

Research Education in Australian BSW Programs: Results of a Survey

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Introduction

The AASW Review of Australian of Australian Social Work Courses policy document (1990) currently requires that social work research methods be one of six compulsory components in courses and that such a component 'should provide opportunity for students to develop skills in a range of research approaches relevant to social work practice in order to be able to participate in and evaluate research projects' (p.7).

More recently, the AASW (Australian Association of Social Workers) document on Australian Social Work Competency Standards for Entry Level Social Workers (1994) suggests that as part of 'Strand 4 - Developing Ideas and Information' that a social worker '...undertakes research and contributes to the building of knowledge base' (p.21). The document then goes on to list ten sub-competencies under this heading. These present a formidable list and include having a knowledge of all stages of social research, being able to conduct research '...using sound methodological approaches' and an ability to critically research reports.

The contents of these two documents need to be set in the context of debate around issues in research teaching in social work programs. Exactly what are the goals of such research teaching is a contested issue. Is the primary goal to create informed consumers of research? Is it to prepare students to evaluate their own practice? Is it to prepare students to contribute to the generation of knowledge for practice and theory-building (the practitioner-researcher goal)?

There have been debates in the US literature for a number of years on the goals and content of research teaching (Smith, De Weaver and Kilpatrick 1986; Poulin 1989). Glisson and Fischer (1987, p.50) contend that research education in social work is

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characterised in that country by '... confusion and disagreement over the extent and type of research content to be included in the curricula'. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) issued a revised set of guidelines for research courses in MSW programs in 1983 after a decade of conflict over the nature of research training for practice. These Guidelines set up two basic goals for courses: 1) to prepare students to evaluate their own practice and 2) to prepare students to contribute to the generation of knowledge for practice. After coming under attack as being unrealistic, the second goal was abandoned in 1986.

Fraser and Lewis (Fraser, Lewis and Norman 1990; Fraser and Lewis 1993) surveyed MSW courses across the United States of America in an attempt to describe the content and structure in research curricula, with particular attention to evaluating the latest Guidelines four years after their implementation. They found there were four competing perspectives in programs: 1) the 'de rigueur' approach (rigorous training across a full range of basic and advanced research and statistical methods); 2) the single-subject plus approach (main emphasis on teaching single subject research methods); 3) the traditionalist approach (emphasis on teaching basic research methods with modest attention to basic statistics); and 4) the minimalist approach (basic research methods taught at a modest level with minimal exposure to basic statistics and single-subject designs). Based on the survey of 83 schools, the single-subject plus approach and the traditionalist approach predominated amongst the US schools with 29 each, followed by the minimalist approach with 15 schools and, lastly, the 'de rigueur' approach with ten schools.

In contrast, there has been little literature on research education in Australia. There have been articles calling for particular emphases in research or research teaching such as those by Brown (1988) who advocated an 'Australianising' of research including research training and Grichting and Smithson (1984) who wanted more quantitative research training in social work. Recently, there have been calls in Australia for social workers to engage in more practice research (Tierney 1993) and to use greater scientific rigour in research (Barber 1996) if they are to survive as members of a distinct, respected and viable profession in the future. There have been case studies of the efforts of individual schools in teaching research such as Grichting (1994a; 1994b) who reported on aspects of postgraduate research education at the University of Tasmania at Launceston and Crisp (1998) recounted her experiences at Deakin University in teaching research via distance education.

In order to respond to and inform these debates, the authors believed that baseline data on the nature of research education in schools of social work was necessary. They conducted a study of all Australian BSW programs in 1996-97. The study had the following research objectives: 1) to describe the content of research subjects in Australian BSW programs and 2) to provide a direct Australian comparison with the US results of Fraser and his colleagues (Fraser, Lewis and Norman 1990; Fraser and Lewis 1993), particularly in relation to the four distinct types of research sequences they identified. The study consisted of a survey of research subject coordinators using a mailed questionnaire on the

content of subjects. This paper will present the findings of the study and discuss their implications for future social work education.

