilities, for example.

In many ways, the positive impact of secondment and sponsorship on student retention are unsurprising. Seconded or sponsored students may have greater amounts of financial and employment security compared to their counterparts who do not. However, the study also raises some important questions about differential access to support from an employer that will remain pertinent to new social work qualifying routes such as Step Up and Frontline. In reality, the finding that older students were more likely to be seconded or sponsored may be a reflection that employers have tended to favour those who have been in post for longer and who might be seen as more likely to remain with their employer once they qualify. This contrasts, of course, with the Frontline/Think Ahead model where the emphasis is on those at the beginning of their professional lives where there is an acceptance that people may leave the profession once they have completed their two-year contractual commitment.

Students who did not define themselves as having a disability were more likely to be seconded than others. This may have been attributable to employees choosing not to disclose their disability to their employer (McLean, 2003), or it may have reflected the lower rates of employment in the public sector of people with disabilities (Hirst & Thornton, 2005).

The results also suggested that employers tended to use secondment and sponsorship as a response to local labour market shortages. The Think Ahead report (Clifton & Thorley, 2014) drew attention to the regional variation in social work vacancy rates currently, suggesting that there may be pressures to implement regional targets for training social workers (Centre for Workforce Intelligence, 2012), as exist in nursing.

## Study limitations

It is important to be clear about the limitations of this study. Retrospective longitudinal data is less able to offer casual explanations than data which is collected prospectively (Hakim, 2000). Use of secondary data constrained the analysis and the voices of students themselves were clearly absent from this study.

There is also the risk of seeming to make too great a claim for the value of secondment and sponsorship. The danger is increasingly recognised that the outcomes of higher education may become defined in ways that are too mechanistic and overly focused on vocational targets (Tight, 1998), rather than the upon the opportunities for personal growth and development that are valued by many students (Reay et al., 2002).

## Future research

Part-time social work students represented an important group of people achieving a social work qualification in this period. We found that the number of students failing was far fewer than those who withdrew. Did this reflect the way in which educators chose to help students reach a decision to withdraw rather than wait until they fail? How do educators negotiate the tensions between their responsibilities to their employer and their responsibilities to their profession? These remain important topics for further research but the limited data on student social workers currently will make this more challenging than the timeframe of our study when the GSCC data were being collected.

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