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Citation for final published version:

Maxwell, Nina , Scourfield, Jonathan , De Villiers, Teresa, Pithouse, Andy and Zhang, Meng Le 2018. The pre-training characteristics of Frontline participants and mainstream social work students. *British Journal of Social Work* 48 (2) , pp. 487-504. 10.1093/bjsw/bcx042

Publishers page: <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcx042>

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# **The pre-training characteristics of Frontline participants and mainstream social work students**

## **Abstract**

*Frontline is a fast-track training scheme for social workers in children's services in England, which aims to attract 'outstanding' graduates who may not previously have considered a career in social work. This implies that students recruited onto the Frontline programme will be of a higher academic quality than those on mainstream social work courses. This article presents findings from an independent evaluation of the Frontline pilot stage which compared the pre-training characteristics of Frontline participants with those of social work training enrolments in England for 2013-14, derived from Higher Education Statistics Agency data, the Frontline participant database and a questionnaire administered to postgraduate students in five 'high tariff' universities. Frontline participants have significantly better prior academic qualifications than students on mainstream programmes. They are significantly younger, more likely to have parents who are graduates and more likely to have attended private schools. The Frontline programme has fewer minority ethnic students than mainstream programmes. Frontline's objective of attracting those who may not have previously considered social work as a career has featured recruitment of a more socially advantaged and less diverse group of entrants. How likely Frontline trainees are to stay in the profession remains to be seen.*

## **Introduction**

The introduction of the social work degree in England in 2003 was in part a response to a decline in applications for social work programmes. This decline coincided with a shortage of qualified staff, high staff turnover and relatively short professional career lifetimes. (Hussein *et al.*, 2011). The degree was aimed at reversing these trends and raising standards. Although student numbers have increased since 2008, recent figures show that local authorities remain reliant upon high numbers of agency staff to fill vacancies (Department for Education, 2016). Moreover, evidence for the degree having improved the standard of social work training as envisaged is inconclusive (Taylor, 2015; Crosidale-Appleby, 2014; Narey, 2014). According to MacAlister *et al.* (2012), in order to raise standards, the social work profession needs to attract recruits with high achieving academic backgrounds. Government initiatives in England such as Frontline and Step-Up to Social Work have sought to encourage high calibre graduates and career changers to the profession by offering intensive fast-track employment-based training schemes linked with sponsoring local authorities. Frontline has been developed to appeal to graduates from the UK's top performing universities. This attempt at recruitment from elite universities would seem to run counter to government policy over the last three decades to increase the diversity of students. (Fletcher *et al.*, 2015). Indeed, social work courses in particular have been successful in opening up professional training to recruits previously underrepresented in higher education such as those with non-traditional educational qualifications (Moriarty and Murray, 2007). This has been in recognition that the significance of a strong academic profile at entry for

effective social work learning may not be predictive of other important considerations such as relevant experience, self-awareness and emotional intelligence. Hence, the emergence of Frontline would seem to sit uneasily with attempts to promote a more diverse and culturally competent workforce in social work capable of engaging in anti-oppressive practice.

## **Background**

The Department of Health (then responsible for social work education in England) established the social work degree in 2003 (DH 2002) as part of its commitment to modernise the social care workforce against a background of growing disquiet about whether the workforce had the required skills and abilities to undertake the complex tasks necessary for social work (see Social Care Workforce Research Unit, 2008).

The DH recognised the need for social work degree entrants to have achieved minimum standards in English, Maths and communication skills (written and spoken). This document also instructed higher education institutions (HEIs) to determine those applicants with the ‘appropriate personal and intellectual qualities to be social workers’ (DH, 2002:2). This placed the onus on HEIs to design procedures which would identify applicant *suitability* for social work. HEIs were also committed to widening participation, as prioritised under the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (Dearing, 1997), and the Aimhigher Excellence Challenge (Department for Education and Skills, 2006). From a social work perspective, HEIs were thus faced with the dilemma of identifying the more ‘academic’ of applicants via higher entry standards as well as moderating entrance requirements to ensure that these also take account of personal qualities indicating

suitability and to widen access for groups under-represented within universities and social work training (black and ethnic minorities, women, older applicants, those with non-traditional educational qualifications, see Moriarty and Murray 2007).

