

# **Making the education of social workers consistently effective**

**Report of Sir Martin Narey's independent  
review of the education of children's social  
workers**

**January 2014**

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## Foreword

Earlier this year the Secretary of State for Education asked me to take a look at the initial education of children's social workers, and advise him of the extent to which reforms to social work over the last few years had impacted upon basic training, and whether there were improvements that still needed to be made.

This has not been a formal inquiry in the sense that I have not asked for submissions of evidence nor held formal hearings. I haven't gathered a working party around me. Instead I have had a large number of private interviews with employers, academics, students and newly employed, established and retired social workers. That approach encouraged many individuals to be rather more candid than they might otherwise have been. That has been vital.

In turn, in writing these observations, I have been frank about the deficiencies I have found. I have made eighteen recommendations, which if implemented will significantly increase the confidence we can have in the initial training, and therefore the calibre, of newly qualified social workers. The cost of implementing those recommendations would be minimal.

There are some reforms recommended here which, if accepted and implemented, would affect all universities which teach social work (not least my call for a much clearer prescription of the things a new children's social worker needs to understand at graduation, and my suggestion that there should be greater specialisation allowed in both undergraduate and postgraduate study). But it is important for me to acknowledge at the outset that there are many universities doing a good job: they recruit students of high ability and ensure that academic standards are high. I reject entirely the suggestion that we do not currently produce some very good social workers. But there are universities and colleges where entry and academic standards appear to be too low and where the preparation of students for children's social work is too often inadequate. In the words of one Director of Children's Services: "We need to lift the lid on the quality debate." That is what I have tried to do in this report, not least because, without it, the reputation of good universities will continue to be damaged by concerns about poorer institutions.

I have had excellent cooperation from officials in the Department for Education who have been simultaneously challenging and supportive. In particular, Bekah Little has been an invaluable source of advice. But this report and the recommendations are entirely my own responsibility.

**Martin Narey**  
**January 2014**

## Part One: What social workers learn at university

Before being allowed to enter a profession students need to acquire a basic professional understanding sufficient to allow them to begin practice safely and competently. In the case of medicine, the General Medical Council (GMC) outlines its expectations of the universities which train new doctors. In *Tomorrow's Doctors* (available on the GMC website) - a succinct, well-drafted, nine-page document - they list the things newly qualified doctors need to understand, whether as scientists, as practitioners or as professionals.

So, for example, as a scientist, a newly qualified doctor needs to be able to explain:

- *normal human structure and functions;*
- *the scientific bases for common disease presentations; and to be able*
- *to select appropriate forms of management for common diseases, and ways of preventing common diseases, and explain their modes of action and their risks from first principles; and*
- *to demonstrate knowledge of drug actions: therapeutics and pharmacokinetics; drug side effects and interactions, including for multiple treatments, long-term conditions and non-prescribed medication; and also including effects on the population, such as the spread of antibiotic resistance.*

As a practitioner, the graduate has to be able to:

- *carry out a consultation with a patient;*
- *take and record a patient's medical history, including family and social history, talking to relatives or other carers where appropriate;*
- *elicit patients' questions, their understanding of their condition and treatment options, and their views, concerns, values and preferences;*
- *perform a full physical examination;*
- *perform a mental-state examination;*
- *provide explanation, advice, reassurance and support.*

And as a professional, the graduate must be able to:

- *demonstrate awareness of the clinical responsibilities and role of the doctor, making the care of the patient the first concern;*
- *be polite, considerate, trustworthy and honest, act with integrity, maintain confidentiality, respect patients' dignity and privacy, and understand the importance of appropriate consent;*
- *respect all patients, colleagues and others regardless of their age, colour, culture, disability, ethnic or national origin, gender, lifestyle, marital or parental status, race, religion or beliefs, sex, sexual orientation, or social or economic status. Respect patients' right to hold religious or other beliefs, and take these into account when relevant to treatment options; and*
- *recognise the rights and the equal value of all people and how opportunities for some people may be restricted by others' perceptions.*

There is no equivalent single publication for the social work profession. Instead, universities construct curricula drawing on a number of sources. This was identified as a problem as recently as 2009 by the Education Select Committee (then the Children Schools and Families Committee), which recommended that:

*Current requirements for the social work degree should be rationalised, combined and, where appropriate, set out in greater detail to form a basic common curriculum. We particularly wish to see consensus on the content of training on child protection, child development and communication with children.*

This rationalisation has not happened. The result, in terms of the quality and the content of teaching, is seen by many employers as unsatisfactory. One distinguished Director of Children's Services told me: *it's beyond me why universities don't work to a common list of need to know issues.* Another suggested that in the uncertainty about exactly what needs to be taught, we have been left with an academic vacuum, *which we have filled with attitudinal stuff rather than skills.*

This is not all the fault of universities. To their evident frustration, and in determining the academic content of the social work degree whether at Bachelor or Master's level, universities need to draw upon, at least, five source documents:

## **The Health and Care Professions Council**

The first is published by the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), which regulates sixteen professions, including physiotherapy, chiropody and occupational therapy. It has regulated social work – which sits oddly in the HCPC portfolio - only since the abolition of the General Social Care Council in 2012. HCPC describes its main function as the protection of the public; hence it seeks to set standards for the education and training of the professionals it supervises, and approves educational programmes which lead to entry to one of its professions.

HCPC - which, curiously, is independent of Government in England (the regulators in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are not independent of Government) - publishes *Standards of Proficiency*. These outline HCPC's threshold standards, which, it believes, are necessary for safe and effective practice as a social worker. The *Standards* seek to set out what a social worker in England must know, understand and be able to do following completion of their social work degree. In that respect they serve a similar role to the GMC's *Tomorrow's Doctors*. But, I would argue, they do so with considerably less success.

HCPC argue that the standards *set out clear expectations of a social worker's knowledge and abilities when they start practising.* But most of the standards (76 of them in fifteen groups) are general in nature and could be describing almost any professional and, in many instances, non-professional occupation. Very few are measurable. So, for example, registrant social workers must:

- *recognise the need to manage their own workload;*
- *be able to respond appropriately to unexpected situations;*
- *be able to manage competing or conflicting interests; and*

- *be able to maintain records.*

Only a handful of the seventy-six standards have direct relevance to children's social work. One of the 76 standards refers to the knowledge base required of social workers. So a social worker needs to understand:

*social work theory;*  
*social work models and interventions;*  
*the development and application of relevant law and social policy;*  
*the development and application of social work and social work values;*  
*human growth and development across the lifespan and the impact of key developmental stages and transitions;*  
*the impact of injustice, social inequalities, policies and other issues which affect the demand for social work services;*  
*the relevance of psychological, environmental, sociological and physiological perspectives to understanding personal and social development and functioning; concepts of participation, advocacy and empowerment; and*  
*the relevance of sociological perspectives to understanding societal and structural influences on human behaviour.*

This is both an incomplete and an inadequate summary of the things a children's social worker needs to know. And in any case, because HCPC insists that the standards are not hierarchical and all are equally important for practice, it is lost in a sea of genericism.

The *Standards of Proficiency* are linked to two other HCPC publications, *Standards of Conduct, Performance and Ethics* (another 14 standards) and *Standards of Education and Training* (another 59 standards). These documents apply to all HCPC professions but were first drafted before social workers became the responsibility of HCPC. The documents are general in nature and undemanding. So, for example in the *Standards of Conduct, Performance and Ethics*, the first three ethical standards are:

- *You must act in the best interests of service users.*
- *You must respect the confidentiality of service users.*
- *You must keep high standards of personal conduct.*

The *Standards of Education and Training* outline the standards against which HCPC assesses education and training programmes. But universities are unlikely to be troubled in meeting the standards. For example, in managing admissions the standards require that:

- *The admissions procedures must give both the applicant and the education provider the information they require to make an informed choice about whether to take up or make an offer of a place on a programme;*
- *The admissions procedures must apply selection and entry criteria, including evidence of a good command of reading, writing and spoken English;*
- *The admissions procedures must apply selection and entry criteria, including criminal convictions checks;*
- *The admissions procedures must apply selection and entry criteria, including compliance with any health requirements;*

- *The admissions procedures must apply selection and entry criteria, including appropriate academic and / or professional entry standards;*
- *The admissions procedures must apply selection and entry criteria, including accreditation of prior (experiential) learning and other inclusion mechanisms;*
- *The admissions procedures must ensure that the education provider has equality and diversity policies in relation to applicants and students, together with an indication of how these will be implemented and monitored.*

It is perfectly possible to envisage a university being able to demonstrate compliance with these processes while, at the same time, admitting students who are unlikely to become successful social workers.

I believe that neither the *Standards of Conduct Performance and Ethics*, nor the *Standards of Education and Training* are of very much use to universities in preparing social workers. Nor can they give Ministers, or the public, confidence about the quality of social work education. And the core document, the *Standards of Proficiency*, does not remotely provide adequate guidance to universities about the skills and professional knowledge required of graduate social workers.

## **The College of Social Work**

The newly established College of Social Work produces a number of curriculum guides for about twelve subject areas including, *disability, diversity and oppression, social work law, and human growth and development*. That initiative is to be welcomed, although the quality of the guides is variable, and their impact on universities seems to be limited. More significantly, the College produces the *Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF)*, which was first created by the Social Work Reform Board.

The College describes the PCF as an overarching professional standards framework, which:

- *sets out consistent expectations of social workers at every stage in their career;*
- *provides a backdrop to both initial social work education and continuing professional development after qualification;*
- *informs the design and implementation of the national career structure; and*
- *gives social workers a framework around which to plan their careers and professional development.*

The PCF has nine domains: professionalism; values and ethics; diversity; rights, justice and economic well being; knowledge; critical reflection and analysis; intervention and skills; contexts and organisations; and professional leadership.

I am not convinced that these nine domains or priority areas for social worker training and long-term development are the right nine (and I would like to see a prioritising of them). But the PCF, in my view, is a significant improvement on HCPC's *Standards of Proficiency*. It is to be regretted that the College and HCPC did not work together to produce a single source document for social work training. Instead, HCPC publish a twenty- one- page

document that maps their *Standards of Proficiency* to the *Professional Capabilities Framework*. Simultaneously, the College has produced its own twenty-four-page document mapping the PCF to the Standards of Proficiency. This is, frankly, embarrassing.

