An Exploratory Study of the Relationship of Admission Criteria and Field Education Performance in an Australian Bachelor of Social Work Course

Martin Ryan, Helen Cleak, Lisa Brophy and Mark Furlong

Introduction

A significant concern for any profession is the selection of students to study in the course that provides the recognition to practice in that profession. Social work and welfare work are no exceptions in this regard. Our aim is to produce graduates who will be effective, ethical and competent practitioners. How can students best be selected to meet the objective of producing such practitioners? Which criteria give the most accurate predictions of desired outcomes, particularly in field education performance? This paper reports on one social work school’s efforts to examine the relationship of BSW preadmission criteria to first year field education performance.

Studies in the United States on admissions to social work programs (where they have both Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) and Master of Social Work (MSW) programs designed to prepare students for practice) have found that criteria for entering the program and field placement tend to be weighted towards academic performance standards such as course completion and GPA (Grade Point Average), rather than characteristics which are more difficult to measure, such as sensitivity to diversity and ethical behaviour (Cunningham 1982; Gibbs 1994). A more recent study by Miller & Koerin (1998) found in a survey of MSW programs that over 80% of respondents identified nonacademic indicators were being used to assess the suitability of applicants. These studies overall suggest firstly, that admission to a social work program is a fairly non-selective process, regardless of the criteria used, and secondly, that very few students' enrolments are ever terminated once they are admitted (Dinerman 1981, 1982; Wahlberg and Lommen 1990; Gibbs 1994).

Previous research on gatekeeping mechanisms in Australian Bachelor of Social Work programs (Ryan, Habibis and Craft, 1997; 1998) was based on a survey of heads of

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schools in 1994-95. Eighteen schools were sent questionnaires and 15 subsequently returned a completed questionnaire (an 83% return rate).

Their key findings in relation to admissions criteria were that in terms of **formal criteria** the schools used for determining entry into the BSW course, it was found that potential/demonstrated academic ability emerged as the criterion most frequently cited (n=11, 73%) followed by 'commitment and interest in social work' (n=9, 60%). Only 27% cited skills and personal qualities (or less than 4 respondents) with 'emotional/mental maturity' least often cited (7% or n=1).

Respondents were also asked about the **informal criteria** they used based on a list of factors supplied for them to check. The factors mentioned most frequently were: 'consistency between personal values & social work values' (n=7, 47%); 'commitment to and interest in social work' (n=6, 40%) and 'communication skills' (n=6, 40%).

They were also questioned about the **methods used to assess the formal and informal criteria** they used and again a list of factors was supplied for them to check. Virtually all (n=14, 93%) used formal academic records, followed by employment record and voluntary work (n=10, 66%). Written essays and references came next (n=7, 47% each). Only four schools (27%) used interviews.

When the opportunity was given to respondents to rank all the criteria (formal and informal) they utilised, the results were consistent with the previous data in that academic ability is ranked higher than anything else (by 67%) with a range of personal qualities being ranked lowest (13%).

Ryan, Habibis and Craft (1997; 1998) also asked respondents about the percentage of applicants denied admission to the course in the 1994 admissions cycle. Of those schools able to respond to this question (n=9), 63% of these (n=6) said that 50% or more of their applicants were denied admission and 13% denied admission to 75% or more of their applicants. The most common reasons for applicants to be refused entry to the course were related to academic achievement. No other category of reasons was listed. All 15 schools allowed students to apply for admission more than once (in a subsequent year).

Respondents were also asked how often a student failure in field education has occurred in the last five years. Thirteen schools provided quantifiable annual data which when averaged out produced a figure of 15 field education failures per annum across all 13 schools. Only two schools have failed more than 15 students in five years. Sixty percent of the schools have failed less than two per year. Whilst the size of enrolments clearly varied across the schools, the number of failures is very small regardless of enrolment size.

Overall these findings indicate, similar to US schools, that the admissions process would seem to be of key importance in the gatekeeping, particularly as failure in field education units was relatively rare and exclusion on non-academic grounds was problematic.