More generally, a polarisation has emerged between HEIs, with children of professional or managerial parents around three times more likely to enter a high-status university than those with working class parents (Jerrim, 2013). Academic achievement only accounts for 73% of this gap, suggesting that some working-class children with the academic pre-requisites for entry into high status universities either do not apply or are not offered places. This finding is replicated in both Australia and the United States where children from professional backgrounds are six times more likely to attend elite private universities than their working-class counterparts (Jerrim, 2013). Such polarisation would seem evidenced by variation between HEIs over minimum social work entry requirements, which range from 120 to 320 UCAS<sup>1</sup> tariff points (Holmström, 2010). While variation is perhaps not unexpected, the lowering of entry requirements led to some concern that social work courses were enrolling candidates with especially low prior academic achievement (Narey, 2014). Unlike North America where there is a substantial body of research which demonstrates the benefits of student diversity on learning outcomes, widening access in the UK has been perceived to be at the expense of academic standards (Fletcher *et al.*, 2015). Social work courses in England are associated with an above

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<sup>1</sup> \*UCAS tariff points are allocated to post-16 qualifications. They enable universities and colleges to make broad comparisons between qualifications and courses to determine entry into higher education. For GCE A level subjects, a grade A is equal to 120 points, a grade B is equal to 100 points and a grade C is equal to 80 points.

average proportion of entrants from non-traditional educational routes, typically populated by students from less privileged backgrounds, women and black and ethnic minorities, as well as those with no formal qualifications (Dillon, 2011). Whilst this trend has widened participation and engendered diversity, it has not necessarily been accompanied by strong employer satisfaction with the calibre of some trainees and it is thought that some employers may be averse to recruiting from HEIs known to set lower entry requirements (Narey 2014). Notably, there is evidence from Canada and the US citing the importance of previous academic achievement together with social work values and educational competences as likely to lead to successful graduate achievement (e.g. Bogo and Davin, 1989; Vleich, Fogarty and Wertkin, 2015). It is in this realm of competing if not contrary objectives around attracting high achieving trainees while also widening access that Frontline finds its institutional context as a fast-track training scheme. It has prioritised previous academic success in aiming to attract ‘outstanding’ graduates who may not previously have considered a career in social work.

Funded by the Department for Education as a pilot, the programme was designed to attract high calibre graduates as well as career changers. Applicants undergo a rigorous recruitment process to identify those with the qualities necessary for social work such as confidence, empathy, communication skills, resilience and motivation (MacAlister, Crehan and Olsen, 2012). Applicants are required to have an undergraduate degree at upper second class or higher, and at least 300 UCAS points in their top three A-levels or equivalent. Applicants undertake a verbal reasoning test, written exercise, simulated client interview and a joint interview with Frontline

and the Local Authority in which they would be placed. The Frontline training model emphasises direct practice skills, with a single over-arching theoretical framework – a systemic model – and teaching of two evidence-based interventions, i.e. motivational interviewing and a parenting programme based on social learning theory. Training lasts twelve months and participants enjoy generous financial support, with fees paid and a stipend (in 2014-15) of at least £16,428. This article now draws on data gathered for the independent evaluation of the Frontline Pilot (*Authors, 2016*) and examines the pre-training characteristics of successful Frontline applicants, compared with social work students on mainstream postgraduate courses in England. A range of variables are addressed including demographics, educational background and career aspirations.

## **Research methods**

Data were obtained from the Frontline applicant database on the demographic characteristics and educational background of the first two cohorts of successful Frontline applicants, starting the scheme in 2014 (Cohort One, n=104) and 2015 (Cohort Two, n=124). Comparison group data were obtained from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), relating to social work higher education enrolments in England for the period 2013-14. Inclusion criteria were first year of study, ‘social work’ within the course title and if the course (undergraduate and post graduate qualifying routes) led to registration with the independent statutory social work regulator, the Health Care and Professions Council (n=4750). In addition, a sub-group of the HESA data was formed of the 14 universities in England with all-subject tariff of 400+ UCAS points for UG admission (‘HESA high tariff’ group).

