# Social justice research: reflections on research learning in a BSW degree

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## Abstract

This paper draws on an assessment task within a Bachelor of Social Work program. The unit aims to help students develop an understanding of the ways social workers use research in different practice contexts: assessing community needs, formulating policies, developing new services, evaluating programs, enhancing social work practice and developing theory. Students are introduced to quantitative and qualitative approaches and methods in social work research, in the context of specific practice fields including mental health, domestic violence, community development and policy advocacy. The unit required students to develop and implement a small-scale research project. This paper includes a discussion of what worked well, what might change in the future and a reflection on how research skills may be useful for future practice as social workers.

## Keywords

# Introduction

This paper is a reflection on the highs, lows and learnings of my research project surrounding the level of recognition and accessibility for physically disabled students at the University of Sydney. The paper discusses the process in which the research was conducted, outlines the challenges faced and devices improvements for future research. It also focuses heavily on the importance of research within the Social Work field and for social justice, paying particular attention to the imperative nature of ethical considerations within research projects.

Research is imperative to good social work practice. Through devising my own research plan and introducing myself to literature surrounding the place research holds within the world of social justice I have become acutely aware of just how important it is. While my research plan had solid intentions, the collection of data proved to be difficult. However, I see this as a teaching moment for future research and find the hurdles I faced within my research to be useful in gaining awareness of how to implement research properly, particularly within a field that deals so closely with people's well-being.

Through constructing my research plan, I learnt the importance of research for social work, especially as particular ways of approaching the research can promote autonomy and agency for the research participants. Participatory approaches to research challenge the ongoing exclusion of research participants from the research process that often emphasises the oppression and inequality that the researcher is attempting to solve (Lavoie et al., 2010). This specific form of research struck instant interest within me, so I was ultimately determined to have participant input at the forefront of my research. As someone who is not part of the community I was researching, it was imperative that I constructed a research process that allowed for participant involvement, particularly when it comes to ethical considerations. The social work profession deals entirely with understanding the context of specific groups of people in order to eradicate oppression and unjust treatment (DCruz & Jones, 2013), therefore research, particularly participatory research, is paramount to gaining this understanding. As the purpose of social work is to uncover what can be done to make society

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more inclusive and just, using a research approach like participatory research that emphasises agency and empowerment allows social workers to engage in social change in a more authentic and genuine way.

## Research Project

My research question was "Are students living with a physical disability recognised enough by the current modes of accessibility within the University of Sydney campus?". Choosing a methodology for my research on this question proved to be a difficult task. I wanted to place participatory methods of research at the forefront of my research, however I initially was not sure how to approach doing this as a lot of my research required concrete, numerical answers. I felt my research required both breadth and depth, thus I could not decide which methodological path to take. I ultimately decided to do a mixed-method approach, constructing a questionnaire that included both questions with scalable answers and questions with room to provide long and personal answers. The quantitative, scalable questions were to provide insight into trends and specific numbers to understand more holistically the experience of physically disabled students (Muijs, 2013), while the qualitative, long answer questions allowed room for the participatory research approach as participants were able to share their experience in as little or as much detail as they felt comfortable with. As this is a sensitive matter, it was important to me that the participants felt involved within the dialogue surrounding it (Holland & Shaw, 2017). I was hoping that through the quantitative answers I could gain insight into why accessibility may be neglected within the disability services provided at the University of Sydney (USYD), and through the qualitative answers the participants could feel a sense of agency in implementing necessary change and improvement for their tertiary education experience.

## Ethical issues

As research is very often a system of exclusion just like society, ethical considerations were most important to me when devising my research plan and implementing the research. There is commonly an uneven power dynamic between the researcher and the participants, causing

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the researchers themselves to sometimes become tools for oppression (Strier, 2007). Using a more participatory approach in my research was my first point of call when it came with being ethically minded, as it aids the process in not being oppressive. As disability can be a sensitive topic and the disabled community are a vulnerable group within our society, I was extremely careful with regard to the language I used when constructing my questionnaire, ensuring that I did not use any discriminatory or stigmatising language. The questionnaire was also anonymous, as participants were likely to share a relation with one another that would hinder confidentiality and privacy. Anonymity within this project was of particular importance as some of the questions required answers participants may not have wanted shared surrounding the competence of the USYD disability services. The notion of informed consent was also of utmost importance to me in creating the questionnaire. In order to provide this informed consent, I firstly explained what the concept means at the beginning of the questionnaire and ensured the participants were aware of the agency and autonomy they have in their role within the research (Holland & Shaw, 2017). A trigger warning was also included at the beginning of the questionnaire as some participants may find discussing their disability and their experience within society to be a sensitive or triggering subject. To continue my emphasis on a participatory approach, I provided space at the end of the questionnaire for feedback on how it was implemented. This allowed room for the participants to shape the ethics surrounding my project themselves (Holland & Shaw, 2017) and ensure that I continually placed ethical considerations as the primary aspect of my research.

## Reflection

The significance of my research question is evident within already existing research. In a study conducted in 2016 surrounding the success of disabled students within tertiary education facilities it was found that the number of students living with a disability had increased from 4.4% in 2007 to 5.8% in 2014, and continues to grow today (Kilpatrick et al., 2016). Findings from this study also suggest that the success rate of these students was consistently lower than the total student population and very few disability practitioners involved in the study saw adjustments being made to facilitate access for these students to

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create equal opportunity (Kilpatrick et al., 2016). While I would have liked to have gained primary statistics and insight of my own surrounding this social justice topic, my data collection unfortunately did not coincide with my research plan. After writing up my questionnaire, I reached out via email to the USYD Disabilities Collective to recruit participants. This is an Student Representative Council (SCR) led group consisting entirely of students living with a disability, advocating for their needs and overall recognition and inclusion on the USYD campus. I outlined in my email who I was, what I am studying, the purpose of my research project and made sure to discuss ideas of informed consent and anonymity in their participation.

However, I never heard back from the collective, thus I was unable to bring my research project to fruition. It is difficult to pinpoint why I did not hear back from the collective. It could be due to the email getting lost in the ether, or perhaps they did not feel comfortable contributing to the research. If I were to approach recruitment again, I would probably be less targeted with the people I contact and instead post flyers around the campus with a link to the questionnaire or seek interest within a Facebook post. These methods of recruitment would have also been more anonymous than recruiting from a group who know each other. As my project was intended to evoke a stronger discourse on campus surrounding disabled students in the hopes that this might highlight the significance of meeting their needs, being more public about recruitment could have effectively contributed to starting this conversation.

While my research project did not collect any primary data, I still gained a lot of insight about research and its significance in social work practice. In reading literature surrounding participatory research, I learnt that departing from more traditional approaches to research that limit involvement to academics and experts and gaining understanding and input from the participants themselves can break down the divide between academia and the social world (Lavoie et al., 2010).

Social research is concerned with systematically examining data concerning the social forces operating within a social justice issue (Monette et al., 2008), highlighting to me the combination of the analytical and critical world with the social and psychological world in

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order to gain depth and breadth of how to go about implementing change. Constructing my own research plan alongside the help of academic literature has mainly reminded me of the importance of recognition. You cannot pay proper recognition, a fundamental aspect of social work practice in providing the oppressed with social capital (Papasotiriou et al., 2012), unless you are aware of the full context through gaining knowledge and recognise participants as equal within this knowledge gaining process.

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