Universities might find responding to separate guidance from HCPC and the College of Social Work reasonably challenging. But their world is yet more complicated. As well as considering HCPC and College documentation, they must also take account of *The Benchmark Statements for Social Work*, produced by The Quality Assurance Agency For Higher Education (QAA). As the QAA website explains:

*Benchmark statements represent general expectations about standards for the award of qualifications at a given level in terms of the attributes and capabilities that those possessing qualifications should have demonstrated.*

I found the QAA document to provide an unbalanced description of what social work is, and the skills which a successful children's social worker needs to have. At paragraph 4.6, the QAA say that the six things a social worker must learn to do are:

- *recognise and work with the powerful links between intrapersonal and interpersonal factors and the wider social, legal, economic, political and cultural context of people's lives;*
- *understand the impact of injustice, social inequalities and oppressive social relations;*
- *challenge constructively individual, institutional and structural discrimination;*
- *practise in ways that maximise safety and effectiveness in situations of uncertainty and incomplete information;*
- *help people to gain, regain or maintain control of their own affairs, insofar as this is compatible with their own or others' safety, well-being and rights; and*
- *work in partnership with service users and carers and other professionals to foster dignity, choice and independence, and effect change.*

Although the commitment to understanding the social and economic influences on peoples' lives and a commitment to challenging discrimination and injustice are laudable, there is no balancing reference, or even allusion, to the necessity of prioritising the interests of a child above the interests of the adults who care for the child, or to the need for scrutiny and scepticism alongside compassion. There is no acknowledgement that when one is protecting the interests of a neglected or abused child, there are very real limits on the extent to which working in partnership is appropriate.

Despite (or because of) the hundreds of pages to be found in this plethora of guidance documents for universities, there is very little clarity about what a newly qualified social worker needs to know. In some cases, such lack of clarity may allow higher education institutions to develop their curriculum, at least in part, according to the expertise and research interests of their staff. As The General Social Care Council observed in 2012:

*Many of the institutions delivering the degree have specialist interest and knowledge in certain areas of social work practice and – whilst having to meet the same requirements – courses have tended to reflect that specialised interest.*



That may often be acceptable, but I was told repeatedly of universities which dedicated time to interesting, but relatively obscure, subjects while providing limited time for some core issues. At one university I was told that, during the undergraduate degree, there had been nothing on parenting and hardly anything at all specifically about children. One social work student wrote to me and said:

*To be brutally honest I don't think the course is good enough. I don't feel it is preparing students for the reality of social work. We spent weeks and weeks in our ethics and values module looking at Plato, Socrates and Aristotle etc. Interesting yes, but I feel that time could have been better spent equipping us with skills relevant to social work. We had very little teaching on the law module, which was a concern to me. Two modules we studied were structured round the core texts written by a particular lecturer.... We had a seminar of "social work as art" which I felt was a waste of time. Will anybody I work with as a social worker care whether social work is an art? Probably not... I thought the time would be used effectively teaching us skills applicable to social work practice.*

Another student approaching graduation wrote on the Guardian website in September:

*As a mature student in my final year of a BA in social work I feel I have been let down by the course. I have so far learned nothing concerning signs of abuse... I feel my course concentrates upon the past, and how social work came to be what it is today. There is not enough practical experience or theory related to its actual use in practice.*

Universities, and the student social workers who attend them, need to be clear about what are the essentials of social work training. This is not to suggest that university curricula should be identical. But employers need to be more confident that students at every university will graduate with an adequate grasp of the basics necessary for them to develop into competent and confident children's social workers. They can have no such confidence at the moment.

There is nothing new in saying this. When The Times published my report on adoption in 2011, I quoted a newly qualified social worker working on child protection in a London borough who wrote to me and summarised his university experience. His anxiety about the extent to which university failed to provide a basic knowledge of statutory processes is not untypical:

*[The] content of the course and its delivery was grossly deficient... There was no training for the real nature of social work. I wrote many essays on theoretical viewpoints but I was never once taught how a statutory team in children's social services worked... When I started my first job (in a child protection team) I had never heard of an initial assessment form or ever seen or been schooled in the strategies for questioning parents... I never had any quality child development training and I never had sessions on how to work directly with children.*

The Munro Report, published the same year, said:

*Not all newly qualified social workers are emerging from degree courses with the necessary knowledge, skills and expertise; and they are especially unprepared to deal with the challenges posed by child protection work. Degree courses are not consistent in content, quality and outcomes. For child protection, there are crucial things missing in some courses such as detailed learning on child*

*development, how to communicate with children and young people, and using evidence-based methods of working with children and families.*

Lord Laming reported in 2009 that:

*Social workers themselves do not think that their training is equipping them to take on the responsibilities for which they are being trained – two-thirds of newly qualified social workers felt that the degree prepared them just enough or not at all for their current role.*

Just a few months ago, the Social Worker of the Year for 2013, Estelle Thain, told *Community Care* that:

*I don't feel that the degree prepares you adequately for the on-the-ground work. There were basics missing from my degree training – I didn't even know what a core assessment was when I left university and that's key to the job. It was very difficult those first few months in the job because I felt I didn't quite have enough skills or experience to take on the role.*

A list of the things a newly qualified children's social worker needs to understand at graduation will be a long one. But such a list should include, I suggest, a comprehensive grasp of the basics of:

- child development;
- attachment theory;
- the longer term impact of neglect and maltreatment on children;
- communicating with children;
- the law and the primacy of the child in social work related legislation;
- the evidence base around successful family support and parenting capacity; and
- assessment: how to collate and critically analyse information to arrive at the right decision (particularly vital when defending decisions at court).

But none of these examples flow from HCPC's *Standards of Proficiency*, The QAA's *Benchmark Statements For Social Work* or the College of Social Work's *Professional Capabilities Framework*.

## **The politics of social work teaching**

This is not just about the things that need to be taught, it's also about the politics of social work education. I have been troubled for some time by the priority given in social work education to what is known as non-oppressive practice. According to Professor Lena Dominelli in *Social Work, Themes issues and Critical Debates*:

*Anti oppressive practice with its strong commitment to people's holistic wellbeing... has become part of mainstream social work practice in Britain... Its main components, social justice and human rights, have become commonplace.*

Anti oppressive practice is vital, she goes on to argue, because social work should be about empowering:

*People whose lives are configured by struggles against structural inequalities like poverty, sexism, racism and disablism.*

The view of those receiving social work support as being necessarily victims is captured by a recent Community Care blog published in the summer of 2013:

*Good practice [in social work] is based on building relationships. It also depends on being given the scope to use them to the benefit of service users whose issues are the product of being at the bottom of a very unequal and oppressive society... the service user is a victim rather than creator of their life situation.*

Anti oppressive practice in academic social work is closely linked to concepts of empowerment and working in partnership. While a number of social work academics reject them, these are not extreme notions at the fringes of academic social work. One newly qualified social worker from a well-regarded University told me that the concentration in her course on non-oppressive practice was at the expense of understanding practicalities about the job. I don't believe her experience was unique. Although some academics are dismissive of these philosophical approaches, they have a prominent place in some of the university social work curricula I have seen and enjoy significant prominence in core texts. In part they represent a challenge to the views of successive governments that the child has primacy in children's social work and needs to be viewed as an individual. In the wake of the controversy surrounding the death of Daniel Pelka, one respected, senior, and influential academic, chastised me on Twitter for arguing in the Guardian that greater scepticism about his parents might have saved Daniel, saying we:

*need to weigh up the costs of such scepticism if we seek a democratic and humane society.*

She later tweeted that it was *profoundly mistaken to focus on children as individuals* and said she was *opposed to the term child protection on ethical and practical grounds.*

I stress, being fully aware of how my argument here is likely to be caricatured, that I am not ignoring the reality that many families in which parenting is inadequate struggle with disadvantage, poverty and social isolation. Those at the bottom of an unequal society face day to day challenges, including coping with cramped living conditions, limited income and often grinding debt, which can significantly undermine their ability to cope and to provide children with the safety and security on which they thrive. On the other hand, many families of modest income provide loving and safe homes for their children and it is vital – I would argue – not to seek to persuade students that poor parenting or neglect are necessary consequences of disadvantage. There may be a partial correlation between disadvantage and poor parenting but there is not a causal link. I reject entirely the sometimes expressed view that removing children from unsatisfactory homes is about victimizing poor families.

Sometimes, parents and other carers neglect and harm children. In such circumstances, viewing those parents as victims, seeking to treat them non oppressively, empowering them or working in partnership with them can divert the practitioner's focus from where it should be: on the child. Numerous deaths of children who were being observed by local

authority and voluntary sector social workers should have taught us this by now. As Brandon reminded us in a biennial analysis of serious case reviews: 2003 – 2005:

*Apparent or disguised cooperation from parents often prevented or delayed understanding of the severity of harm to the child and cases drifted. Where parents made it difficult for professionals to see children or engineered the focus away from allegations of harm, children went unseen and unheard.*

Lord Laming reminded us in 2009:

*Social workers [need to be] prepared for the realities of working with children and families who may have complex needs and parents who, in some cases, may be intentionally deceptive or manipulative.*

More recently, Peter Hay, Birmingham's Director of Adult Social Services, who has recently taken responsibility for Children's Services as well, reflected on how social workers working with the family had contributed to the death of two year old Keanu Williams. Speaking to the Guardian, he highlighted a case conference in 2009 when a social worker put together a clear report on the risks posed to Keanu.

*For the first and only time in his life, Keanu was the focus. But at the conference it was decided to give support to the family. That became the defining motif of poor quality work, which, wrongly and ineffectively, responded to the needs of Keanu's mother and not his safety.*

The immensely impressive Jenny Hope, who once took herself and her siblings to a police station and asked for them all to be admitted to care, is now a successful author and is a visiting lecturer at a number of universities. She explained to me how the needs of adults can dominate:

*All too often I hear Social Workers talking about adults and what is best for them. Keeping the child at the centre of all we do is, at times, seriously lacking in social work.*

Finally, as Davies and Ward reminded us in Messages from Research (2012):

*A focus on empowerment can lead to an over identification with birth parents, as was evident ... in the numerous, ultimately fruitless, opportunities given to some parents to demonstrate that they had made sufficient progress in overcoming their problems to provide a nurturing home for a child.*

I am not suggesting that the role of disadvantage and inequality in exacerbating poor parenting and child neglect or abuse should not be discussed at university. But it is vital that social work education for those working with children is not dominated by theories of non-oppressive practice, empowerment and partnership.

