# 1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter we introduce the book and set the context for studying social work. In particular we examine:

- issues related to learning about social work in a university environment;
- challenges for new social work students, such as balancing time commitments and becoming used to information and communication technology;
- different approaches to using or developing knowledge in practice, including the relevance of two threshold concepts: evidence-based practice and critical reflective practice.

*I need to be open and I need to be honest or I'm not going to learn. And if I don't put it out there, then how am I going to learn? … I didn't come here to get a piece of paper. I came to be an effective worker and I think that's the bottom line for me. (SW student)*

Such a genuine and committed approach to learning for social work is supported and enhanced by effective study skills. However, as with professional practice skills, the skills needed to survive and flourish at university do not necessarily come automatically. They need to be identified, practised and refined so that you can gain the most you possibly can from the learning opportunities offered and, also, get that piece of paper at the end. In fact, as one student observed in a most insightful comment: 'It's very helpful to think of yourself not as a student, but as a social worker in the making'. So this book is not just a study skills guide; it supports your development as a social worker.

The book is designed to assist you in developing your academic capacity and confidence so that you can meet the requirements of your social work degree. In particular, it aims to help improve your written and spoken communication in academic contexts, as well as highlighting the relevance of these for social work practice. You can learn better, develop more effective reading and analytical skills, access information easier, and make better use of your time in undertaking academic work. We have used quotes from interviews we conducted with social work students in Australia and from other publications, acknowledging of course the source of these

other student quotes. In this way we have attempted to ground the book in the experiences, needs, and contexts of students studying for social work. The book aims to reduce concerns and anxieties about academic work and is relevant to both younger students and those returning to study after lengthy periods in the workforce.

## UNIVERSITIES AND PROFESSIONAL SOCIAL WORK

*I question why I'm here sometimes and you have to. I am aware that I [will be] working with people's lives and the role that I play could be extremely critical, usually is extremely critical for most people. And I don't take that lightly. I don't take that lightly at all. And I am learning a lot and I love learning. … Being my age and coming to uni and actually achieving – 'Whoa!'. I think that's pretty cool. Yeah, so that's a good feeling. (SW student)*

One of the hallmarks of a profession is a university qualification as the entry standard. While there has been a long-standing debate as to whether social work is considered a profession along the same lines as medicine and law, there is no doubt that one of the strategies used to promote professionalization has been the establishment of social work degrees. During the twentieth century, universities, with their scientific and philosophical traditions, were seen to give status to rising professions, such as social work. Today, social work education is offered at qualifying level through both undergraduate (bachelor's) and post-graduate (master's) degrees. Advanced studies in social work are also offered through a wide range post-qualifying certificates, diplomas, master's degrees and doctorates.

However, universities don't just offer status to social work. They also offer structures, processes, cultures and theory that facilitate some key qualities, attributes and competencies in social work practitioners. In addition to providing access to relevant knowledge, universities assist the development of core skills, such as critical thinking, the capacity to theorize, the ability to develop and use research, and skills in written and verbal communication. The diversity of the benefits gained from university education can be appreciated by perusing the lists of learning outcomes and graduate attributes that universities promote as being achieved on the completion of a course or degree programme.

But things haven't always gone smoothly. Over the years there have been regular debates about the appropriateness of university-based programmes for preparing social work students for practice. Concerns have been expressed about splits between theory and practice, and between the university and the 'real world'. While both of these critiques can be challenged, it is, nonetheless, the case that more and more effort is going into ensuring that, as well as providing intellectually challenging environments, universities deliver programmes that meet the requirements of the industry and the end users of social work services – service users, clients and community members.

In countries such as the UK and Australia, governments, regulatory bodies and professional associations are placing increasing demands on universities to ensure that they graduate students who are 'job ready'. For example, in the UK more

emphasis is being placed on ensuring that social work education contains significant amounts of practice learning and is focused on the needs and concerns of service users. Practice competence is also facilitated by having the National Occupational Standards for Social Work underpin the social work curriculum. These standards set the benchmark for good practice and students are required to meet and demonstrate these standards by the time that they complete their degree. The purpose of social work and the key roles are outlined below. A full copy of the National Occupational Standards can be accessed from the Skills for Care website, listed at the end of this chapter.

