

Admission Criteria and Internal Assessment in a School of Social Work: An Analysis

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Examining data from a school of social work, the author has established that candidates' past performance (Bachelor's Degree) determines the outcome of the entrance test in a significant manner. Moreover, variations in grades received by the trainees seem to stem from differences in the teachers' approach to evaluation, rather than from true differences in performance. For greater transparency and fairness, a regular and candid appraisal of the evaluation process by teachers themselves is essential.

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INTRODUCTION

It is customary to hold written tests and interviews along with group discussions to assess the suitability of candidates seeking admission to social work courses. The contents and components of these tests vary among the different schools. So do the weightages given to these components. The schools, however, are not always free to adopt whatever entrance tests and procedures they prefer. The choice of admission procedures is influenced by a variety of factors, for example, the rules and regulations of the university to which the school is affiliated and which sets standards for the conduct of the courses.

Additionally, the state government, which often provides funds for the running of the courses, may also issue some directives in this regard. This has taken place at least in one instance. Recently, the Government of Tamil Nadu, through its Department of Collegiate Education, has laid down guidelines for admission to MA in Social Work which, *inter alia*, stipulate that the criteria would be the percentage of marks earned by the candidates in the Bachelor's Degree course, combined with marks earned in the entrance test (40 per cent) and the interview (10 per cent). This was in the year 1999. The previous year,

the Department had forbidden the conduct of interview for admission purpose (vide Tamil Nadu Higher Education Department G.O. Ms. No. 168 dated 24.4.1998).

These directives give social work educators food for thought. Is there a real need to conduct written tests and interviews at all? Do these entrance tests merely serve as convenient devices to filter out a large number of candidates and admit just a few, since the number of authorised seats is small? To phrase it differently, will not the degree marks alone serve as a criterion for admission, should there be a high degree of correlation or association between these grades and performances in the other components of the entrance tests? Can not written tests, group discussions and personal interviews be eliminated? Will not we be, thereby, saving a lot of time and efforts, our own as well as the candidates'?

THE NEED FOR APPRAISAL

Schools of social work would perhaps do well to study, independently and jointly, the outcome of their entrance tests and inter-relationships among their components. We can be sure that the outcome of such an appraisal will render our systems of admissions more scientific than, they have so far been.

It is equally necessary to make our procedures, for assessing students' performance at various stages after admission, scientific. For example, Flippo (1984:239) refers to 'common error's of traditional rating' and says that some of these errors are the halo error (one aspect of the person's performance influences the entire evaluation); the central tendency (marking all personnel as average); 'tough' rating and 'easy' rating (rarely awarding high grades or awarding them to the entire class).

Do 'tough' and 'easy' ratings exist in our departments? One should indeed take a closer look at our own systems of appraisal so that, ultimately, these could be standardised and improved.

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

It is interesting that even in the 1920s, the difficulties associated with enrolment (to the social work courses) were thought of (see, for example, Walker, 1928:147). Nanavatty (1968) has said that the process of enrolment at the schools of social work makes an important contribution to social work and has emphasised the need to select those with the right kind of personality.

P. Ramachandran, and A. Padmanabha, in their pioneering study of professional social workers in India (1969), have mentioned that the professionals do not always come up to the expectations of the employers. To set right this situation, some changes in the enrolment procedures are indicated, besides modifying the training appropriately.

H. Nagpaul (1965) pointed out the need for an inter-disciplinary approach to training in the Indian context. If this idea were acceptable, then it should be borne in mind even at the entry or enrolment point. R. Prasad (1987) bemoaned the paucity or the virtual absence of research activity in professional schools. Obviously, no study regarding enrolment and evaluation had come to his notice.

Armaity S. Desai, in her monumental study (1994: 235,601), found that most social work students, in her sample, had a background in the arts faculty. This is one of the few available studies that have touched upon the background of social work recruits. She also found that the present performance of the social work students was significantly associated with their past (Bachelor's Degree) performance.

R.R. Singh (1985: 102) emphatically highlighted, more than ever before, the need for a careful evaluation of students' performance in field work and goes to the extent of suggesting that a five-member panel should conduct the evaluation in each case to avert 'the possibility of bias affecting evaluation'.

The situation in the United States of America (USA) has not been very different. Morris, Dana, Glasser, Marks, Rein, Schreiber and Saunders (1974: 263) have bewailed the fact that the educational research studies (in social work) have been rarely undertaken in that country. Evaluation research, they say, is virtually non-existent. Ramachandran, as far back as in 1961, suggested that a separate council of social work research ought to be created and evaluation research should be encouraged.

