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Numbers and demographic characteristics of UK social work students over time

Chloe Corten, Josie Keam, Jonathan Scourfield, Nina Maxwell, Nell Warner and Martin Elliott

Children's Social Care Research and Development Centre (CASCADE), School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University, Cardiff, UK

ABSTRACT

Although the numbers and demographic characteristics of social work students are published annually by workforce regulators in each of the four UK nations, these have not before been brought together to form a UK-wide picture, over time, and allow some comparison between the four nations. This article does that, using individual-level data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency, from 2007/8 to 2021–2. The analysis found the well-known picture of a higher proportion of female students, older students and ethnic minoritized students on social work programs, compared with all nonsocial-work courses. Perhaps less well known is the higher proportion of disabled students and students from low-HE-participation neighborhoods on social work programs than nonsocial-work. Comparing the four nations, there was more similarity between them than difference.

Introduction

Following a dip in 2012 attributed to reforms in the sector, the UK has witnessed a steady increase in numbers entering higher education from 2.5 million students in 2018/19 to 2.9 million in 2022/23 (Higher Education Statistics Authority [HESA], 2024). While the higher number of female students (57% in 2022/23) has remained fairly static since 2016/17, there have been record proportions of students from disadvantaged backgrounds across all four nations (Bolton, 2022). The percentage of students with a known disability has increased by one percentage point every year since 2018/19 (HESA, 2024). This article's focus is the changes in social work student numbers over time, in a period of more general higher education expansion, as well as their demographic characteristics. It is important to consider both the UK as a whole and also the four nations of the UK separately, not least because Government responsibility for both university education and social care is devolved, with the nations following different paths.

The most recent HESA figures at the time of writing this paper (2023) show there were 26,580 social work student enrollments in higher education in 2021/22, across all years of study. Of these, 25,545 were UK entrants with 20,580 from England, 1,320 from Northern Ireland, 1,340 from Wales and 2,260 from Scotland. Of the non-UK entrants, 160 were from the European Union and 875 were from outside it. Surprisingly, where literature examining the profile of social work students exists, only an incomplete picture of limited years is provided. There is a lack of published information on trends over time and across UK nations, especially in relation to demographics. Analysis conducted by UCAS (2020) provides some insights, noting that social work is the only course containing more students from disadvantaged backgrounds than from advantaged backgrounds in the UK. In relation to ethnicity, UCAS notes social work as among the subjects with the highest proportion of undergraduate acceptances from the black ethnic group (23%)

Social Care Wales publish data on social work students studying in Wales, dating back to 2016/17. The most recent year shows an increase in student numbers to 320, which has been attributed to increases in the bursary (Stephenson, 2024). Of the students joining the social care register in 2021/22, 94% were White, 4% considered themselves disabled and 9% were male (Social Care Wales, 2022). The average age was 32. For the whole student body (all subjects), fewer students from Wales have been enrolling with Welsh providers since 2016/17 and Welsh-domiciled students were found to be more likely than those from other nations in the UK to cross borders for higher education (Higher Education Statistics Authority [HESA], 2022a).

In Scotland, the number completing a qualifying social work course consistently declined between 2013 and 2018 (Scottish Social Service Council [SSSC], 2019), although this may be down to the closure of two of Scotland's undergraduate courses during this period rather than applications decreasing. The latest publicly available figures (Scottish Social Service Council [SSSC], 2024) show the number of registered students in January 2024 close to the number in March 2019, following some fluctuation over that period.

In Northern Ireland, as of 31 December 2023, there were 781 registered social work students (Northern Ireland Social Care Council, 2023). Following an increase in the number of social work student applications between 2019 and 2021, there has been an incremental decline of around 10% since 2021 (National Ireland Social Care Council, 2024). This reflects a more general pattern across health and social care-related training programs. Of the students enrolling on social work programs in 2022/23, there was a slight increase in the number of male entrants, but the vast majority were female, with most students living in Northern Ireland.

In England, Skills for Care report annual data around social work students, albeit only their most recent year at the time of writing (2021–22) is available online. Within this report, they recorded that around 5,580 students enrolled onto social work courses in 2021–22, decreasing by 2% since the last academic year (Skills for Care, 2023). Numbers are up, however, on the 2010s, a decade in which typically national numbers were around the mid-4000s for most years. This increase can likely be attributed to the emergence of new routes into the field. There have been new fast-track postgraduate schemes unique to England, which allow students to qualify as social workers in 14 months or less (Step Up to Social Work, Frontline and Think Ahead), as well as apprenticeship schemes, whereas the devolved administrations have tended not to innovate as much away from standard

UG and PG provision. It is not known whether students are attracted to England from the other nations by these generously funded alternative social work training routes.

