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Becoming a Social Worker

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Published in:
British Journal of Social Work

DOI:
[10.1093/bjsw/bcx157](https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcx157)

Publication date:
2018

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication in Discovery Research Portal](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Mcculloch, T., & Taylor, S. (2018). Becoming a Social Worker: Realising a Shared Approach to Professional Learning? *British Journal of Social Work*, 48(8), 2272-2290. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcx157>

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Becoming a social worker: realising a shared approach professional learning?

Abstract

Social work education has again been subject to scrutiny and review across the UK. Different countries have set about this task in different ways. In England we can observe a top-down process driven by government; in Scotland the approach has evolved more collaboratively. This paper discusses the recent Review of Social Work Education in Scotland within the broader pressures and opportunities of public service reform. At the heart of the Review findings is a simple but timely conclusion: we need to realise a shared approach to professional learning, across the social work career path. This means moving beyond recent preoccupations with social work education, and polarising approaches to reform, towards a genuinely co-owned approach in which professional learning is a shared responsibility and a central feature of what it is to be a social work professional. In closing, the paper considers how we might realise a shared approach to professional learning in Scotland and beyond.

Keywords:

Social work, social work education, professional learning, professional education, social services, reform

Introduction

Once again, social work education has been subject to revived scrutiny and critique (Webb, 2017; Grant et al., 2016; Hunt et al., 2016; Cartney, 2016; Narey, 2014; Frost, 2013). In England, debate has been fierce, fuelled largely by what became known as 'Cameron's social work reforms', describing the social work reform programme set in motion by the then UK prime minister David Cameron. The tenor of this particular reform project has been top down, sweeping and combative, with much talk of 'tackl[ing] inadequate children's services' (Stevenson, 2015) and 'poorly trained' social workers considered 'not ready for frontline practice' (Stevenson, 2016). Indeed, in some quarters, remedying the 'problem' of social work education and training has become 'arguably the most important issue to be tackled' (Department for Education, 2015). The critique and politicisation of social work education in the UK is not new, particularly amongst the political right. In 1991, for example, in response to child tragedies, the then Conservative Secretary of State for Health, Virginia Bottomley, famously called for a force of 'streetwise grannies' to staff social services, criticising the alleged intellectualisation of social work education. More recently, the intense media and political 'handling' of a series of child deaths in England, particularly that of baby Peter Connelly in 2007, is recognised as providing the catalyst for the top-down and arguably polarising reforms now transforming social work education in England (Kettle et al., 2016).

In Scotland, the recent review of social work education has followed a more moderate path. Though vulnerable to similar pressures, Scotland's rapidly developing political context has

provided some protection from the media and political populism displayed in England. As Smith (2016) argues, approaches to social welfare in Scotland have long revealed distinguishing features, reflecting Scotland's particular historical conditions and institutions. However, in the wake of devolution in 1998, the formation of a minority SNP administration in 2007, the SNP's landslide victory in 2011, and the transforming process of the Scottish independence referendum in 2014, many observe that Scotland's political identity, culture and method has 'changed utterly' (Salmond, 2014). Specifically, the SNP government has repeatedly asserted its intention to deliver a distinctive Scottish politics, responsive to 'Scottish needs'. The development of a 'progressive' approach to Scottish social welfare has been central to this vision, rooted in principles of solidarity, social justice and equality. As Mooney and Scott (2016: 249) observe:

The reframing of welfare in Scotland, increasingly imagined in terms that stress Scottish progressiveness is ... a key plank in the envisioning of an Independent Scotland. As in Finland and Sweden, the symbolic role and vision of the welfare state strongly tugs at ideas and feelings of inclusion, belonging, collectiveness and community.

Linked to this, the SNP government has outlined an equally progressive approach to public service reform, centred on principles of participation, prevention, partnership and performance, as detailed in the Christie Commission report (Scottish Government, 2011).

Though most observe that government ambitions are yet to be fully realised across these areas, the shift towards a more progressive and participatory politics in Scotland, driven in part by a broader politics of national autonomy and nation building, has made for a more collaborative

approach to social service development and reform in Scotland. The Review of Social Work Education in Scotland sits within this developing matrix.