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### Purpose and key roles of social work

The National Occupational Standards (Topss, 2002) outline the following purpose of social work, based on a definition by the International Association of Schools of Social Work and the International Federation of Social Workers:

> [Social work is] a profession which promotes social change, problem solving in human relation-ships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work. (Topss, 2002: 12)

From this definition a series of key roles were developed:

> Key Role 1: Prepare for, and work with individuals, families, carers, groups and communities to assess their needs and circumstances.
> Key Role 2: Plan, carry out, review and evaluate social work practice, with individuals, families, carers, groups, communities and other professionals.
> Key Role 3: Support individuals to represent their needs, views and circumstances.
> Key Role 4: Manage risk to individuals, families, carers, groups, communities, self and colleagues.
> Key Role 5: Manage and be accountable, with supervision and support, for your own social work practice within your organisation. (Topss, 2002: 12)
> Key Role 6: Demonstrate professional competence in social work practice.

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In Australia, the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) has rolled out strategies to ensure that universities increase students' competence in child protection, mental health work, cross-cultural practice, and work with Indigenous Australians. These developments rightly challenge universities – and their staff – to stay actively engaged with developments in social work practice, and in other areas such as social policy and the law.

For new students, universities can seem like large, impersonal, arcane bureauc-racies. While this may be true to some extent, it is the case that universities are, fundamentally, human organizations. They rely substantially on their human resources to deliver their services, and the products of their industry are human qualities, such as increased knowledge and skills. And they are very

much human in their politics, their mistakes and their struggles over funding and access to other resources. In this sense, universities are not so dissimilar to the organizations social workers work in: they are often under-resourced, dealing with complex issues, and negotiating with their students/clients through webs of power-based relationships. But, also like social work organizations, they are made up of people who are passionate about what they do, who want to promote goals such as freedom to learn and to speak out, and who want to make a difference in society. This is certainly the case for many social work academics. As one second year social work student said:

> A lot of teachers teach because they love social work and they want us to have the best knowledge that we can. They are teaching because they love the occupation. (SW student)
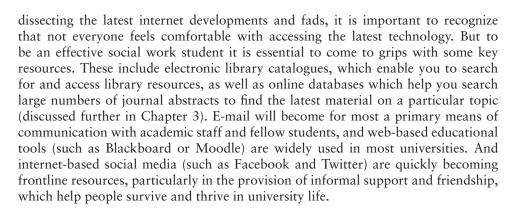
## CHALLENGES FOR NEW SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS

As large and complex organizations, universities present many challenges for new students, including new social work students. These challenges affect the capacity of students to study and prepare themselves for professional practice. Many students in qualifying social work programmes, at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, are mature-age and are entering university after a period in the workforce. This can be daunting and these students inevitably require assistance getting back into the swing of writing assignments and preparing for exams. For younger students, it quickly becomes apparent that university is not like school, and there are fewer people around to actively check up to see you are doing the work and meeting your responsibilities. Both groups will need to become more confident with the style of writing and presenting expected in a university setting as this may differ considerably from what they have been used to.

> Improve timekeeping … Keep diary … Meet deadlines. (SW student; O'Connor et al., 2009: 443)

For many students, a key challenge is balancing the different commitments they have in their life. Academics often reflect wistfully on the days when university education was free, when attendance was high in classes, and when people had time to participate in student politics. While the latter two are certainly still achievable (and desirable), it is nonetheless the case that today's students have more and more demands placed on their time. Time to work to survive, time spent on family and parenting responsibilities, and time for leisure all compete with time available for study. We discuss these issues in depth in Chapter 2, but it's worth noting here that developing positive time management and self care strategies at university will stand you in good stead after graduation as these are also big issues in social work practice.

