

What are the factors which contribute to level one social work students failing to progress or achieving low grades?

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Background and Rationale

This study is a preliminary review of the possible reasons for low achievement among some level one social work undergraduates. These may be viewed as challenges to the individual, attempting to study in a particular social context, or as challenges to the institution in raising achievement and accommodating differing needs.

Much of the literature is concerned with the experiences of students from particular social groups. In some studies, these concerns are integrated with the identification of individual strategies for success and/or institutional practices which foster or inhibit achievement.

The Student Learning Experience

The literature about student experience tends to focus either on the experiences of younger students or mature students (generally defined as aged over 21 at the time of admission to university), with the implicit or explicit premise that there are considerable differences between the two (Johnson and Robson, 1999).

There is considerable concern in the literature about the barriers to education experienced by mature students, particularly those entrants who are also working class and/or female and/or carers. All the literature I have been able to locate about social work students concerns this sub- group (Jones, 2006; Lister, 2003; Johnson and Robson, 1999). There is a larger body of literature about the experience of student nurses, which again focuses on mature women entrants (Steele *et al.*, 2005; Kevern and Webb, 2004). The research depicts students who feel under huge pressure to manage multiple and unrelenting demands from university, family and paid employment (Johnson and Robson, 1999; Reay, 2003) in a university environment better suited to the “bachelor boy” model (Kevern and Webb, 2004). Winn (2002) was unable to determine the factors which enabled some mature students with multiple responsibilities to give large amounts of time to study, when others did not. She attributes high intrinsic motivation to the former group, and reports that many of the second group were motivated to perform by assessments.

Mature students in Jones’ (2006) study also highlight the importance of input from staff. They report having less support from tutors at university than on access courses, particularly in explaining and discussing ideas and material. A mature student explained to Leathwood (2000, p243) how she was affected by this lack of ‘support’: “*I’ve got lots of information but I just feel lost. And I sat down and I had a go at one essay but I just feel really I don’t know*”. This perhaps illuminates a similar experience for younger students, floundering without the frequent contact with staff that they had known at school (Winn, 2002; Gollins, 2005).

In this example, the needs and experiences of 'younger' and 'mature' students are not as clearly distinguished as the literature sometimes suggests. Haggis (2004, p349) argues that academics cannot expect that students will "know how to think, read and write" in response to reading lists and essay questions, and this has perhaps been illustrated by the experiences reported above. She suggests that this challenge may apply to students from many different backgrounds, and that it is more important that staff focus on the clarity with which they communicate expectations and conventions, than that they amass information about their students' identities and social contexts.

This is not to deny that mature students may face particular challenges in managing study alongside financial and family responsibilities. Some authors make recommendations for large structural changes to institutional practice (Winn, 2002) in order to meet the needs of mature students with responsibilities. However, only Lister (2003) reports on actual experiences of such experiments.

Younger students also feature in the literature. In contrast to the experience of mature carers, one of the challenges for younger students is how to make effective use of a greater amount of unscheduled time than has previously been available, with the result that more time is spent socialising than studying (Gollins, 2005), a problem that Leathwood (2001) identifies more amongst male students than female students. This seems to be more complex than simply preferring to socialise than study. There is also the aspect of being self-directed; as Gollins (2005, p56) notes, first year students were used to being "managed by their previous institutions" and had therefore not learned the skills of independent study.

From a slightly different perspective, Winn (2002, p453) argues that, apart from the lack of structure to daily life and work, young students are also affected by a lack of verification or scrutiny of the learning activities, summarised as 'it's easy not to do it'. For example, if students were asked to read a chapter before a seminar, it was clear that they were not likely to be "found out" if they did not read it. In Winn's analysis, the implication is that some students are driven only by the extrinsic motivation of assessment, and that teaching and learning activities may need to accommodate this. However, there are alternative interpretations: Thomas' (2002, p432) student framed a presumably similar experience as the tutor "*not giving a stuff*" and had been disinclined to work in such circumstances. S/he also had an alternative framework, however: "If someone cares about my work, I'll go out and do that extra bit of research or look into this".

Continuing to look at the University's response to student needs, a range of research has been undertaken into 'integration' (Wilcox *et al.*, 2005; Tinto, 1997) and 'belonging' (Read *et al.*, 2003; Johnson and Robson, 1999) as experienced by so-called "non-traditional" students (young or mature). It is acknowledged that there are both social and academic aspects to integration (Wilcox *et al.*, 2005). A recurrent theme is the essential quality of mutual support amongst students in promoting academic integration and persistence (Wilcox *et al.*, 2005) and this is a consistent finding for mature students (Steele *et al.*, 2005) and mixed-age groups (Thomas, 2002; Devenport and Lane, 2006). Promoting collaborative learning in small groups is advocated (Cartney and Rouse, 2006) but must be genuinely valued within the classroom (Tinto, 1997). A less emphasised but still important theme is that of "support" from tutors (Wilcox *et al.*,

2005), and this resonates with the comments noted earlier, in which tutor involvement was conceptualised in the emotional terms of ‘caring’.

