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Advancing Social Work Research in Australia: Experienced Researcher Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

While social work research in Australia is in reasonable shape, it requires a strong research culture promoting rigorous research to enhance its credibility and influence on social policy discourses. This study explored proposals to advance social work research, based on interviews with 20 experienced Australian social work researchers. Strategies identified include improving research culture and training, the development of research infrastructure to promote and stimulate research, and forming new partnerships both among researchers and between researchers and research end-users. Growing and strengthening the research foundations of the discipline is essential to its future relevance.

IMPLICATIONS

- The Australian social work community would benefit from a more deliberate and strategic approach to increasing the quality and quantity of research to inform practice and policy.
- Opportunities for social work researchers to connect with each other to disseminate, discuss, and plan research could provide a hub for increasing research development and research collaboration.
- The responsibility and capacity to lead research development and advocate for social work research is shared between the academy, the human services sector, and representative professional associations.

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The research foundations of social work are vital to the future of the profession, as practitioners draw upon, and develop, knowledge and theories and stimulate interest in new research to address social inequalities (Shaw, 2007). Compared to other social science disciplines Australian social work research has both weaknesses and strengths: the volume of social work research publications by Australian universities is mid-level and competitive grant income is relatively low (Tilbury, Bigby, et al., 2021), but there are high levels of engagement with service providers, and social work researchers have

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identifiable impacts on social policy and practice (Tilbury, Bigby, et al., 2021). International studies of social work research point to similar issues: underinvestment in social work research and infrastructure, especially compared with health; a need to improve workforce training and development; relatively few doctoral students; and complexities of research translation (Proctor, 2010; Sharland, 2013). Increasing the quality and quantity of research requires developing research infrastructure, investment, leadership, and collaborative research networks and partnerships that are sustained over time (Sharland, 2013).

These problems have been tackled internationally in various ways, with new translation bodies, different funding requirements, and professional initiatives in the form of new networks for developing strategic research agendas. For example, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (www.nice.org.uk) and its predecessor the Social Care Institute for Excellence (www.scie.org.uk) were funded by the UK government with the purpose of improving social care by defining and disseminating best practice guidelines. The European Social Work Research Association (<https://www.eswra.org/>) was formed to progress the development and utilisation of social work research. In the USA, the Society for Social Work and Research (<https://secure.sswr.org/>) encourages the design, implementation, and dissemination of rigorous research that enhances knowledge for social policy and social work practice. Some social research funding bodies take an active role in knowledge development, dissemination, and exchange. For example, the Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare (<https://forte.se/en/about-forte/>) operates a national program for applied research aimed at strengthening client and practice-oriented research in the human services, including intervention research.

In Australia, there are examples of field-specific research organisations and programs that aim to strengthen the research and practice nexus. The Australian National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (anrows.org.au) runs a government-funded applied grants program to generate, disseminate, and assist in applying evidence for policy and practice addressing violence against women and their children. There are other linking organisations that focus on particular fields of practice. For example, the National Ageing Research Institute (nari.net.au) is an independent health institute that produces research evidence to improve health and aged care systems. Its approach focuses on innovation, collaboration, and codesign with industry and service users. The Australian Institute of Family Studies does not fund or undertake research, but it operates the Child Family Community Australia (aifs.gov.au/cfca) information exchange, which aims to disseminate evidence-based information, resources, and support for professionals in the child welfare field. However, most government and nongovernment human services agencies do not have well-established research capacity, few have research or research translation units, and industry-based funding for evaluation is limited.

A national study of the nature of Australian social work research and its contribution to policy and practice was undertaken between 2017–2021. The overall goal of the research was to identify strategies to advance social work research in Australia, in order to improve the quality and outcomes of social work and human services. It entailed quantitative analyses of social work research outputs to appraise its strengths and deficits, a study of the perspectives of human services research end-users, and 12 case studies of the impact of social work research (Tilbury et al., 2017; Tilbury, Bigby, et al., 2021;

Tilbury, Hughes, et al., 2021). As such, it captured multiple perspectives on the state of Australian social work research and how to improve it. The empirical work provided the foundation for ideas about how to increase the quantity and quality of research, outlined in a discussion paper titled “Agenda for social work research” (see supplementary material). The ideas and strategies proposed included:

- Increase visibility by publicising research excellence and grant success, and making research connections to social work explicit.
- Work in teams, develop sustained programs of research, improve research training, and build long-term research partnerships with industry and service users.
- Ensure existing infrastructure such as conferences, professional bodies, and journals promote a stronger research culture in the academy and the profession.
- Build infrastructure such as networks between researchers to provide a hub for social work research development and leadership in advocacy for social work research.