One important matter that confronts many new students is negotiating computer and IT (information technology) systems. While the media spends a lot of energy

dissecting the latest internet developments and fads, it is important to recognize that not everyone feels comfortable with accessing the latest technology. But to be an effective social work student it is essential to come to grips with some key resources. These include electronic library catalogues, which enable you to search for and access library resources, as well as online databases which help you search large numbers of journal abstracts to find the latest material on a particular topic (discussed further in Chapter 3). E-mail will become for most a primary means of communication with academic staff and fellow students, and web-based educational tools (such as Blackboard or Moodle) are widely used in most universities. And internet-based social media (such as Facebook and Twitter) are quickly becoming frontline resources, particularly in the provision of informal support and friendship, which help people survive and thrive in university life.

> I think you need to have a few friends around at uni that know where you're at and know where they're at. [Knowing that] we are all in the same place normalizes without everyone going crazy at the same time. So you need to have that kind of community help. (SW student)

Two other key challenges for new students are feeling comfortable in expressing personal views and knowing how and when to stand up for one's rights. It is a sad reality that some students go through university without having a single meaningful one-to-one conversation with a university lecturer. While this is probably less likely in social work than in some other disciplines, it is true that many find it difficult speaking up in class or approaching academic staff. This is particularly so for those students for whom English is not their first language or who have communication difficulties (e.g. because of anxiety). Effective communication with academics is critical when problems are encountered, such as when you feel you have been unfairly treated or discriminated against. Being able to talk directly to the person concerned is usually the first step in conflict management processes within universities and is, coincidentally, a basic social work skill. There are other ways of providing feedback (e.g. through course evaluations), and making concerns heard (e.g. via anti-discrimination officers, and the support of student unions).

> We needed some guidance, everyone was anxious, it was the first assignment, didn't have clue and when we were saying, 'look we need help here', it was like 'oh you need to take responsibility, you need to be reading'. What do we need to be reading? We need some structure. (SW student; Worsley et al., 2009: 834)

> I came to uni really under prepared. I had never done academic writing before. (SW student)

For most social work students, the key challenge will be developing studying skills – researching and writing assignments, developing skills in critical analysis, and conducting presentations. These challenges are the focus of our book. In many ways they are about how to develop and present effectively your own knowledge for professional social work. Before overviewing each of the chapters, some important points in relation to the development of knowledge for professional social work practice are highlighted.

# KNOWLEDGE FOR PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

## DIFFERENT SOURCES OF KNOWLEDGE

Social work draws on a wide range of disciplines and practices from psychology to organizational management, from social policy to community development: it is truly a transdisciplinary profession. So in thinking about how to study for social work, it is important to recognize that there are different types or sources of knowledge you will draw upon in professional practice. When thinking about knowledge you might automatically think about 'facts' or evidence, or alternatively about theories. And everyone involved in social work has a view on what sorts of knowledge you need in order to be an effective practitioner. Social workers in the field may highlight the value of common sense knowledge that is applied in specific practice situations. Service users may value knowledge of local resources. Managers may emphasize knowledge of organizational policies and procedures. Funders may prioritize knowledge gained through an evaluation of the effectiveness of professional intervention. Academics may emphasize practice theories and broader theoretical perspectives to help inform and critique practice.
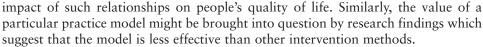
While this is a caricature of what managers, practitioners, and others might prioritize in social work knowledge, it does highlight the different sources of knowledge that are drawn upon in practice. According to Drury Hudson (1997), social work professional knowledge comprises:

- *Empirical knowledge:* knowledge drawn from the findings of research studies based on a range of different methodologies, but usually incorporating quantitative and/or qualitative methods.
- *Procedural knowledge:* knowledge about organizational policies and procedures, as well as government policy and legislative requirements.
- *Practice wisdom:* knowledge gained from practice experience that develops over time – it emerges from a sense of having previously encountered similar practice situations.
- *Personal knowledge:* intuitive and common sense knowledge that you have gained by being part of a particular culture or society.
- *Theoretical knowledge:* knowledge of a range of different theories that can be used to inform and critique practice; this can include broad orienting theories (e.g. sociological and psychological theories), as well as more specific practice theories and models (e.g. anti-oppressive practice; the strengths perspective).

