

BUILDING THE EVIDENCE FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

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Evidence based practice is a model that has been in healthcare since the 1990s with the advent of 'evidence based medicine'. EBM was defined in 1996 as "the conscientious, explicit, and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions about the care of individual patients". The practice of EBM "means integrating individual clinical expertise with the best available external clinical evidence from systematic research." (Sackett, et al *BMJ* 1996;312:71). How successful healthcare providers are at translating EBP into better patient outcomes and better practice is difficult if not impossible to measure. All healthcare providers and all healthcare practitioners have a part to play. Published research makes up an important part of the evidence based practice paradigm. Research in social work is justified by its relevance for use in social work practice and policy making (Kreisberg et al. 2015). This article examines the evidence base of social work in Ireland in terms of published literature over a 10 year period. It explores the quality and quantity of the research and the translation of evidence based practice into better outcomes for users of the health service.

Keywords: evidence based practice, bibliometrics, research, impact, social work, knowledge translation.

Introduction

Social work is a regulated profession in Ireland since 2013. All social workers must register with the Health and Social Care Professionals Council at CORU. The majority of social workers are employed either by the Health Service Executive (HSE) or The Child and Family Agency (TUSLA) set up since 2014. As of 31st December 2014 Tusla had 1396 wholtime equivalent (WTE) social workers in employment¹. The latest health personnel census reports that there were 2,329 WTE social workers working in the public health system in the republic of Ireland at the end of December 2013. Of these, the majority (1,934) work in the HSE, with the remainder working in voluntary hospitals. (Health Service Executive 2014 p16).

Hodge and others (Hodge et al 2012) have started the discussion on the most influential papers in social work. They identified the 100 most influential articles published in disciplinary social work journals between 2000-2009. Influence was determined by the number of citations each paper received. However very little research is available which investigates the knowledge base of social work in the Republic of Ireland. This article is an attempt at starting this investigation.

Aims

This research aims to uncover a baseline of research in Irish social work, both in terms of quantity and quality. The research will seek to uncover which platforms index social work research and the quantity and quality of social work research produced in Ireland over a decade between the years 2004-2014. The resources selected for analysis will be informed by their availability to social workers in Ireland and information seeking preferences of this population group. The translation of knowledge into practice is intended to be examined in part through a citation analysis looking at the number of times social work research of relevance to Ireland is cited.

Methods

Two approaches are used to inform this research. Firstly an analysis of two HSE conducted surveys is made with relevance to the working environment of social workers in Ireland and their research activity. Secondly a bibliographic analysis of research output relevant to the same population is carried out. The two surveys in question are – the Health and Social Care Professions (HSCP) survey carried out in 2013 and the HSE's Irish health repository - Lenus survey carried out in 2014. Both surveys are examined to look at particulars relevant to social workers. This contextualises the current working environment of social workers in the Irish public health system and highlights the level of engagement of HSCPs with research. The results of the HSCP survey are available from a published report in 2014. The author carried out the Lenus survey and has access to the results in an unpublished format.

The bibliographic analysis entailed the identification of relevant subscription based and free resources which contain literature relevant to social work and by authors affiliated to Ireland. A search was carried out using available search indices and features in each identified resource. The search of bibliographic databases was used to determine research output that has an affiliation to an author or a named author on a paper based in Ireland and concerned the general topic of social work. The identified resources included: CINAHL, Lenus, SocIndex, ERIC, PubMed, Medline, Web of Science, Google Scholar. The resources were selected based on the premise that all social workers employed by the HSE or TUSLA have access via their HSE library to these resources. Some of the resources are open access and thus freely available to all, these include Google Scholar, Lenus and PubMed.

Additionally all of the databases contain research relevant to social workers based in Ireland. The search parameters used were: Publication date between 2004 – 2014. Affiliation: Ireland NOT "Northern Ireland", this was done to filter out results from Northern Ireland and restrict results to the Republic of Ireland only, where possible. Subject: social work. Search terms and filters varied in accordance with the functionality available in

each bibliographic database. A breakdown of the search strategy and results are shown in Figure 1.

The searches made were general in nature to ensure a broad picture of potentially relevant research. The search strategies give an indication of the quantity of research output of relevance to social workers in Ireland from a select number of resources.

