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Newly qualified social workers in Scotland

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Very few empirical studies have traced the experiences of newly-qualified social workers as they progress in their careers. As a result, very little is known about the acquisition and development of skills and knowledge at the start of professional social work practice, and how these early-career professionals maintain their value base in the face of growing welfare challenges that impact on relationships with service users (Grant et al., 2016). In Scotland, we find that a number of social workers leave the profession within five years of qualification. This study will attempt to provide insight into factors that matter to newly-qualified staff, and factors that impact on decisions to leave or stay in practice. This poster will present preliminary findings from a national five-year longitudinal study on newly-qualified social workers in Scotland (funded by the Scottish Social Services Council).

This is a mixed-method longitudinal study. It includes a series of national repeat-measure online surveys, in-depth interviews, focus groups and ethnography. Purposive sampling is used; the study is tracing only newly-qualified social workers who qualified in 2016. This research is producing quantitative and qualitative data – both are respectively analysed and synthesised with each subsequent year of data collection. A thematic approach is applied throughout this study.

From online survey data, a significant proportion of newly-qualified social workers report high levels of confidence across a range of knowledge and skill categories. Many report the ability to practice in ways that align with core social work values, and a high proportion indicate positive levels of satisfaction with supervision, training and learning opportunities. However, data collected from interviews, focus groups and ethnography, suggests a more complex picture. Indeed, Interviews and focus groups provide a nuanced representation of experience that suggests we have underplayed the importance of local practice cultures and informal learning in the first stage of social work careers. Findings from ethnography suggest that new agile working practices are providing fewer opportunities for newly-qualified staff to engage informally with other, more experienced staff. Other findings suggest that austerity measures from government are having significant impact on the ability of social workers to meet the needs of service users, and that we have understated the significance of emotional labour in everyday practice. Important questions are raised here about the methods we use more broadly in social work research and practice when attempting to build an accurate picture of lived experience; different methods produce different responses, and the project team have identified this as both challenging *and* valuable in this study.

Early findings from the study have informed a recent review of social work education in Scotland. Emerging findings are currently informing plans for a supported and assessed year for all newly-qualified social workers employed by Scottish organisations. The study concludes in 2021, and findings will be disseminated to the Scottish Government and other key stakeholders. The project team will produce a series of articles for publication in academic journals.