A number of recent Australian studies have examined university admission procedures and outcomes for specific groups such as low SES (Socio Economic Status) school leavers (Ramsey, Tranter, Charlton and Sumner 1998), TAFE graduates (Cohen, Lewis, Stone and Wood 1997), as well as outcomes of flexible admission policies (Ramsey, Tranter, Sumner and Barrett 1996) and selection methods in general (Pascoe, McClelland and McGaw 1997). Older Australian research focuses more generally on predictors of student success at university. A group of the latter studies attempt to develop regression or econometric models in order to chart student performance and progress through courses. The other group of studies tries to explain pass and retention rates.

Key pieces of research in the first group, which are most relevant to the present research study, include West (1985) and Lewis (1994). West (1985) investigated the effects of pre-entry characteristics on the academic performance of students who entered Monash University from secondary school in 1975, 1980 and 1982. The author found that students who undertook most of their schooling in government schools performed better at the end of first year of university than students with the same selection score from independent schools. Neither father's occupation or country of birth were significant predictors of university performance over the three years researched.

Lewis (1994) analysed the results of just over 10,000 commencing students at the University of Wollongong between 1990 and 1993. This study concluded that female students, students who attended government schools and older students who were not school leavers, performed significantly better than the university-wide average.

Despite the crucial nature of decisions made about who is to be admitted to social work courses, there appears to have been no Australian research done on the admission process and its relationship to student placement performance outcomes in social work courses.

Cunningham's US study (1982) and its methodology was used as the basis for the present study. In her study, conducted at the University of Texas at Austin with a sample of 83 BSW students, she examined the relationship between 11 pre-admission independent variables and the dependent variable of performance ratings in a fieldwork program using multiple regression. She was particularly interested in previous academic performance and the age of students. She found that only grade point average and age were significant success predictors. She concluded that, 'young students and those with a high grade point average seemed to be the best candidates for the fieldwork program' (1982, p.31).

Obviously this is a somewhat controversial finding which tends to run against the common wisdom and experience of those involved in social work education. It is
probably more likely that educators would contend that mature-aged students with life and work experience would perform better in the social work role. Would such findings hold true in an Australian program?

The authors had the opportunity to test these findings in an Australian BSW course, namely La Trobe University in Melbourne, where they were all involved in either the admissions process, fieldwork education or both. The BSW course, at the time of the study, was a two-year course largely admitting graduates.

Prior to 1996, decisions on accepting applicants into the La Trobe University BSW course, were based on applicants completing an application form, supplying two referees' reports (one academic and one non-academic) and an academic record. A member of the three-person admissions committee would then read this information, make an overall unscored assessment as to acceptance or not and make a recommendation to the whole committee, who would then reach a final decision.

In 1996 a new scoring system for admission to the two-year BSW course at La Trobe University was introduced which incorporated variables including previous academic level and grades, relevant subjects, work/volunteer experience, referees' reports and a discretionary points category. Applicants were scored on each of these factors and from them a total percentage score was calculated. Given the introduction of this scoring system into the BSW application process and hence having quantitative data available to students in relation to preadmission variables, it seemed to present a good opportunity to carry out a replication of Cunningham's study at La Trobe University.

Our aim in carrying out the study was to subject the variables which we thought to be predictive to empirical testing to see if they were in fact related to outcome. The study was exploratory in nature and sought to examine the relationship between a range of preadmission variables and performance in the first year BSW field education program in 1997. We were particularly interested in the variables of age of the students at entry and academic ability as predictor variables.

**Literature Review**

In reviewing the literature, it quickly became apparent that the area of admission predictions in social work programs was a field of research that was very much in vogue in the United States from the late 1960s, through to the 1970s and in to the early 1980s. (After that time, the research literature has tended to focus on gatekeeping in social work programs more broadly (eg. Hepler and Noble 1990; Younes 1998). In that country, there were a number of research studies that examined the predictive factors for student success in schools of social work (Dailey 1974; 1979; Pfouts and Henley 1977; Hughes 1979; Johnson 1980; Cunningham 1982). Even though these studies are in some instances over 20 years old, they are still significant as they remain the key pieces of research on social work admissions in the United States given the relative dearth of more recent studies. These studies followed on from the initial survey work on admissions policies done by Constable (1977) and McNeece (1979). McNeece found that despite the disrepute into which grades had fallen as a screening criterion, the majority of schools still selected the grade-point average as the single best predictor of an applicant's chances for success in graduate school.