The need to teach time and task management skills for mature students is specifically mentioned (Howard, 2001; Fleming and McKee, 2005; Robshaw and Smith, 2004). As noted earlier, these skills are also needed by younger students (Gollins, 2005). Devenport and Lane (2006) emphasise the importance of such skills academically. In a study of first year students at the University of Wolverhampton, they found that “students who withdrew from the course reported significantly lower scores on self-efficacy to manage time, self-efficacy to use resources, self-efficacy to work in groups, and self-efficacy to work well in lectures” (ibid, 2006, p134). The study suggests that students should be assisted to develop active-coping strategies such as dividing complex tasks into smaller goals and interim targets. Burris (2001) offers the view that, in assisting mature carers to manage multiple responsibilities as students, educators are also encouraging the development of essential professional skills; I would argue that the desirability of time and task management skills for work would equally apply to younger students.

In conclusion, there are a number of recurrent themes about the factors that influence achievement in higher education. These may be summarised as:

- The ability to manage independent study:
 - understanding and managing material
 - understanding and managing tasks
- The ability to manage time (too little or too much).
- Support from peers.
- Positive engagement with academic staff.

These themes recur throughout the literature whether the focus is on young or mature students. Many kinds of students may need help to acquire the skills and support that are likely to enable success. The use of small study groups is one technique supported by the literature, along with specific attention to time and task management.

In the next part of this paper, I compare the conclusions from my review of the literature to the findings of a small-scale study of low achieving students in my own area of teaching.

Level 1 Social Work Students

In semester one, level one social work students study two 15 credit and one 30-credit module. At the Assessment Board in January 2007, in line with usual practice, “at risk” level one students were identified so that they could be offered tutorial support. Students are perceived to be “at risk” if they have two grades of D5 or below. On this occasion, 14 students were identified; this included four students who were retaking modules having failed to progress to Level Two. All fourteen were contacted by letter and e-mail and asked to participate in a research interview, but were offered a straightforward tutorial if they preferred. Information about the purpose of the interview, and principles of confidentiality, were given in the invitation.

Nine students agreed to be interviewed for the project. All students were female (the one male “at risk” student did not respond). As described by the students themselves,

their ethnic identities were Black African (1), Black British (3), white British (4) and Indian (1). The majority (6) were over the age of 21.

Standardised open-ended interviews were used (Patton, 1980, cited in Cohen *et al.*, 2007) within the study.

Students were asked, “What do you think were the reasons for you achieving low grades in Semester One?” Table 1 summarises the responses below.

Table 1: Reasons for achieving a low grade.

Student	Category 1: lack of time to study	Category 2: personal problems	Category 3: skills/ motivation
1	1		1
2			2 & 4
3		√	
4			5
5			6
6			3
7		√	2 & 6
8		√	
9	2		5

Category 1 codings:

- 1: Not enough time to study
- 2: Not enough time to study over Christmas holidays

Category 3 codings:

- 1: Not feeling able to ask questions
- 2: Expectations different to previous degree
- 3: Not understanding what was wanted
- 4: Dyslexia
- 5: Organisation of time
- 6: Not putting in enough time/effort

Most students did not perceive that they had been unable to invest the necessary time because of pressures from dependents or paid employment. Two students did cite “*lack of time to study*”. However, through further discussion, it emerged that at least some time had been available but not used.

The three respondents who cited “personal problems” could be seen as demonstrating that women with family responsibilities are pulled away from their studies by these demands. However, all three women saw these problems as one-off events that would not occur again; at this stage of their study, this remains an open question. It is also perhaps a limitation of the study that students who had been given mitigation at the time of the Assessment Board could not be included in the sample, as this might have produced more evidence of individuals struggling to manage competing demands.

The Social Work Pathway Guide (HLSS, 2006) indicates that students should have been undertaking around 32 hours study per week, in addition to the time spent in the classroom. All of the “at risk” students were falling well below this target. Students were asked why they had not spending more time studying and the responses are summarised in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Reasons for not spending more time studying

Student	Category 1: Personal problems	Category 2: Paid work	Category 3: Self- management
1		1	1
2		2	
3	√		
4			1 & 3
5			1, 2 & 3
6			3
7		1	4
8	√		
9		2	
Total respondents: 9			

Category 2 codings:

- 1: Paid work
- 2: Paid work: I have now cut down

Category 3 codings:

- 1: Self-discipline
- 2: Organisation
- 3: Difficulties in engaging with material/tasks
- 4: Perception of what was necessary

It was clear that five of the students were unable to study alone effectively, partly because of a lack of time and task management skills.

“I can’t always account for what has happened to my spare time”.

“It was daunting doing three modules at the same time, knowing what to do first.”

“My mistake was not doing things as I went along so that I had too much to do at the end.”