The sub-group was selected because Frontline focuses its recruitment efforts on high status universities which have the highest UG admissions tariff, so we hypothesised that these universities might be more likely to also attract the highest achieving post-graduate students who were most similar to those recruited by Frontline.

To supplement the HESA and administrative data, questionnaire data were also obtained by the evaluation team during the intensive ‘Summer Institute’ block of teaching before their practice learning began. Questionnaire data were received from 97 of the 104 Frontline Cohort One participants (i.e. 93%; 20 male and 77 female) who gave permission for this questionnaire to be linked to their application data. Participant name was used to link the data before all data were anonymised. Fisher’s exact tests were used to assess any difference in the composition of the 97 who completed additional questionnaires, with permission for data linkage, and the full sample of 104 anonymised Frontline participants from the Frontline database. No evidence was found of any differences between the 97 and the 104. One hundred and twenty-eight social work post-graduate students in high tariff universities completed the same questions that were asked of the Frontline participants. These students came from five different universities that agreed for their students to be approached. There were 27 males and 98 females and the response rate was 70%. These data are referred to in the article as the ‘high tariff university PG group’. Ethical approval was granted for the study by the (*University Name*) Research Ethics Committee.

Frequencies and bivariate statistical analyses are presented. Appropriate statistical tests are used to determine whether differences between groups were significant at the 0.05 level.

## **Findings**

### **Gender**

A gender breakdown of students showed that the majority of social work students were female for both Frontline (Cohort One and Two) and the All-HESA and HESA high tariff groups (Table 1). The increasing over-representation of women in UK social work reflects in part a decrease in applications from males who are thought to perceive social work as a relatively low status and low pay occupation (Parker and Crabtree, 2014). The gender makeup of Frontline participants was slightly different from that of the general social work student body; the all-HESA group had a lower proportion of men (14%) compared with 22-24% of Frontline participants. This difference between Frontline and the all-HESA group was statistically significant for both cohorts ( $X^2=5.33$ ,  $p=0.02$  for Cohort One and  $X^2=9.99$ ,  $p=0.001$  for Cohort Two). When comparing Frontline with only the HESA high tariff university students, the difference was significant at the 0.05 level for Cohort Two ( $X^2=5.99$ ,  $p=0.01$ ) but not for Cohort One ( $X^2=3.06$ ,  $p=0.07$ ). The Frontline participants' gender profile is similar to the number of registered social workers in England, where 77% were female and 23% were male (General Social Care Council, 2010).

### **Age**

Some 64% of Frontline participants were aged under 25, with 90% being under 29 (Table 1). Findings from the all-HESA data showed that the social work student population tended to be more distributed across age groups with fewer under 29 (62%), 24% aged between 30 and 39 and 14% over the age of 40. This difference was statistically significant for both the all-HESA group ( $w=171940$  [i.e. Wilcoxon rank sum test],  $p<0.001$ ) and the HESA high tariff group ( $w=30578$   $p<0.001$ ). A similar pattern emerged for Frontline Cohort Two, where 88% were aged under-29, with the notable exception of one participant in the 55-59 age range. Moriarty and Murray (2007) note that although only 10% of UCAS undergraduate applications are from those aged 25 and over, half of those accepted for mainstream social work courses are aged 25 and over. Likewise, social work graduates aged 24 and over are more likely to gain employment as a social worker than those aged 24, largely because the latter have less work experience (DH 2015). Frontline's focus on employment-based learning seeks to address this issue by enabling younger participants to gain the necessary experience whilst studying for their qualification.

## Disability

Only two Frontline participants specified having a disability; however a few more subsequently disclosed learning difficulties such as dyslexia. Seventeen per cent of all-HESA students and 13% of the HESA high tariff group reported having a disability of some form but no further details were available. The disclosure of disabilities once the Frontline programme had started would seem to lend support to the notion that individuals control the pace and extent of disclosure in relation to their perceptions of the potential benefits and losses at a particular point in time. For

example some applicants might fear disclosure would be detrimental to satisfying selection criteria and ‘fitness to practice’ decisions (see Stanley *et al.* 2011).