The profiles of student numbers in England show a mainly female workforce, with 87% female in 2021. The average student age is relatively older than for other degree programs at 27 for those enrolling onto undergraduate social work programs in England in 2021 and 31 for postgraduates (Skills for Care, 2023).

As noted above, whilst most of the UK nations publish demographic summaries of their most recent year, there is a lack of analysis that considers student numbers and demographics over time, and a lack of a comparative picture across the four UK nations. We therefore attempt to address these evidence gaps. Our research questions are as follows:

- What are the demographic characteristics (age, sex, disability, ethnicity and HE participation level) of students on initial qualifying social work programs across each of the four nations of the UK? And how do these compare with the rest of the student body?
- How have these characteristics changed over time?

Materials and methods

Data sources

The study examines data on students gathered by the Higher Education Statistics Authority (HESA), the central source in the UK for collecting, assuring, and disseminating data about higher education. HESA publish aggregate data on trends in higher education, including student demographics, but their individual-level data sets are not publicly available so have to be purchased. Relatively little use has been made of HESA data for social care research to date. The only examples appear to be Moriarty and Murray's (2007) investigation into the number of people wishing to become social workers and their demographic characteristics; Cutmore and Roger's (2016) measurement of the cost of different training routes and Maxwell et al. (2018) comparison of Frontline (a fast-track social work training program) and mainstream postgraduate student demographic characteristics. In addition to these studies, Skills for Care (e.g. 2023) publish a report each year on social work education in England using HESA data.

Higher education providers in England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland return data to HESA via these records annually. Essentially, such data is collected at an individualized level on a census basis, and coverage extends to all students undertaking a course or program which leads to a qualification or credit. A majority of data items are collected for all students (HESA, 2022a), but some are restricted to a particular type of students or location, and missing data are recorded as 'unknown' (Higher Education Statistics Authority [HESA], 2025). For data protection purposes, HESA implement a standard rounding methodology which has also been followed within our research, namely that all numbers are rounded to the nearest multiple of 5, to avoid the possibility of identifying individual students, and percentages are only reported where there are at least 22.5 students in that category.

The specific data we purchased from HESA related to people studying social work in higher education across the UK for the period 2007–08 to 2021–22, and some demographic characteristics of this population, which were available for both undergraduate and postgraduate students. The inclusion criteria consisted of 'social work' courses (code 100,503 from 2019/20 and L500 for the years prior) at undergraduate or postgraduate level and home address categorized by nation (England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, non-UK country). To help identify trends for social work students, data were drawn from Heidi Plus to act as a comparator. Heidi Plus is an analytical tool containing HESA data that is used by universities for operational purposes. Its data were used to identify undergraduate and postgraduate first-year entrants on all courses excluding social work (2007–08 to 2021–22). Undergraduate and postgraduate students are not disaggregated in the results.

Identification of qualifying programs

The HESA data included an array of social work programs at different levels, so those not on an initial qualifying course needed to be excluded. Course names are entered manually by universities. When purchasing the data, we believed there to be no field in HESA data to determine whether a program is qualifying, post-qualifying or other type. In fact, we have subsequently found out there is a field labeled 'Regulatory body for health and social care students', which we did not purchase. This field would have helped identify professional qualifications, although some post-qualifying courses would still have needed to be manually removed.

As it was, given the large number of course titles over 15 academic sessions, we used a combination of automated and manual coding of titles. The social work courses were grouped according to three categories based on a set of criteria. If the course title contained 'PhD', 'MPhil', 'Doctor', 'DSW' or 'CPD' they were coded as 'post-qualifying' and excluded. Other titles including only the term 'social work' were coded as 'initial qualifying'. To allow identification of the remaining programs, the titles were manually read through against information obtained on historically approved programs from Social Work England, Social Care Wales, Scottish Social Services Council, and Northern Ireland Social Care Council through Freedom of Information requests. No response was received from the Scottish or Welsh bodies about historical course titles, so course titles of solely 'social work' were used, along with the *current* published list of approved courses found on their websites as a guide to determine historical course names. All the results are based on first-year entry to courses, rather than all cohorts together.

Variables

The variables derived from these data included demographic variables as well as a measure of higher education participation in their local area. The demographic variables obtained were:

Age—This was classified into four age groups: 17–20; 21–24; 25–29; 30 and over.
Sex—Three categories were used: Female; Male; Other.

Disability—This was a binary variable denoting that a disability had been recorded in the data or not: Known disability; No Known disability.

Ethnicity—This was classified into five overarching groups collected within the data, which follow the classifications used by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). White; Black (including Black Caribbean or Caribbean British, Black African or African British, Any other Black background); Asian (including Asian Indian or Indian British, Asian Pakistani or Pakistani British, Asian Bangladeshi or Bangladeshi British, Asian Chinese or Chinese British, Any other Asian background); Mixed or multiple ethnic background; Any other ethnic background. Only the five broad ethnic categories used in the England and Wales census are presented for the ethnicity analysis. The more detailed 18 categories were available in the purchased HESA data, but analysis of these categories produced some numbers less than five so it was decided to use the broad categories only. Note that HESA do not collect ethnicity data on overseas students.