Figure 1: Breakdown of search results from 6 resources for social work research output of relevance to Ireland between 2004-2014

Database	Breakdown of records by publication type	Search strategy	Total Result
CINAHL	Peer Reviewed 62	AF ireland NOT AF "northern ireland" AND (MH "Social Work") OR (MH "Social Work Service") OR (MH "Research, Social Work") OR (MH "Education, Social Work") OR (MH "Social Work Practice") OR (MH "Social Work, Psychiatric") OR (MH "Students, Social Work")	62
SOCINDEX	Peer-Reviewed 53 Academic Journals 53 Magazines 3	SU social work AND GE ireland NOT "northern ireland" Pub Date 2004-2014	56
Lenus	Thesis 1 Conference Poster 1 Journal articles 2 Report 1	Lenus has a specific collection for social workers available at http://www.lenus.ie/hse/handle/10147/143560	5
PUBMED	Peer reviewed 18 Reviews 1	(social work[MeSH Major Topic]) AND (((Cork[Affiliation] OR Galway[Affiliation] OR Mayo[Affiliation] OR Donegal[Affiliation] OR Kerry[Affiliation] OR Tipperary[Affiliation] OR Clare[Affiliation] OR Limerick[Affiliation] OR Roscommon[Affiliation] OR Wexford[Affiliation]	16

		OR Meath[Affiliation] OR Kilkenny[Affiliation] OR Wicklow[Affiliation] OR Offaly[Affiliation] OR Cavan[Affiliation] OR Waterford[Affiliation] OR Westmeath[Affiliation] OR Sligo[Affiliation] OR Laois[Affiliation] OR Kildare[Affiliation] OR Leitrim[Affiliation] OR Monaghan[Affiliation] OR Longford[Affiliation] OR Dublin[Affiliation] OR Carlow[Affiliation] OR Louth[Affiliation])))) Pub Date 2004-2014	
Web of Science	H-Index for all papers was 9. This means 9 papers were cited 9 times or more. The average citation per item was 3.74	ADDRESS: (Cork OR Galway OR Mayo OR Donegal OR Kerry OR Tipperary OR Clare OR Limerick OR Roscommon OR Wexford OR Meath OR Kilkenny OR Wicklow OR Offaly OR Cavan OR Waterford OR Westmeath OR Sligo OR Laois OR Kildare OR Leitrim OR Monaghan OR Longford OR Dublin OR Carlow OR Louth) AND TOPIC: (social work) Refined by: RESEARCH AREAS: (SOCIAL WORK) Timespan: 2004-2014.	88
ERIC	Journal articles 12 Reports 12 Books 1 Collected works 1 Proceedings 1	abstract:"social work" abstract:"ireland"Published since 2006.	14
Google Scholar	No breakdown available	irish OR ireland "social work" -"northern ireland"Pub Date 2004-2014 (exclude citations, patents)	17, 900 Res- ults

In terms of quality of research output, the results are filtered using available functionality in each of the resources. For example results are filtered to peer-reviewed items and reviews or systematic reviews. The breakdown of the publication type is shown in column 2 of Figure 1. Whether an item has gone through peer-review or is published as a review is an indicator of the

quality of the research. In addition to this, two of the resources searched – CINAHL and SocIndex – were interrogated to extract the highest number of papers published by journal title. The journal titles with the most papers were analysed to find out whether they had an impact factor or not, and if so what the impact factor was. Impact factor is an index based on the frequency with which a journal's articles are cited in scientific publications. Impact factors are also accepted as a general indicator of quality of research (Saha, 2003).