[Table 1]

## Ethnicity

The proportion of white people in England in the 2011 census was 83%; according to the General Social Care Council’s Annual Report 2009-10, 70% of registered social workers in England are white, with 10% black and 4.3% Asian. Both Frontline Cohort One and the all-HESA data revealed high numbers of British white students (86% and 70%, respectively). Participants identifying as either black, Asian or other/mixed differed across the groups, with Frontline reporting fewer in the black and other/mixed categories. Frontline Cohort Two reported an increase in black participants (from 2% to 7%) and in those describing themselves as either ‘other’ or mixed race (from 9% to 15%). The difference in distribution of ethnic backgrounds across the groups was statistically significant for Frontline Cohort One and all-HESA (Fisher’s exact test [FET],  $p < 0.001$ ), and for Frontline Cohort Two and all-HESA ( $p < 0.001$ ). The difference in distribution was also statistically significant for Frontline Cohort One and the HESA high tariff group ( $p = 0.005$ ) and for Frontline Cohort Two and the HESA high tariff group ( $p = 0.02$ ). In terms of ethnicity, Frontline participants are more similar to the HESA high tariff group than the all-HESA group, although it should be noted that Frontline Cohort Two attracted more participants from ‘other’ or ‘mixed’ ethnic backgrounds (15% and 8%,

respectively) than the all-HESA group. Low numbers of black students were also reported for the first cohort of Step Up to Social Work (Smith *et al.*, 2013).

Frontline's entry requirements are a degree of 2:1 class or higher and evidence suggests that generally ethnic minorities attain lower honours classifications than white students and this is not explained by other factors such as prior attainment, gender, or subject choice (Wakeling, 2009). **Socio-economic background**

Frontline applicant data contained three items which can be used as socio-economic status indicators: income support receipt, free school meal entitlement, and parental education (Table 1). Of these, only parental education, was obtainable from HESA data. The questionnaire administered to PG students ( $n=128$ ) in five high tariff universities also contained items relating to income support for families, free school meal entitlement, and parental education.

Frontline data showed that 17% of Cohort One and 12% of Cohort Two reported that their families had received income support during their school years. Similar numbers were found for Cohort One (17%) and the high tariff university PG group (21%), although there was a difference between Cohort Two (12%) and the high tariff university PG group (21%). This difference was not statistically significant for Cohort One (FET,  $p=0.23$ ). Statistical significance was found for Cohort Two (FET,  $p=0.01$ ). Both Frontline Cohort One and the high tariff university PG group reported that 15% of students had received free school meals.

Fifty-nine per cent of Frontline Cohort One had parents with a degree, compared to 31% of all-HESA social work students. Statistical analysis confirmed that Frontline

Cohort One parents were more likely to have a degree than the all-HESA group ( $X^2=17.70$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and also those from the HESA high tariff group ( $X^2=6.47$ ,  $p=0.01$ ). For Frontline Cohort Two, the proportion whose parents were graduates rose slightly. The difference was significant for Cohort Two and all-HESA ( $X^2=28.77$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and Cohort Two and the HESA high tariff universities ( $X^2=11.65$ ,  $p=0.001$ ). In their analysis of social work student data using both HESA and UCAS sources, Moriarty and Murray (2007) found that unlike the general population of university students (all subjects) who tended to be from more affluent backgrounds, social work attracts students across all socio-economic groups. In this regard, Frontline participants appear more like the general population of students than their social work counterparts. This was more pronounced for Cohort Two. As with Jerrim (2013), we note that children with professional parents have been found to be around three times more likely to enter a high-status university than those with working class parents. Similarly, those children who attend independent or fee paying schools are more likely than children at state schools to attend elite universities in the UK (Boliver, 2013).