Area-level higher education participation—The POLAR4 (Participation of Local Area Backgrounds) measure classifies local areas according to what proportion of young people are in higher education. It uses small areas of around 2000 to 6000 households, defined by middle-layer super output areas (for England and Wales), Intermediate Zones (for Scotland), and Super Output Areas (for Northern Ireland). The number of young people from each area who enter higher education aged 18 or 19 is divided by the population of that age in the area. The small areas are divided into quintiles. Quintile 1 contains areas with the lowest participation in higher education and quintile 5 is defined as areas with the highest rates of participation. Each quintile represents 20% of the UK population aged 18–19. POLAR4 was calculated using data for students beginning university between 2009–10 and 2013–14. Comparative data over time were not available in Heidi Plus for POLAR4 for all UK nations.

Coverage of our data

Numbers of social work students starting qualifying programs in England in our dataset derived from HESA were compared with the numbers published by Skills for Care (2023) for the available years of 2009/10–2021/22. No other nation published comparable numbers over time. There was a mean annual difference of 6% (range 0% to 16%), with the numbers in our study population being lower than Skills for Care. Based on the assumption that Skills for Care have accurate numbers, an important study limitation is that the adopted inclusion-exclusion of programs by name had the result of accidentally excluding some that were in fact qualifying programs.

Univariate and bivariate statistical analysis

Section 1 of the results provides a bivariate analysis of the demographic characteristics of social work students by UK nation. This analysis contains data from the most recent five years (2017/18–2021/22) only. In Section 2, changes over time in demographic characteristics for social work and nonsocial-work student populations are compared for the whole UK. Graphs are used to look at trends over time between 2007/8 and 2021/22.

These look at all UK nations together because graphs presenting all four nations separately are difficult to read and interpret, with fluctuating small numbers on social work programs in the smaller nations. Any UK-wide institutions were excluded from the analysis in section 1 (separate UK nations) but included in the all-UK combined results in section 2. Results are published with HESA permission.

Results

The HESA data contained a total of n = 84,240 students who were first-year entrants to social work initial qualifying courses between 2007/8 and 2021/22. A breakdown of these students by UK nation program provider and year of entry is shown in Table 1. Overall, the numbers have increased over time, but the numbers studying in Wales have gone down.

Excluding UK-wide institutions, there were n = 28,365 first entrants into social work qualifying courses between 2017/18 and 2021/22. In Section 1 below, we explore the demographic characteristics of students over these five years.

Section 1. Four nations comparison of social work student demographic characteristics

Ethnicity

Table 2 shows the number and percentages of social work students in different ethnic categories compared across the four UK nations. Generally, all four nations follow the same overall proportional trend of ethnic representation. This consists of a majority White social work student base (60–98%), accompanied by considerably smaller Black (0–23%) and Asian (0–7%) student populations. Mixed and other ethnic groups consistently make up 5% or lower of all social work student populations.

There are some further notable variations in relative ethnic diversity between the nations, which are broadly in line with differences between the four nations in the

Table 1. First-year entrants to social work initial qualifying courses, by year and nation, as identified by analysis of HESA data.

Year of entry	England	Wales	Scotland	N. Ireland	Total
2007/08	4710	260	430	240	5640
2008/09	4780	265	415	230	5685
2009/10	4815	240	390	240	5685
2010/11	4840	240	445	245	5775
2011/12	4835	205	445	240	5720
2012/13	4370	185	435	210	5200
2013/14	4370	210	420	205	5200
2014/15	4185	215	450	220	5070
2015/16	4580	210	445	200	5435
2016/17	3980	195	505	210	4890
2017/18	4450	175	500	220	5345
2018/19	4010	185	475	195	4860
2019/20	4855	195	450	210	5710
2020/21	5220	165	550	230	6170
2021/22	5355	150	550	225	6275
Total	69350	3090	6900	3325	82665

Table 2. First-year social work students in the four UK nations, 2017/18–2021/22, by demographic categories.