The present study was designed to test and further develop these proposals by consulting with leading Australian social work researchers. It sought their views about previously published findings from the project, and more generally, their views about improving social work research. The research questions were what are the main problems facing social work research and how can these problems be addressed?

Method

The study used a qualitative approach and comprised a series of semistructured interviews to collect data. Experienced social work researchers were identified based on their number of publications and citations, identified through a previous study (Tilbury et al., 2022). A sample of 28 researchers was identified, all mid-level or senior in their careers. The group included representatives from social work professional bodies involved in research activities (e.g., journals and conferences). They were emailed about the project and 20 researchers from five Australian states agreed to participate. All participants had a university affiliation, either as employee ($n = 16$) or adjunct ($n = 4$). Nineteen were interviewed by members of the research team by videocall and one responded by email. Ethics approval was granted by Griffith University human research ethics committee (approval 2017/012). Confidentiality was provided and transcripts were de-identified by assigning a number for each participant.

Participants were provided with a copy of the discussion paper, “Agenda for social work research” in advance of the interviews. The interviews were directed at obtaining perspectives about the issues raised in the agenda paper: social work research training, research production, research career trajectories, research programs and goals, perceived research impact, and the relationship of research to the social work knowledge base. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Direct content analysis was used to examine and interpret the data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), and, as such, the agenda paper guided the identification of predetermined categories and their operational definitions. The analysis involved systematic coding and categorisation of participants’ views and perceptions, as evident in the text of each transcript (Graneheim & Lundman, 2003; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). All the data were coded

within the predetermined categories. Similar codes within and across categories were then combined, aiming for consolidated meaning and understanding (Saldana, 2009). We coded divergent viewpoints to ensure that initial ideas were tested, aiming to confirm, disconfirm, and expand potential strategies. The findings are presented descriptively within each category, with relevant segments from participant interviews to illustrate meaning (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Findings

Most participants agreed that Australian social work was a mid-level performer in research quality and quantity compared to cognate disciplines. They also noted areas of improvement and strength, and argued social work had considerable achievements in research that should be recognised. Nevertheless, they identified a range of factors that hinder progression, including those perceived to be detrimental to the quality and quantity of research undertaken. They made suggestions about how to improve performance within the broader research context of the higher education environment and the human services sector, which impacted on social work research.

Challenges in the Higher Education Context

In relation to the higher education context, most participants spoke about the challenges of achieving research goals such as grants and publications when teaching responsibilities detracted from research time and opportunities. Teaching workloads, administrative duties, high levels of casual and contract staff, and auditing and monitoring systems, together with the complexity of student needs, were seen to undermine research productivity. Most participants believed the focus placed by universities on teaching resulted in less time for research, yet there were still high expectations for academics to produce research. It was acknowledged that these pressures applied to most disciplines across the university sector: “We’re in T&R [teaching and research] positions but teaching just rules, and research works around it” (Participant 10).

One consequence of these demands was research occurring in personal and unpaid time (e.g., nights and weekends), as this participant explained:

I know some universities do have more space for research but even in those that do ... you still have to put in many hours outside of what you get paid to do in order to get the runs on the board. (Participant 3)

This was noted to be a particular problem for disciplines like social work with predominantly female staff, who are more likely to have caring responsibilities and career interruptions, with detrimental repercussions for research careers.

Time restrictions also were perceived to result in academics undertaking research with reduced complexity or that achieved quick outcomes, for example:

... building those networks, those relationships, setting up as projects takes a lot of time. And when the teaching is becoming increasingly burdensome, people ... will go for sort of quick wins, you know, rapid evidence reviews [and] book chapters because they’re under pressure from teaching. (Participant 8)

Thus, time restrictions were perceived to limit the range of research activities and outputs that could realistically be pursued, and to work against research goals that required longer preparation and timeframes. Examples were the de-valuing of editing and publishing books (which take longer to produce), or pursuing consultancy or tender contracts that may not result in publications due to contractual requirements for confidentiality.

The lack of research focus within some universities was perceived as another hindrance to research progression, because the value of research was not prioritised for either staff or the students who are future professionals. As participant 17 reflected: “... some of these other [universities] ... often they don’t really even want research ... you know, like [name of higher education provider] and these places offering social work degrees, with no real interest in research at all”.