## **A definition of social work**

Part of the problem is that we do not have a satisfactory definition of children's social work. I find many of the definitions offered in academic texts to be profoundly unsatisfactory. So, for example, in their recently published and warmly acclaimed *The New Politics of Social Work*, Professors Stephen Webb and Mel Gray argue that social work in the UK should be about:

*A renewal of a progressive Left agenda... contributing to the abolition of exploitative and despotic regimes maintained by the capitalist class and its neoliberal economic order. [And that this requires] a militancy which confronts the system of capitalist power that redefines, limits and rejects the core values of social work.*

Less dramatically, the international definition of social work - accepted by the British Association of Social Workers - states that the social work profession:

*promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work.*

I have not discussed the international definition with the current Secretary of State for Education, nor with any of the three of his predecessors for whom I have worked and know reasonably well (David Blunkett, Charles Clarke and Ed Balls). But I should be more than a little surprised if any one of them considered it adequate. It's not that it's an appalling definition. But in terms of describing the work of a Children's Social Worker in England it is, I would argue, thoroughly inadequate. We need a more satisfactory and relevant definition. And we need a definition that concentrates on that work, generally carried out in the statutory sector, which is about protecting children. We need a definition which makes plain what Government, employers and the College of Social Work expect from children's social workers. The Chief Social Worker for England should lead the work on providing that, as a foundation for her work in developing a core curriculum.

## **Recommendation**

1. Universities are sovereign bodies and it is entirely appropriate and justifiable, not least in terms of student choice, that social work degree courses vary. But there needs to be a concise, single document drafted, drawing on the advice of the College of Social Work, academics and, particularly, employers, which offers in a single publication, a GMC style summary of what a newly qualified children's social worker needs to understand. Such a document should cover not only factual issues but those which are best described as philosophical or attitudinal. I recommend that the Chief Social Worker For Children take the lead in drafting such a document. To provide a foundation for that work, I suggest she needs first to draft a definition of children's social work.

## Part Two: The calibre of students entering higher education institutions

The calibre of students studying for social work degrees has been an issue of debate since the social work degree was introduced in 2003. That debate continues quite properly in my view. There may have been recent improvements, not least that secured by the Social Work Reform Board, which agreed that universities should increase minimum entry requirements for students applying with A-levels. But anxieties remain: I did not speak to a single employer who said that he or she was always satisfied with the calibre of students entering social work study (although, often, there was a high level of satisfaction expressed about particular universities). And some academics were candid in their criticism of entry standards. One, at one of the UK's top universities, told me that some social workers graduating from some other institutions were barely literate.

Until its abolition in 2012 and the transfer of its responsibilities to the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), the General Social Care Council (GSCC) was responsible for regulating social work education. Last July it published a commendably frank account of the history of that regulation.

The GSCC took over responsibility for regulating social work in 2001, two years before the introduction of the degree. From 2005 it became necessary to hold a social work degree before being first registered with the GSCC as a social worker. As well as registering social workers, the Council also had responsibility for approving and regulating social work degree courses. Since the introduction of the degree in 2003 and until its abolition in 2012, the GSCC approved 307 social work degree courses at 83 institutions.

Between 2003 and 2012 a significant imbalance developed in the distribution of courses, and in the number of students studying social work across England. This suggests that expansion was not related solely to employer demand. In 2010-11 one in five of all social work students in England were enrolled at a higher education institution in the North West. In the same year the North West and Yorkshire and Humberside trained twice as many social workers, relative to their population, as the East Midlands and the South West. Overall, the numbers of students studying for the degree have been significantly higher than those studying for its predecessor, the Diploma in Social Work. Between 2005 and 2012 average annual student enrolment on social work degrees was 6,111, a 47% increase on the numbers enrolling annually for the Diploma.

Alongside this expansion – and despite the Social Work Reform Board's recognition that there needed to be a way of forecasting social worker supply and demand – there has been a startling absence of any serious workforce planning. The GSCC had the powers to determine how many individuals should be admitted to social work courses each year, but it declined to use those powers throughout its life. What little workforce planning there has been, has been completed by the Centre For Workforce Intelligence (CWI). Its evidence suggests that employers might be better served if we produced fewer, but better prepared, social workers. Despite social worker vacancies in some local authorities, there is no evidence of a shortage of individuals being trained. When compared to an annual student intake of around 6,100 (about 55,000 students have enrolled on social work degrees since

only 2005), the number of registered social workers in England is relatively small at only 87,929. Of those, it was estimated in 2012 that only 47,000 are working as social workers in local authorities.

## **A-level students**

I found employer - and sometimes academic - concern about the calibre of new social workers to focus on the undergraduate degree. Those who lacked confidence in the consistency of those qualifying with a first degree frequently, if not inevitably, expressed concern about low entry requirements at some universities. Their concerns have some justification. According to GSCC data, since 2003 only 31% of Social Work students have had one or more A-levels. And where students hold A-levels their grades are likely to be low. In their written evidence to the 2009 Select Committee on Social Work Education, the Association of Professors of Social Work (APSW) were honest about this, telling the Committee:

*An issue, which has been of concern to members of the APSW, concerns the variability of the academic requirements for entering degree programmes. There are concerns that students with good A Level grades are not applying for courses and that entry requirements for some programmes are very low.*

The Select Committee found that the proportion of A-level entrants to social work degrees, and with fewer than 240 UCAS points (the equivalent of 3 Cs at A level), was twice the proportion entering teaching or nursing. Partly as a consequence of that criticism, there has been an attempt to increase the minimum requirements for entry to a Social Work course to 240 points. I was told by a number of academics and employers that this was likely to make a substantial difference. But 240 points, or 3 Cs at A level, is not a demanding requirement. No Russell Group university, and only a small minority of others, will allow any student to study for a degree in any subject with such indifferent grades.

However, I'm not convinced that even this modest uplifting in entry requirements is adhered to. First of all, I have been told that many institutions routinely relax the formal 240 points requirement as the annual recruitment cycle closes and where vacancies on courses need to be filled. And some institutions appear from the outset to have lower requirements. In the current *Which? University Guide*, nine UK institutions (six in England and three in Scotland) advertise minimum UCAS requirements for social work study starting in 2014, of fewer than 240 points, Six will accept students with 200 points or fewer and one will accept students with just 120 points (equivalent to 2 Ds at A level).

## **Entry standards for non A-level students**

GSCC data suggests that only about 31% of social work students have one or more A-levels, with the majority applying with other degrees, diplomas or qualifications or starting study after completing an *Access To Higher Education Course*. We know very little about the proportion of students being accepted through *Access* and similar routes at different universities, and we know just as little about the extent to which these alternative

entry requirements are robust. As the Association of Professors of Social Work told the Select Committee:

*We note the difficulties there appear to be in assessing the quality of Access programmes or the quality of a student's overall performance on Access courses.*

So we have a situation where employers cannot be confident about the abilities of newly qualified social workers, in part because of uncertainty about their raw calibre. Sometimes, for this reason, they are unwilling to recruit from universities they don't know. I found that both employers and academics had an informal list of those universities where, they believed, standards were poor (as well as a list of those institutions in which they had confidence).

## **Widening access**

Since its introduction, and despite excellence at some institutions, and the undoubted quality of some newly qualified social workers, the reputation of the social work Bachelor's degree has been, at best, mixed. That reputation has fallen further in recent years as some highly regarded universities have withdrawn from offering the first degree. Sheffield, which has a very good reputation, and whose undergraduates very much impressed me when I met them earlier this year, is the latest to withdraw from offering the Bachelor's degree. At another university with a fine reputation, I was told that they declined to offer an undergraduate degree in social work because of the potential damage it would cause to their reputation.

Some believe that the expansion in student numbers at some HEIs has been inappropriately influenced by financial considerations. Firstly, because the greater the number of students recruited to a course, the greater is the fee income. One academic was candid with me about the pressure from their Vice Chancellor to over-recruit students for financial reasons.

Additionally, some question whether additional recruitment has been for the benefit of the social work profession, or has been primarily motivated by universities' wish to improve their performance in attracting students from non traditional backgrounds. Inducements for universities to widen access do exist. The Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE) has a Widening Participation policy, which encourages HEIs to recruit more students from low participation neighbourhoods, from certain socio-economic groups, with low qualifications and with a disability. Funding is allocated to HEIs according to the number of students from those groups accepted for study. There is no data on which degree courses recruit relatively large numbers of students from the four priority groups, but there are those who believe that social work might carry too much of the burden.

It is entirely proper that we allow students with poor, few, or no qualifications to study to become social workers if they can demonstrate an ability, aptitude and commitment. But we need to ensure that we have not made social work too easy an option for university entry and, in seeking to increase access, locked too many poor students into social work while - as the Association of Professors of Social Work fear - discouraging the more able. I visited one university last year, which offers hundreds of degrees but for only one, social



work, offered a dedicated preparation course (of just one half day a week for twenty four weeks) to allow students without qualifications to begin studying for the Bachelor's degree.

As the GSCC were candid enough to opine in their closing report:

*Concerns about the calibre of individuals studying to become social workers have regularly been raised during the lifetime of the GSCC. Often these concerns have focused on the level of qualifications held by those enrolling to the degree... Where HEIs have made efforts to increase access to the social work degree amongst people from a wide range of backgrounds, this has sometimes meant opening routes to the degree to individuals who do not have strong conventional academic qualifications... A tension exists in the sector between the desire to ensure that social work is open to those from all backgrounds, particularly backgrounds where attendance at university has not been common, and a desire to see entrants to the degree with high levels of previous educational attainment.*

Despite this, the GSCC:

*did not see it as its role to set national qualifications requirements for entry onto the social work degree.*

We need to be confident that the calibre and potential of those entering social work study, either with A-levels, or through non-traditional qualifications or through access routes, is sufficiently high to enable those individuals to be successful social workers. Suspicions that efforts to widen access have involved the compromising of entry standards must be resolved.

## **Recommendations**

2. Agreement needs to be reached with Universities to ensure that the minimum UCAS requirement of 240 points for A-level students is not breached save in exceptional circumstances.

3. The calibre of students entering through Access courses and with qualifications other than A-levels needs to be audited at individual institution level.

I recommend that the College of Social Work provide that assurance as part of a radically more rigorous endorsement process (see part three).

## Part Three: Ensuring the quality of education at higher education institutions

Concerns about the calibre of students entering undergraduate study might be reduced if there was greater confidence about university rigour and less suspicion, as the 2009 Select Committee speculated, that social work degrees – with a failure rate of just over two and a half per cent - have become difficult to fail.