	UK nation							
	England		Wales		Scotland		N. Ireland	
Demographic characteristic	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Ethnicity								
White	14,355	60%	795	92%	2155	85%	1040	96%
Black	5,385	23%	35	4%	140	6%	5	*
Asian	1,775	7%	10	*	35	1%	0	*
Mixed/multiple	1,210	5%	15	*	50	2%	10	*
Other	250	1%	0	*	0	*	0	*
Unknown[a]	915	4%	5	*	140	6%	25	2%
Total[b]	23,890	100%	860	100%	2,520	100%	1,080	100%
Age								
17–20	5,270	22%	85	10%	720	29%	185	17%
21–24	4,640	19%	210	24%	490	19%	280	26%
25–29	4,225	18%	210	24%	480	19%	270	25%
30 and over	9,750	41%	360	43%	830	33%	350	32%
Total[b]	23,885	100%	865	101%	2,520	100%	1,085	100%
Sex								
Male	3,340	14%	120	14%	390	15%	175	16%
Female	20,525	86%	745	86%	2,130	85%	910	84%
Other	25	0%	0	*	0	*	0	*
Total[b]	23,890	100%	865	100%	2,520	100%	1,085	100%
POLAR4 quintiles[c]								
1	4,550	19%	175	20%	225	9%	185	17%
2	4,860	20%	255	29%	405	16%	135	12%
3	4,880	20%	195	23%	555	22%	190	17%
4	4,940	21%	130	15%	535	21%	265	24%
5	4,060	17%	105	12%	650	26%	280	26%
unknown	605	3%	5	*	150	6%	35	3%
Total[a]	23,890	100%	865	100%	2,520	100%	1,090	100%
Disability								
Known disability	4,960	21%	145	17%	495	20%	220	20%
No known disability	18,930	79%	715	83%	2030	80%	865	80%
Total[a]	23,890	100%	860	100%	2,525	100%	1,085	100%

[a]Ethnicity data not collected on overseas students.
[b]Due to rounding, some totals Ns do not add up to 28,363.
[c]Ranging from low (1) HE participation area to high (5).
*% suppressed because based on $n < 22.5$.

wider populations. England has the smallest white majority in its social work student base, with 60% white students. This compares to a considerably higher percentage in Scotland, which has 86% white social work students. Northern Ireland and Wales demonstrate the largest white student populations, with 98% and 95% white students, respectively. Black students make up a sizable minority in England (23%), compared to much lower percentages (4% and 5%) in Wales and Scotland, respectively. Northern Ireland, in particular, shows very low overall ethnic diversity in its student base, with 0% representation of all nonwhite categorized ethnicities other than the mixed category. Across all nations, mixed or multiple ethnic groups make up a consistently low proportion of the social work student base, ranging between 5% and 0% across the nations.

Using published census results for each nation (Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, 2023; Office for National Statistics, 2024; Scotland's Census, 2023) the proportions in Table 2 can be compared with estimates for the general population. These show that in all nations, the proportion of Asian social work students is lower than in the

national population. However, the proportion of Black social work students is higher than in the population for England, Wales and Scotland. Analysis of the more detailed 18 categories of ethnicity, which is not presented here due to data suppression, shows Black African students to be especially well represented, compared with the general population. We know these to be domestic students, as HESA do not collect ethnicity data on overseas students (HESA do collect data on country of origin for overseas students but these were not included in our data purchase, as they were beyond the scope of our research questions). Comparison with the rest of the student body follows in Section 2.

Age

In terms of age, there is a predominantly mature (25 years and older) student population in the 2021–22 social work cohort, UK-wide. For all four nations, students aged 25 or over constitute over half (ranging 52–66%) of total social work students with the majority of those aged 30 or over. The percentage of students aged 30 or over ranged from 33% to 42%. This is consistently seen across all four nations. Variation between the four nations is present in the broader distribution of students across these age groups. Scotland, for example, hosts the highest proportion of 17–20-year-old students (29%). Conversely, Wales has a considerably lower proportion of younger social work students compared to the other four nations, with 10% and 14% of students being aged between 17–20 and 21–24 years old, respectively. At the same time, Wales has the highest representation of students aged 30 and over (42%, or 320 students), closely matched by England (41%, 9,750 students).

Sex

The sex divide (male/female) of social work students shows consistency across the four nations, with a considerable and consistent majority of social work students being female (84–86% for all four nations) (see Table 2).

Students from neighbourhoods with lower higher education (HE) participation

There are considerable variations in the distribution of POLAR4 quintile backgrounds among social work students across the four UK nations (see Table 2). Half of Welsh social work students come from the two lowest HE participation quintiles, comprising 50% of Welsh social work students (when unrounded, combined and re-rounded). Conversely, Wales has the lowest proportion of social work students from POLAR4 higher HE participation areas: quintiles four (15%) and five (12%). These proportions are the lowest of the four nations. This suggests that students entering social worker courses in Wales come from areas which have a relatively lower proportion of students in higher education. This contrasts with England, in which a generally much more even representation across the five quintiles is identified (with all quintiles each contributing between 17% and 21% representation).

Diverging from both Wales and England, Scotland shows an inversely distributed POLAR4 trend compared to Wales, with overrepresentation of social work students from the highest participation quintiles (three to five). Almost half (47%) of Scottish social work students come from quintiles four or five, whilst quintile one sees only 9% representation in Scottish social work students. Northern Ireland also has a greater student representation from high HE participation backgrounds. The highest HE

participation quintiles (four and five) contribute 50% of Northern Ireland social work students, compared to the lowest two quintiles contributing 30%.