Methodology

The study consisted of a survey questionnaire sent to all BSW research subject coordinators in all Australian Schools of Social Work. If the name of the research subject coordinator was not known to the authors, the covering letter and questionnaire were sent to the Head of School who was requested to pass it on to the relevant staff member to complete and return.

All Schools of Social Work conducting a BSW course were contacted. They numbered 21 in total and included a school who had not yet received provisional accreditation from the AASW. All of the other 20 schools had received at least provisional accreditation from the AASW.

The mailed questionnaire was sent out in August 1996. The further follow up letter was sent out in late September 1996. Follow up letters were sent to individual schools in October and November 1996 and again in October 1997. The last response was received in November 1997. Twenty schools eventually responded (95% response rate).

The survey questionnaire that was used was based on one developed previously by the authors to survey the health content in BSW courses (Ryan and Martyn 1994). The questionnaire focused on the content of these subjects and covered the following topics:

- 1) whether there was a separate research unit in the Bachelor of Social Work course;
- 2) the title of the research unit;
- 3) the year the unit was first offered;
- 4) the stage of the course the unit was offered;
- 5) the length of the unit;
- 6) whether the unit was compulsory or optional;
- 7) the weighting of the unit;
- 8) the aims, objectives and rationale of the unit;
- 9) topics taught in the unit;
- 10) teaching methods utilised in the unit;
- 11) assessment involved in the unit;
- 12) number of school staff involved in teaching in the unit;
- 13) whether the unit is directly linked to fieldwork;
- 14) particular problems experienced in developing the unit;
- 15) any gaps perceived in the present format and content of the unit;
- 16) the decision-making process involved in determining the content of the unit;
- 17) textbooks used in the unit; and
- 19) any other units in the course with a research methods component and their relationship to the social work research methods unit.

As part of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to rate the degree to which the 26 content areas are taught in the subject. A four-point scale was utilised, based on that used by Fraser, Lewis and Norman (1990). It consisted of: 0 = not taught; 1 = taught for recognition or awareness only; 2 = taught for comprehension or understanding in detail; 3 = taught for skill or the ability to apply in practice. Fraser, Lewis and Norman (1990) had based these categories on Bloom (1956) and Gronlund's (1982) work on learning theory and knowledge acquisition.

The authors utilised 14 of the 24 content items from the instrument developed by Fraser and Lewis (1993) from which Fraser and Lewis identified five dimensions i.e. basic research methods; basic statistics; single-subject design; advanced statistics and advanced experimental design. This selection of the 14 items was based on including items that the authors thought were likely to be familiar to and taught by Australian social work academics. In selecting these 14 items, care was also taken to ensure that all five dimensions identified by Fraser et al. were represented with at least one content area in the present study's questionnaire eg. 'designing Solomon four-group studies', 'designing classical experiments' and 'designing factorial studies' (from Fraser and Lewis 1993, p.76) were covered by the single term 'advanced experimental design'.

The 14 content areas chosen were: defining research problems; drafting research questions; designing a data collection instrument; using standardised instruments; assessing validity and reliability; writing research reports; single-subject designs; calculating means, medians, modes; calculating t tests; calculating Chi-square tests; using ANOVA; using regression analysis; using multivariate techniques/statistical techniques; and advanced experimental design.

Whilst it was not explicitly stated by Fraser et al. (1990), it is apparent from their choice of content areas that there was a heavily quantitative bias and a complete exclusion of a qualitative approach or methods. In order to redress this bias, the authors included additional content areas in the survey questionnaire. These areas were based on the authors' own knowledge of research subject content in Australia (through both having taught social work research), areas of current interest and concern in Australian social work research and research-related sub-competencies from the document on Australian Social Work Competency Standards for Entry Level Social Workers (1994). The additional 12 content areas chosen were: the use of statistical computer software packages; use of qualitative computer software packages; qualitative research/qualitative data analysis; research ethics; philosophical underpinnings of social research; conducting a literature review; program evaluation; direct practice research and evaluation; assessment of research articles/studies; feminist research; research and postmodernism; and the politics of conducting research.

Analysis was based on the collation of responses and was largely based on the frequencies of responses.