Analysis of HESA data as outlined in Table 1 suggests that far fewer of the social work students from the all-HESA group or the HESA high tariff group had attended an independent or fee-paying school in the UK. However, as 34% of the all-HESA group and 51% of the HESA high tariff universities group did not enter a response to this item, there is no way of knowing whether they did in fact attend these establishments. With regard to Frontline Cohorts One and Two, there were similar results with 20% and 19% respectively having attended an independent school. Only

7% of the high tariff university PG respondents had attended an independent school. This difference was statistically significant for Cohort One and the high tariff university PG group (FET,  $p < 0.01$ ).

### A/AS Levels and other previous qualifications

As noted earlier, Frontline's admission criteria for the programme include at least 300 UCAS points in top three A-levels or equivalent. By contrast, requirements for undergraduate social work courses vary across institution ranging from 120 UCAS tariff points from 2 A-levels to 320 points from 3 A-levels (Holmström, 2010). It was anticipated that a comparison could be made between the top 3 A/AS level results of Frontline participants, all-HESA students, HESA high tariff group and PG students completing the evaluation questionnaire, but in practice this proved problematic, mainly due to differences in how grades were reported.

For Frontline Cohort One, it appeared that some participants reported the total of all qualifications undertaken including A, AS level and Advanced Extensions which in some cases, gave rise to a figure of 500+ UCAS points. Frontline Cohort Two participants were asked to provide individual A/AS level subject and grade; giving rise to more accurate data. Six of the 124 Cohort Two participants were excluded at this stage, as they had not followed the A/AS level route into undergraduate study although it should be noted that all participants had achieved the 300 point or equivalent minimum entry requirement. These reporting differences led to a significant difference between Cohort One and Two ( $w=6497$ ,  $p=0.002$ ).

Difficulties were also noted for the all-HESA data as only 515 students provided grades for their top three A/AS levels or Advanced Highers. Whilst this figure suggests that only 515 of the 4,750 students had attained A/AS level of study, further analysis of the item 'highest qualification on entry' shows the different educational pathways for the all-HESA group. To aid comparison, these data have been categorised using the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) which provides a single system for cataloguing qualifications (Ofqual, 2015). This shows that 2,440 students had achieved a level 3 qualification, of these 515 had completed A/AS level whilst the remaining 1,925 students had followed a more vocational pathway such as BTEC or NVQ. Further, 2,140 students reported their highest qualification as higher than a level 3, where 1,540 had completed an undergraduate degree (level 6) and 245 had achieved a Masters-level qualification or above (levels 7 and 8). Having removed the 4,235 who were recorded as following alternative pathways, the A/AS grades for the remaining 515 students (likely to represent a section of the undergraduate social work body) were converted into UCAS tariff points.

For the HESA high tariff social work population 465 students had completed an undergraduate degree, with a further 55 having a Masters degree. Of the 259 remaining, their entry pathways varied with only 70 reporting grades from A/AS levels. Finally, the high tariff university PG group from five universities (who completed a questionnaire) were specifically asked for the grades of their top three A levels. This yielded the most accurate data on this group as the grades could be

translated to UCAS points. Of the 130 students in this sample, 20 had not studied A-levels and 10 did not respond, leaving a sample of 90 students.

Whilst acknowledging the difficulties presented above, Table 1 shows the difference in UCAS points for Frontline Cohort One and the mainstream students for whom we do have A-level grade data, with all-HESA students being much lower than their Frontline counterparts. This is unsurprising given Frontline's stated entry requirements. The distribution of Frontline UCAS tariffs was significantly higher than that of the general social work all-HESA student population ( $w=72080$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and the high tariff group in HESA ( $w=6350$ ,  $p<0.01$ ). Such variation across the different pathways would seem to reinforce Dillon's (2007) point that UK higher education institutions have found elusive the implementation of equitable and reliable social work admissions criteria. These findings would seem to support Frontline's claim they are recruiting applicants with higher UCAS tariffs on the basis that this is a predictor for successful performance on the Frontline programme. Longitudinal research is needed to determine whether programme performance is predictive of some distinctive and durable practice quality by this cadre of new workers once in employment.