The GSCC reported in 2012 that social worker vacancy rates in some English local authorities remained high while:

*there have been reports of newly qualified social workers struggling to gain their first employment.*

One explanation for that is there is not enough employer confidence in some newly registered social workers. Policy Exchange's *Reforming Social Work*, published in June 2013, confirmed the apparent contradiction between the continuing demand for social workers and an unwillingness to appoint some of those who are newly qualified. They discovered that:

*Of 155 Local Authorities surveyed, 13 per cent had a vacancy rate of over 20 per cent and 50 per cent had a vacancy rate of over 10 per cent in 2012; [Simultaneously there was] limited recruitment of new social workers: 27 per cent of NQSWs in England being unemployed in 2011.*

They argued that:

*A key problem is that many potential employers are reluctant to take on newly qualified social workers... This suggests that they may not believe that the current level of social work education prepares students for practice.*

I am quite clear that there are universities where standards are high, and where students, however modest their entry qualifications, are required to meet rigorous academic requirements. But there are others which, to say the least, have a mixed reputation. The variability in standards is neatly captured by the experiences of two recent graduates whom I met earlier this year. They had first degrees of an equivalent standard and in the same subject. But while one had applied to study for a BA, she was surprised to be offered a place on a Masters course. The other applied to a different university to study for a Masters but had been steered toward undergraduate study. I was not surprised to learn the identity of the universities. The first had an uncertain reputation among employers, the second was held in high regard.

One social worker who supervised students while on practice placement told Community Care in 2010 that:

*Over the past three years I have assessed about 30 students and have often been dismayed at the standard. I have been asked to take on repeat placements and on reading the previous practice assessor's reports have been astounded that the student has been allowed to progress when they have clearly been unsuitable for social work... It sometimes feels that it is impossible to fail a student.*

## Course sizes

Many employers and students – and some academics - believe that financial considerations, represented by the recruitment of very large numbers of students, dilute the quality of social work education at some HEIs. Employers in particular, frequently if informally, correlated smaller courses with higher quality.

The numbers of students at different universities certainly varies. At many the class sizes are strictly limited. At one, for example, course sizes for the BA and the MA are each limited to 30. As a result, seminar groups are rarely bigger than 12 and often smaller. But there are other courses which have a hundred students and more, and where seminar groups of 30 are sometimes found.

One student wrote to me describing how high student numbers on her degree course made obtaining a statutory practice placement difficult and damaged academic delivery:

*The number of students in my year totalled 126 in September 2011 falling to 100 in September 2012. Those who have left cite unsuitable placements and over subscription of the course. The high numbers have impacted greatly on the taught aspect of the course with overcrowding in lecture rooms. Overall my experience has been extremely varied.*

There will be instances where large course sizes are managed well, where students are still put into small seminar groups where they are able to engage closely with other students and with lecturers, and where lectures are not so huge as to inhibit discussion. If students are to develop they need support, advice and guidance and need to be able to explore issues through discussion in which they can take an active part. We need to be confident that such opportunities are present at all HEIs preparing social workers.

There are also concerns about the ease with which students are able to graduate. In evidence to the Select Committee, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) said that its practice teachers had "on occasion" advocated that a student should not be allowed to progress, but had come under pressure from their institution, to pass them. A senior lecturer in social work at a London University, told the Committee that students were *often given the benefit of the doubt about their suitability to practice or their performance in placements*. More recently, a frustrated lecturer from a long established university told me that he believed the current training was simply inadequate and that he was deeply concerned about the ability of students whose work he was "pressurised to pass".

Students have widely differing views of their own experience at university, and data on employment after graduation shows significant variation between universities. Drawing on data from the National Student Survey and from the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education Survey, *Unistats* provide an independent analysis of both. Student satisfaction with social work courses at different institutions has a mean of 76%, with thirteen universities having a satisfaction score of 90% or higher. But one HEI has a satisfaction score of only 12% and a further six score 60% or lower. In terms of the proportion of graduates employed in the profession six months after graduation, one university scores 100% and 14 others score at 85% or higher. But 13 HEIs have 60% or

fewer graduates employed six months after graduation. One establishment is recorded as having only 34% of graduates employed. Against such figures it is hard to argue that variations in HEI performance are acceptable.

The problem is that employers, and prospective students, find it difficult – other than relying on the *Unistats* and similar polling data – to distinguish the good universities from the indifferent. This is despite universities being subject to various forms of inspection and audit by a number of bodies.

## **The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)**

The Quality Assurance Agency For Higher Education (QAA) uses their *UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code)* to assure the standards and quality of higher education in the United Kingdom. The Quality Mark can only be awarded to higher education providers which are QAA subscribers (an arguably dubious condition) and which meet, or exceed, QAA expectations of quality and standards. The QAA say that the quality mark:

*Communicates to everyone that an institution has a guaranteed minimum level of quality and standards.*

But a visit to their website reveals a list of 309 Institutions in England and Northern Ireland alone which have obtained the Quality Mark (including all nine Institutions which allow Students with fewer than 240 UCAS points to enrol for the social work degree). There is no list of Institutions which have failed to meet the QAA minimum standards. When I e-mailed the QAA and asked how they might help me to select a good university social work course they replied – quickly and courteously – that:

*You would probably be better off looking at the UCAS website than ours.*

## **The Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC)**

HCPC (and before July 2012, the General Social Care Council (GSCC)) approve social work degrees in England. An individual who has successfully completed an approved programme is then eligible to apply to join the HCPC Register of Social Workers. As part of the approval process HCPC visit education providers to ensure that their standards of education and training are being met and that graduates will be able to meet their *Standards Of Proficiency*.

Between 2003 and their abolition in 2012, the GSCC approved 307 Social Work degrees at 83 higher education institutions (as at July 2013 there were 80 Institutions offering social work which have HCPC approved status). But in their *Learning Report*, published as they were abolished, the GSCC was candid about the limitations of their approval mechanism and regretted the absence of a single set of standards against which institutions could be audited:

*There has never been a detailed prescribed curriculum for the social work degree... [The absence of] a single set of standards, which the GSCC owned... made the task of regulating complicated.*

Rather apologetically, but honestly, the GSCC admitted:

*When faced with an institution or a course that was not meeting the requirements, or had weaknesses in certain areas, the GSCC only ever had one formal sanction available to it, which was to withdraw approval for that particular course.*

In the event, the GSCC did not decline to approve or withdraw approval from a social work course during its entire existence. Nor has HCPC done so in the relatively brief time it has held responsibility for course approval. HCPC's recent report (November 2013) of the first year of its approval visits to universities, records a reduction in the number of approved social work degree courses. But that is entirely due to universities closing courses of their own volition, or because courses previously approved, but which have never recruited students, have had approval withdrawn. In the academic year 2012/13 HCPC inspected 72 Social Work programmes and approved them all. So, since the introduction of the degree in 2003, no course has failed to gain GSCC or HCPC approval and no course has lost approval.

HCPC told me that they contract with just twenty-three university inspectors (*Visitors* as they describe them) on a fee per day basis. They would not allow me to see the list of visitors, so I was unable to establish the veracity of claims that some were distant from practice and relatively junior (although since HCPC pay them just £180 a day I would be surprised if all of them were sufficiently senior or experienced to be credible). The inspection visit lasts just a day and a half. It includes a tour of the teaching facilities but teaching is not observed. It involves a paper review of student placements but placements are not visited. HCPC may point out that, of the courses approved after their inspection visits this year, 86% of them had conditions attached to their approval. But I remain entirely unconvinced that an overwhelmingly paper based exercise and which measures universities against HCPC's inadequate prescription for social work training, can provide Ministers, employers, or potential students with adequate assurance about the quality of individual degree courses. The fact that HCPC has been keen to conduct inspection visits simultaneously with the College (so there are two teams present on the same day but measuring compliance against different documents) betrays an unnecessary duplication. Essentially, we have two weak inspection processes instead of a single robust one.

I question the utility, including the value for money, of HCPC involvement either in the registration and regulation of social workers, or in the approval of social work degree courses. I know that professions are often regulated by one organisation while a separate body upholds standards of professionalism (in medicine, the GMC does the former while the Royal Colleges do the latter). But I'm not convinced that such a model is necessary for social work in England and it is not present for other professions such as accountancy. In Wales, the Care Council for Wales (CCW) is the single registering and regulating body for student and qualified social workers, as well as being the standard setting body for social work education and which approves university social work programmes.

I am not suggesting that HCPC is not an entirely competent body in its regulatory role with other professions. But in the list of professions it regulates, social work sits very oddly. The other fifteen, most of which were once known as the *Professions Supplementary*

*To Medicine*, have much in common (art therapists, biomedical scientists, chiropractors, podiatrists, clinical scientists, dietitians, hearing aid dispensers, occupational therapists, operating department practitioners, orthoptists, paramedics, physiotherapists, practitioner psychologists, orthotists and radiographers) but very little in common with social work.

There is limited expertise in children's social work in HCPC either in the executive or in the body's governance. The Governing Council of 20 includes one social worker (not from a children's background) and in a pending reorganisation and reduction in Council numbers, that representation may be lost. HCPC's approval process and its inspections do not provide any assurance that cannot be provided by the College. And, as I have explained in part one, its three main prescriptions for social work education (*Standards of Proficiency, Standards of Education and Training and Standards of Conduct performance and Ethics*) are of limited utility. If the College of Social Work could emerge, as intended when it was established, as a reforming body driving forward social work professionalism and effectiveness, then I see a strong case for transferring HCPC duties in relation to social work to the College. The College's financial viability would be strengthened through the professional registration fees, which currently go to HCPC, while the duplication, confusion and expense caused by two bodies, each prescribing their own professional standards for social workers and each inspecting university social work departments, would be removed. There would be some conflicts that would need to be managed. For example the College, which advocates for the profession, would have to conduct fitness to practice hearings for individual professionals. But credible and independent arrangements could easily be formulated. It would not be in the College's wider interests to deal other than robustly with individuals allegedly unfit to practice.

The challenge facing the College would not be in demonstrating its fitness to deal competently with registration issues, but the need considerably to strengthen what would be, in the absence of HCPC's approval system, the only audit of higher education social work study.

It is a matter for the College Board whether they want to take on that challenge which, inevitably, will strain relationships with some in academia (although others will welcome audit by a single body). I have, however, been sufficiently impressed by the very able new Chief Executive to believe that the challenge of making the endorsement scheme sufficiently robust might be met. That said, she will not be helped in seeking reform by the tortuous governance arrangements she has inherited at the College. There is a board of eight people, an eighteen person assembly and four faculties, each of which has a steering group. The Children and Families Faculty Steering Group has 22 members.

I hope the College grasps the opportunity. If it does not, then an alternative body to quality assure social work training at university will have to be identified, and the possibility of the College fulfilling the optimism present at its establishment is unlikely to be fulfilled.

## The current College of Social Work endorsement scheme

The College claims that its endorsement scheme:

*will promote and celebrate high quality education and training, over and above the threshold standards required by the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC).*

The process involves five stages: the submission of the endorsement request form; the submission of documentation; the visit; the post visit consideration; and the formal decision making process by the College. But some weaknesses are immediately apparent. Although this five-stage process appears reasonably rigorous, there is only one day spent at the university. Like HCPC's approval process, the endorsement scheme rests primarily on a review of documentation. The scheme is voluntary and universities may decline to seek endorsement and, most troublingly, any university failure to obtain endorsement will not be made public by the College.