Findings

Twenty of the 21 (95%) schools of social work in Australia responded to the survey questionnaire. One school indicated their curriculum was currently changing from a subject-based curriculum so that the teaching of research would not take place within a specific subject, so was not included in the analysis. One other school integrated the teaching of research with other subjects of the course. Where appropriate this particular school's responses have been included in the results.

The remaining 18 schools of social work offered a specific research subject within the BSW course. The subjects were generally entitled 'social work research'. There were also slight variations on this title such as 'social policy and research' or 'social work research in action'. One subject was entitled 'methods of social enquiry', another was called 'research design' and another simply 'research methods'. The length of time the subjects have been offered coincide with the age of the particular school or department. Given that the AASW requirements include the teaching of research as a core course in BSW programs, this was not surprising.

The teaching of research occurred in the penultimate year of the BSW in six of the respondent schools. In four of the courses, research was taught in the final year of the BSW. Four schools offered one semester of research in each of the final two years of the course. Three schools taught research in the second and third year of a four-year course. One school offered one semester of research in each of the four years of the BSW course. Generally, the research subject was one semester in length. In seven courses the subject ran for two semesters and in one course the subject ran for four semesters.

In all cases, the subject was compulsory which was again expected given the AASW course requirements. The weighting of the subject varied considerably across courses according to how each school weighted the component subjects of the BSW. It was impossible to extract a generalised finding about weighting except to note that it is a core course in the BSW and must be satisfactorily completed during the course.

Overall, the aims of the subject were generally similar across the respondent schools. The aims were to introduce students to the nature of social work research and to the application of research approaches to practice. It was generally expected that students could complete an independent research task as a consequence of doing the subject. One subject aimed also to provide students with an understanding of the social, political and ethical constraints in social work research. Eight of the subjects specifically noted the ability to critique social work research as a subject aim, despite the AASW guidelines reference to the need to teach students to 'participate in and evaluate research projects'.

The extent to which the content areas were taught in the unit were rated according to the four point scale developed by Fraser, Lewis and Norman (1990). Based on these scores for individual content areas, total scores for each school were computed with the higher the score representing a greater likelihood of a greater number of areas being taught for

comprehension or application. The scores for the schools ranged from 27-66 with the median score being 46.

Table 1: Coverage of content areas in the social work research methods subject

| Content Area | 0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | Median |
|--|----|----|---|----|--------|
| Defining research problems | - | - | 2 | 17 | 3 |
| Drafting research questions | - | 1 | 4 | 14 | 3 |
| Designing a data collection instrument | - | 6 | 1 | 11 | 3 |
| Using standardised instruments | 2 | 10 | 5 | 2 | 1 |
| Assessing reliability and validity | - | 8 | 8 | 4 | 2 |
| Writing research reports | 1 | 1 | 5 | 11 | 3 |
| Calculating means, medians, modes | 1 | 3 | 4 | 11 | 3 |
| Calculating t tests | 2 | 6 | 2 | 2 | 1 |
| Calculating Chi-square tests | 4 | 4 | 3 | 7 | 2 |
| Using ANOVA | 9 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| Using regression analysis | 13 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Single-subject design | 4 | 8 | 6 | 1 | 1 |
| Using multivariate analysis techniques | 12 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 0 |
| Advanced experimental design | 16 | 2 | 1 | - | 0 |
| Conducting a literature review | - | 4 | 6 | 8 | 2 |
| Use of statistical computer software packages | 3 | 9 | 2 | 2 | 1 |
| Use of qualitative computer software packages | 6 | 7 | 4 | 1 | 1 |
| Qualitative research/data analysis | - | 5 | 6 | 8 | 2 |
| Research ethics | - | 1 | 5 | 13 | 3 |
| Philosophical underpinnings of social research | 1 | 2 | 5 | 11 | 3 |
| Program evaluation | - | 8 | 6 | 5 | 2 |
| Direct practice research and evaluation | - | 4 | 8 | 7 | 2 |
| Assessment of research articles/studies | 3 | 2 | 6 | 8 | 2 |
| Feminist research | 5 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 1 |
| Research and postmodernism | 10 | 5 | 3 | - | 0 |
| The politics of conducting research | 1 | 5 | 6 | 6 | 2 |

Scale: 0 = not taught; 1 = taught for recognition or awareness only; 2 = taught for comprehension or understanding in detail; 3 = taught for skill or the ability to apply in practice

Note. The highest number of schools for any one content area will total 19 as one school was excluded as their teaching of research was not taking place within a specific subject. Despite this, not all rows total 19 as not every school scored every item. Unless an item was given a number by a school, it was not scored.