Additionally, some participants saw social work academic discipline groups being comprised mainly of early career researchers or people without doctorates employed for their practice expertise. This constrains access to research mentoring and leadership and also reduces the capacity to develop research teams:

... in order to teach a social work program, you invariably need people who’ve got a mix of skills so ... to recruit well for a diverse staff group for a teaching program means that we’re ... unlikely to have a group of people who are doing research in a similar area. (Participant 2)

Thus, recruitment difficulties combined with a relatively low number of social work PhDs mean that schools may not have a sufficient critical mass of social work researchers to generate a strong internal research culture.

Challenges in the Human Services Sector

In relation to the profession and the human services sector more generally, participants noted a range of views about evidence-based policy and practice and how this affects social work research. Several participants spoke directly about social work practitioners’ perceptions of research. Some believed research is used regularly and is valued by practitioners to inform interventions. In contrast, other participants asserted that many practitioners have limited interest in research and are reluctant to engage in debate about topics such as how to measure client outcomes. Here, a dichotomy between academia and practice was highlighted. One participant linked the challenges facing social work in the academy to the position of the profession more generally:

Partly the problems in research are related to our status and position as a profession. The work we do with marginalised people is undervalued and underfunded—so research is underfunded. Therefore, we need to develop as a profession ... being more evidence-based ... alongside developing research. (Participant 15)

Research Training and Early Career Development

There were two interrelated views about developing social work research, which involved (1) strengthening research training and (2) mentorship to assist early career researchers in their career development. This could range from supporting research collaborations before commencing a PhD to helping novice researchers establish and navigate a career pathway upon completion. Career uncertainty related to the lack of available

and funded postdoctoral positions to consolidate research achievements, practitioners employed in academia over PhD graduates, teaching responsibilities prioritised over research, and completing a PhD online impacting immersion in academic culture (e.g., involvement in lecturing and tutoring). Several participants emphasised the value of early career mentoring, supporting Indigenous scholarship, increasing PhD rigour, broadening researchers' knowledge of different methodologies, and publishing in high-quality peer-reviewed journals.

Participants discussed the need for more robust research training across the undergraduate, honours, masters qualifying, and PhD programs and the re-establishment of advanced masters programs with a research focus. There was a particular emphasis on the strengthening of knowledge around research methodology and methods, including quantitative and mixed methods. They perceived Australian social work research as too concentrated on qualitative methods without sufficient appreciation of the value of other approaches. Some of the advantages of methodological pluralism included graduating social workers who are less research averse and supporting the development of research-literate practitioners. There was concern that in undergraduate studies, research is presented as irrelevant or an add-on, rather than integral to daily practice, whereby the practitioner uses research and theory to inform and further develop practice.

Relatedly, there was an observation that many social work PhD candidates had extensive practice careers prior to enrolling in a PhD, in contrast to other disciplines that foregrounded research careers from the undergraduate stage. Developing a clear research pathway from the undergraduate and masters programs to the doctoral program was recommended, as participant 8 explained:

Going into a PhD straight out of undergrad without anything along the way to train you, to give you that kind of craft. It's a bit of a gap and so maybe we do need look at that more traditional pathway of actually doing a master's degree. Don't try and sort of squeeze into a PhD and pick up what you need along the way, cause the pressure is then on to just get done in four years without that space to learn, to learn methods and appreciate those methods.

Most participants discussed the importance of mentorship for PhD students and early career researchers. This mentorship included supporting research students to publish during their candidature and encouraging PhD students and early career researchers to be part of research teams with more senior academics. This was seen to be lacking in social work because it does not have a strong team research culture, limiting opportunities to develop experience in copublishing and joint grant applications. As a consequence, publication and grant track records were relatively undeveloped. Additionally, mentors connect early career researchers to established networks and encourage the development of the necessary skills for team and collaborative research, as explained by participant 19:

Just the clear message of, you know we can't have PhDs, early career researchers rising if we don't have bodies of academics working together. So we have to go into a team ... to project expertise. The individual stuff, it's not going to work anymore.

Some participants spoke about the importance of senior researchers passing down skills and knowledge, together with normalising research experiences. As explained by participant 5: "You get shocking reviews on a paper and you have to pick yourself up, and what

happens for an early career researcher is they just want to leave altogether, so I think sharing those stories are really, really helpful”.