Globally, there exist similar indicators of review and reform (Hunt et al., 2016; van Pelt et al., 2013; Frost, 2013; Agllias, 2010). Despite differences in approach and emphasis, across western jurisdictions, social work education is again under scrutiny with debate fuelled by common anxieties and stimuli. These include new economies of welfare, changing social demographics, increases in service demand, political anxieties around risk, related anxieties around newly qualified workers' 'readiness to practice', the rise of centralised regulation and control, and a seeming unerring faith in the relationship between reform and improvement (Broucker and De Wit, 2015). As Cannan (1994: 5) observes, that education systems should become a particular target in seasons of politically driven reform should not surprise: 'for it is seen both as the site of 'old' attitudes and as the locus for the inculcation of the new'.

As associated pressures play out within higher education, in the form of new public management and sustained economic uncertainty (Broucker and De Wit, 2015), this political-professional interplay makes for a particularly challenging change environment. As can be seen from recent social work education reforms in England - specifically the rise of fast-track, specialist and work-based learning models, in such circumstances it is tempting for both 'sides' of the professional learning community to retreat into our respective silos, now in the name of efficiencies (see MacAlister, 2016), and/or to place our faith in 'new and improved' models of learning that promise to yield a bigger, better or less troublesome return. This is, arguably, the

promise and project of new public management reform. But it doesn't always deliver and findings from recent review activity across the UK suggest that there is little to be gained and much to be lost by hasty investment in untested models of learning that threaten to distance and divide professional communities that need to unite (Forrester, 2016; House of Commons Education Committee, 2016).

This paper begins by discussing recent UK initiatives to reform social work education paying particular attention to the Review in Scotland. Drawing on the Review findings, we argue that social work education must be understood as part of a broader process of professional learning, a process and outcome that requires substantive contributions from all involved in education, learning and practice. Accordingly, the paper calls for a shared approach to professional learning, across the social work career path. This means moving beyond recent preoccupations with qualifying education and polarising approaches to reform, towards a genuinely co-owned approach in which professional learning is a shared responsibility and a central feature of what it is to be a social work professional. In closing, the paper considers how we might advance a shared approach to professional learning in Scotland and beyond.

Locating social work education

Social work is a contested profession (Jones, 2014). It's identity, form and function is driven simultaneously by a dominant state and its shifting mechanisms of welfare, as by marginalised

publics whose role in co-producing welfare outcomes, and the mechanisms by which these are achieved, can no longer be ignored. That social work sits janus faced between these two entities is widely accepted if sometimes overlooked (Beresford, 2016).

Added to that constant, across the UK, social work is being contested in a landscape of relentless public service transformation and reform. As outlined, in England the pace and scale of social work reform is acute, currently taking in an 'overhaul' of children's services, 'radical changes' to education and training, and the active dismantling of the sector's professional body – soon to be replaced by a new 'regulatory' body with a 'relentless focus' on quality and standards (Morgan, 2016). In Scotland, reform has been less divisive but no less demanding. Post devolution, Scottish social services are implementing an unprecedented volume of legislative and policy change, significant transformations in governance and service delivery structures and significant and sustained public service spending cuts (Accounts Commission, 2016). Though approaches to reform may differ across the UK countries, the observed distance between reform ambition and on the ground realities is raising important questions about the extent to which politically-driven reform, enacted in climates of rising demand and diminishing resource, has the capacity to deliver desired outcomes. As McNicoll (2016) observes, if a key aim of current reform is to strengthen the sector, its workforce and its outcomes then 'continuous criticism, new calls for change and short term funding initiatives or 'innovations' that have no evidence base to support them' seems a particularly corrosive way to go about it.

Added to the above, we appear to have entered a broader cultural space in which fear of getting it wrong, or not getting it 'right' has reached new levels within the profession (Whyte, 2017). Emerging and newly-qualified social workers in particular report disturbing levels of fear, anxiety and emotional distress, linked in part to what many describe as a compliance culture now dominating key aspects of social service work (Grant et al., 2016; Munro, 2011).

This current blend of ambition, demand and strain is perhaps part of what it is to work and become in a contested profession, but messages from the field suggest that the balance is not where it needs to be and that the profession is struggling (Accounts Commission, 2016; Duschinsky et al., 2016).

