This project has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 801604.
### Scientific Excellence (500 words)

This study will deploy an experimental method to evaluate the efficacy of an IT-based solution in reducing administrative demands on social workers. Initial discussions, with an industry-based advisory group, suggest that social workers’ recording responsibilities and multi-disciplinary interactions are ripe for streamlining. The underlying premise of the project is that voice-to-text and voice-recording applications, together with a sound clip filing system can be deployed in frontline social work to reduce the time spent on administration. This project proposal is therefore grounded in industry-based stakeholder consultation, and will help address a real-world problem.

This project also has the potential, through the facilitation of better quality relationship-based social work practice, to impact the well-being of some of the most vulnerable people in our communities: social work service users. The project comes, therefore, with a strong research ethics mandate as potentially impactful on the efficacy social work practice, where ever social work is practiced.

The project supervisory team has been chosen for its experience in designing and delivering scientific evaluations of complex interventions, in social work practice (Dr McGinn and Prof Taylor). This expertise is complemented by Dr Synnott’s...
expertise in leveraging advances in information technology for better patient outcomes in the health care sector.

Dr McGinn has recently completed a systematic review of attempts to evaluate one of social work’s flagship practice vehicles: family group conferencing (McGinn et al., In Press). The learning gleaned from this exercise has been significant. The challenges to the rigorous measurement of social work intervention outcomes are significant. However, there has also been considerable advancement in our understanding of how study bias and potentially confounding variables in experimental evaluation, can be reduced (Campbell et al., 2007; Chandler, Churchill, Higgins, Lasserson, & Tovey, 2013; Higgins, Lasserson, Chandler, Tovey, & Churchill, 2017). The current project will avoid common shortfalls in the rigour of social work practice evaluation, by adhering to this guidance using mechanisms of rigours such as:

- Comprehensive baseline assessment of group characteristics
- Treatment integrity analysis (monitoring of the deployment and use of the technological adjunct to practice)
- The use of measures of intervention impact on social work service users (as opposed to measures of administrative efficiency, such as case processing times)
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<th>Aim (400 words)</th>
<th>Rationale</th>
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<td>We asked our partners, in the world of social work practice, to suggest a research topic which had the potential to assist frontline social work staff. A dominant theme from this consultation was that the weight of administration duties puts pressure on client contact times. They described an interest in the evaluation of potential technological adjuncts, or</td>
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- Blinding of social work service users to intervention deployment, and blinding of data collectors.

Overview of proposed method
Intervention: the provision of a bespoke technological application to reduce the administrative burden on frontline social work staff

Study participants (n=120) will comprise of social work service users; divided, on a random basis between an experimental group and a control group.

Data: measures of social work service user well-being; and social work service users’ ratings of the quality of the relationship they experience with their social worker.

Data analysis: findings will be processed to compute an overall effect size, confidence interval and probability value.
substitutions, to the current administrative practices of front-line social work staff.

Method
Following a comprehensive literature review and stakeholder consultation (encompassing benchmarking consultations) the successful candidate would be supported to review the potential of up to three software applications which can deliver voice recording and filing functionality in a public service setting. It is likely that these applications will include speech-to-text technologies, voice recording technologies and project/time-management applications. With stakeholder input, one of these technologies would be chosen for a comprehensive evaluation in a randomised controlled trial. Social work service users’ feedback, on the quality of relationship they enjoyed with their social worker, will be a key outcome of interest.

| Strategic Relevance (300 words) | Our partners in social work practice (local health trusts and not-for-profit agencies) struggle to spend adequate time with their service users. Their obligations to record and share information in a multi-disciplinary environment, have led to increasingly cumbersome administrative duties which weigh heavily on social work staff, and interfere with their capacity to build meaningful relationships with clients. The elevation of administrative duties, and the unintentional relegation of |

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service user contact, is seen as a global trend in social work (Rogowski, 2015). It has also been highlighted in a review of transnational social worker perspectives on UK practice (Hanna, Lyons, & Profession, 2018).

Several commentators (Cortis, Smyth, Wade, Katz, & Work, 2018; Garrett, 2005; Gillingham & Graham, 2016) have suggested that technologies now exist which can significantly reduce social workers’ administrative duties. The evaluation of these technologies is a current priority for our partners in practice.

This project is of strategic relevance, in Europe and beyond. International social work bodies have called for a return to relationship-based social work, in which practitioners have time and space to work in a face-to-face environment with service users (Hughes & Wearing, 2012; Lees, Meyer, & Rafferty, 2013). This aligns with efforts to complete more preventative intervention, relying less on risk assessment and reactive emergency service provision (Atwool, 2019; Jönsson, 2018; Webb, 2018). Any measure which is proven to increase the quality of practitioner-client relationships, in this sector, will be of interest to social policy makers, charged with making best use of social care funding.
**Interdisciplinarity and fit with DTA3**

The interdisciplinary context of this proposal is clear. The project brings together expertise from the University’s social work and data analytics teams.

The current proposal fits with the DTA programme’s emphasis on the need for effective, evidence based social policy which will ultimately make a difference at community level. Social work practitioners work with the most vulnerable communities in society. Research which can increase the reach and impact of social work has the potential to strengthen communities in a sustainable way.

**Industrial Relevance (300 words)**

The identified placement opportunities with this project are (including contact for on-site supervision)

This project is about increasing the quality of life, and potential in life, for social work service users. It is of interest to any social work agency which is trying to do more for the people they work with, within finite budgets. The social work department at Ulster University has strong links with social work educators across the Island of Ireland through the All-Ireland Social Work Researchers’ forum. Placements can be arranged at one or more of: National University of Ireland Galway; University College Dublin; and University College Cork.
We are also fortunate to have Professor Aron Shlonsky (Monash University, Melbourne) on the advisory panel for this project. The initial phase of the project will involve a benchmarking exercise with Melbourne social work agencies, at which time the candidate will be based at Monash.

### Economic and Societal Impact (300 words)

The potential economic benefits of streamlining frontline social work practice, and facilitating better quality practitioner-client interactions have been outlined previously (Aber, Bennett, Conley, & Li, 1997). Improvements in social work practice can have positive implications for allied services such as the judiciary, and health services (Lees et al., 2013). High quality social work practice has a preventative function through its role in finding community-based solutions to individuals' problems (Brekke & Anastas, 2019).

### References


## Specific Admission Requirements

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<td>Candidates from a range of disciplines will bring a relevant education background to this project, including social work, human resources, business improvement, social policy and relevant IT specialisms. Candidates should enjoy project management and working with a range of stakeholders simultaneously. They should be comfortable in presenting their ideas to senior management teams. Candidates should have a clear interest in the scientific method, and the rigorous evaluation of their project outcomes.</td>
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<td>Minimum IELTS score</td>
<td>6 (with no score less than 5.5)</td>
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