Building a Research Career Through Partnerships and Collaborations

Participants were asked about the main ingredients of success in their own careers, as well as what advice they gave to others about building a productive research career. Many participants highlighted the importance of establishing and articulating an area of interest or program of work. However, they emphasised a balance between not spreading yourself too thinly and not creating a narrow research niche. Adapting to opportunities and taking educated risks were necessary, while looking for ways to thread your area of interest across the research. As explained by participant 11:

Because I've been able to keep my focus and my eye on [my topic], even though all the research I've done has not been about [my topic] ... I've been able to thread [my topic] through a whole range of other things. So research I've done on [field 1] and ... [field 2] ... [my topic] sits in all of those things ... I've been able to weave it through everything.

Participant 17's views differed from the majority, believing it is essential to develop and maintain a narrow focus of research. This participant discussed the need to be cautious when collaborating, ensuring not to move outside of your research niche, to safeguard the development of your expert status in your research topic. This tension exemplifies the need for balance referred to earlier—defining a niche while being open to working with others.

Most participants discussed the role of collaboration and working in teams in their success, together with a clear and coordinated research program. Collaborations included spending time in research centres; building local, national and international connections; working within multidisciplinary teams; and forming research relationships with practitioners and human service organisations. These collaborations enable exposure and skill development, opportunities for grant partnerships, and the establishment of a research track record. They also bring a social work perspective to multidisciplinary research teams and increased credibility through impact. They saw research collaborations and partnerships with human services agencies as a strategic priority to maximise grant success and contribute to knowledge for practice. Such collaborations could facilitate the progression of generations of researchers through the sharing of research expertise, as well as progressing social work knowledge in focused areas of concern. As participant 3 explained:

So, a research program that is not just for the three years of the ARC grant or for the 12 months of getting a particular publication done, but looking at a decade or two into the future and seeing a progression of generations of researchers and a grand plan for developing knowledge in a particular field. To be bold enough to do that.

Participants highlighted the importance of building sustainable teams and collective agendas. Of significance were partnerships with social work practitioners and service users to facilitate impact. The difficulty or unwillingness to form research collaborations was highlighted as problematic by participants, as explained by participant 11:

But then there's all of these lone wolves, all of these lone voices, people that have this little area of particular interest, and they just can't seem to find other people to play in the sandpit ... We know people that have come into academia, and have left because they just couldn't find those playing people and I can see that happening today.

Increasing the Visibility of Social Work Research

Social workers often comprise a small occupational group within larger multidisciplinary organisations, and much of the research produced by social work has implications beyond its own professional boundaries. This can mean that opportunities are missed to communicate the particular role and purpose of the discipline to addressing contemporary social and health challenges. Several participants discussed the importance of researchers identifying as social workers and with the profession, in order to assist in defining the contribution of social work research in the context of other disciplines. Most participants identified themselves as social workers or social work researchers throughout their careers. They spoke of working in multidisciplinary teams and across fields where social workers were in the minority (e.g., legal, health) while contributing a social work perspective. One participant expressed this as social work research being a collective responsibility, focused on impact for service users and advancing the social work profession, rather than pursuing individual interests or working alone.

Participants emphasised social work's unique and vital perspective in research and practice and the need to hold onto and advance the social work identity. They expressed the need to capitalise on social work strengths, such as engagement with industry, researching questions close to practice, and including service-user voices.

In any dealings ... I would go in and say "What a social worker can bring to this research is this". And I talk very much about the focus on the individual, on problem solving, on making connections between the person and the external community, on the social capital that's gained from social work research and that I can deliver the knowledge about vulnerable and marginalised people ... So identifying as a social worker is really important to me. (Participant 14)

Ways to achieve this included identifying as a social worker on publications and in media interviews, and undertaking research that supports the education and practice of practitioners. Additionally, participants spoke about the importance of universities making a social work submission in the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) exercise, and coding grants and publications as social work. Some saw research and higher education as their mode of practice as a social worker, rather than separating practice from research. Two participants described a dual identity—a researcher in their area of expertise (e.g., mental health) and a social worker. Another did not identify as a social worker but instead aligned their research with their area of field expertise.

Several participants discussed the opportunities that the nonacademic impact agenda (e.g., as evident in the Australian Research Council's Engagement and Impact Assessment Exercise) presents for social work. They commented on social work being an applied discipline concerned with complex and pressing real-world problems that considers interpersonal, contextual, structural, and systemic issues, relevant to both case-work and policy development.