Though much is often made of the gap between practice and the academy, social work education exists in a similarly strained space (Cartney, 2015). As outlined, in addition to the considerable financial challenges facing the UK University sector, and the problems this presents for programmes who can't easily bolster their income by developing a suite of international programmes, across the UK and beyond there has emerged considerable critique around the purpose, method and effectiveness of social work education. In England, recent controversy centres around two reviews of social work education which, despite being commissioned within weeks of each other, reveal divergent agendas, approaches, and conclusions.

Professor Croisdale-Appleby's review was commissioned by Liberal Democrat MP Norman Lamb in the Department of Health, with the stated intention of upgrading the quality and professionalism of social work through education. Entitled 'Re-visioning Social Work Education', the review is extensive and concludes in a detailed list of recommendations spanning student selection, university-based learning, practice placements and continuing professional development. The report identifies a key challenge facing social work education as a lack of clarity around what social work education, and by extension practice, is for. In doing so it identifies a need to be more ambitious about what we want and expect of professional social workers, across career journeys. Accordingly, Croisdale-Appleby rejects a training model in favour of an integrated and continuous approach to education and learning, governed by three key professional identity outcomes. Drawing on the General Medical Council's *Tomorrow's Doctors* framework (2009), these are mapped as: social worker as practitioner, social worker as professional, and social worker as social scientist. In this respect and others, Croisdale-Appleby resists polarising academic and practice communities and instead calls for greater collaboration between the two, with increased resource to enable that. For Croisdale-Appleby, *improving* education and practice requires a bold re-visioning of social work's identity and outcomes, and investment in the integrated and career-long learning methods required to deliver on that. The report concludes that our ability to rise to this re-visioned identity and method is critical to our ability to articulate and advance social work's contribution in an integrated and competitive professional landscape.

A few weeks following Croisdale-Appleby's commission, Sir Martin Narey was commissioned by the then Conservative Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, to review the initial education of children's social workers. Narey (2014) concluded that the 'training system' within too many universities was not fit for purpose, some of which was seen to rest on an alleged over-emphasis on issues of inequality, empowerment and anti-oppressive practice. As Gove put it, the problem with social work education was that it had 'become too ideological – blaming social injustice rather than individual actions for the collapse of their lives' (Ramesh, 2013). Narey's solution was a move away from generic social work education, and the academic institutions and orthodoxies in which it is observed to occur, to fast-track, specialist and mostly 'on the job' training, so ensuring that qualified social workers enter the workplace 'practice ready'. Though many of Narey's recommendations sit in tension with existing research on professional learning (Boud and Falchikov, 2006; Clouder, 2003), even before publication, his conclusions prompted pronouncements by Gove promising an 'overhaul' of social work education in England, much of which is now being enacted.

The purpose of this brief review of the politics and policy of social work education reform in England, is to highlight that the 'what', 'why', 'how' and 'who' of social work education is also much contested. Just as in practice, what different communities want from social work education vacillates in accordance with the shifting pressures, priorities and ideologies playing out in our political and professional world. On the one hand, this is as it should be. Social work exists and evolves in the social world and social work education must evolve with it. However, rapidly shifting environs and politics necessitate caution, particularly in seasons of reform.

Though few might argue with reform emphases of efficiency, effectiveness and performance, how these outcomes are prioritised and best achieved is contested (Broucker and De Wit, 2015). Even if we see merit in Narey's conclusions regarding qualifying education, in a profession committed to strengths-based, joined-up and participatory practice, it is difficult to see merit in his method. In the midst of significant social shifts it is right to ask more from our profession and from the learning processes which underpin it, but it is naïve to think this can be achieved through the often deficit-based and polarising impulses of new public management reform (Hammerschmid et al., 2013). If we mean to improve the outcomes of professional education and learning then we need to do that critically and collaboratively, starting from a negotiated vision of what it is we want to achieve, and a commitment, even in the face of significant obstacles, to deliver on that together.

Reviewing social work education in Scotland

It is against the above backdrop that the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) initiated the Review of Social Work Education in Scotland. Before tracing the contours of the Review, we provide a brief outline of the shape of social work education in Scotland.