Dailey (1974; 1979) replicated his own previous study of the correlation of predictions by academic staff on admission (admission ratings) and student outcome measures of classroom performance and field performance. In both studies, it was found that full-time faculty had some capacity to predict classroom performance, but no ability to predict field performance. Pfouts and Henley (1977) constructed a multivariate predictive index to be used as an admissions tool based on four factors: intellectual ability; maturity and work experience; quality of undergraduate school and sex.

Pfouts and Henley (1977), in reviewing the admissions research to that time in the US, state that undergraduate GPA has been shown to be associated with performance by a number of researchers. But they add that a minority found no relation between undergraduate grades and success in social work school. They also report that, in general, middle-aged students have been found to be less successful than younger students, although one previous study found no correlation between age and success.

A more recent study by Dunlap, Henley and Fraser (1998) examined the correlation between admissions criteria and academic performance at one state university. The data was based on 654 MSW students who attended from 1985-1992. The measure of academic performance was based on a score in a comprehensive exam just prior to graduation. It was found that undergraduate GPA, Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores and gender and race were significantly correlated with academic performance. In relation to latter point, it was found that females scored significantly higher than males on the exam and Caucasian students scored significantly higher than African-American students.
In conclusion, the available US research appears to be equivocal when evaluating exactly which variables are good predictors of successful outcomes, including field education performance. This is compounded by the fact that there are problems associated with generalising from US MSW programs to undergraduate BSW programs and vice versa. In a BSW program applicants are admitted straight from the completion of high school and for an MSW program they already possess a first degree. Academic ability has been found to be the most consistently successful predictor, with others like age of the students having a less certain predictive value. In Australia these issues appear to have not been researched at all in social work programs.

Methodology

The study aimed to examine the relationship between a range of preadmission variables and performance in the first year BSW field education program. Preadmission variable data in the form of an admission score were gathered on all commencing BSW students at La Trobe University, Bundoora, Melbourne, prior to their acceptance into the two-year course at the beginning of the 1997 academic year. Data were utilised on 55 students who commenced their first field education placement in September of that year.

The following variables were the eight preadmission variables utilised in the admission scoring and for this study:

1) Academic Record (level of previous academic qualifications weighted at 20 points of a total score of 100 points given to each student) For example, an incomplete or complete Bachelor's degree or any postgraduate qualifications;

2) Preadmission Academic Standard (based on all previous subjects undertaken at tertiary level and calculated on median grade - worth 20 points). For example, a D average was given 5, a C average 10, a B average 15 and an A average 20;

3) Work experience (both paid and unpaid for which a score out of 10 points was given for the type of work and 10% for the quality of the work, to give a total of 20 points);

4) Life Experience (up to 5 points was given for travel, personal experience of living with a disability or serious illness, as a carer, migration. It had to be demonstrated that the applicant had gained from experience or can be related to motivation to study social work, rather than just had the experience);

5) Academic References (up to 5 points could be scored on references from an academic referee);

6) Other References (up to 5 points could be scored on a reference from a non-academic referee);

7) Discretionary Points (up to 20 points could be given under this variable, with no more than 5% for any of the following grounds: demonstrated regional interest; a second language; research experience/skill; management experience/skill; equity grounds; outstanding interpersonal skills; or any other grounds); and

8) A total preadmission score was given out of 100 points on these 7 variables to enable a quick and consistent means of comparison.

There was another category of 'relevant subjects' which was worth 5 points, with 1 point being awarded for each year of passing a relevant subject in the social/behavioural sciences area. (This variable was not included in this study as virtually all successful applicants received the maximum score of 5 points.)