These are not discrete sets of knowledge. For example, a child welfare agency may have organizational procedures that reinforce an anti-racist practice (see Turney, 1997) and a strengths-based approach (see Saleebey, 2008) to working with young people; or research findings on the reluctance of older people to question medical practitioners' advice may coalesce with your practice experience in hospital discharge planning. However while each source of knowledge may reinforce another source, they may also be in conflict and be used to interrogate each other. For example, a practitioner's personal value that people should not have sex before marriage may be challenged by a disability support agency's policy that enables clients to establish sexual relationships and with research that demonstrates the positive

impact of such relationships on people's quality of life. Similarly, the value of a particular practice model might be brought into question by research findings which suggest that the model is less effective than other intervention methods.

While university study tends to highlight the importance of empirical, theoretical, and procedural knowledge, in social work degrees there is recognition of the need to develop practice experience and wisdom and of understanding how personal knowledge affects practice. So it is necessary to think carefully about these sources of knowledge and how they can be made use of in different practice situations. Throughout this book we recognize the value of learning about and within these different sources of knowledge. We turn now to a brief discussion of two threshold concepts: evidence-based practice and critical reflective practice.

## EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE

One of the key challenges in professional practice is being able to make use of the wide range of knowledge and information to inform the work. Evidence-based practice (EBP) is an approach to the use of research to inform social workers' work and decision making. Increasingly social work degree programmes and government agencies are highlighting the importance of this approach. EBP was originally developed in relation to medicine as a means of better informing clinicians' treatment decisions. In social work the approach involves evaluating the quality of research findings (e.g. by evaluating how successfully the methodology employed helps answer the research questions) and using that information to inform practice decisions. According to a report prepared for the Social Care Institute for Excellence (Marsh and Fisher, 2005: 3), 'evidence = research findings + interpretation of the findings'. EBP has been promoted as a means of overcoming professional authority (i.e. the professional knows best) by ensuring that clients are offered the most effective intervention (i.e. what works best).

As in medicine and nursing, EBP has been substantially debated within social work. Key concerns relate to the alignment of evidence-based practice with managerialist demands for practitioners to demonstrate their cost effectiveness. Thus some practitioners have been concerned that EBP can erode professional autonomy. Others have been concerned about its focus on guiding professional decision making – arguing that the rational and logical approach to EBP decision making does not reflect the complex reality of how most decisions are made (Webb, 2001). Others highlight the potential for clients and service users to be left out of the decision making altogether, reinforcing rather than reducing professional authority and control (Beresford and Evans, 1999). Also within social work there have been concerns that some types of research evidence (e.g. that produced via experimental designs) tend to be valued more highly than others (e.g. that arising from qualitative studies) and that this may not always be appropriate. Increasingly social workers are thinking more broadly about what constitutes evidence, and how research evidence is only one source of knowledge informing practice (e.g. alongside service user preferences). In this way, the emphasis in social work is often on 'research-mindedness' in the sense

that a range of appropriate research knowledge should be drawn upon routinely in practice situations. Thus for both students and practitioners it is critically important to understand how research is carried out and how to evaluate it. We explore these issues in depth in Chapter 5.

## CRITICAL REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Another approach to thinking about knowledge in professional practice which you are likely to encounter early on in a social work degree is critical reflective practice. While critical reflective practice looks at knowledge in a different way from EBP, the ideas are not necessarily incompatible. However, whereas EBP emphasizes the application of knowledge (particularly research knowledge) to practice situations, critical reflective practice seeks mainly to generate knowledge from practice experiences. That is, its focus is on how practitioners (and students) reflect critically on their practice and then continue to refine and improve their practice based on this understanding. A similar concept is reflective practice and the two terms may be used interchangeably by some. However, as noted below, for us the use of the term 'critical' signifies the importance of understanding power relations and the need to promote equitable relationships both within social work and within society more widely as well as of the centrality of anti-oppressive practices.
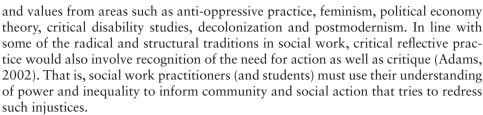
According to Hughes and Heycox (2010) critical reflective practice can be seen to comprise four inter-related dimensions: reflective learning, emotionality, criticality, and reflexivity. Reflective learning relates to the process of purposely and carefully thinking before, during, and after action (e.g. an interview with a client) about the experience and how your understanding of the situation is developing. Schön's (1983) concept of the 'reflective practitioner' embodies the idea of 'reflection on action', during which practitioners reflect on how they made sense of a particular situation and what they can learn from it.