Misra (1994: 324, 325) referred to Philip Klein's five-fold classification and Friedlander's fifteen-fold classification of social work research, but the training aspects and enrolment do not find a place therein. On the other hand, Palaniswamy (1994) refers to ten different emerging aspects of social work such as curriculum teaching and research and suggests that the Association of Schools of Social Work in India conduct a survey about all aspects of social work education.

Two distinct, but related, trends are derived from the review of literature presented above. These are:

1. One set of authors have given specific suggestions regarding admission, recruitment and the training process, including the assessment of candidates' performance during training. However, they have not cited any research studies to support their contention (except in one case).
2. A second set of authors have laid a strong, but general, emphasis on the need for more research on the profession including professional training. But they have not indicated the specific sub-areas that should be investigated.

To sum up, the opinion of most experts quoted above is that research on recruitment to and training in social work is a neglected area and virtually no research based data exist that could be cited as a precursor of the present attempt. Nor has my query, sent to six different schools of social work in and outside the city of Chennai, yielded any information on similar studies carried out elsewhere. Prof. Armaity S. Desai's study, already referred to is, of course, an exception.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The present study may be deemed to be a partial response to the call implicit in both sets of works cited above. The conceptual framework for the present study is as follows.

Two specific areas have been chosen for systematic investigation, namely the admission criteria and the assessment of students' performance in the course of the training process. An important link connecting these two aspects is the fact that raw data are readily available for statistical analysis in every school of social work in these two areas. There is no need for any special efforts to be made by the teacher-researcher for obtaining original data for a fruitful research study. The required data are practically 'up for grabs'. There is no need to prepare a separate instrument for data collection except to determine the aspects of admission and internal assessment on which the researcher wishes to focus attention.

Yet another reason for covering admission criteria and internal assessment of students' performance after admissions in one and the same study, is the focus on consistency. In other words, attention is being drawn to the same issue, in two different contexts. More specifically:

- Are the candidates aspiring to join a post-graduate training programme consistent to their performance at the degree level, and later at the entrance test for the course they aspire for?

- Do teachers consistently use uniform criteria to assess the performance of students who were selected on the basis of entrance tests and who are currently undergoing a training programme?

In the present study, the term 'consistency' is being more or less used in the same sense in which Jahoda, Deutsch and Cook (1959:168, 172) have used it to describe reliability, stability and equivalence. Stability is 'consistency' of measures on repeated application, they say. Further, they have opined that 'equivalence' is established when different investigators produce 'consistent' results.

Thus, the present study focuses attention on consistency in candidates' performance as well as consistency of the evaluation criteria employed by teachers. It is worth mentioning that the present study does not purport to establish a correlation between performance in entrance tests and performance during the actual training at later stages. In other words, the present writer has not undertaken the task of validating the entrance tests. Rather, an attempt has been made to see if the candidates are consistent in their performance and further, to see if the internal assessment criteria and standards employed by the teachers are uniform. Consistency and uniformity belong to the realm of reliability rather than validity.

STATEMENT OF OBJECTIVES AND THE ENUMERATION OF RELEVANT VARIABLES

A major objective of the present study is to find out whether, and to what extent, candidates' performance in the Bachelor's Degree is related to their performance in the various components of the entrance test conducted for admission to MA in Social Work. The marks scored by the candidates in their Bachelor's Degree is treated as the independent variable. The dependent variables are marks awarded in the entrance tests (written test and personal interview).

Another major objective is to find out whether there are significant variations in marks awarded to students of social work for their performance in subjects assessed internally, namely field work and research project work. The variables relevant in this case are subjects in which students of social work specialise, namely Personnel Management on the one hand and all other social work practice-related subjects on the other. These may be treated as independent variables, since each of these two groups claims roughly 50 per cent of the total student strength. The marks awarded to them in only the two

components of training that are internally assessed, namely field work and research project work, will be treated as dependent variables.

METHOD OF STUDY

The units of observation will be the marks earned by applicants attending written tests and interviews held by the selected institution for admission to MA in Social Work. These will include the Bachelor's Degree marks.

The relevant universe or population consists of all the candidates for whom records are available. In the institution under consideration, such records were available for a five-year period, namely, 1995—1999. This being a preliminary study, it was decided to randomly select the data for one of these five years and see the trends. Thus, it is a probability sample of information pertaining to one particular year, namely 1996.

Actually, it had been planned to compare the 1996 data with those of 1997, 1998 or 1999, but the admission criteria kept changing during these successive years and hence no comparison was attempted. For example, in 1997, admissions completed the announcement of many candidates' degree results. In 1998, interviews had been banned and hence were not conducted, as mentioned earlier. In 1999, the weightage given to Bachelor's Degree marks (in regard to admission to MA in social work) had been raised from 40 per cent (in 1998) to 100 per cent (out of a total 160).