The scores for each of the 26 content areas are displayed in Table 1, along with the median score for each area. Based on these results, the following topics appear to be well canvassed, in that at least 11 of the 19 schools that responded to this question on content areas in their questionnaire supplied a category 3 response (taught for application in practice):

- 1) defining research problems (17 schools)
- 2) drafting research questions (14)
- 3) designing a data collection instrument (11)
- 4) writing a research report (11)
- 5) calculating means, medians, modes (11)
- 6) the explication of the philosophical underpinnings of social research (11)
- 7) research ethics (13)

Note that of these content areas, the top four were in the basic research methods dimension of Fraser and Lewis, the next one was covered under their basic statistics dimension and the final two were included in the survey questionnaire by the authors.

The methodological tasks of the use of standardised instruments, the assessment of validity and reliability and the specifics of research design were not as well covered as the above areas. The politics of conducting research was addressed in virtually all courses.

A concentration on quantitative research methodology was not apparent overall, with only two schools teaching advanced statistics at an application level and neither of these schools taught advanced experimental design. Three schools taught advanced experimental design, but only at the minimal 1-2 level. All schools taught qualitative research/analysis, with 14 of them teaching it at a comprehension -application level. Most schools seemed to strive for a balance of quantitative and qualitative methods, but none could be accused of having an overwhelmingly qualitative bias. With the exception of calculating measures of central tendency (11 schools rated this area at an application level) and chi square test calculation (seven schools rated it at an application level with a median of two), it could be considered that the basic statistics content areas were covered relatively poorly overall with median ratings of 0-1 for t-test calculation, use of ANOVA and regression analysis.

Advanced statistics were either not taught at all by the majority (12) or were taught for comprehension rather than application for practice, with only two respondent schools covering them at the recognition-application level. Thirteen schools introduced students to the use of a statistical computer software package and the same number to a qualitative computer software package at the level of recognition-comprehension about their use rather than applying this knowledge to practice settings. Just under half of the schools (nine) taught both to their students.

All 19 schools taught students about program evaluation with eight schools teaching this at the application level. Feminist research was included in most curricula (12 schools), but tended to be taught recognition and comprehension rather than application.. Postmodern research was relatively poorly represented, with eight schools teaching it at any level. Whilst only eight schools specifically referred to the critique of social work research in their subject aims, the content areas covered by the various courses show that 16 schools covered the assessment of social work research, with a median rating of two overall.

As stated previously, Fraser and Lewis (1993) identified four differing approaches to the teaching of research in US schools: 1) the 'de rigeur' approach; 2) the single-subject plus approach; 3) the traditionalist approach and 4) the minimalist approach). In analysing the results of the present study, the criteria developed by Fraser and Lewis for inclusion of schools under their various approaches were utilised. The different approaches and their frequencies are listed below:

1) *'De Rigeur' approach* - schools that adopt this approach provide vigorous training across all of the research content dimensions. Schools with this approach will mainly score 3s (application level), except for the advanced statistics dimension where they are likely have 1-2s (recognition-comprehension). Two Australian schools were judged to have adopted this approach with scores of 66 and 56 respectively. (It should be noted that both of these schools scored themselves at an application level (3) on qualitative research, and one of each of them scored three for the politics of research and the use of a qualitative computer software package.)

2) *Single-Subject Plus approach* - one school was characterised as adopting this approach as it scored an application level score on the single-subject design area and moderate to low scores on basic statistics and advanced research design.

3) *Traditionalist approach* - in these schools there is an emphasis on teaching basic research methods with modest attention to basic statistics. There is minimal exposure to single-subject and advanced research design and statistics. Based on this criteria, eight Australian schools were judged to be in this category with scores ranging from 42 to 53. (Again it should be noted that two of these eight schools taught qualitative research at an application level.)