RESULTS

HSE'S HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE PROFESSIONS SURVEY 2013

The HSCP Survey 2014 was completed by 1,325 HSCPs, representing 8.4% of the 15,844 HSCPs in Ireland. Social workers were among the highest respondents, making up 11% (n=146). While the majority of the results are found to be general and not analysed in relation to any one professional group, the overall findings suggest that there is considerable motivation amongst HSCPs working in healthcare to carry out research. 40.7% of participants were found to be research active. Barriers to research included lack of time, clinical workload and lack of funding. There are clear recommendations for the advancement of evidence based practice through research which emerge from the report. Two specific recommendations concerning the dissemination of research are:

7.2 Continue to promote and develop Lenus and other open access initiatives.

7.3 Support efforts to translate research findings into policy and practice (HSCP Survey 2014, p.45).

HSE's Lenus Irish Health Repository Survey 2014

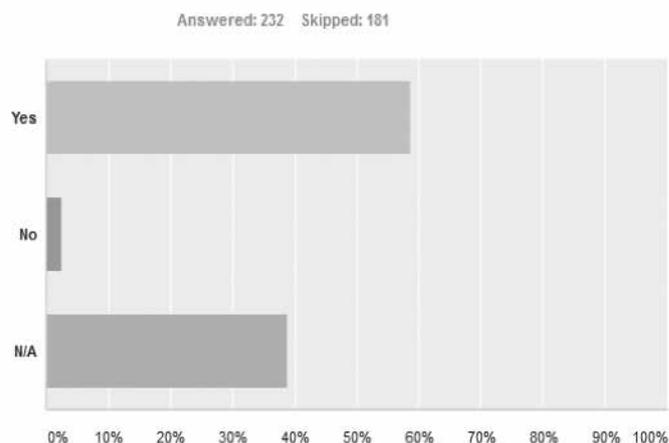
The Lenus survey was carried out in July-September 2014. The survey was emailed to the Health Science Libraries Group (HSLG) and the HEA (Higher Education Authority) electronic discussion lists. It was emailed to all registered Athens users and via Broadcast email to HSE workers. It was also circulated to Health and Social Care Professionals and managerial groups within the HSE. A tweet was sent out about the survey from the Lenus HSE twitter account.

1,477 responses were received. Of these, the highest proportion of responses received were from Allied health professionals (n=413). Allied health professionals displayed low awareness of both open access publishing and Lenus. 62.5% had never heard of open access publishing and 94% were not aware of the HSE position statement on open access publishing. However the benefits of open access publishing were held in high regard with 98% responding that research which is

publicly funded should be made openly accessible. 44% of allied health professionals had not heard of Lenus, but 58% agreed that if they had research they would make it available in Lenus. See Figure 2.

Figure 2: Willingness of allied health professionals to submit publications to Lenus

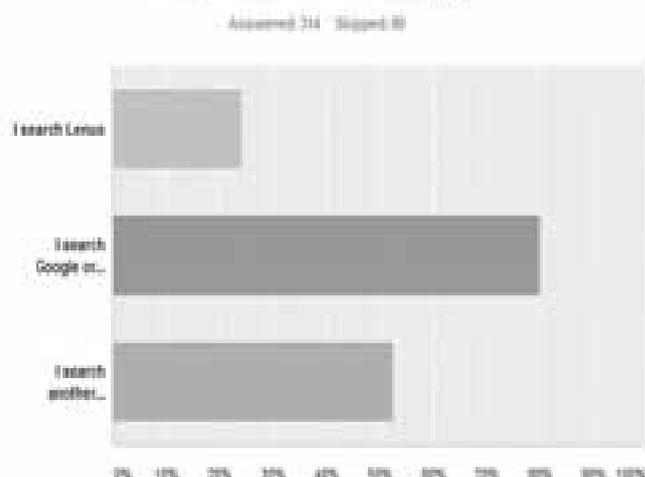
If you are working on a publication would you consider submitting it to Lenus upon completion?



Finally search engines including Google or Google Scholar were cited as the most commonly used source for finding research by allied health professionals. This was followed by searching another research database. See Figure 3.

Figure 3: Sources of current research for allied health professionals.

How do you currently search for Irish research (journal articles, published reports etc)? Please tick all that apply



Bibliographic Analysis

As the results from the Lenus survey indicate, allied health professionals working in Ireland use search

engines mainly to search for research, followed by other research databases and Lenus. Therefore the bibliographic analysis described here incorporated Google Scholar, Lenus and a selection of relevant bibliographic databases. Result obtained from each resource is detailed below.