There were two additional variables included in the study. The first of these was the student's academic standard in the first and second semesters of the first year of their BSW which was undertaken prior to placement. This was scored in the same way as the preadmission academic standard ie. the median grade in the four subjects undertaken. By doing this we were interested in the relationship between the academic component of the BSW and performance in the field education program. The second additional one was the student's date of birth, which Cunningham had also utilised as a variable in her study. The 11 variables that Cunningham had utilised in her study were: grade point average at the junior level, student birth year, score on the Rathus Assertion Inventory, the number of organisations students belonged to in high school, the number of leadership roles held in these organisations, the number of college organisational leadership and membership roles, the number of hours in relevant volunteer work, and the number of months in previous employment in social service related jobs, other service related employment, and general work experience.

The dependent variable for this study was a five-point rating (unsatisfactory, below average, average, above average, excellent) of the student's overall performance in field education at the end of their first year field education placement in the first year of the course. The assumption was made that a student's performance in a field education placement most closely mirrors the demands and expectations of their later role as a graduate social worker. The instrument used a five-point scale as a measure rather than the Department's pass/fail range as it allowed greater specificity and was also a means of making direct comparison of the present study's results with those of Cunningham (1982).

This performance rating was done by each of the 13 members of staff of the Department of Social Work & Social Policy who conducted liaison duties for the students. Liaison persons made at least two agency visits per placement to the students they were evaluating.
The students were in placement on a full-time basis (Monday-Friday 9-5) for 12 weeks from September to December. This measure was completed shortly after placement ended in 1997.

The outcome data were gathered after the liaison persons had carried out these two visits which were three-way meetings with the agency field teacher and the student and after the grade for the student's placement had been determined on a pass/fail basis. The Department of Social Work & Social Policy uses an evaluation instrument for students in field education placements that rates their performance in eight key areas. This evaluation was completed by the field teacher and student.

As Cunningham (1982) had also done, it was decided to use university liaison persons for the rating data to ensure as much uniformity and consistency as possible and to make data collection less burdensome (ie. 13 people to collect from rather than 55 field teachers). Only one staff person had contact with the student and therefore it was not possible to have two persons rate the students for inter-rater reliability. This may have been desirable, but not practically possible in this case. It should be noted that the liaison persons were all experienced staff to whom instructions were given on rating the students.

Data Analysis

A variety of methods of statistical analysis were used in the study. The SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) for Windows computer package was utilised to analyse the data. These were:

1) Frequencies on all variables;
2) Correlations (using Spearman's correlation coefficient) were drawn up based on the preadmission variables' correlations with the dependent variable;
3) From these correlations, matrices were drawn up using only statistically significant associations using McQuitty's (1957) elementary linkage analysis, as a means of reorganising and simplifying the patterns of association that may exist in the data (Phillip, McCulloch and Smith 1975); so that any relationships can be easily comprehended and communicated (Everitt 1974). McQuitty's analysis techniques searches for linkages between 2 variables and defines a linkage as being the largest association which a variable has with any of the other variables being studied. Thus every variable is assigned to a group or a cluster in terms of its highest correlation. It is a technique based on logical linkage rather than a statistical one and therefore can stimulate a logical explanation for linkages between variables. It has been used in a number of research studies in social work (Philip et al... 1975; McCulloch and Smith, 1978; Ryan 1991); and 4) the Mann Whitney U test was used to determine if two independent samples (the students who were 1) those rated unsatisfactory to average and 2) those rated above average to excellent) were significantly different.

Findings

Sample Description

The sample consisted of 55 students, of which 51 were female and four were male. Of the 55 students, 52 students were admitted as normal entry students and three as special entry applicants (ie. did not meet the normal requirements of having at least two years of tertiary study). Based on frequency tables that were constructed on each of the preadmission variables, it was found that the age of students in 1997 ranged from 20 to 48 years with a median of 28 years. The modal age was 22 years (n=8 students).

Preadmission academic standards (assessed in terms of median grades) ranged from a D (50-59%) grade (n=6, 11%) to an A (80-100%) (n=6, 11%) with the median standard being C (60-69%) (n=26, 47%). In terms of previous studies, 30 (56%) had completed a three year degree, with only eight (15%) having completed the minimum two years of a first degree.