[Table 2]

### *Undergraduate degree*

Data on undergraduate degree class come from Frontline's administrative database and the questionnaire to PG social work students in five high tariff universities (see Table 2). A much higher percentage of Frontline participants had attended a Russell

Group university than the high tariff university PG group (71% and 30%, respectively). The government-encouraged expansion of the UK university sector post-1992 established, implicitly at least, what came to be seen as pre-1992 universities (including the more traditional and elite), with post-1992 institutions (where polytechnics and colleges of higher education were given university status) willing to recruit groups less likely to seek higher education or have high tariff A levels or equivalent. It was notable that far more from the high tariff university PG sample had, as undergraduates, attended a post-1992 university (52%) than their Frontline counterparts (12%). This difference was statistically significant (FET,  $p < 0.001$ ).

Frontline participants were required to have achieved a 2:1 degree or higher. Of the 98% from Cohort One who provided their class of degree, 31% achieved a first and 67% a 2:1. Only 15% from the high tariff university PG group had achieved a first and 66% a 2:1. In comparison with the five high tariff university PG sample, Frontline participants were twice as likely to have achieved a first; the differences in grade was statistically significant (FET,  $p < 0.001$ ). Despite having the same entry requirements, the percentage of Frontline participants with a first class degree was higher than the Step Up to Social Work students for cohorts one (15%) and two (19%, Baginsky and Teague, 2013).

Analysis of graduation year data revealed that Frontline participants had completed their undergraduate degree on average three years prior to starting Frontline (mode=1 year). Reflecting the older age range of students reported above, students

from the high tariff universities had an average of 6 years since graduation (mode=2 years).

### *Previous employment*

Students at the five high tariff universities were more likely to be employed prior to studying social work – see Table 2 ( $\chi^2=9.26, p=0.01$ ). There was a statistically significant difference between the high tariff students and Frontline in terms of the sector in which they were employed (FET  $p<0.001$ ). The high tariff students' previous work experience could be classed broadly as having relevance to social work (e.g. healthcare, not-for-profit, public sector and social sciences). Mainstream postgraduate social work programmes typically specify the need for previous relevant experience, whereas Frontline is keen to recruit career changers and to attract those who would not previously have thought of social work as a potential career.

### *Motivation and Career aspirations*

Participants were asked when they had decided to train as a social worker. There was a statistical difference between groups ( $\chi^2=12.37, p=.002$ ). For Frontline, 45% had made the decision within the previous year, and 53% from 1-3 years before. Slightly fewer high tariff students had made the decision within the year (39%) and 1-3 years (45%) with more students having contemplated social work as a career for 4 or more years. Again, this fits the age profile of students with more Frontline participants having only graduated between 1-3 years previously.

The overwhelming majority across both groups reported that they expected to remain working as practitioners for five or more years. Seventy-three per cent of high tariff students thought they would remain working as a practitioner for seven or more years, compared with 42% for Frontline. However, 71% Frontline participants thought they would remain practitioners for the foreseeable future, compared with 60% for the high tariff group. Fewer Frontline participants (than high tariff university students) envisaged themselves leaving social work and doing something else altogether. By contrast, a higher percentage of high tariff university students reported having the ultimate goal of becoming a social work manager (14%) or to work in a policy, education or research job in the social welfare field (8%), although this difference was not statistically significant (FET,  $p=0.22$ ).

### *Response to Frontline publicity*

The survey sought to identify if applicants who would not otherwise have contemplated social work as a career, were attracted to the Frontline scheme (see results in Table 2). Perhaps not surprisingly, more of the Frontline participants reported that they had been influenced by the high-profile publicity for Frontline than the high tariff university PG students ( $\chi^2=47.93$ ,  $p= <.001$ ). The survey responses suggest that 83% (n=86) had only applied to Frontline. Some 33% of Frontline participants stated that Frontline publicity helped confirm an existing interest in social work, with a further 23% indicating that Frontline advertising had made them think about becoming a social worker for the first time. These findings are interesting as we could perhaps assume from the data that most of the Frontline participants were already thinking about a social work career, yet they did not apply