Building Research Infrastructure

The majority of participants supported establishing a social work research network or organisation, seeing it as an opportunity to connect, share ideas, form collaborations, and discuss different methodologies with like-minded people. This was seen as particularly valuable for early and mid-career researchers to provide mentorship and training opportunities and for those where a social work research culture may not be strong in their place of employment. As participant 5 explained:

We've got something like 15 people in the ECR [early career researcher] and mid-career space. They would be hungry for those sorts of opportunities to just know who is around and have those conversations that are there to support research ideas and research collaboration.

Additional benefits of a research network included strengthening the profile of social work research, developing research culture and being more competitive in grant applications. Two participants discussed the value of involving practitioners with research interests. Additionally, some participants raised the possible extension to a research-focused conference and journal, similar to some international bodies such as the European Social Work Research Association.

Several participants spoke about the need for any research forum to have subgroups around areas of interest, methods, or fields of practice because social work is such a broad and diverse profession. For similar reasons, one participant believed multidisciplinary networks were more beneficial than a solely social work network. Additional barriers to the success of a social work research network included the potential for groupthink, competitiveness between universities, and resources (time and money) required to establish and maintain a network.

Discussion

Social work research is aligned with the mission and purpose of social work, encompassing critiquing and deepening understandings of social problems and their effects on people; improving practices in human services; contributing to and advocating for equitable social policy; and empowering service users (Orme & Powell, 2008). It seeks to generate and add to knowledge about social work and human services, highlight the nature of lived experience and the ways that inequality and diversity shape experiences, and promote social justice and social inclusion (Shaw, 2007). Many of the identified challenges for research are not unique to social work—especially balancing research and teaching and dealing with metric-based performance targets in universities (Debowski, 2022). However, the social work academic workforce faces additional challenges compared to larger and longer-established disciplines with stronger research cultures, such as staff being mostly women, recruited from practice (often without doctorates), and having an uneven commitment to undergraduate research training (Orme & Powell, 2008). Cree et al. (2020) notes the contradiction whereby women in social work can thrive in female-dominated academic workplaces that are, at the same time, sites of continual disparity in many aspects of seniority, pay, duties, and tenure. These challenges require social work to continually work to secure its research position in the academy, in a way that more-established disciplines do not. The voices of experienced social

work researchers from this study, in combination with other studies of social work research in Australia, can inform action on long-term strategies for research growth and development in social work. This is necessary if the discipline is to increase its credibility and influence on social policies that underpin service delivery.

There has been considerable progress in the last two decades, but there is still room for universities to strengthen curriculum and research training at undergraduate, honours, masters, and doctorate levels to increase the number of research-trained professionals. Enhancing pathways into PhD programs and supporting postdoctoral research fellowships can help to position research as a form of practice, rather than separate from practice. Universities (via academic heads of social work) could collaborate to track annual completions of doctorates and other research higher degrees to provide essential data for research workforce development (Hodgson et al., 2020).

More social work research could add a social work dimension to multiple fields that lack evidence-informed practice. Most fields of practice for social work are multidisciplinary (e.g., disability services, health, disaster recovery), so it is important that social work can influence and get a share of available funding for research on such topics. As Gehlert (2016) argued, social work contributes to major questions facing science today through its unique ability to integrate knowledge from a variety of disciplines. Likewise, social work strengths in qualitative research can be harnessed to add knowledge about the lived experiences of service users, which is vital to problem solving in social policy (Broadhurst, 2015). The coming generation of social workers must be prepared to operate to their full potential in the current transdisciplinary world of science. Moreover, social work, as an applied profession, is uniquely placed to be at the forefront of the research-impact agenda and must play an active and constructive role. In doing so, narrow instrumental approaches to tackling complex problems can be resisted and social work can join with other disciplines to assert the public value of social science knowledge and methods of inquiry (Broadhurst, 2015).

Some human services agencies have built admirable research partnerships and have allocated funds to research over significant time periods. They may have research units or research brokers with responsibilities for research dissemination and building research partnerships. These provide a vital link to university-based researchers. Such roles would be bolstered by incentives for staff to undertake research higher degrees and industry-based research career pathways. While governments, especially those that are large providers of human services, have all made commitments to evidence-based policy and practice, underinvestment in research remains a problem. Translational activities and partnership development between researchers and practitioners receive scant recognition in universities, and research grants may not cover the considerable cost and time investment for open-access publishing, engagement, and translational activities. There is a need to build mutual understandings of responsibility and capacity for research engagement and impact, and this would be an outcome of strengthened research partnerships.