4) *Minimalist approach* - five Australian schools were placed in this category as basic research methods were taught at a moderate level (scores of 1-2 on areas) and they provided minimal exposure to basic statistics and single-subject designs. There was no exposure to advanced statistics. These schools scores ranged from 27-40.

In addition to these four approaches, there was found to be a fifth approach amongst Australian schools which could be characterised as *Traditional/Progressive approach*. Whilst this may appear to be a contradiction in terms, the three schools who were included in this category clearly met the criteria for being included in the traditionalist approach (in that they taught basic research methods for application with modest

attention to basic statistics, but minimal attention to single-subject and advanced research design and statistics) and had scores of 51, 52 and 53 respectively. But at the same time, they taught three areas (qualitative research, feminist research and the politics of research) for application which would lie outside the confines of a traditionalist approach as postulated by Fraser and Lewis (1993).

Subjects were taught in the majority by a mixture of lectures, tutorials and seminars and computer laboratory sessions. Five courses used guest speakers; two required students to undertake a piece of group research. Overwhelmingly, students were required to prepare a research proposal as the assessment for the research subject. This assessment may have taken different forms; however the main aim was for students to be able to prepare a proposal. Five courses required students to complete other assessment tasks. One required the development of a research instrument and the completion of an actual piece of research. Another required students to complete a computer assignment as well as developing a research proposal, whilst another required analysis of a research article. Another two had a combination of assignments and examinations.

In two-thirds of the respondent schools, only one staff member was responsible for coordinating and teaching the research subject, although others may have been involved. One school which taught research across the four years of the BSW involved seven members of staff. Most schools' staff (16) teaching the research subject in the BSW course had qualifications recognised by the AASW. In the four other schools, the subject was taught by those with psychology and sociology backgrounds.

Fifteen of the respondent schools granted exemptions to students where they could demonstrate they have completed another tertiary course with complementary subject content. The number of exemptions granted varied widely across the schools. One school reported 45% of students apply for exemptions. However, generally the numbers exempted ranged from between 10% of the enrolled students to a handful of students.

In nine schools, more than one social work subject with a research component was offered. These were subjects such as computing skills, evaluation, community work, and social planning, as well as an additional research subject.

The majority of courses (13 respondent schools) did not require students to undertake research in the field as part of their research subject requirements, with only three making this compulsory. However, eight schools reported that, whilst it was not required, students often undertake a research project as part of one of their placements.

The integration of the research subject into the BSW course varied across the schools. Eleven schools reported that there was good to excellent integration of the subject into the BSW course, three reported little integration and four regarded the integration as poor.

Generally schools were confident their subjects offered students an adequate introduction to research to students. They reported that the integration of research into social work

theory and practice in the field was an area they would like to improve. The costs incurred in teaching the unit were a restraint on this subject development. Nearly all respondent schools referred to problems experienced in the development of the research subject. These include: 1) the great variability of student knowledge about research and about computers and 2) what two respondents refer to as 'quantitative phobia'. 3) Time and resource consumption are also noted as is 4) the challenge to base the subject content on social work research. One respondent also commented on staff division over the type of research which was taught in the subject as a problem in subject development.

Specific gaps in the teaching of the research subject were identified as the need for more time and resources to offer a broader research subject. Three of the schools which offered a one semester subject would have preferred a two semester curriculum. One school noted the need for more computer teaching in the subject. Another noted the need for exposure to more qualitative material.

Decisions about subject content were generally decided by the lecturer and by staff consultation, with oversight from a school or faculty committee. Three schools referred to the role of a curriculum committee in this decision making. One school noted that student evaluation informed decisions about curriculum content. One school also referred to practitioners in the field about the research subject course content.

The texts used in the teaching of research also varied widely. There still tended to be a reliance on texts from the USA and to a lesser extent on the UK. There were a number of Australian texts used (eg. Sarantakos, Bouma, Kellehear, Francis and Wadsworth), but usually they were not social work-specific texts and tended to be in the minority on reading lists.