In regard to objective, the universe or population consists of all the records of teachers' internal assessment of student's performance in field work and research in the selected institution. The records pertaining to two years were randomly selected, namely 1997 and 1999 and examined for purposes of the study.

This study is confined to one institution (a school of social work) with which the researcher is familiar. The name of the institution is not revealed for reasons of confidentiality.

THE ANALYSIS

The chi-square test, the 't' test and the median test were applied to see the association between the relevant variables, to test the difference between means and to determine the significance of these differences and associations.

The results of the analysis are presented in the form of cross-tables as follows:

TABLE 1: Admission to MA in Social Work, 1996: Relationship between Basic Degree and Entrance Test (Written) Performance

<i>Academic Performance in Basic Degree</i>	<i>Entrance Test Marks</i>			
	<i>Low</i>	<i>Middle</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>Total</i>
Upto 55 per cent	42	48	4	94
56 per cent and above	35	140	39	214
Total	77	288	43	308

Chi-square: 32.3

Significant at 0.001 level

Degree of freedom: 2

Note: The Entrance Test marks are classified as follows.:

Low : 14 or less out of a maximum of 40 marks.

Middle: 15 to 24.

High : 25 and above.

It is clear from Table 1 that candidates with 56 per cent marks and above in the qualifying examination (namely, the Bachelor's Degree) have performed better in the entrance test. This association is statistically very significant. This may be due to several reasons such as higher Intelligence Quotient, greater self-confidence, superior general knowledge and a higher level of motivation on the part of the high-achievers.

TABLE 2: Relationship between Basic Degree and Admission Interview Performance

<i>Academic Performance in Basic Degree</i>	<i>Interview Marks</i>			
	<i>Low</i>	<i>Middle</i>	<i>High</i>	<i>Total</i>
Upto 55 per cent	49	42	3	94
56 per cent and above	60	132	22	214
Total	109	174	25	308

Chi-square: 16.78

Significant at 0.001 level.

Degree of Freedom: 2

Note: The Interview Marks are classified as follows:

Low : Upto 9 out of maximum of 20.

Middle: 10 to 14.

High : 15 and above.

It is seen that high-achievers in the basic (Bachelor's) degree also perform better at the admission interview for the MA in Social Work course (Table 2). Adequate speaking skills and self-confidence are required in a greater measure for a successful interview performance, than perhaps for the written test. High achievement at the degree level

may indeed prepare the candidate for a successful interview. This fact may account for the results stated above.

TABLE 3: Comparison of the Means of Marks Awarded by Teachers

Teacher 'A'	45	49	45	44	44	45	45	44	44
	(N = 9; Mean = 45.11)								
Teacher 'B'		56	64	60	60	56	64	64	
	(N = 7; Mean = 60.57)								

$t = 19.09$ Degree of Freedom = 14

Significant at 0.01 level.

The marks awarded by two teachers in the same Department have been compared in the Table 3. The said teachers were selected because they had awarded, respectively, the highest and the lowest marks in field work in the year under reference (1997).

It is seen that the difference is statistically significant and is not accidental. The difference is of such an order that all the students under one teacher might very well have passed with distinction while those under the second could have secured only mediocre grades. Such results should be deemed unfortunate and unfair, if the grades awarded by the respective teachers do not truthfully and accurately reflect the actual abilities of the students and represent only the individual idiosyncrasies of the concerned teachers.

Even if the above sample is deemed non-representative, since it pertains to a single year (though randomly selected), the median test could still be applied (see Levin, 1983: 186) and the significance of the variation estimated as follows:

TABLE 4: Extreme Variation in Marks: The Median Test

Nature of Evaluation	Number of cases in which marks awarded are		
	Above Median	Below Median	Total
'Stringent' (Teacher A)	2	7	9
'Liberal' (Teacher B)	7	0	7
Total	9	7	16

Chi-square (with Yate's correction): 6.1

Significant at 0.02 level.

Degree of Freedom = 1

Note: 'Stringent' — Most grades awarded are Below Median.

'Liberal' — Most grades are Above Median.

Yate's correction: Yate's correction has been applied only in 2 x 2 tables, wherever the need arose. This is in consonance with views expressed among others, by Garret (1981) and Porkess (1988: 233).

It is once again proven that marked variation in grades, evident in the above data, is not a product of chance, but of other factors, possibly variation in standards of evaluation adopted by the respective teachers.