The College has had a difficult start and may have considered that it had to tread carefully, not least with universities, which one senior figure at the College told me, had greeted the introduction of the endorsement scheme with outrage. But the current scheme does not appear remotely robust enough. The College tells higher education institutions that they will need to demonstrate that their educational programmes are underpinned by:

- *current theory, knowledge values, and ethics;*
- *evidence informed practice and research;*
- *high quality placement provision;*
- *active learning;*
- *critical reflection and analysis;*
- *transfer of knowledge and skills; and*
- *the involvement of people who use services, and carers.*

This does not seem, to me, to be an adequate list. There is nothing here about the quality of teaching (which, regrettably, is not observed), the entry calibre of students, the robustness of examination or other assessment systems, or the extent to which new graduates are ready for employment. And it is impossible to believe that the quality of placement provision can be assessed on a day visit to the university. In any case - and rather predictably - the College says that the emphasis of the inspection will not be on the various alleged weaknesses in some social work degrees, but on:

- *valuing diversity;*
- *challenging own prejudices;*
- *maintaining probity and dignity;*
- *preventing and challenging discrimination; and*
- *reflecting own practice and working inclusively.*

## Credibility of college inspectors

Inspectors are paid modestly. They receive £300 for preparation, including reading extensive documentation, the visit to the university itself and then writing up a recommendation. According to some critics, the College has failed to attract sufficient inspectors of the required seniority or reputation to make the endorsement scheme credible. Certainly, at the moment, there have been too few senior employer or academic figures recruited.

## Making the endorsement scheme more robust

The reality is that, at the moment, neither the HCPC approval scheme nor the endorsement scheme can provide Ministers, or employers, with sufficient confidence about the preparation of social workers at individual institutions. Little has changed since Lord Laming's 2009 assertion that:

*The quality and content of degree courses are not yet sufficiently well developed and there is no rigorous assessment regime in place to ensure that standards are being met by providers.*

While I believe that the College of Social Work has the potential to correct this troubling inadequacy, I am equally certain that current arrangements are simply not adequately robust. The endorsement scheme is underpinned by the *Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF)* which, while being an improvement on HCPC's *Standards of Proficiency*, still falls far short in terms of listing the things a new social worker needs to understand. The *PCF* is open to wide interpretation by universities and others, and it certainly fails to provide the succinct and clear guidance for HEIs that, for example, the GMC provide to medical schools.

The endorsement scheme's greatest weakness perhaps, is that it concentrates too much on process. So, taking admissions as an example, rather than the scheme seeking simply to establish that the calibre of students admitted to the degree are of adequate ability and potential, inspectors assess – inter alia – whether there are:

*systems and policies in place for the regular review of the student selection and interview process; and that admission and selection procedures are carried out in accordance with the guidelines on calibre of entrants (selection, admissions and suitability) held by the College of Social Work, including that people who use services, carers and employers, are involved in the process.*

In my view, an institution which adequately conforms to process, is likely to pass the current College endorsement test even where there might be deficiencies in the quality of graduates being produced. It is simply vital to make the endorsement process significantly more robust. Teaching should be observed; entry standards scrutinised; the extent to which course sizes might inhibit individual student development probed; the curriculum examined; and the rigour of examinations and other forms of student assessment audited. Endorsement needs to be compulsory for all institutions offering the social work degree and when an HEI fails to obtain endorsement – which should happen from time to time if the scheme is genuinely robust – that failure must be made public.



## Practice placement quality

It is important that we can be more confident about the academic content of the social work degree. But the degree is a sandwich with academic work being built around two practice placements, which, together, take up the best part of one year of the three-year course. The College of Social Work has, quite properly, described the placement experience *as the cornerstone of social work students' learning*.

The current national requirements for practice learning are set out by the College and by the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC). They require that social work students undertake two placements of 70 and 100 days. Each student must have experience of two practice settings. One must be in a statutory setting where social work involves legal interventions. And the two placements need to provide experience of different settings (for example, child care and mental health).

Since the establishment of the social work degree there has been a considerable challenge in finding student placements of consistently high quality. The rapid expansion in the numbers studying social work has made this more difficult. I heard on a number of occasions how the aggressive growth of student numbers at some universities had led to extreme, and sometimes sudden, pressure on placements in that locality. Even at those universities that enjoy excellent relationships with local authorities, and where expansion of student numbers has not been as pronounced as elsewhere, securing high quality placements has often been a struggle. Obtaining at least one placement for every student in a statutory setting has been particularly challenging.

This is not to suggest that placements other than in the statutory sector are a waste of time. Some non-statutory experiences are very useful. One highly experienced and senior social worker wrote to me to remind me that many individuals, like him, had not had a placement in a statutory setting but enjoyed experiences elsewhere which were challenging and of immense benefit to future practice.

But that is often not the case. I have heard too often about placements which were, in any view, unsatisfactory, including some allocated to students studying at highly regarded universities. A number of universities whom I visited, or contacted, admitted they were unable to provide statutory placements for every student. That reality is borne out by *Community Care*, which, in 2011, surveyed 77 institutions offering a qualifying social work course: 22 had not provided statutory placements for all their students (a further 17 refused to provide any information).

It was sometimes put to me that, strictly speaking, the rules simply require one of the two placements to be in an environment where legal interventions are involved. It was argued, for example, that students placed in a voluntary adoption agency, were obtaining adequate experience of statutory or legal interventions. Having managed a large voluntary organisation, which was also a voluntary adoption agency, I am quite sure that the student experience which might be obtained there falls far short of that which is likely to be experienced, and needs to be experienced, in a local authority setting. And students with whom I spoke and corresponded, as well as some experienced social workers, made plain that they shared the view that local authority experience was vital.

One social worker of forty years experience told me:

*The shortage of local authority placements means that many [graduates] obtain the social work degree without ever having undertaken the social work role in children's services. It seems crazy that people who want to be children's social workers can qualify without any experience of doing the job.*

A number of students wrote to me to express deep anxiety that the relatively poor quality of their placement experience would make it very difficult for them to obtain a post within a local authority children's services department.

One student completing her Masters degree told me:

*Statutory placements appear to be few and far between in my area...Both my placements have been non statutory, the first being with the XXX Fire and Rescue Services (Prince's Trust programme) and I'm now with an Independent Fostering Agency. This means I do not have any opportunity to experience statutory provision and gain the knowledge, skills and experience required to fulfil my role as a qualified social worker. I am not alone. Many of my fellow students are in the same position and while [non statutory] placements can provide excellent learning opportunities they still fall far short [in ensuring] that student social workers are fully prepared.*

She went on to say:

*Furthermore many vacancies are now stating that statutory experience is essential so, those like myself, that have not had a statutory placement, have yet another hurdle to climb before being able to apply for posts.*

Her fears are justified. Policy Exchange concluded earlier this year that:

*The main reason that NQSWs have trouble finding employment is that their education does not give them sufficient practical experience for them to be desirable candidates from an employer's point of view. Many of the social workers we interviewed emphasised that one of the decisive factors affecting the employability of NQSWs was the nature of the placements the student had undertaken as part of the qualifying social work course. Most social workers we interviewed highlighted a statutory placement as indispensable.*

So, those leaving university without having had a statutory placement experience are likely to struggle to gain employment and, even when they are successful, they are likely to be unfamiliar with some key statutory procedures. That explains the entirely proper caution of some local authorities about appointing some newly qualified social workers.

The reality is that although we continue to produce some very fine social workers, we are producing too many ill prepared for local authority employment and, consequently, with poor employment prospects. And this is despite the government's investment in the social work bursary scheme of around £70m a year, and a further annual investment in the Education Support Grant (ESG) of £28m a year.

## **The Education Support Grant**

The ESG has been in existence since 2003 and is used to compensate employers who accept placement students from social work courses. At the moment, the Government is consulting on how the £28m might more effectively be spent and how overspending might be avoided (the grant is demand led). Expenditure is routed from the Department of Health to universities which then, after paying for their own expenses related to placement preparation and administration, distribute the cash to employers. In my view, universities should only receive ESG funding for those students whose placement experience is satisfactory, and where at least one placement takes place in a statutory setting, or a setting of genuine equivalence in terms of readying a student for practice in a local authority.

### **Recommendations**

4. The Department for Education should consider whether the role of HCPC in regulating the social work profession, including prescribing standards of proficiency and approving HEI social work courses, duplicates the role of the College of Social Work, and, if so, whether those duties should be transferred to the College.
5. The College of Social Work endorsement scheme needs to be compulsory for all institutions offering the social work degree. An HEI unwilling to agree to the endorsement process should not be allowed to train social workers.
6. The College needs radically to increase the rigour of the endorsement scheme. Teaching should be observed; entry standards scrutinised; the extent to which course sizes might inhibit individual student development probed; the curriculum examined; and the rigour of examinations and other forms of student assessment audited.
7. The endorsement process needs also to include an evaluation of the quality of practice placements. Universities which fail to provide every student with at least one statutory placement (or an alternative which is genuinely comparable and accepted by employers as comparable) should not receive endorsement.
8. The Education Support Grant should be distributed only to universities which can demonstrate the quality of their placements, including providing every student with statutory experience, or an alternative experience which is genuinely comparable.
9. The College must be willing to fail institutions, temporarily or permanently, and to publicise such failings; and
10. The College needs to recruit a more senior cross section of assessors, particularly from the ranks of employers, to secure the credibility of the endorsement process. This will almost certainly necessitate an increased level of compensation.
11. If the College membership is unwilling to agree to this more robust role for the College, an alternative assessor of the quality of social work education at individual HEIs will need to be found.

## Part Four: The Masters Degree, Bursaries, Step Up To Social Work and Frontline

Since the introduction of the Social Work degree there has been a significant increase in the proportion of courses at postgraduate level. In 2003, only seven percent of social work qualifications were obtained through postgraduate study. By 2012, this proportion had reached 42%, caused in part by the closure of a number of undergraduate courses, some at highly regarded universities.

While I discovered considerable anxiety about the raw ability of some entering social work through the undergraduate route, I found greater employer confidence in those who enter social work with a Masters degree. In part this is to do with age, Masters students being at least in their twenties when they begin their studies. The proportion of very young adults entering social work degrees is sometimes significantly overstated. In reality, since 2004, only about 12 per cent of those beginning social work study have been aged nineteen and under. But, nevertheless, that proportion is much greater than the one or two per cent who studied for the pre 2003 Diploma. Some of those with whom I have discussed this issue urged me to recommend a minimum age for practising as a social worker and I understand the rationale behind that. I certainly believe maturity should be an important issue for universities to consider when accepting applicants to the undergraduate degree. But I am not persuaded that a hard and fast rule is necessary.