Disability

Moving to consider disability, the representation of social work students who have declared they are disabled is broadly similar across the four nations (see Table 2). Wales shows the lowest representation, with 17% of its students recorded as disabled. Scotland, England and Northern Ireland show slightly higher proportions than Wales, with around one-fifth of students reporting as disabled. We note the caveat that students control the pace and extent to which they disclose disability, and they may not disclose at the application stage for fear of this having an adverse effect (Stanley et al., 2011).

Section 2. Change over time in demographic characteristics of all-UK social work and non-social-work student populations

In this section, we move on to graphically present comparisons between social work and nonsocial-work students, with the latter results from Heidi Plus data.

Representation of ethnic minoritised populations

Figure 1 shows general consistency in the higher representation of ethnic minoritized students within social work and nonsocial-work courses. Although both student populations have seen increased representation of ethnic minoritized populations between 2007/8 and 2021/22, as the UK population has become more ethnically diverse over
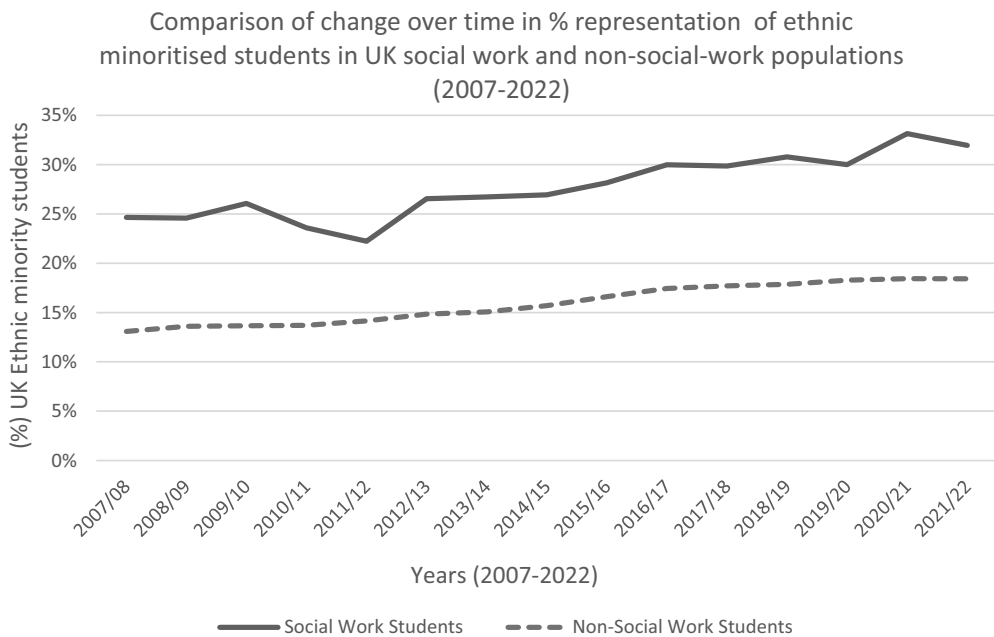
Figure 1. Change over time in the percentage of ethnic minoritized students, comparing social work and non-social-work students for the whole UK, 2007/8–2020/21.

time. Social work students have seen a slightly greater increase (7 percentage points, compared to 5 for nonsocial-work students), with 32% of students on UK social work courses now identified with a minoritised ethnic category. The year-on-year trend of change is difficult to compare because of fluctuations in the relatively smaller social work student population.

### Representation of students aged 30 or over

Figure 2 shows divergence over time in the age composition of social work and non-social-work students. Whereas the percentage representation of students aged over 30 has very slightly declined over time for UK nonsocial-work students (from 32% to 23%), this has not been matched by a corresponding decrease for UK social work students. Overall, the contribution of those aged over 30 to the social work student population remains greater and consistent over time.