Emotionality refers to the importance of staying in tune with and critiquing the emotional dimensions of professional encounters. The literature on psychodynamic practice and observation is useful here in highlighting the importance of practitioners attending to the emotional undercurrents in practice (Briggs, 1999). An understanding of other people's and one's own emotions is an important source of information in professional practice. For example, understanding and responding to the emotional climate of a support group the first time a new member attends is an important function in group work facilitation. Similarly, understanding your own, sometimes negative, emotional responses (e.g. of like or dislike) when encountering a client for the first time is essential to ensure you provide a good quality service to all people.

The concept of criticality, as discussed, relates to an understanding of how power is reflected in social work relationships and more widely within society. Thus, in this context, being critical does not just mean being analytical, it also means being able to expose inequality, oppression, and disadvantage. This understanding of criticality is informed by critical social theory, involving the application to social work of ideas

and values from areas such as anti-oppressive practice, feminism, political economy theory, critical disability studies, decolonization and postmodernism. In line with some of the radical and structural traditions in social work, critical reflective practice would also involve recognition of the need for action as well as critique (Adams, 2002). That is, social work practitioners (and students) must use their understanding of power and inequality to inform community and social action that tries to redress such injustices.

Reflexivity has been defined in different ways (D'Cruz et al., 2007), but includes the idea that knowledge is constantly folding back and emerging as you subject yourself and others to critical scrutiny. In particular, what is emphasized is the need to examine one's own identities, values, attitudes and beliefs and how these impact on your understanding of and action in practice situations. It involves developing an awareness of self and of how this sense of self impacts on your work. For example, how does a heterosexual man's sense of his self and his sexual and gender identity impact on his work with other heterosexual men and women, and with gay and lesbian people? This self awareness has long been a feature within social work through the popularization of the concept 'use of self' in the sense of how we use our bodies, knowledge and skills to form effective professional relationships. Particularly relevant is an understanding of self as constructed through relationships and interactions, and as being in constant development (Arnd-Caddigan and Pozzuto, 2008).

Some of these ideas are discussed further in Chapter 4 where a range of issues in relation to learning for professional practice are discussed. Social work degrees are not just about instilling knowledge in students, but also about developing your own capacity to generate and access knowledge to inform your professional work.

## OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

The topics presented in this book reflect our own experiences as students, as well as our experiences as teachers and academic advisors. They are informed by comments and feedback we have received from social work students in focus groups and have gathered from reports of social work students' experience in the UK and Australia. Our aim is to help you identify and develop the appropriate skills to survive and thrive at university. We talk broadly of 'study skills', but these extend beyond simply studying for exams. They also include knowing how to write appropriately for an academic context, how to think critically, how to manage time effectively, how to access information, and how to present well. All of these skills are transferable to social work practice. Being able to write for a range of audiences is essential. Thinking critically and analytically is key to improving the quality of practice. Accessing information, including research knowledge, is crucial, as is being able to present effectively to a wide range of groups.

In order to gain the most from the learning opportunities available in social work programmes, students need to be well organized in terms of the use of their time

available for study. They also need to be able to balance study commitments with other life commitments effectively, such as work, family and leisure time. Chapter 2 examines the challenges for students in managing their time and offers some useful suggestions to assist with this. The focus is not so much on trying to make more time available (although this may be important for some) but rather on making effective use of the time that is available. The chapter discusses how to plan for longer-term projects (e.g. assignments), as well as weekly planning.