TABLE 5: Specialisation-Wise Variation in Marks Awarded for Field Work (1999)

Marks Awarded out of 150	Special Subjects		Total
	Personnel Management	Others	
Upto 89	22	6	28
90 and above	11	13	24
Total	33	19	52

Chi-square: 5.16.

Significant at 0.05 level.

Degree of Freedom: 2.

It is seen that a relatively smaller proportion of students of Personnel Management have received higher grades (Table 5). The difference is statistically significant. In other words, some factor, other than mere chance, is probably responsible for the variation.

TABLE 6: Specialisation-Wise Variation in Marks Awarded for Field Work (1999)

Marks Awarded out of 100	Special Subjects		Total
	Personnel Management	Others	
Upto 79	26	9	35
80 plus	4	9	13
Total	30	18	48

Chi-square (with Yate's correction) : 5.38.

Significant at 0.05 level.

Degree of Freedom: 1

Note: The categorisation of marks in this Table differs from that in the previous table because of variation in maximum marks in the two cases.

Once again it is found that the marks differ according to specialisation to a significant degree (Table 6). The implications will be discussed at a later stage.

The variation in marks awarded by the eight teachers is statistically significant (Table 7). In other words, some teachers do seem to have a tendency to give relatively low grades, while many other teachers have the opposite tendency. The trend evident here is not a product of chance, but of other systematic factors.

DISCUSSION, SUGGESTIONS AND LIMITATIONS

Past Performance

Schools of social work in India have routinely been conducting interviews, written tests and group discussions as requirements for admission to social work training programmes. It is seen from the data made available in one institution that marks scored in basic degree seems to play a crucial role in securing admission to social work courses (Tables 1 and 2).

This should not be interpreted to mean that the schools should rely entirely and only on the Bachelor's Degree grades. However, it may be worthwhile stipulating a passing or admissible minimum in the various other components, namely the written test, the personal interview and group discussions.

Nevertheless, it ought to be mentioned that should, for some reason, the government once again ban the holding of interviews, the schools placing a sole reliance on performance at the Bachelor's Degree level will not be committing a grave error or injustice to the candidates. More research in this area will help the schools to evolve standardised admission procedures and entrance tests for admission to social work courses.

Extreme and Unaccounted Variations

Extreme variations in marks by two teachers in this sample was not a product of chance. The variation was real and significant and probably arises from variations in teachers' attitudes and approach to evaluation, one of them being too liberal and the other too stringent.

Flippo (1984) offered a possible remedy. Harshness and leniency are both constant and systematic errors and can be corrected by manipulating the ratings by 'translating the raw score into percentiles', for example. However, the best solution, according to him, is education. Variations in scores should be discussed by the faculty members and the possible reasons for the same should be gone into. An honest self-appraisal on the part of the teachers is necessary to see how far the grades awarded by them reflect true differences among the students and not differences among the teachers themselves, namely their individual idiosyncrasies.

There are noticeable variations in grades awarded to students specialising in different subjects. All these variations, once again, cannot be attributed to true differences among the trainees themselves. Unless

this trend is checked, it might very well result in one or more groups continually being denied reasonably high grades which they might really deserve.

The teachers earlier compared (Tables 3 and 4) were both handling subjects pertaining to the same speciality which goes on to show that there exists not only inter-group variations in grades (that is, between specialisation groups), but intra-group (that is, within the same group) differences as well.

However, it seems highly unlikely that these variations reflect the true differences among students' abilities and performance, unless one is willing to argue that all the high-achievers have deliberately been assigned to one particular teacher and the rest to the other. Such a stand would seem untenable, for obvious reasons. Unaccounted variations of this kind are seen not only in regard to field work but in marks awarded for research as well.

Suggestions

To reduce the extent of unexplained variations, teachers should discuss the issue among themselves, both generally and department-wise (or specialisation-wise). Additionally, it will be worthwhile displaying all the mark lists for the benefit of the student community. Such a display will facilitate general and specialisation-wise comparisons and the prompt settling of grievances, if any. If particulars regarding mean grades and standard deviations are also provided, it will lend credibility and transparency to the entire system of evaluation.

Limitations

This preliminary and exploratory investigation has obviously suffered from a number of limitations. For example, data pertaining to just a few selected years have been examined. Also, these data have emanated from one particular institution. Continuous observation of trends, and inter-school symposia and discussions on the same are sure to pay greater dividends.

This has been an exploratory study designed to see certain trends and in regard to admission criteria and evaluation of social work students' performance. It has shown that it is possible to use the available statistical procedures to appraise admission criteria and award of grades. Social work teachers would do well to adopt these procedures regularly and discuss the outcome among themselves

dispassionately and objectively and institute due remedial measures wherever necessary.

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