Sex representation

From Figure 3 we can identify considerably lower representation of male students within UK social work courses when compared to nonsocial work. This is generally stable over time, with male students constituting 14% of all social work students in 2021/22, having changed only very slightly since 2007/08. This proportion is considerably less than the proportion of students on nonsocial-work students, of whom 42–44% are male, remaining consistent over time (42% in 2021/22).
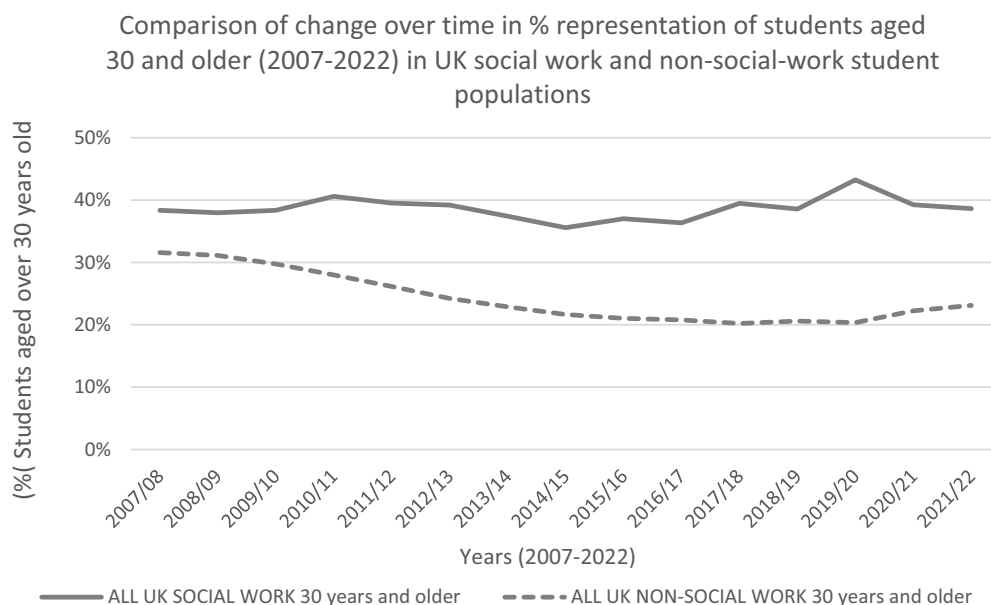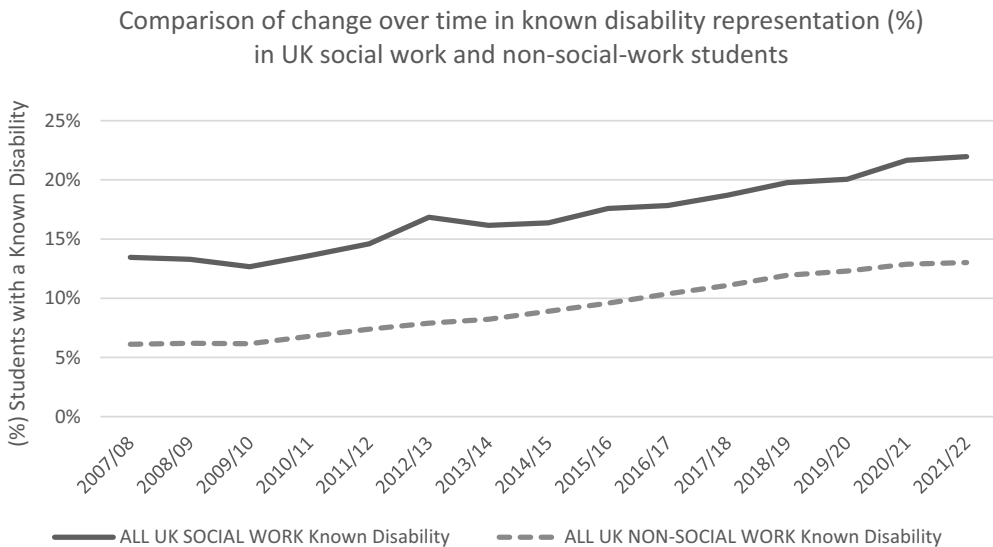

Figure 2. Change over time in the percentage of students aged 30+, comparing social work and non-social-work students for the whole UK, 2007/8–2020/21.

Comparison of change over time in male representation (%) in
UK social work and non-social-work student populations (2007-2022)
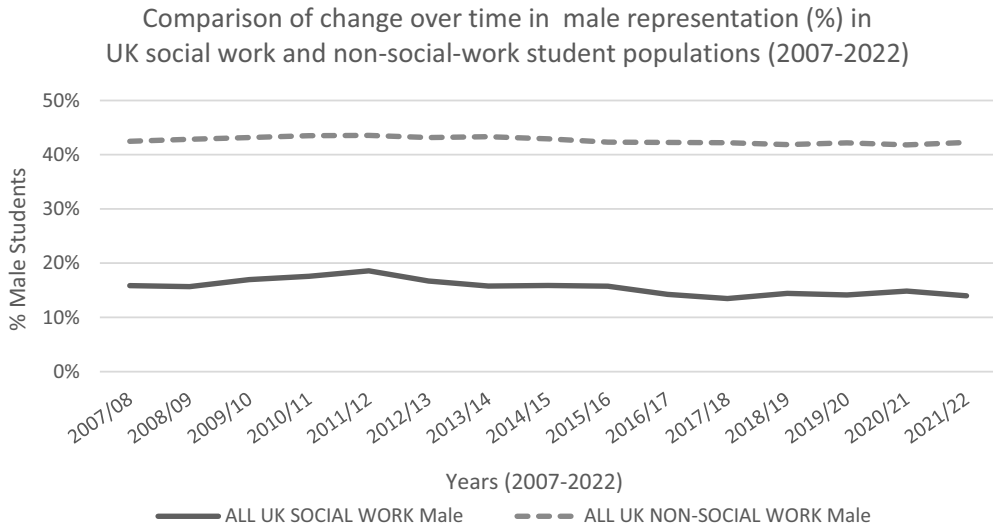
Figure 3. Change over time in the percentage of male students, comparing social work and non-social-work students for the whole UK, 2007/8–2020/21.