The only applicants interviewed before being admitted were special entry applicants who were being seriously considered for admission and those of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent. (The University requires, as a positive discrimination measure, that all applicants of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent be interviewed.) The remainder of the applicants were assessed for admission based on information in their application form, their academic record and referees' reports (one academic and one non-academic).

In terms of volunteer and work experience, all of the students had at least done some work or volunteer experience ie. no student had scored lower than 10 out of 20. Twenty students (36%) scored the maximum 20 points for this variable indicating significant, relevant paid or volunteer welfare experience.

Preadmission scores were computed for all applicants. The mean admission score was 63 with a standard deviation of 11.3. The range was 48-81 with a median of 64.

Study Findings

The frequencies and percentages for the performance rating categories (dependent variable) as scored by the liaison staff members are shown in Table 1.
Table 1: Performance outcome ratings of first field education placement students in sample (N=55)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>No of Students</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unsatisfactory</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below Average</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above Average</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>49.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be seen in Table 1, the distribution of performance outcome ratings was negatively skewed with 70% of the students scoring in the above average to excellent range, but all points on the rating scale were represented, including three students graded as unsatisfactory and 3 below average.

The eight preadmission (independent or predictor) variables were each correlated with the performance ratings (dependent) variable using Spearman's correlation coefficient. Spearman's correlation coefficient was thought to be more appropriate than Pearson's correlation coefficient given the skewed nature of the data. The additional two independent variables (student's academic standard in the first and second semesters of the first year of their BSW and date of birth) were also correlated with the dependent variable.

As can be seen from Table 2, none of the correlations of the predictor variables with the dependent variable were statistically significant (at the .05 level), apart from the first year BSW academic standard variable with the field education rating which was $r_s (55) = .28$, $p = .034$. This correlation suggests that those who did well in placement also tend to experience greater academic success, as measured by their performance in the academic subjects in their first year of the BSW.

Other interesting findings from Table 2 include:

1) Date of birth and the rating of performance in field education: $r_s (55) = .0798$, not significant at .05 level ($p = .562$). This indicates that younger students did very slightly better in their field education placement than older students, but still not at a statistically significant level.

2) Preadmission academic record and the rating of performance in field education: $r_s (55) = .0378$, not significant at .05 level ($p = .79$). This indicates that students who performed relatively well academically prior to admission to the BSW did slightly better in terms of performance in the field placement, but again this was not statistically significant.

Table 2: Correlations and significance levels of the 10 predictor variables with the dependent variable (performance rating)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor Variables</th>
<th>Correlation Coefficient (Spearman's)</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Academic record</td>
<td>-.22</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Preadmission academic standard</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Work experience</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Life experience</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) Academic references</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6) Other references</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7) Discretionary points</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8) Total score</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9) Student's academic standard in the first and second semesters of the first year of their BSW</td>
<td>.28*</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10) Date of birth</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* $p < .05$

Other significant correlations

Other correlations amongst the independent or predictor variables that were statistically significant at the .05 level were:

1) Discretionary points (awarded for skills and characteristics possessed by applicants not covered by other categories eg. a second language or management skills) and the applicant's total score: $r_s (55) = .43$, $p = .001$. This correlation which indicates that those who got a high score on the discretionary points variable tended to also achieve a high total admission score.

2) Life Experience score and Date of Birth: $r_s (55) = -.31$, $p = .02$. This was a logical correlation in that those who tended to score relatively low on the life experience variable were the younger students.

3) Life Experience score and Discretionary points score: $r_s (55) = .41$, $p = .002$. This was again an understandable correlation with those students who scored highly on life experience also scoring well on the discretionary points variable.
The first year experience. In the second cluster a relatively high preadmission academic standard associated with the life experience score, and this latter variable was negatively associated with date of birth (ie. younger students score more poorly in terms of work correlation with the field education performance rating at r(55) = - .31, p=.03. This was another logical correlation with students with better academic grades receiving academic references which scored relatively highly.