Being able to access academic and professional literature is essential for studying social work at university and for making effective use of existing knowledge in professional practice. In Chapter 3 we overview strategies for conducting literature searches, particularly in terms of using online academic databases and other internet-based resources. Techniques for handling bibliographic data (e.g. use of Endnote software) are outlined. The chapter highlights other sources of information that can be used in students' academic work, including policy material from government departments, and data from research institutes (such as the Office for National Statistics in the UK and the Australian Bureau of Statistics).

Chapter 4 addresses styles of social work learning and teaching that students may not have encountered previously including issues based, problem based, practice, experiential, reflective, group and self-directed learning. It discusses the rationale and meaning of these learning and teaching styles and provides guidance on how to engage successfully with them.

The place of research in social work study is discussed in Chapter 5. As social work students it is important to understand and be able to critically analyse a research article or report. This involves understanding the study's methodology and its limitations. The chapter looks at these issues, as well as providing an initial grounding in some basic social work research concepts, methods and approaches to analysis. The chapter also examines the construction of literature reviews.

Critical thinking and reading is important not just for academic work, but also for social work practice as evidenced in the increasing popularity of the concept of criticality in social work. In Chapter 6, experiences, definitions, and understandings of how to think critically are presented and illustrated. It includes strategies for effective critical reading and provides annotated examples from current social work literature.

The specific kinds of writing required to carry out academic work are examined in Chapter 7. The tasks include incorporating a large amount of evidence, synthesizing information from different sources, demonstrating one's own perspective, writing clearly and producing a well-structured and cohesive piece of writing. We provide examples of how to summarize material, paraphrase, and quote to best effect.

Chapter 8 looks in depth at particular modalities of academic writing: essays and reports. The purpose of each is outlined and examples are provided and analysed. How to structure the material appropriately and how to write for the intended audience, are also discussed. It addresses writing for assessments and dealing with assessment feedback.

Chapter 9 examines specific issues and styles of writing for social work. A key focus is on writing for practice learning, including how to write reflectively on practice and how to write to demonstrate competence. The expression of identity in

writing, particularly when referring to one's own practice, is highlighted. Effective integration of academic literature and argument with personal/professional reflection is examined and ethical issues, such as the reflection of values, involved in writing about practice are addressed.

Effective communication in university settings relies not just on written communication, but also verbal communication, the topic of Chapter 10. Social workers rely on verbal and personal communication for most of their professional practice so rehearsing these is an important part of social work education. This chapter highlights the different contexts in which students are required to present verbally, ranging from informal discussions and debates in seminars through to formal assessed presentations. Strategies for preparing formal presentations are examined in detail, including structuring presentations, and developing discussion points and interactive exercises. We highlight particularly challenging issues in spoken communication, including managing anxiety, engaging the audience, and good delivery techniques. We have used direct and, to some extent, informal language throughout the book and hope this makes it engaging and relevant to you, its student readers.

## Finding out more

### *Websites*

**The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW)** is a global organization linking national associations of social work and working towards the development of social work, best practices and international cooperation between social workers and their professional organizations.
http://www.ifsw.org/

**Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE)** is an online source of good practice guidance, research and learning materials for social care and social work.
http://www.scie.org.uk/

**Skills for Care (formerly Topss)** is a UK charity that works with employers in setting standards and appropriate training in social care.
http://www.skillsforcare.org.uk

### *Readings*

D'Cruz, H., Gillingham, P., and Melendez, S. (2007) 'Reflexivity, its meanings and relevance for social work: a critical review of the literature', *British Journal of Social Work*, 37: 73–90.

Dominelli, L. (2002) *Anti-Oppressive Social Work Theory and Practice.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Gould, N. and Taylor, I. (eds) (1996) *Reflective Learning for Social Work.* Aldershot: Arena.

Healy, K., and Mulholland, J. (2007) *Writing Skills for Social Workers.* Los Angeles: SAGE.

Walker, H. (2008) *Studying for Your Social Work Degree.* Exeter: Learning Matters Ltd.