Disabled students' representation

Social work courses consistently host higher proportions of students with a known disability (9 percentage points more than nonsocial-work students, in the most recent year of 2021/22). Figure 4 shows high correspondence in the trends over time for social work and nonsocial-work students. Both student populations saw considerable net increase between 2007/08 and 2021/22 in representation of disability. This may be due

Comparison of change over time in known disability representation (%)
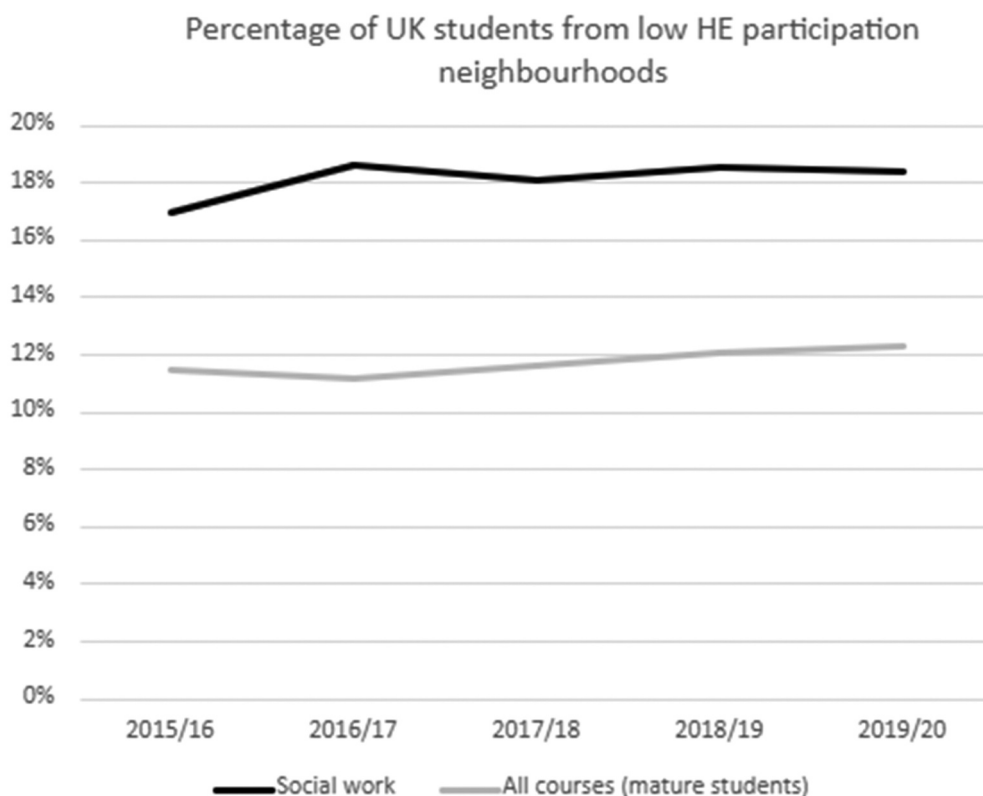in UK social work and non-social-work students

Figure 4. Change over time in the percentage of disabled students, comparing social work and non-social-work students for the whole UK, 2007/8–2020/21.

to an increased awareness and diagnosis of disability leading more students to disclose disabilities. The percentage of social work students indicating a disability increased from 13% to 22%, while comparable figures for nonsocial work students were 6% increasing to 13%.

Low HE participation neighbourhoods

It is not possible to offer quite the same comparison over time for students' background by neighborhood level of HE participation because the comparison POLAR4 data for nonsocial-work students are not available for all UK nations in the Heidi Plus data. However, all-UK POLAR4 results are summarized by Higher Education Statistics Authority (HESA, 2022b) for the timeframe 2015/16 to 2019/20 for 'low HE participation neighbourhoods' which are POLAR4 quintiles 1 and 2 combined, so these are presented for comparison in Figure 5 below. From the published HESA tables, we have used the slightly higher percentages for mature students, given the older age profile of social work students. Data are only available on the whole UK until 2019/20.

Figure 5. Change over time in the percentage of students from low HE participation neighbourhoods, comparing social work students with mature entrants to all courses for the whole UK, 2015/16–2019/20.