CINAHL (Cumulative Index of Allied Health Literature)

CINAHL is a subscription based bibliographic database owned by the company and publisher EBSCO. It contains nursing and allied health literature. 1,300 journals are available via CINAHL. Many of the journals are relevant to social work and are indexed in CINAHL. HSE libraries provide access to CINAHL to all HSE and TUSLA employed social workers. The search string used in CINAHL to identify work relevant to social work and Ireland included (AF Ireland OR health service executive) AND (TX social work). The AF string searches for Authors with an Affiliation to the Republic of Ireland. The TX string searches for social work as part of any of the full text of a publication. This is quite a general search which was kept deliberately general to compensate for the lack of precision searching available in other databases searched such as Google Scholar and SocIndex. Precision searching is strengthened by the use of thesauri. Google Scholar, SocIndex, Lenus and ERIC do not have a reliable or available thesaurus. In the absence of a thesaurus freetext searching is used.

In contrast to the other databases PubMed, CINAHL and ERIC have comprehensive thesauri. PubMed uses MeSH (MEdical Subject Headings) as its thesaurus. MeSH terms have been shown to facilitate precision searching in PubMed (Damarell, 2013). CINAHL uses CINAHL subject headings as its thesaurus. ERIC uses its own in-house thesaurus. However the other databases as mentioned do not operate any comprehensive thesaurus. To make a search more precise a combination of thesauri combined with keywords should be used. This is to facilitate capture of non-indexed terms in databases using Thesauri including PubMed and CINAHL.

CINAHL produced 62 results based on the search syntax outlined in Figure 1. All results were shown to have gone through a peer-review process (n=62) and a fair proportion were reviews, approximately 19% (n=12). The top ten journals with the most quantity of papers were checked for their impact factor. The impact factor was sourced from the publisher's website. The majority of journals had an impact factor, only two did not. The most popular journal for social work research was the British Journal of Social Work. See Figure 4.

Figure 4: Top 10 Journals in CINAHL with published articles between 2004-2014 on the topic of social work where the author is affiliated to Ireland.

Name of journal	No. of articles published	Impact Factor
British Journal of Social Work	16	1.162
Journal of Social Work	7	0.709
European Journal of Social Work	7	0.352
Child & Family Social Work	3	0.824
Critical Social Policy	7	1.297
Nurse Education in Practice	2	1.177
Social Work in HealthCare	2	0.709
Adoption and Fostering	1	na
Australian Social Work	1	0.591
Bereavement Care	1	na

A similar analysis was made of the top ten journals in SocIndex. See figure 5. Of the top ten journals publishing research about social work with an affiliation to the Republic of Ireland, only 3 journals are common to both CINAHL and SocIndex: British Journal of Social Work, European Journal of Social Work and Social Work in Health Care. The top journal in both CINAHL and SocIndex was the British Journal of Social Work which has one of the highest impact factor for any social work journal at 1.162.

Figure 5: Top 10 Journals in SOCINDEX with published articles between 2004-2014 on the topic of social work where the author is affiliated to Ireland.

Name of Journal	No. of articles published	Impact Factor
British Journal of Social Work	8	1.162
European Journal of Social Work	5	0.352
Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies	3	NA
Child care in Practice	2	NA
Children & Society	2	0.684

Journal of Adult Protection	2	NA
Journal of Elder Abuse & Neglect	2	NA
Practice	2	NA
Social Work Education	2	NA
Social Work in Health Care	2	0.709

Lenus, the Irish health repository · Health and Social Care Professionals · Social Workers 5

Research by social workers

Search: in Social Workers

LATEST PUBLICATIONS

- 19 NOV 2014 Mental health reform in Ireland: social workers' perceptions of progress
Browne, Frank; Show All Authors
- 19 NOV 2014 Social work profession in Ireland: opportunities and challenges
Browne, Frank; Author
- 20 NOV 2013 A recovery focused housing approach: supporting mental health service users with their choice of housing and supports [Poster]
Cowman, John;

SocIndex

SocIndex is a sociology research subscription based database. It is provided to social workers via HSE library and the publisher's platform called EBSCO. This is the same platform as CINAHL. SocIndex features more than 2.1 million records. There is full text availability for more than 860 journals dating back to 1908. Just 56 results were found in SocIndex using a similar search strategy to that used in CINAHL. The number is lower than in CINAHL which is somewhat unexpected given that SocIndex is purely a Sociology research database, whereas CINAHL covers both nursing and allied health research. Of these, a high proportion (n=53) were items published in academic journals, it is unclear from the database whether they were all peer-reviewed papers or not. Of the top ten journals, only 4 had an impact factor. None of the articles were review articles.

