Advancing Social Work Research: Pathways to Impact

Christine Bigby, Mark Hughes, Clare Tilbury and Mike Fisher
Research team

**Professor Clare Tilbury**, Leneen Forde Chair of Child and Family Research, School of Human Services and Social Work, Griffith University.

*Research Focus*: Child protection systems, outcomes, accountability and performance measurement.

**Professor Christine Bigby**, Director Living with Disabilities Research Centre, La Trobe University.

*Research Focus*: Supporting quality life outcomes for people with intellectual disability policy, program effectiveness and practice.

**Professor Mark Hughes**, Professor of Social Work, School of Arts and Social Sciences, Southern Cross University.

*Research Focus*: Aged care service delivery, social work practice with older people and LGBTIQ ageing.

**Professor Mike Fisher**, Director Institute of Applied Social Research, University of Bedfordshire, UK.

*Research Focus*: Providing sensitive and responsive care, re-enablement, early aging intervention and systematic evidence reviews.
Project aims and research questions

*Enhance conceptual, methodological, and empirical understandings of the distinctive nature of social work research and its contribution to human services policy and practice.*

- What is the scope and quality of social work research in the human service fields of child protection, aged care and disability in Australia?
- What are the strengths and limitations of this body of research?
- What is the impact of social work research on human services delivery in the selected fields?
- What strategies can advance social work and human service research productivity, uptake and impact in Australia?
Project stages

- **Stage 1: Mapping & assessing scope of social work research, inc.**
  - Scoping reviews in 3 fields: ageing, disability, child protection
  - Comparative analyses between Australia & UK, and between social work, criminology, & social policy
  - Assessment of ARC-funded social work research

- **Stage 2: Investigating research impact**
  - Impact case studies developed: 4 in each field
  - Research Impact Forum: held in November: academic, research end user, industry perspectives on case studies & pathways to impact
  - Development of a ‘how to’ guide for social work researchers to maximise impact

- **Stage 3: Research end user study**

- **Stage 4: Strategies to advance innovation – leading researchers – strategy - agenda**
Some findings from scoping reviews

- Australian social work research articles in 3 fields: focused on quantity, nature & range of the publications/studies
- Common criteria: approx. 10 year timeframe, at least 1 author social work qualified, journal articles, in English
- Many authors with just 1 publication in that field in the timeframe of the reviews (disability 63% 3 authors)
- High level of interdisciplinarity
- High level of publication in international journals
- Many publications in non-social work journals
- Much research on social issues [nature of social problems, marginalised groups, lived experiences] policy development, program delivery, but not a lot specifically on social work practice
- Not much service user engagement in research processes – e.g. design & delivery
- But much research had a ‘client focus’ – e.g. perspectives via qual research/surveys

Australian social work research compared

- ERA 2012, ERA 2015, REF 2014: Within Australia, social work research quality rated well compared to criminology and policy & administration.

- SW productivity per FTE slightly lower; policy & administration generated around double the income.

- Most SW research funding from government and industry, about 20% Aust competitive grants (compared to 50% for crim)

- 30% of Australian submissions compared to 70% of UK submissions achieved a rating of excellent or world leading.

- Adding impact measures to Australia’s research assessment criteria likely to benefit social work.

Development of 12 impact case studies

- Focused on engagement activities & (non-academic) impact of a program of research
- Selected on basis of most productive researchers (by journal publication) identified in scoping reviews
- Based on interviews with the researchers & other data sources
- Formatted with common template, inc.
  - Context – background/rationale for the research program
  - Research projects underpinning impact
  - Research outputs (i.e. academic publications)
  - Approach to impact
  - Impacts on public policy & legislation; human service organisations & service delivery; wellbeing of service users/communities
  - Engagement activities
  - Research income

- Give examples from 2
  - Clare Tilbury re School leavers and employment - policy and practice  2006-2018
  - Chris Bigby – Quality of support in group homes – program design  1999- 2018
Impact  What has changed as a result of the research - instrumental – conceptual - capacity

“..contribution that research makes to the economy, society, environment or culture, beyond the contribution to academic research”.

Public policy

• Influence on policy or debate [expose the problem – issue]
• Changes to public policy, legislation, or regulations [new policies Dept Child Safety & Education]
• Improved understanding or reframing of a problem leading to new strategies.
• Priority shifts in expenditure profiles or quantifiable reallocation of non-profit or public budgets. [Funding NGOs new program Next Steps After Care]
• Improved community awareness of a social problem, based on research.
Impact on human service organisations or service delivery

- Decisions by a human service organisation or industry body informed by research.
  - [changed structures – more focus practice leadership]
- Training programs have been developed or amended based on research.
  - [greater access to training – on line resources active support]
  - [new strategies – training foster carers – career advice – raise awareness CP workers]
- Clinical tools or practice guidelines developed or amended based on research.
  - carer booklet and website used across the sector
  - guide to good group homes
- Improved understanding or reframing of problem leads to new services
- Take-up and use of new or improved service delivery products, practices or processes that aim to improve client or community experience or outcomes
Impact on quality of life of clients or community members

• Community impact - Improved community well-being, inclusion, or community participation.
• Community impact - Public behaviour has changed.
• Client impact - Improved client knowledge, status, experience, or well-being.
  • better equality of support in group homes
• Organisational impact – Improved democratic participation or service access.
• Community engagement or involvement in research has improved.
  • organisations involved and see the value of research
Engagement

“interaction between researchers and research end-users outside of academia, for the mutually beneficial transfer of knowledge, technologies, methods or resources”

Not the same but likely to be a pathway to impact

• Research funding and partnerships (public sector or industry)
• In-kind support for research
• Appointments to government advisory boards
• Contributions to human service organisations boards, committees, advocacy groups
• Advice to/consultation community groups, professional bodies, government.
• Submissions to public inquiries on industry-research related issues
• Presentations, seminars, lectures and workshops for human service organisations,
• Research reports for industry bodies – government and nongovernment
• Use of media/social media to communicate research
• Co-designing and collaborating on research events, symposia etc
• Mentoring external research partners – HDR internships
What does this suggest

- Impact is a long term proposition
- Need Long term and multiple faceted engagement
- Plan from the beginning
- Difficulty of verifying impact
- Time consuming – different expertise – not necessarily valued in the past
- Not part of trad researcher skill set
- Requires infrastructure – Universities and the profession
- Difficulties of defining social work research – often invisible
Reflections

- All types of (good) research are useful - into social issues, organisational practices not only those framed as evidence-based practice
  - Inform policies, program design and implementation.
  - Innovative ways of working in the human services.
  - Extend the evidence base for interventions.
  - Strengthen professional foundations for practice impact and advocacy
- Recognise different ways of operationalising ‘social work research’ & the limitations
- We need to understand how to ensure research can inform policies, program design & implementation – how research can facilitate innovation
- Research links universities to practice and wider human service sectors
- Research is crucial to place of social work in universities and the standing of the profession
Publications


Thank you

Contact

C.Bigby@latrobe.edu.au