The higher academic calibre of Masters students also fuels employer confidence in postgraduate study. Since 2003, 95 per cent of those beginning Masters degrees have possessed either an undergraduate or another Masters qualification. The comparison with undergraduate qualifications at entry – where only 31 per cent hold one or more A-levels – is stark.

### Bursaries

One of the reasons for the introduction of the social work degree in 2003 was the alarming fall in the number of applications to social work programmes in the 1990s. To address this, and coinciding with the introduction of the degree, a non-means tested bursary scheme was introduced by the Department of Health. It is generally assumed that the bursary scheme has contributed significantly to the recovery in the numbers applying and the marked expansion in the numbers studying social work in England. In fact, a review of the evidence by Kings College, for the Department of Health in 2012, was surprisingly lukewarm about that assumption. It found little published empirical data on the impact of the scheme other than *some* evidence that it had helped to increase the diversity of social work students, and that *some* had been able to study who might otherwise have been unable to do so. The number or proportion was not quantified. On the other hand, it was sometimes suggested to me that the bursary scheme might have encouraged applications from some students primarily motivated by the non-means-tested financial support. Certainly, the availability of bursaries is sometimes marketed very strongly by universities when recruiting to social work courses.

It is not surprising, therefore, that last year the Department of Health sought to reform the scheme, in part to reduce costs but also further to improve the quality of social work graduates. This was in line with a recommendation from the Social Work Task Force that the bursary scheme should be used as a lever for improving quality. Consequently, and from this year, full time undergraduates will only get a contribution toward living costs in years two and three of the degree. The grant, about £4,500 outside and a little under £5,000 within London, continues to be non-means-tested. Social work students may, additionally, apply for loan funding from Student Finance England.

The number of undergraduate bursaries has also been capped at each higher education institution. Where numbers of students exceed the cap, HEIs are required to send a list of all first year social work students who have passed year 1 of the course to the NHS Business Services Authority where they are assessed for eligibility. Universities are required to rank their lists but universities have discretion over which factors to take into account when ranking.

Full time postgraduate students continue to be eligible for support for both years of their study. They can apply for a grant for living costs of around £3,300 outside and around £3,700 inside London, and a contribution to tuition fees of up to £3,700. Additionally a second grant to provide further help with living costs can be applied for, but is means-tested. Postgraduate bursaries have also been capped at each university and, in the event that the number of students exceeds the number of bursaries, the university has discretion in prioritising students.

Spending pressures on bursary funding are inevitable. Annual expenditure is planned to fall from £73m a year in 2013-14 to £65m in 2014-15. Against those pressures the relatively greater protection given to providing bursaries for postgraduate study is to be welcomed. Postgraduate students will frequently already be carrying student debt from their undergraduate studies and a number explained to me how vital the bursary was. More significantly, when satisfaction with social workers coming through the Masters route remains relatively high, and when we can have far greater confidence about their raw intellectual ability, it is important that bursary scheme arrangements do not halt the growth in the proportion of social workers taking the postgraduate route. Indeed, I would go further: there is a case for further tilting support in favour of funding for Masters students.

## **Step Up To Social Work**

*Step Up to Social Work* is a social work training programme for those already possessing a good degree and which, originally, provided successful trainees with a Masters in social work. Successful participants now receive a postgraduate diploma but can continue study to achieve a Master's qualification. *Step Up* was specifically designed, by the then Children's Workforce Development Council, as a way of attracting career changers into social work. It was launched in 2010 and the third cohort of *Step Up* trainees began their course in January 2014. 76 local authorities, grouped together into 13 regional partnerships, are taking part and training 310 students. To be eligible, all students must hold an Upper Second, or First, and a grade C or above in both GCSE English and Maths.

*Step Up* is an employer-based course: that is the student is employed within a local authority, and is based at his or her workplace, rather than on campus. Employer-based courses are not new: of the 307 Social Work degree courses approved by GSCC, about a quarter were employer based. But the proportion of students taking the employer-based route, typically at around 11%, has been much smaller than the availability of employer-based courses might suggest.

Those on the *Step Up* programme can reasonably expect a job after finishing the course (for the first cohort of *Step Up* some local authorities required trainees to sign a contract stipulating they would work for the local authority for a set period of time after completion). I was surprised to learn that has not been repeated for cohort two and is unlikely to be repeated for the third cohort. Because students are employed, and likely to remain in employment after finishing *Step Up*, there is significant commitment by the local authority to their training and *Step Up* participants report much greater satisfaction with, for example, their practice placement experience.

The *Step Up* participants I met have been bright, committed and, patently, intellectually able, not surprising when they all have a good first degree. At one meeting of a mixed group of newly qualified social workers, the contrast in the apparent potential of those who had come through the *Step Up* route and those from the undergraduate route was troublingly stark. But this is not simply about high intellectual ability, which other Masters students frequently possess. There are three other things about *Step Up* that have impressed me and make it more than simply another postgraduate programme.

The first is that *Step Up* tilts the balance of influence about the content of the curriculum, very much a university prerogative, in favour of the employer. Local authority *Step Up* partnerships contract with an HEI to provide the academic content of the programme, the content of which (within HCPC parameters) the partnership can specify. While there may be good examples elsewhere of effective partnerships between universities and employers, relations are often strained and employers often expressed a dissatisfaction with some aspects of the curriculum and the difficulty of getting universities to respond to changing requirements. As one Director of Children's Services told me:

*Universities have been allowed to provide too much theory, too much sociology and not enough about spotting things in a family which are wrong.*

A senior social worker who had, for some years, sought to manage the partnership between a number of local authorities and a group of universities told me:

*[A Director of Children's Services] chaired the partnership board but with little success... Institutions resisted efforts from employers to influence the content of degrees. Employers wanted the Common Assessment Framework to be covered on the degree, but universities insisted that was an issue for practice placement... Universities saw social work as a cash cow, in one instance doubling their number of students at short notice and putting immense strain on placement provision.*

By contrast, and as the De Montfort University 2013 evaluation of *Step Up Cohort One* found:

*For [employers] there was a clear sense of being more in control, and feeling empowered to determine how HEI partners should go about facilitating trainees' learning. The sense of genuine partnership was strong, enabling HEIs and agencies to work closely together throughout. Agencies felt that they had greater capacity to contribute directly to learning.*

The second encouraging thing about *Step Up* is that it has certainly been successful in bringing high calibre graduates into social work. As the De Montfort evaluation of the first cohort concluded:

*The programme is generally believed to have generated a significant group of highly capable and committed new entrants to the social work profession.*

Research into the second cohort offers further encouragement. While 15 per cent of Cohort 1 respondents had obtained a first class degree at the end of their undergraduate studies and 11 per cent had a post-graduate qualification; 19 per cent of Cohort 2 had a first class degree and 39 per cent had a post-graduate qualification. Just under 20 per cent of Cohort 1 respondents but 29 per cent of Cohort 2 respondents had ten years or more paid employment or mixed employment and voluntary work experience considered relevant to social work.

Thirdly, *Step Up* has begun to address one of the significant weaknesses of traditional university preparation in that the quality of practical experience, so often a weakness with the BA degree, is much higher because employers have a commitment to students whom they employ and intend to employ in the future.

As the evaluation of cohort one found:

*Support for trainees was very thorough and seemed to be closely aligned to individual needs and progress. Practice learning in particular was more easily managed, in the sense that it could be aligned with academic elements of the programme. It was repeatedly observed that linkages between theory and practice were more easily made than had previously been experienced, both because of the structure of the programme and the abilities of the trainees.*

The evaluation of cohort one was not entirely positive. De Montfort expressed anxiety about a lack of diversity in *Step Up* recruits (although my understanding was that ethnic diversity was very similar to other postgraduate programmes). But, in any case, the ethnic diversity of cohort two appears satisfactory with only 189 of 224 trainees (where ethnicity is known) describing themselves as White British.

The cohort one evaluators also expressed concern about the concentration in *Step Up* on children's social work. They were troubled by:

*both the feasibility and desirability of achieving a truly 'generic' social work qualification, in the context of a programme deliberately and explicitly targeted at achieving improvements in children's social work.*

But this criticism is only important if it is seen as necessary to persist with a generic degree for social workers. As I shall argue later, I don't believe it is.

If I have a criticism of *Step Up* it concerns the hard and fast nature of its requirement that all participants should hold a First or Upper Second degree. I applaud entirely the success of *Step Up* in drawing the most able graduates into social work, something which addresses many of the weaknesses identified in this report. But there are university graduates who matriculated some years ago, when Firsts and Upper Seconds were much less common, who should certainly not be excluded from *Step Up*. Indeed, I would go further by suggesting that the scheme should be open to any participant who can demonstrate that he, or she, has the intellectual calibre equivalent to that needed to obtain an Upper Second currently. Such participants, I suggest, should either already be in the employment of local authorities in order to ensure that there can be absolute confidence in their ability and potential; or have very clearly demonstrated excellence in careers elsewhere.

The evaluation of *Step Up* Cohort One and Cohort Two both found very high levels of overall student satisfaction, albeit that satisfaction levels with academic input varied widely by university and was sometimes troublingly low (hardly surprising in the context of my wider concerns about variability between universities). Satisfaction with practice placements was very high with all *Step Up* graduates in Cohort 2 enjoying at least one long placement in a statutory setting, and two thirds having both placements in a statutory setting. The proportion of graduates securing permanent employment at the end of their studies was also high. By the end of the training, 93 per cent of Cohort 1 respondents had accepted posts as social workers, while the figure for Cohort Two was just under 80 per cent with some applications still being processed.

Cohort Three of *Step Up* began in 2014 and involves 310 participants from 76 local authorities. It has the potential to go to greater scale and I should like to see it do so. It is important to state that, in my view, *Step Up* and *Frontline* (see below) are not alternatives but have the potential to complement one another. *Frontline* is aimed at bringing a relatively small number of outstanding individuals into social work and is based, at the moment, in just two centres, London and Manchester. *Step Up* has the potential to work with a very large proportion of local authorities and deliver into the profession a greater number of high quality, if not always outstanding, individuals. For that reason I very much hope to see the continued funding of *Step Up* beyond cohort three.

## **Frontline**

*Frontline* has developed at remarkable speed and, relatively soon after the concept was first proposed as a possible new route into social work, it is recruiting its first 100 students. Based on the very successful *Teach First* initiative it will offer participants qualification as social workers within 13 months and a Master's degree qualification within two years.