Lenus

Lenus is the HSE's repository for Irish health publications. It is managed by Dr. Steevens' Library in Dublin and was set up in 2009. It is an open access repository which means there is no login or fee to access content in Lenus. There is a unique collection in Lenus for Social Workers to disseminate their research which is available at <http://www.lenus.ie/hse/handle/10147/143560>.

Figure 6: Social Workers collection of Irish health research via Lenus, the Irish health repository

Lenus, the Irish health repository

Home Browse About Submit an Item Feedback

The number of papers in the social workers collection is very low (n=5). This does not reflect the level of research by HSE or TUSLA researchers. The reasons for the low quantity are multiple and complex. There is a low level of awareness about Lenus in the HSE as demonstrated from the Lenus survey. The collection shown in Figure 6 is a unique collection in Lenus. Other collections in Lenus include research by social workers with various affiliations, who work independently, in academic institutions or as researchers in the domain of sociology. Lenus is managed by a small team of librarians with limited resources for outreach and marketing.

5,950 items were retrieved from Lenus using the Google search engine to search within the Lenus repository using the search term 'social work'. It was not possible to restrict the publication year to quantify results. It was also not possible to do a comprehensive publication type breakdown on this result. However the research in Lenus includes grey literature in the main, including HIQA inspection reports, HSE reports and former Health Board reports as well as items such as thesis, journal articles and conference publications. Lenus is a unique source of Irish health literature and social workers are encouraged to use it both as a discovery aid to research and to disseminate their own research. Anyone who has a publication that is relevant to social work who is working or a student in Ireland is eligible to upload their research to Lenus. A 'Submit' button is on the homepage of Lenus. When an author submits their research, they will receive notification from a HSE librarian when it goes live on the system, with a unique link. Authors should check that they are the copyright holder of the work. In some cases, journal publishers will allow a version of an article to be made freely available on a repository, like Lenus immediately upon publication. Other publishers request that an embargo of 6 or 12 months is placed on the item before it is freely available. It is best if the researcher checks with the publisher or contacts the library for further assistance. Items considered for Lenus include: theses, journal articles, conference posters and papers and published reports.

PubMed

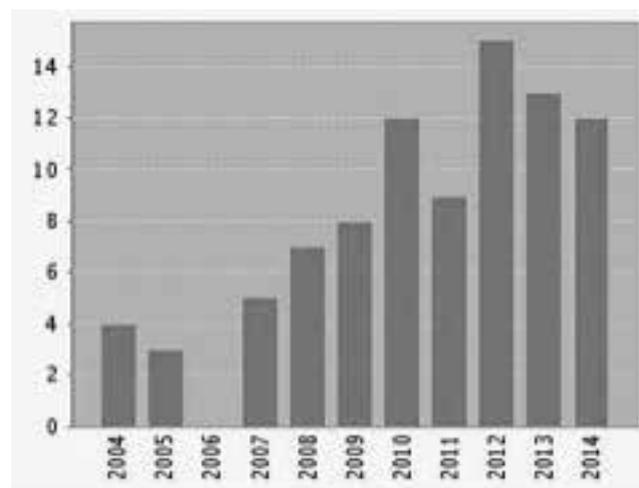
PubMed is managed by the US National Library of Medicine and comprises more than 23 million citations for biomedical literature from MEDLINE, life science journals, and online books. It is freely available on the Internet. The search string used to identify relevant research on the topic of social work combined social work as a MeSH topic with each of the 26 counties of the Republic of Ireland used as an author affiliation search. The publication dates were filtered to between 2004 and 2014. 16 results were retrieved. Of these all were peer-reviewed with no review articles. The majority of the articles were from authors based in third level institutions or hospitals.