The authors were also interested in examining the relationship between the preadmission variables to see if any patterns emerged amongst them in order to shed light on the way they may have inter-related, which may have in turn revealed the way they were associated with field education performance. McQuitty's cluster hierarchies were drawn up based on the preadmission variables' correlations (with the first year BSW academic standard variable removed) in order to examine relationships between the preadmission variables only. The following picture emerged as displayed in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Preadmission variables' correlation clusters using McQuitty's cluster analysis

1) Discretionary points score \[ \rightarrow \] Total score
\[ .43 (P=.001) \]
\[ \rightarrow \] Life Experience score
\[ .41 (P=.002) \]
\[ \rightarrow \] Work Experience score
\[ .47 (P=.000) \]
\[ \rightarrow \] Date of Birth

2) Preadmission academic standard \[ \rightarrow \] Academic Referees' score
\[ .31 (p=.029) \]

What are these two clusters saying? First in 1) there were a number of variables that are associated. A high discretionary points score was associated first with a high total score on admission with the latter variable being most closely associated with a high work experience score. The discretionary points score was in turn most closely associated with the life experience score, and this latter variable was negatively associated with date of birth (ie. younger students score more poorly in terms of work experience). In the second cluster a relatively high preadmission academic standard was associated with a high score from academic referees.

The first year BSW academic standard was the variable that had the highest correlation with the field education performance rating at \( r(55) = .28, p<.05 \), but it was not one of the preadmission variables. In contrast, the preadmission academic standard variable's correlation with the field education rating was only \( r(55) = .0378 \), not significant at .05 level \( (p=.79) \). Interestingly, the first year BSW academic standard variable's correlation with the Preadmission academic record variable was not significant \( r(55) = .1615 \), not significant at .05 level \( (p=.253) \).

The dependent variable was divided into two distinct groups in order to compare them on the independent-predictor variables. In this case, the groups were: 1) those rated unsatisfactory to average (17 students) and 2) those rated above average to excellent (38). These two groups were then compared by using the Mann Whitney U test to determine if the two independent samples were significantly different.

It was found that again only on the independent variable 'the 1st Year BSW academic standard' was there a statistically significant difference between the two groups with a \( p = .0169 \) \( (p<.05) \). But overall these results indicate that the chosen variables were poor predictors of performance in the field education placement.

This overall trend was borne out when there was an examination of the field placement performance of a sample of the students on a case-by-case basis by the authors. The six students who were rated unsatisfactory (3) and below average (3) on field education ratings were compared with the top six of the 11 who were rated as excellent in terms of their admission scores. It was found that those rated 1) Unsatisfactory (three who failed placement) had admission scores which ranged from 60-79, with a mean score of 69. Those rated 2) Below Average (three) had admission scores which ranged from 57-81, with a mean score of 70. Those rated 3) Excellent (with six of 11 with the highest admission scores being selected), had admission scores ranging from 59-73, with a mean score of 68. Therefore the admission scores of those in the excellent sub-group were marginally lower than those in either the unsatisfactory or below average group.

In summary, it was found that the preadmission variables utilised in the BSW admission process were poorly associated with the first year BSW field education performance. The only variable that both correlated highly and at a statistically significant level with field education placement performance was the first year BSW academic standard (which was not a preadmission variable). Neither the age of students nor the preadmission academic standard were highly correlated with field education placement performance, as previous US studies had found. The poor associative qualities of the preadmission variables was verified by a case-by-case examination of the field education performance scores, with those students who were judged to have had the best field education performances having lower admission scores than those who had the poorest field education performances.

Discussion

We have taken the view in writing this paper that results that run counter to expectations or hypotheses and which produce non-statistically significant results can
be equally important as predicted statistically significant results. They can be equally worthy of discussion and something can be learnt from them.

Overall, our starkest finding was that the preadmission variables that La Trobe University utilise in their BSW admission process had generally low levels of association with performance in field education placement, which as Cunningham (1982) argues is the part of the curriculum 'most like the later professional work role' (p.28).

It was comforting to find that there was a significant correlation between academic performance in the BSW and subsequent field education performance, which indicates that there are common aspects that there seem to be important for successful performance in both parts of the course (academic and field education).