“Maybe at College it was a bit too easy...there weren’t as many strict deadlines.”

This related strongly to the evidence in the literature of similar problems of managing independent study for students entering higher education (Leathwood, 2001; Gollins, 2005).

Students also reported difficulties, during their independent study time, of engaging with either the material or the tasks:

“I got bored easily and I get distracted and go off track.”

“I could not be bothered to pick up a book, I kept putting it off. When I did try, I would get distracted. I’m not like this when I’m studying things I really enjoy. It’s strange because I really want to be a social worker.”

“I didn’t see the links between those (weekly) tasks and the assignment, but I do now.”

These comments might be interpreted as a lack of intrinsic motivation (Winn, 2002), at least as regards the semester one modules. However, the literature also clearly evokes how lost and disconnected new students can feel, particularly when they have difficulties understanding and do not know where to go with their problems (Leathwood, 2001; Thomas, 2002; Jones, 2006). These students appeared to be attempting to study in a solitary way, and might be assisted by the kind of peer group support which is highlighted very consistently in the literature (Wilcox *et al.*, 2005; Steele *et al.*, 2005).

Other significant information emerged when the students were asked if they had learned anything from feedback on their assignments that had helped them understand why they had achieved low grades. According to the students, the issues raised in feedback are summarised in Table 3.

Table 3: Issues raised on feedback

Student	Category 1	Cat 2	Cat 3	Cat 4	Cat 5	Cat 6
1	√	√				
2				√		
3			√		√	
4						
5	√	√	√			
6			√	√		√
7						
8				√		
9	√		√			

Category 1: Structure

Category 2: appropriate language

Category 3: Demonstrating knowledge/going into detail

Category 4: Not answered the question/ not understood the question

Category 5: Rushed

Category 6: Referencing

Students were also asked (Table 4), “Has there been anything about the way you needed to study or write assignments that you have found difficult?”

Table 4: Difficulties in studying or writing assignments

Student	Cat 1	Cat 2	Cat 3	Cat 4
1	1			
2		1		
3				√
4		2		
5		3		

6			√	
7	2			
8		1	√	
9	3 & 4			

Category 1: The way I am expected to write

Coding 1: Applying my material to the question

Coding 2: Difference from previous discipline

Coding 3: Structuring

Coding 4: Referencing

Category 2: Organisation/ personal study

Coding 1: Having to study 3 modules/number of deadlines

Coding 2: Getting started and writing the first paragraph.

Coding 3: Self-discipline

Category 3: Access to tutors/ guidance

Category 4: Nothing

Discussion of Survey

The majority (6) had been at F.E. College, taking access courses, Btech qualifications or A-levels. Two of the students had successfully completed courses in higher education. Both of them commented that a significant factor in their low achievement was that the subject required them to write in a different style to their former disciplines and they had not realised this. This is particularly interesting in the light of Haggis' (2004) argument that, in response to the diversity of the student population, staff should focus on communicating explicit information about what is required of students in the discipline they are studying. It is certainly clear that all of these students were struggling with some aspect of understanding the tasks of writing, and it was this that was emphasised rather than the subject material itself. Self-managed study was again raised as a significant issue.

I had hoped to carry out some statistical analysis of the identities of the low achieving students compared with the rest of the cohort, to gather more information about whether any social groups were over-represented. However, for a number of reasons this proved too complex to undertake. Nevertheless, some issues did emerge from the qualitative data available.

In order to begin to open up the issue of whether any groups of students felt discriminated against in any way, students were asked, "Does anything about the course stop you having a fair chance to succeed?" The majority (6) said that they considered that they had a fair experience. One student with a disability commented on the importance for her of inclusive practices by tutors (such as ensuring that presentations were available in advance). Three students commented on the importance of positive attitudes and guidance from tutors. Overall, there were five comments made during the interviews about tutors: their approachability (or not) and regret that there were not more opportunities for consultation. This reflects the findings in the literature about the importance of tutors in assisting students' transition to H.E.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while the pilot study was small scale, it has illuminated some of the significant factors which have contributed to students in this cohort achieving low grades, which are broadly consistent with the findings of the literature review. Students' supply of time does not appear to be a very significant factor, but use of time is very important; in particular, some students struggle to make use of independent study time. Students are affected by not understanding the expectations of staff in how they write, or not having the skills to meet these expectations. This group appear to lack peer support and place emphasis on the importance of access to tutors for guidance in their studies.

This suggests that there is the potential for the institution to encourage higher achievement by assisting students to develop skills in independent study (especially time and task management) and skills appropriate to higher education (particularly in writing assignments). Promoting peer group support would also be likely to benefit struggling students.

There seems no evidence to suggest that it would be appropriate to target any particular group of students; for example, time management skills would seem to be significant for many students, albeit that they might have different kinds of problems with time. However, the issues around whether certain social groups may be facing particular barriers needs further research, and therefore this conclusion has to remain open to review.

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