The absence of one dominant voice or representative of the discipline in Australia means an agenda to advance social work research cannot be owned by any single entity. Social work leadership and influence are dispersed, as neither professional practice nor education are regulated by government, and social workers are employed in thousands of organisations in federal and state government, nongovernment, and private

sectors. By necessity, the responsibility to increase the quantity, quality, and impact of social work research must be shared between the profession, universities and research bodies, government, and the human services sector. Currently, much of the impetus rests with individual researchers forging their own research agendas.

The professional associations AASW (Australian Association of Social Workers) and ANZSWWER (Australian and New Zealand Social Work and Welfare Education and Research) have remits to promote the value of social work research to the profession and other stakeholders. This can be difficult in a practice-based profession that debates its “art or science” foundations. Practice wisdom is long recognised as an important form of knowledge. But multiple forms of knowledge, including research and theory, sit alongside knowledge from practice—indeed, this is essential for professional practice. There are clear links between the status of the social work profession in Australia and the status and identity of social work as an academic discipline. As participants noted, it is important to assert a social work identity within multidisciplinary research teams, as well as in neo-liberal human services workplaces where disciplinary boundaries have faded and social justice ideals are downplayed. The professional associations can work together and lead on developing social work esteem and prestige markers, such as a college or learned academy awards, and other forms of recognition for research achievements. These forms of institutional support for research are vital to professional standing in other disciplines (Healy, 2018) and especially worthwhile to counter any perceptions in the academy about social work being applied rather than research-focused (as if these were not compatible). Both of the associations support scholarly journals, *Australian Social Work* (by AASW) and *Advances in Social Work and Welfare Education* (by ANZSWWER), which are essential to the dissemination of research. Achieving and maintaining good international journal rankings is imperative to the status and growth of the journals, especially given the increasing competition between journals for quality papers as academics seek to publish in high-impact and high-readership journals (Hughes, 2015).

In addition to making optimum use of existing research infrastructure to lead and take action, we must consider what can be built to advance social work research (Healy, 2018). Social work research networks have been established internationally with the purpose of (a) connecting social work researchers with each other; (b) providing a hub for social work research development and research collaboration; and (c) advocating for social work research. They undertake various activities to achieve these goals, such as annual conferences, scholarly journals, awards to honour scholarly accomplishments, and establishing special interest groups or subnetworks of researchers around specific topics. Another example is the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare’s “Grand Challenges for Social Work” initiative (<https://grandchallengesforsocialwork.org/>). Through a process of national consultation, 12 Grand Challenges were identified to address the big social research issues in health and human services. Teams have been formed around each of the challenges to forge collaborations between researchers, practitioners, community-based organisations, and professionals from all fields and disciplines to work together to tackle these social problems. There are no comparable networks for Australian social work researchers. Such a network would help to build ownership of a collective research agenda, along with getting individual social work researchers and their practice-based partners to see themselves as part of a larger community of researchers, with small projects building to a bigger program of research.

Given resource constraints, existing conferences could initially provide a forum to build these types of networks and facilitate strategic planning for research development. Online or in-person symposia bringing together social work researchers from multiple institutions around defined topics are another relatively low-cost option for stimulating research collaboration. These types of gatherings do not always yield results in the short-term, but they create necessary opportunities for sharing ideas and plans, promoting connection and engagement.

Limitations

The qualitative nature of this study meant the sample was not representative of social work researchers but was comprised of successful mid-level or senior researchers. Practitioners and early-career researchers may have identified a different set of challenges and potential solutions for improving research. Interviews for the study were undertaken in 2021, and it could be argued that the difficulties identified for researchers in universities—especially with regard to managing workloads and gaining research funding—have worsened since that time.

Conclusion

In this article a range of broad proposals for advancing social work research in Australia has been identified, in order to improve the quality and outcomes of social work and human services. It contains messages for social work researchers and academic leaders; messages for human services agencies; and messages for the profession. Taking action to enhance social work research takes place within a neo-liberal policy context that has reshaped both universities and the human services sector: competitive funding and contracting; privatisation and enterprise models overtaking not-for-profits; and managerial practices continue to pose major challenges for the discipline. This environment constrains efforts to expand and develop, yet makes it all the more vital to strategise and plan. This will involve taking a longer-term view to develop larger research projects, build collaborations and teams, and increase the level of research engagement and translation. Improving research culture and research career development will be aided by a stronger focus within the profession and from professional and academic leadership on recognising, promoting, and valuing research. It is evident that advancing Australian social work research will require new partnerships of different kinds, between researchers and with research end-users.

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