Training will begin in 2014 at a Summer Institute, which will provide five weeks of intensive preparation before students start work within a local authority. Students will work together in groups of four in child protection work in either Greater Manchester or Greater London, being supervised throughout by an experienced social worker. In Year 2



as qualified social workers they will be managing their own cases while completing their Masters degree.

The rapid development of *Frontline* and its pathway to qualified social work status in just thirteen months has divided the academic profession with the largest and most vocal group expressing robust opposition. There is no doubt that the initiative has developed at speed. Not surprisingly, therefore, the rationale for its introduction can sometimes appear a little thin. On *Frontline's* website for example, they list ten facts about the world of children's social care. But it's a simplistic list, concentrating entirely on children in care, and in confusing correlation with causation it perpetuates old myths about the failure of the children's care system (and by implication, the failure of children's social work).

And I am troubled about the extent to which *Frontline* is being marketed to those who might want just a brief taste of social work rather than entering social work as a career. The encouragement to potential applicants to the Civil Service Fast stream to complete *Frontline* first and defer entry to the Civil Service, suggesting *Frontline* should be no more than a step up to something better, is unfortunate. One of the great achievements of *Teach First* has been to deliver high quality individuals into teaching who have - contrary to some expectations - stayed there. If *Frontline* is to be as successful as *Teach First* it is vital that participants do not view it simply as a platform for better remunerated careers.

On the other hand *Frontline* has been marketed with immense energy and enthusiasm. As a consequence, it has excited a great deal of interest with 5,931 registering for the application process for the 100 places. And the *Frontline* curriculum is appropriately sensitive to the skills required in children's social work, and child protection particularly. Some critics argue that the 13-month qualification period is too short. I don't think that criticism holds water. The truth is - as one senior academic at the University of Kent, Professor David Shemmings, told *The Economist* earlier this year - that *Frontline* students will get about the same amount of face-to-face lecturing before qualification as students on a traditional university course. If *Frontline* succeeds in attracting the best of graduates and, after completion, a large proportion remain in social work - measures which will be established by independent evaluation of the initiative - it will be a most worthwhile initiative.

## Recommendations

12. In further revisions to the allocation of bursaries and in the light of the financial need further to reduce expenditure, postgraduate study should be protected.
13. *Step Up* should be funded for a fourth year and beyond as a now proven way of bringing high calibre graduates into children's social work.
14. Entry to *Step Up* should be open only to those of the intellectual calibre sufficient to obtain, currently, an Upper Second Degree. But where that ability can be demonstrated to the satisfaction of the employer, possession of an Upper Second or First should not be mandatory.
15. *Frontline* should seek to recruit individuals the majority of whom are likely to stay in social work for a considerable time. In evaluating the initiative, the proportion of *Frontline* graduates remaining in practice should be an important measure of success.

## Part Five: A children's social work degree?

When the social work degree was introduced in 2003 it was decided that the degree should be a generic one and that students should undertake practice placements in two contrasting service settings (generally a children's setting and an adult setting). By contrast, and before the introduction of the degree, many Diploma students were allowed a degree of specialisation, aimed at preparing them, once qualified, either to work with adults or children. When that option was removed, immediate concerns were expressed that generic degree graduates would not have sufficient knowledge and experience for the challenges of children's social work. Those concerns have grown rather than abated, although a considerable body of opinion, particularly from academia, robustly rejects the proposition that the generic degree provides an inadequate platform for children's social work.

The General Social Care Council (GSCC) examined the issue in 2008, and after research by Blewett and Tunstill, concluded that children's issues were being adequately covered in the generic degree. But they admitted that:

*The sample in the research is small and it is interesting that there is other evidence coming forward that suggests that the depth of understanding of new social workers is variable.*

A year later, in his 2009 report, Lord Laming challenged the GSCC conclusion:

*At the heart of the difficulty in preparing social workers through a degree course is that, without an opportunity to specialise in child protection work or even in children's social work, students are covering too much ground without learning the skills and knowledge to support any particular client group well.*

Lord Laming's concern was not confined to anxiety about the academic content of the degree:

*There are few placements offered in children's services and fewer still at the complex end of child protection or children 'in need'. It is currently possible to qualify as a social worker without any experience of child protection, or even of working within a local authority, and to be holding a full caseload of child protection cases immediately upon appointment.*

He concluded that:

*The current degree programme should be reformed to allow for specialism after the first year, with no graduate entering frontline children's social work without having completed a specialised degree including a placement within a frontline statutory children's social work team, or having completed further professional development and children's social work experience to build on generic training.*

The 2009 Select Committee probed this issue and noted that in the evidence they had received, those speaking on behalf of employers were typically the most supportive of introducing specialisation. The Chief Executive of the Children's Workforce Development Council told the Committee:

*When the newly-qualified social worker joins them, our employers need to know that they understand what it is like to operate as a children's social worker in the children's services context, understanding the wider integrated working that is underway.*

The Association of Directors of Children's Services told the Committee there was a strong justification for specialisation in initial training. And Janet Galley, an independent consultant with 40 years' experience in social work and inspection, argued that:

*The reality is that there is now little commonality, apart from the basic principles and values, in the work of the adult social worker and the children and families' social worker. The legislative, policy, practice and organisational frameworks are completely different, and the opportunities for working in depth across the interface minimal... It could be argued that it is equally important that children and families social workers understand the role of teachers, named nurses and doctors, and police officers working in child protection, as it is to understand the role of the social worker for adults.*

The Social Work Task Force, established to undertake a comprehensive review of frontline social work practice had been more cautious about Lord Laming's recommendation. Dame Moira Gibb, the Task Force Chair, spoke of:

*Not wanting to pull up the drawbridge once [children's and adults'] services had separated.*

Academic evidence to the Committee was adamantly opposed to specialisation. Professor Hilary Tompsett, Chair of the Joint Universities Council social work committee, argued that:

*In order to do a good job with children and families, it is clear that we have to recognise that children live in families, they live in communities. The needs of the adults around them will be absolutely critical... If social workers did not understand what the issues were for the parents, and the law in relation to mental health and childcare, they would not be able to give such good service to children and families.*

The Select Committee was persuaded and, although they observed that social workers were often insufficiently prepared for work with children, they supported the continuation of a generic degree. In my more recent discussions with academics I found generally – although not always – continued and profound resistance to the notion that there should be greater specialisation. It was put to me that children's social workers need to understand, for example, adult issues including those around mental health, domestic violence and drug misuse. And so they do. No one would argue – certainly I would not – that children's social workers do not need to know about those and other adult issues. But they do not, I would maintain, need to know quite as much about issues relating to elderly people, which now amounts to about two thirds of adult social work. And children's social workers who spend weeks in placement practice in, for example, residential care homes for the elderly could spend their time much more constructively in a children's setting. If that happened they would be better prepared at graduation for the challenge of children's work.

The reality is that demographic changes are stretching the notion of social work as a single profession. According to a House of Commons Library briefing paper in 2010, there are currently around 10 million people in the UK aged 65 and over. But that figure will

increase by more than 50% by 2020 and the number will have doubled by 2050. Within that total, the number of very old people will show particular growth. The current population of around three million people aged 80 and over will grow to six million by 2030 and eight million by 2050. As a consequence a greater integration of adult social care and adult health care seems inevitable. As one senior academic admitted to me, that will necessarily re-open the question of the generic degree.

Peter Hay is in an ideal position to offer a view as he manages both adult and children's social workers in Birmingham, England's largest local authority. He suggested that there was a middle ground of social work training which both children's and adults' workers needed. But he argued that building on that middle ground, there now needed to be specialisation. At least one Dean of a university training social workers agrees. He told me that rather than combining study of adult and children's social work in the generic degree, there was a strong case for combining a study of children's social work with Health Visiting and he regretted that, to date, he had been discouraged from pioneering such an initiative.

## **Teaching time on the social work degree**

In the past, the lack of teaching time available in a typical social work degree has been used to support the case for genericism. Professor Dominelli, representing Universities UK, told the Select Committee that three years was:

*A very short time... to learn what I would argue is one of the most difficult professional tasks in the world.*

Universities UK's rationale was that the limited time available for academic study meant that specialisation would necessitate the exclusion of vital material. I take the alternative view. There is too little time available within the generic degree for adequate coverage of some vital issues. Were social work undergraduate and postgraduate study to be longer in duration, or of greater intensity, there might be greater force in the arguments in favour of genericism. It is indisputable that knowledge of social work across the age ranges might sometimes be beneficial to a children's practitioner. But I would argue that there is too little time, whether in a Bachelor's or a Master's programme of typical intensity, to allow such breadth of study.

The Department of Health requirements for social work training include a requirement that the number of hours spent in structured academic learning, under the direction of an educator, are sufficient to ensure that students meet the required level of competence. Although there is no prescription, the Department's expectation is that achieving competence will require an academic input of at least 200 days or 1,200 hours. I have found it difficult adequately to assess just how frequently that expectation is met. A number of universities claim that the burden they put on students is onerous (although some, quietly, claim that other institutions are not as conscientious).

No student or newly qualified social worker suggested to me that the academic burden on him or her – in terms of hours or days they were in teaching – was onerous. Some suggested that that the overall input was too little and that the amount of teaching

dedicated to some key issues, particularly practical issues (the core assessment of children in need was often mentioned) was inadequate. One group of students facing fees of £9,000 a year were blunt enough to challenge the value for money of their degree in terms of the amount of teaching they received.

Masters students at one very good university told me that their academic input was limited to about 64 days over the course of the two-year degree. A particularly able group of undergraduates at the same university calculated that over the course of their three-year degree they had academic input for only 80 days. At another University - one which told me that they worked their students relatively hard - the total number of days during which undergraduates were taught seemed to be around 130 days. What is clear is that, compared to undergraduate study to enter professions like medicine or accountancy, the amount of teaching on a social work degree, at Bachelor's or Master's level, is severely limited.

For those intending to become children's social workers, more of that teaching, and both practice placements, need to be relevant to the world of children. That is not to say that the degree should only teach things which are exclusively about children, or that both placements must be within a children's setting. I accept entirely the relevance of, for example, sociology, social policy and research methodology both to adult and children's social work. And I can see the potential benefit to a children's social worker of a placement that offers experience of, for example, domestic violence or mental health. But when the time dedicated to teaching over the term of either the Bachelor or Master's degree is relatively light, and when days on practice placement are limited, it is vital that more time is dedicated to core issues. So, for example, the study of human growth and development across the whole life cycle, currently taught at many universities, could be more usefully replaced by a more concentrated study of child development.