Discussion

Research curricula in Australian Bachelor of Social Work courses did vary. Whilst widespread diversity was not evident, there was variation across schools. Like Fraser and Lewis (1993) in the US, there were found to be proponents to their four different approaches to research curricula: the 'de rigeuer' approach; the single-subject plus approach; the traditionalist approach and the minimalist approach. Whilst the 'de-rigeuer' and single-subject plus approach had relatively few adherents (with just two and one respectively), the minimalist (five schools) and the traditionalist (seven schools) had more adherents. It was also found that there was a fifth approach in Australian schools, which was labelled traditionalist/progressive with three adherents. These three schools adopted a traditionalist view of teaching social work research, yet taught qualitative research, feminist methods and the politics of research.

It would appear from these results that the 'de-rigeuer' and single-subject plus approaches have little support as approaches to teaching social work research in Australian schools, with the minimalist and traditionalist approaches having a much firmer foothold.

Whilst there was found to be at least some adherence to each of Fraser and Lewis's (1993) four approaches, the findings indicated that there was far greater diversity beyond these four approaches in Australian schools than in US ones. For example, all Australian schools taught qualitative research with nearly half at an application level. There was no coverage at all of qualitative methods indicated in Fraser and Lewis's survey. This may be simply indicative of the burgeoning of interest in qualitative research in social work circles since Fraser and his colleagues conducted their survey 11 years ago (in 1987). Since then, there has been the publication of books like Sherman and Reid (1994), Reissman (1994) and Fook (1996), which canvass and advocate for the adoption of qualitative, reflective approaches in social work research.

The less hidebound adoption of a purely quantitative approach to social work research in Australia has no doubt been aided by the more flexible and open-ended AASW guidelines on teaching research in social work compared to the US CSWE guidelines. Even the more specific Competency Standards (1994) are more open-ended, refusing to specify that particular approaches be taught (eg. it specifies that a beginning practitioner be able to '...analyse qualitative and quantitative information' (p.21)).

Fraser and Lewis (1993) concluded, amongst other things, that:

Based on our findings, there appears to be a common base of knowledge that characterizes social work research training in many schools. But this common base is rudimentary, characteristic of introductory research course work in undergraduate programs in nursing, psychology, and sociology. On balance, the faculties of schools with Minimalist and, to a lesser degree, Traditionalist curricula do not appear to be involved in rigorous research training for practice (p.87).

The authors would echo the sentiments in this quote in relation to the present study word for word. As can be seen in the findings, the content areas that the majority of schools taught at application level were all topics that would be taught in undergraduate social sciences research courses. The pressure on schools to equip students with basic research knowledge and skills was evident in the respondents' comments. The emphasis is on recognition and comprehension rather than application. The majority of schools acknowledged this in their comments about the lack of time to do this, which did seem to be less of an issue in the four-year BSW courses.

There does not seem to be agreement as to what constitutes an adequate level of research knowledge and skills for practice, but there is agreement amongst those who teach research on the subject areas that are important to teach and that an appropriate assessment is undertaking a research proposal. But at the same time, there were moves to go beyond the basics as illustrated by the coverage of both quantitative and qualitative methods, as well as postmodernism and feminist research and their application to social work practice which appears to have just begun to happen.

Overall there appears to be an emphasis on doing research rather than critiquing it, despite the AASW's requirements for the latter. This is reflected in the aims of the units, the topics covered and the forms of assessment (most often the completion of research proposal) they adopt. But, at the same time, eight schools taught the assessment and critiquing of research at an application level.

It is encouraging to see that in the majority of schools these research subjects are all taught by staff with social work qualifications recognised by the AASW. It was common for these staff to have PhDs in social work. In only four schools were these subjects taught by those from other disciplines. Locally written textbooks would assist considerably in 'Australianising' social work research (Brown 1988) and by the end of 1998 there will be two such books written by Australian social work academics (Kumar 1996; Alston and Bowles 1998).

There is a sense that research is a two-part process ie., basic research knowledge and skills and then how this is operationalised in practice. This point does raise the whole question of what is unique about social work research. McDermott (1996) has attempted to provide us with some answers on this point.