Web of Science

This bibliographic database is a commercial product owned by the company Thomson Reuters. The HSE's Dr. Steevens' Hospital Library has a subscription to this product which enables HSE and TUSLA employed social workers to access it via their Athens account. Athens accounts are supplied via HSE libraries and are available to staff online at the HSE Library website. This is one of several bibliographic databases which is useful for both conducting research and retrieving bibliographic data of social work research from persons based in Ireland or Northern Ireland during the years 2004-2014 was conducted. The highest cited item where at least one of the authors was based in the Republic of Ireland was Pinkerton, J., & Dolan, P. (2007). Family support, social capital, resilience and adolescent coping. *Child & family social work, 12*(3), 219-228 which was cited 33 times.

The Web of Science database has a 'citation analysis' tool which was used and the results are displayed in Figure 7:

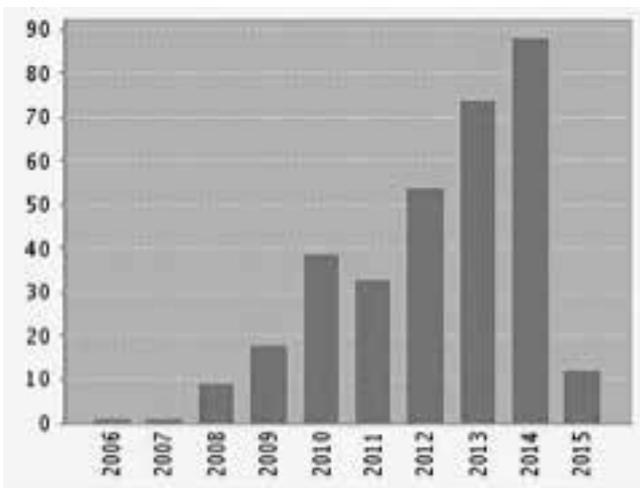
Figure 7: Quantity of Publications relevant to social work in Ireland during 2004-2014



This clearly shows that the quantity of research output has increased in a decade. The quantity has risen from just 4 papers in 2004 to 11 in 2014. The total amount produced in this decade that was indexed by Web of Science was 88. However there appears to be a slight fall off during 2013-2014. In addition to this, the majority of papers were published in the British Journal of Social Work. This journal has an impact factor of 1.162 making it a reasonably good quality journal. Of the 88 papers produced, 8 of these were reviews or systematic reviews. A systematic review attempts to identify, appraise and synthesize all the empirical evidence that meets pre-specified eligibility criteria to answer a given research question. (Higgins, 2008). A systematic review is considered to be a higher level of evidence in terms of quality of research than just a single paper (OCEBM, 2011). The 8 reviews have a H-Index of 2. This means 8 papers have been cited 2 times or more.

The quantity of research produced by social workers has increased steadily in a decade and likewise the number of citations. The number of citations a piece of research gets is a general indicator of impact and therefore quality. Although a word of caution with regards to citations is prudent as ‘bad science’ may also be frequently cited for the very reason that it is flawed. The infamous example is the research published by AJ Wakefield in 1998 who was discredited over the autism and MMR vaccine link. The research was frequently cited though has since been retracted. The sum of the times the social work research of relevance to Ireland was cited is 5524. See Figure 8.

Figure 8: Citations of Publications relevant to social work in Ireland during 2004-2014 Source: Web of Science



Citations of social work research has also steadily increased in a decade from 2 in 2006 to over 85 in 2014. See Figure 8. This demonstrates an increase in the use of knowledge and the translation of research into practice.

ERIC

Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) is a free online resource for educational research. It is funded by the US Government's Department of Education. It has been in operation since 1964 and contains 1.5 million items including journals and peer-reviewed material. The content is related to educational content but includes research of relevance to social work. The full list of content and journals indexed in ERIC is available online at . The search engine behind ERIC was updated in 2013 and a free online search tutorial is accessible at <http://youtu.be/WkUxARnUHn4>. ERIC was searched using abstract:"social work" abstract:"ireland" It was not possible to restrict the year of publication to 2004 due to limitations of the search interface. Articles were limited to those published between 2006-2014. 14 results were retrieved. Of these the majority were peer-reviewed (n=20).