Discussion

The social and political context of this study is one of considerable current concern about the recruitment, and especially the retention of social workers in all four UK nations due to the imbalance between the number of social workers entering the profession and those leaving (Samuel, 2023a, 2023b, 2024). The potential reasons for this are manifold, including public perceptions, high caseloads, poor pay, organizational stress, and the nature of the work (Edwards et al., 2022). Profiling social work students over time at a national level does not in itself directly help with this recruitment and retention crisis, but it does provide an assessment of how representative the student social work population is of the people they serve. This is timely, given the current impetus for lived experience, where the value of personal experience is being acknowledged in the UK for its significance in 'elevating the expertise and knowledge of social workers from marginalised groups to change systems to be more equitable' (Mackay, 2023, p. 1836). Given the concentration of social work activity in more deprived places, which in turn contain higher proportions of ethnic minoritized populations (see, for example, Bywaters et al., 2020), and given social workers' direct role in supporting the independence of disabled people, it can be argued that for certain demographic characteristics we would want to see *over*-representation in the population of social workers.

This does appear to be the case for minoritized ethnic groups of students, of whom there is a higher proportion in social work UK-wide than in the general population or the nonsocial-work student population. Most of this is carried by English social work programs, although Black students are also over-represented in Wales and Scotland. Asian students, however, are under-represented in all four nations. Despite the higher proportion overall, in England, minoritised students' progress is slower on social work programs than their white counterparts (Fairtlough et al., 2014). They are half as likely to be appointed to social work roles from shortlists and twice as likely to face fitness to practise processes than their white counterparts (Skills for Care, 2024). In Scotland, survey findings found minoritized ethnic students had higher rates of education and placement difficulties (SASW, 2021). In Wales, the need for more effective anti-racist education and training has been noted (Forbes & Quinn Aziz, 2023). Further exploration is needed into these patterns, including why minoritised ethnic students are more likely than white students to dropout of higher education, regardless of level of deprivation (Boulton & Lewis, 2024). Future research would benefit from the inclusion of the lived experiences of minoritized ethnic students and qualified social workers, as this is an under-studied area (Dytham et al., 2024).

It is reassuring that we found the proportion of social work students from low HE participation neighborhoods to be higher than it was for mature students on all courses, echoing a trend highlighted by UCAS (2020). Historically, social work has attracted students from diverse backgrounds which has been recognized as enhancing critical discussion during social work training and creating a workforce who are more reflective of the population they serve (Higgs, 2021). However, there are quite different patterns across the nations. Wales has the highest proportion of social work and other students from low participation neighborhoods, and Scotland the lowest. Again, these patterns require further attention.

At a headline level, these trends were already known, although the UK nations' data had not till now been considered together and over time. As is well known already, male students are a minority in all four nations and fairly consistently over time. It has been posited that this is because men are more likely to seek higher status careers with better earning potential (Perry & Cree, 2003). As expected, social work students were older than nonsocial-work. This is true in all four nations but interestingly Scotland has a clearly higher proportion (29%) of 17–20-year-old entrants than the other nations. Drawing on patterns from the US social work workforce, Halvorsen and Emmanuel (2020) suggest that 'encore students' could be ideally placed to address the crisis in recruitment. They describe encore students as a more diverse population of students as they are 35+ year olds first time HE entrants or returners, with a range of sociodemographic factors, life experiences, knowledge from previous work, volunteer and advocacy (Halvorsen & Emmanuel, 2020, p. 677).

In all the UK nations, proportions of disabled social work students are slightly lower than population prevalence (Kirk-Wade, 2023), although the likelihood of disability is also related to age, so in a like-for-like comparison by age there might be different findings, but further research would be needed in this area to identify if this is the case. There are certainly a higher proportion of disabled people studying social work than nonsocial-work subjects, and this is encouraging, given the importance of social work roles in relation to disability. However, given this importance, this relationship needs to be understood better.

Limitations

Missing data was an issue, as there was a mean difference of 6% (0%–16%) between the numbers of social work students we identified for England (in Table 1) and the numbers published by Skills for Care. This is most likely explained by decisions taken on inclusion and exclusion of course titles. If we had been aware of the existence of the data field noting regulatory body for health and social care students and had included this in our data purchase, identification of qualifying courses would have been easier and there might have been less difference from the numbers published by Skills for Care. However, even for the cohort with the largest amount of missing data there is 84% coverage, which is a good basis for estimating demographic representation.

Conclusion

The main impression from comparing student demographics across nations is the amount of similarity. The results about higher education participation neighborhoods were where most variation could be seen and also ethnicity, where there are quite big population differences between the four nations. Some of the demographic trends—age, gender, ethnicity—were already well known and others (disability and HE participation) possibly less well known. Those that were less well-known warrant further quantitative and qualitative study.

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