The immense variability in students' competence and preparatory knowledge in relation to research poses real problems and often harks back to student reluctance and fears about research in general and statistics in particular (Epstein 1987; Taylor 1990; Wainstock 1994).

In relation to decisions about subject content, this often comes down to a single person which does raise the issue of accountability and the capacity of one person to embrace the breadth of social work research. Obviously, individual educators will couch the teaching of their subjects in terms of their own areas of competence, priorities and biases.

It is pleasing to note that there tends to be at least a basic coverage of both quantitative and qualitative skills plus professional issues such as ethics and the political realities of research. There is also an attempt to acknowledge the reality of practice eg. by teaching program evaluation and direct practice research.

Whilst there is coverage of both quantitative and qualitative skills, in a small number of schools there is a preponderance of quantitative skills taught and, in virtually all schools, it seems that there is relatively less attention given to imparting qualitative skills and knowledge, particularly when it comes to postmodernist research.

The AASW in its Competency Standards document (1994) states that entry-level social workers should have competence in both quantitative and qualitative skills. The document also states social workers should to conduct research and critically assess it. Are all these demands realistic? No, not if graduates are expected to have highly developed skills on graduation. If they are to be given exposure to a range of approaches and knowledge areas, they can only be expected to have relatively basic knowledge and skills.

Students need to be exposed to key debates around social work research which has most clearly been embodied in the Australian context by the two sharply contrasting addresses by James Barber and Jan Fook at the 1995 AASW Conference in Launceston. Barber (1996) advocated strongly for the use of the scientific method in social work research, and Fook proposed a more reflective, feminist, qualitative-oriented approach to research. (Both of these positions, under the titles of evidence-based and emancipatory evaluation were contrasted and discussed in a recent paper by Shaw (1997). He proposed a greater attempt at synthesis of the two positions.) Clearly, such debates illustrate how contentious and highly contested the whole area of social work research approaches is. This is most vividly illustrated in published form by Hudson and Nurius's 1994 book *Controversial Issues in Social Work Research*.

One point that all these various contestants would agree on is that research is important for social work and that it should guide and inform practice. This is the core goal; one that there is consensus on from all parties - both the profession and educators. The difficulty is agreeing on the means of reaching that goal.

Beyond that, there are a number of challenges that face Australian social work educators who teach research. First, there needs to be a re-examination of expectations with regard to social work research content and clearer specification of what skills and knowledge needs to be taught in all Australian schools of social work. This applies particularly in relation to statistics where there is a lack of agreement. (The only consensus amongst schools was that for application to practice the calculation of measures of central tendency should be taught. Beyond that there was virtually no agreement.)

Second, the next challenge is to respond to the question: how can the research input taught in schools of social work be made relevant and useful to practitioners and future practitioners so that they will utilise and engage in it? As Fraser and Lewis (1993) recommended, there needs to be '...teaching techniques, practicum-based research projects, and courseload articulated to strengthen the development of skills-focused research curricula' (pp.87-88). The other specific development that could take place is the integration of research, practice and practicum/field education by teaching 'practice-focused' research in practice classes (Richey, Blythe and Berlin 1987).

The Victorian branch of the AASW through its Practice Research Special Interest Group has conducted workshops on practice research with the goal of getting practitioners to engage in their own small scale research projects. The lesson from these workshops is that practitioners are interested in research, want to do it and will do it if they are provided with the opportunity and appropriate, relevant educational input to enable them to do so. It is up to those teaching in schools of social work to imbue their students with the same enthusiasm through interesting, challenging research curricula delivered within a realistic time frame.

In conclusion, whilst there was certainly diversity across the schools, yet there are also similarities as well. It is healthy to have diversity as it is a '...reflection of regional

differences in the nature of practice and philosophical differences in practice theory' (Fraser and Lewis, 1993 p.86). Yet there are many commonalities and similarities; more so than we had anticipated. The development of a common core of knowledge should be developed from this and one that is directly linked to social work practice. Once this has been done, there remains the great challenge for social work educators teaching research - how to make it relevant to practice so that future practitioners and practitioners will utilise it.

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