Google Scholar

Google Scholar(GS) has been in operation since 2000. It is a freely available product from Google. It is not clear what the exclusion or inclusion criteria for scholarly literature is or whether such criteria exists. Despite this, GS is rated by allied health professionals in the HSE as the most commonly used resource for finding research (Lenus Survey, 2014). GS is a popular choice for many, though it has been shown not to be reliable as a source to be used solely for research such as systematic reviews. Indeed appeals have been made for GS to improve its interface and details of its coverage. (Giustini et al, 2013). Using the advanced search feature of GS, the following search was used to retrieve results based broadly on social work relevant to Ireland between 2004 and 2014. See Figure 9.

Figure 9: Screenshot of Advanced Search using Google Scholar.

The results were then filtered to exclude citations-and patents. 17,900 results were retrieved. There is no further functionality available in GS to determine the breakdown of the results into different publication types. GS contains journal articles, books, book chapters, dissertations, conference reports among other types of materials. This analysis is limited due to restrictions of the search interface. However a new feature of GS is metrics. By using the metrics feature it is possible to see the top ten publications in social work based on their h-index. H-index was developed by Hirsch in 2005 a measure of the productivity and impact of a scientific work (Hirsch, 2005). Google metrics display the H-index based on articles published between 2007 and 2011 (Suzuki, 2012).

Figure 10: Google Scholar Metrics. Top publications in Social Work

Publication	H-index
1. Child Abuse & Neglect	39
2. Children and Youth Services Review	36
3. The Future of Children	34
4. British Journal of Social Work	34
5. Journal of Interpersonal Violence	34
6. Aggression and Violent Behavior	32
7. Journal of Child and Family Studies	27
8. Child Maltreatment	27
9. Trauma, Violence, & Abuse	26
10. Journal of Family Violence	26

Of the top 10 journals featured in GS only one overlaps with the results found in the top 10 from both CINAHL and SocIndex, which is the British Journal of Social Work. This could be due to lack of literature relevant to social work in Ireland published in the other 9 publications listed. It also may be due to the volume of literature produced in other countries.

Discussion: Limitations of the research

There is a lack of filtering of the database results to identify the number of records affiliated to social workers who are practitioners in the Republic of Ireland. It is particularly difficult to filter results to authors who have an address in the Republic of Ireland and each database treats this information differently. Also authors may put their affiliation down as Ireland, not Republic of Ireland. When this happens, it is impossible to distinguish author affiliations to Northern Ireland from Ireland. To overcome this, counties were searched. However this still lacks accuracy. Some journals were not included in the bibliographic analysis, notably the Irish Journal of Social Work which remains invisible to search engines and bibliographic databases. Currently the results include research by practitioners as well as academic research units, students and potentially commercial firms, agencies and health organisations. The filtering to practitioners was not carried out due to lack of support but could be incorporated into future research, should funding become available. Additionally results were not de-duped. This means that the results that are presented in Figure 1 which were found in one database may have been also retrieved in other databases. i.e. CINAHL and SocIndex may contain some overlapping results. The most influential research of relevance to social workers that emanated from the Republic of Ireland was beyond the scope of the article but could inform future research.

Conclusion

This paper outlines a baseline of quality and quantity of research of relevance to social workers that emanates from Ireland over a ten year period, between 2004 and 2014. The baseline indicates a profession that is growing both in terms of knowledge production and utilisation. This is evident from the rise in the quantity of publications

and the rise in citations. However the baseline of research produced in Ireland on the topic of social work is extremely low.

Approximately 3,725 social workers are employed by the HSE and TUSLA and this analysis has found less than 300 papers in 10 years. The research output is very poor. Barriers have been identified to producing research including lack of time, clinical workload and lack of funding (Lawton & Flynn, 2015). Building a culture of evidence based practice must be the beginning of a discussion around improving social work research output. Some research has found that the statutory registration of social workers in Ireland will encourage people to participate in CPD (Brady, 2014). Getting knowledge into practice for social workers is in part apparent from citations, but this has clear limitations. Evidence based practice is not limited to published research, it encompasses the tacit knowledge of the social worker with the preferences of the healthcare user. More research is needed to further the impact of research by social workers in Ireland. This paper offers a starting point.

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