to other social work courses. Although not quite as stark, 49% of the high tariff university PG sample also appeared to have only applied to one institution to study social work. This suggests that students are selective about where they complete social work training. It is possible that as the high tariff group tended to be older, with around six years since graduation, responsibilities and commitments rendered it difficult to relocate for study purposes. Indeed, there were significant differences with regard to caring responsibilities between the groups ( $\chi^2=26.60$ ,  $p= <0.001$ ), with 22% of the high tariff group primary carers of a child under the age of 18, 1% the primary carer of a disabled adult and 2% a secondary carer. Only 4% of the Frontline group reported having caring responsibilities, all of which were as a secondary carer. Attendance on a 'fast-track' scheme may have deterred primary carers from applying to Frontline. Lyonnette *et al.* (2015) outline the many difficulties and demands found by student mothers in balancing childcare and studying on mainstream courses.

That said, 50% of the high tariff university PG group had applied to other social work courses, with 13% stating that they had applied to Frontline and 13% reporting they had been influenced by Frontline publicity.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

Based on the findings above, it can be argued that Frontline heralds a move away from the objectives of recruiting a more socially and ethnically diverse workforce. Croisedale-Appleby (2015) argues that there is limited research evidence in support

of interventions being delivered by a social worker of the same ethnic background unless there is a large disadvantaged indigenous (and ethnic minority) population. He further argues that promoting diversity and increasing cultural competence should not take precedence over raising the entry level to social work training to 300 UCAS points for undergraduates and an upper second or first class degree for postgraduate entry. That said, it is important to acknowledge the social reality of academic achievement. Educational outcomes are associated with social inequalities; people from disadvantaged backgrounds and some (though not all) ethnic minorities being less likely to achieve the highest grades in school and university (Mountford Zimdars *et al.*, 2015; Boliver, 2013; Wakeling, 2009). Raising the entry level for social work programmes could have the unintended effect of privileging the enrolment of students from more advantaged backgrounds and undercutting the aims of the widening participation agenda.

To reiterate, Frontline has a highly selective recruitment criteria, based on academic attainment and vocational skills, made possible because of the considerable resources it enjoys to undertake high profile recruitment at universities (supported by the offer of a stipend to trainees) and to engage in intensive and searching selection procedures. The findings show that this has led to the recruitment of a largely white middle class student intake. This is perhaps not surprising as Frontline has actively sought recruits from Russell Group universities, where those from less privileged backgrounds, state schools and certain ethnic minorities are underrepresented (Boliver, 2013).

As Frontline expands, its ambition of bringing top graduates into social work appears to be supported by the data presented. How likely this is to continue in subsequent cohorts and how likely Frontline trainees are to stay in the profession and how their careers will develop remains to be seen. Some scepticism might be suggested by the career destinations of graduates of Teach First, the fast-track teacher training programme on which Frontline was modelled (Hutchings *et al.*, 2006). Although the impact of Frontline on child and family outcomes is also not yet known, evidence from the independent evaluation, which has not been presented in the current article, reveals that Frontline trainees display some superior practice skills in simulated service user interviews. Notably, the practice skills in which they were rated more highly than mainstream students included cultural competence. This evidence (which we discuss elsewhere, Authors 2016), poses a dilemma, for if Frontline's selective recruitment does in fact provide better practitioners (and the evidence to date is partial) and if this is attributable to past academic achievement, then by extension this maps uncomfortably on to matters of social inequality. In such circumstances it may be necessary to weigh the relative importance of recruiting those most likely to display high quality of practice against the importance of promoting diversity in admission to the workforce.

Such considerations are not outwith the interest of neo-liberal rhetoric and reform in which managerialism and marketization has invaded most fields of our public services. In such an era, the arrival of Frontline is of a piece with other efforts in social work to privatise, generate competition or create mixed provision (see Aronson and Smith 2011; Rogowski 2011). Thus, Frontline could become a

competitively unsettling challenge to mainstream social work training and the first steps in the re-framing of professional training in England's children's services. If Frontline continues to attract a more socially advantaged and less diverse cluster of trainees, it will have introduced a new animus into the occupational system. The impact of this not uncontroversial initiative warrants careful monitoring through longitudinal study, if we are to fully understand the nature of this most recent instance of social engineering in England's social work profession.

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