The alternative is that we will continue to produce some graduates whose knowledge of key issues is inadequate. At least one large local authority, conscious of serious gaps in new graduates' knowledge, puts some newly qualified social workers through a basic course introducing them to safeguarding. More authorities may have to resort to that unless the specialisation nettle is grasped. As Lord Laming told me last July:

*I think the well intended legislation that brought in combined social care services in 1971 had the negative effect of confusing a generic service with generic staff. During the Victoria Climbié Inquiry I was shocked by the repeated evidence of qualified staff being ignorant of the legislation under which they should have been operating and which should have underpinned their practice. Social work training has too often become a general education. I suspect it has been captured by academics more comfortable with theory than preparation to practice.*

It is sometimes argued that specialisation is impractical because, at the outset of a degree, students do not know whether, after graduation, they wish to work with adults or children. That has not been my experience. Almost every student and newly qualified worker I have met told me that they were confident about the area in which they wished to work before, or very soon after, beginning their studies. My conviction is that students would have greater confidence in degrees which allowed specialisation and, upon graduation, so would their potential employers.

I am not however suggesting that we split the social work profession. Those following a specialised course of study to equip them to work with children or adults would still qualify as a social worker. And it may be that, at some point in the future, an individual might want to move from children's to adult work or in the opposite direction. Such a move might require some element of conversion training. But in terms of registration and the legal ability to practice, I believe social work should remain a single profession but with specialised degree programmes.

## **Recommendations**

16. Universities should be encouraged to develop degrees for those intending to work in children's social work. Such degrees would build on a first year common to all social workers, with a second and third year focusing exclusively on children and related issues.
17. The requirement that social workers have placements in contrasting service settings (typically, one with children and one with adults) should be relaxed to allow those intent on a career in children's social work to spend all 170 days of placement in a children's setting.

## **Part Six: A note about professional recognitions for non-graduates working in social work**

The degree in social work was introduced in 2003 and was intended to improve the supply, quality and status of social workers. While there have been improvements in the supply, this has been at some cost as newly qualified social workers either fail to enter the profession or leave it relatively soon. There is little evidence to support the contention that the quality of social workers has generally risen. Certainly, since 2003, anxiety about the calibre of social workers has been greater than before the introduction of the degree. And the status of social workers has not visibly improved since 2003 and has probably fallen.

In this paper I have made a number of recommendations, which I believe have the potential to improve the calibre of students entering university to study social work, achieve greater consistency in standards of education at universities, and produce more graduates who are adequately prepared for the challenge of children's social work.

My brief was to take a look at university education of social workers. It was not to review the general principle, established in 2003, that social work be an entirely graduate profession. But I want to suggest that the wisdom of that decision is worthy of review.

My experience of running Barnardo's, the UK's biggest children's voluntary organisation, and confirmed by discussions with some local authority employers, is that there are many extremely effective social work practitioners whose work, while being vital, does not require validation through university study, certainly not through the obtaining of a Bachelors or a Masters degree. Many such workers are able and effective and hugely valued by their employers. I believe their contribution deserves greater professional recognition. I am referring here to those working with families in support roles but not engaged in the most complex assessments; those with limited or no managerial responsibilities; those who are unlikely to be making key decisions about legal interventions and appearing in court to defend those decisions. Such individuals are a significant proportion of the children's social care workforce. They do not need to be graduates.

In their evidence to the 2009 Select Committee, the Association of Professors of Social Work (APSW) made a tentative proposal that there might be two types of qualified social worker in England. They told the Committee that local authorities should build on the Foundation Degree in Social Care, making that a qualification route for:

*Those who may not have the critical thinking, capacity and intellectual skills to be social workers.*

They went on to argue that, accompanying the greater use of the Foundation Degree for this second tier of social work practitioner, a higher intellectual capacity might be required for those admitted to the full degree. These individuals would be those needing:

*The critical analysis and appraisal skills [needed for] collating dispersed and diverse information, making complex and crucial decisions based on sometimes incomplete and possibly conflicting information, managing risks whilst also seeking not to be unnecessarily restrictive, and being able*



*to present judgements logically and cogently. They would also be the leaders of the future within social care and social work, promoting its value and competence base, and ensuring its contribution is developed and safeguarded for the benefit of children, families, and disabled and older people.*

I think the principle behind that proposal is worthy of further consideration. If such a route was followed it might lead to a workforce of fewer, but intellectually more able graduate social workers, supported by those with qualifications short of a full degree. Those more modest qualifications might include the Foundation Degree, as suggested by APSW, but also other attainments, including National Vocational Qualifications.

Probation officers and social workers once obtained the identical professional qualification, the Certificate in Qualified Social Work (CQSW) and social work and probation work were seen as two parts of the same professional family. They have drifted apart academically in the last twenty years or so, although the families and individuals they work with are often indistinguishable in terms of their disadvantage and often-chaotic life style.

I believe the Probation Service has made important progress recently in acknowledging and recognising the skills and professionalism of many of its non-graduate workforce: those able to demonstrate professional competence but who do not possess a degree. In the Probation Service, those holding the professional title of probation officer have generally qualified – in a process familiar to social work - through obtaining a dedicated Bachelor's or Master's degree. Probation service officers do not have a degree but achieve a limited professional recognition through qualifying, while at work, with a Vocational Level 3 Diploma in Probation Practice. Able probation service officers can, after further study, become qualified as probation officers. But from the point at which they gain their diploma, and qualify as probation service officers, they are able to work with all but the highest risk offenders, including assessing the risk of offenders harming others, and the need for interventions that might reduce re-offending. Crucially, while under managerial supervision from senior probation officers, probation service officers are allowed to manage their own cases.

There are a number of examples in children's social work of dedicated training courses for social work support staff, some of which are well regarded. The development of a level three qualification, *Work with Parents*, was funded by the previous Government. It includes teaching on subjects including child development and attachment theory and it is still thriving in some local authorities.

There is a level three qualification for those working in children's residential care and consultation is beginning on the development of a level five (foundation degree) alternative. But none of these qualifications confers any recognised professional status on the practitioner.

If my recommendation that there should be an agreed curriculum for undergraduate and postgraduate social work training were to be accepted, then I believe that such a curriculum could also provide the foundation for a secondary qualification for non-graduate social work assistants. Such a qualification would allow practitioners to obtain a measure of professional status, fulfill their potential and enjoy greater autonomy. If those

staff were allowed to manage less complex cases it might help considerably with the pressures of case management and lift some of the burden, in terms of caseload, from graduate social workers.

More importantly, I believe that the option of an alternative, work-based route to limited professional recognition might prove very popular. Some individuals who take the undergraduate route to becoming a qualified social worker – because there is no other – might prefer to pursue the secondary route. And I am confident that many able practitioners, for whom three years of undergraduate study is an impossibility whether for domestic or financial reasons, would be attracted to the alternative.

## **Recommendation**

18. Ministers should consider whether there is a case for introducing a work based, non-graduate qualification for those in children's social care. Such a qualification, while providing an alternative to the undergraduate degree, would provide a measure of professional autonomy including, under appropriate supervision, the management of cases.

## Summary of recommendations

1. Universities are sovereign bodies and it is entirely appropriate and justifiable, not least in terms of student choice, that social work degree courses vary. But there needs to be a concise, single document drafted, drawing on the advice of the College of Social Work, academics and, particularly, employers, which offers in a single publication, a GMC style summary of what a newly qualified children's social worker needs to understand. Such a document should cover not only factual issues but those which are best described as philosophical or attitudinal. I recommend that the Chief Social Worker For Children take the lead in drafting such a document. To provide a foundation for that work I suggest she needs first to draft a definition of children's social work satisfactory to the College of Social Work, employers and Ministers.

2. Agreement needs to be reached with universities to ensure that the minimum UCAS requirement of 240 points for A-level students is not breached save in exceptional circumstances.

3. The calibre of students entering through Access courses and with qualifications other than A levels needs to be audited at individual Institution level.

I recommend that the College of Social Work provide that assurance as part of a radically more rigorous endorsement process (see part three).

4. The Department for Education should consider whether the role of HCPC in regulating the social work profession, including prescribing standards of proficiency and approving HEI social work courses, duplicates the role of the College of Social Work, and, if so, whether those duties should be transferred to the College.

5. The College of Social Work endorsement scheme needs to be compulsory for all institutions offering the social work degree. An HEI unwilling to agree to the endorsement process should not be allowed to train social workers.

6. The College needs radically to increase the rigour of the endorsement scheme. Teaching should be observed; entry standards scrutinised; the extent to which course sizes might inhibit individual student development probed; the curriculum examined; and the rigour of examinations and other forms of student assessment audited.

7. The endorsement process needs also to include an evaluation of the quality of practice placements. Universities which fail to provide every student with at least one statutory placement (or an alternative which is genuinely comparable and accepted by employers as comparable) should not receive endorsement.

8. The Education Support Grant should be distributed only to universities which can demonstrate the quality of their placements, including providing every student with statutory experience, or an alternative experience which is genuinely comparable.

9. The College must be willing to fail institutions, temporarily or permanently, and to publicise such failings.
10. The College needs to recruit a more senior cross section of assessors, particularly from the ranks of employers, to secure the credibility of the endorsement process. This will almost certainly necessitate an increased level of compensation.
11. If the College membership is unwilling to agree to this more robust role for the College, an alternative assessor of the quality of social work education at individual HEIs will need to be found.
12. In further revisions to the allocation of bursaries and in the light of the financial need further to reduce expenditure, postgraduate study should be protected.
13. *Step Up* should be funded for a fourth year and beyond as a now proven way of bringing high calibre graduates into children's social work.
14. Entry to *Step Up* should be open only to those of the intellectual calibre sufficient to obtain, currently, an Upper Second Degree. But where that ability can be demonstrated to the satisfaction of the employer, possession of an Upper Second or First should not be mandatory.
15. *Frontline* should seek to recruit individuals, the majority of whom are likely to stay in social work for a considerable time. In evaluating the initiative, the proportion of *Frontline* graduates remaining in practice should be an important measure of success.
16. Universities should be encouraged to develop degrees for those intending to work in children's social work. Such degrees would build on a first year common to all social workers, with a second and third year focussing exclusively on children and related issues.
17. The requirement that social workers have placements in contrasting service settings (typically, one with children and one with adults) should be relaxed to allow those intent on a career in children's social work to spend all 170 days of placement in a children's setting.
18. Ministers should consider whether they agree there is a case for introducing a work based, non-graduate qualification for those in children's social care. Such a qualification, while providing an alternative to the undergraduate degree, could provide a measure of professional autonomy including, under appropriate supervision, the management of cases.

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