There was however no significant relationship between preadmission GPA (academic record) and academic performance in the BSW ($r = .04$, N.S., $p = .79$). This suggests that performance in previous studies bears little relationship to academic performance in the BSW. This may have been amplified in this case by allowing applicants to have a wide range of relevant subjects in the humanities and social sciences (rather than more narrowly confining it to sociology and psychology) and that they also came from a wide variety of institutions and courses which may have varying assessment standards. It could also be suggested that the nature of social work subjects is markedly different from those previously undertaken.

Students who performed most poorly in the field education placement tended to have personal problems and/or limited conceptualisation skills (as assessed by the staff engaged in the field education liaison visits) which could not necessarily or easily be identified in the selection process or on measurement of the pre-admission variables that were used at the time. It could be argued that these factors may have been more likely to be identified if an interview prior to admission had been in place.

In adopting the present admission scoring system, we were searching for: i) an efficient, equitable system that would facilitate processing of large numbers of applicants (in excess of 500 applications) at both first and third year levels; and ii) a way of getting the highest quality students. We think we have achieved the first aim, but have some way to go to attain on the second aim, particularly in terms of identifying and excluding unsuitable and less competent students and admitting the most competent ones.

A number of possible explanations can be postulated for the lack of statistically significant results.

1) Small sample size

The sample had 55 cases in it and 10 predictor variables were tested in the study. This meant that there was a ratio of only five cases to one predictor variable. Such a low ratio precluded the use of general linear regression techniques such as multiple regression and discriminant analysis which ideally require such a ratio of the order of 20 to one (Cohen 1988). Use of such techniques would have increased the statistical power of the analysis considerably.

2) Measurement issues

There was a lack of differentiation and specificity in the measurement of some of the independent variables such as referees' scores (for example, 96% of students on other referees' references scored either 2.4 or 5 on this variable), total admission scores (range from 48-81, median 64) and academic scores (89% scored either 10, 15 or 20).

The same lack of differentiation could also have applied to the measurement of the dependent variable (student performance in placement) which had a negatively skewed distribution with 70% of the students scoring in the above average to excellent range. Problems with measurement of the variables would seem to be the most parsimonious explanation for the failure to achieve statistically significant results, and therefore the most likely one.

3) Model problem

A model problem indicates that the variables selected for study are incorrect. It is possible that this is the case, but it is probably not so, as none of the pre-admission variables at all, rather than some of them, proved to be statistically significant in the correlational analysis or with the Mann Whitney U test.

4) Theoretical issue

A theoretical issue indicates that there is no relationship between the variables selected for investigation. Some relationships were found amongst the variables eg. discretionary points and the applicant's total score and academic record (level of previous academic qualifications) and other referees' score, but they were not strong ones. In addition, many of the variables utilised in the research had been found to be significant in previous research studies such as those by Cunningham (1982) and Dunlap et al. (1998).

Further Research

The authors intend to undertake further research on this topic, particularly given the inconclusive results of the present study. Students undertaking the course in 1998 (the year following the present study) were selected purely on the basis of academic record. This was due to a change to the use of the centralised university admission system which meant that this was the only consistent information available on applicants. Also for the first time, students were admitted to the first year of La Trobe University's new four-year course. Data on those seeking third year entry to this four-
year course will be compared to those in the present study. For 1999 applicants we reverted back to the complete scoring system with the Department's own supplementary application form in addition to the centralised one. Based partly on the findings of the present study, the supplementary application for 1999 was modified in order to create greater precision in the measurement of a number of variables.

The other direction for future research is to extend the analysis beyond univariate and bivariate analyses to multivariate analysis, including linear regression techniques to enable a multiple regression model using preadmission predictor variables to be built. This will require a smaller number of independent variables than were tested in the present study and/or a larger number of students in the study sample. The results of the present study may enable some of the predictor variables, which had very weak associations with the dependent variable to be eliminated from the testing in a future regression model, and thereby only retaining those variables with stronger associations.

In conclusion, this study produced an interesting set of results that were certainly not anticipated. Clearly further thought and research needs to be done, but we think that an important first step has been made in researching admissions predictors in Australian social work courses in a systematic way.

References
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