Social work education in Scotland is delivered by eight University providers at honours degree level or above. Programmes are delivered via undergraduate and postgraduate routes over four years and two years respectively. The introduction of an honours degree level

qualification in 2003 followed the establishment of a national regulatory body for social services, the SSSC, established via the Regulation of Care (Scotland) Act (2001). In the same year, the Scottish Executive published *The Framework for Social Work Education in Scotland* (2003) which set out the requirements for qualifying programmes and the standards which students must meet. In 2006, the Scottish Executive published the *Key Capabilities in Child Care and Protection*, designed to strengthen the degree framework and standards and ensure a 'solid foundation' in child care and protection.

The introduction of a degree level qualification and the accompanying framework and standards, represented a significant step forward for social work education in Scotland. The degree set out to strengthen social work's professional identity and standing and appeared to recognise the importance and complexity of doing so. The accompanying Framework and standards underscored the necessary integration of academic and practice knowledge and skill, the necessity of reflective and analytic practice, and the importance of ethical and moral reasoning in the 'often fiercely debated' environs of practice (Scottish Executive, 2003:19). In this respect, the degree continued broader UK drives for modernisation across social services while committing to doing so via an integrated, critical and value-led approach to professional education.

A decade on, in late 2013, the SSSC announced a broad intention: to develop a new and different approach to professional learning through a learning strategy that addresses qualifying and post-qualifying learning for the social service workforce. Noting developments in

England, announcement of the need for 'a new and different approach' to professional learning prompted some unease amongst the mostly academic community assembled. Social work education providers work in close partnership with the SSSC as regulator and, at the time, each had recently undergone a successful process of review and reapproval. The pressing question was why? What was the problem that the 'new approach' sought to respond to? Initial and perhaps 'in the moment' attempts to articulate a rationale did not make for a smooth start. Some sweeping and mostly critical statements emerged, or were heard, which for most felt dated, out of touch with developments in Scottish social work education and lacking in evidence. Early tensions gave rise to dialogue, critical enquiry and collaboration, however, our starting point suggests that a key challenge circling recent reforms to social work education and practice may relate to a failure to start from a shared and evidence-based understanding of the problem or challenge. As Coutts and Brotchie (2017) observe, though we are making clear strides in Scotland towards a more joined up, outcome focussed and participative approach to public policy development, 'the approach to evidence isn't there yet'. The result, often, is policy led evidence rather than evidence led policy (Tunstall, 2016).

At the same time, the Social Work Services Strategic Forum was established as a partnership forum, chaired by the Minister for Children and Young People, to support the development and delivery of a *Vision and Strategy for Social Services in Scotland* (Scottish Government, 2015).

The Forum established the following vision for Scottish social services (p.5):

Our vision is a socially just Scotland with excellent social services delivered by a skilled and valued workforce which works with others to empower, support and protect people, with a focus on prevention, early intervention and enablement.

The accompanying strategy included a commitment to review approaches to social work education to ensure that social service workers joining the workforce have relevant skills, knowledge and values and continually update them throughout their careers. Concurrent to this, the SSSC commissioned two studies evaluating the readiness of newly qualified social workers (NQSW) during the first year of employment. The first study, conducted by academics (Grant et al., 2016) explored NQSW perceptions of their readiness for practice. The second, conducted by the Centre for Excellence for Looked after Children (Welch et al., 2014), explored employer perceptions of the same. Further, the SSSC launched an 'ideas platform' inviting all stakeholders to submit ideas on how the qualifying degree can best deliver social workers fit for 21st century practice. Together, these processes established a clearer basis and method for the review, aligned to the improvement-led and participatory approach to policy development discussed earlier.

From here, the Review advanced in three phases. In Phase One a working group was established with a broad membership encompassing social workers, students, people who use services, employers, academics, the SSSC, Social Work Scotland and other key stakeholders. Key to this phase was moving beyond anecdotal, deficit-based and often divisive constructions of 'the problem', towards an evidence-led understanding of the state of social work education in Scotland, facing opportunities and challenges, and a shared vision for our future. Through an

extended process of talking, listening and analysis, Phase One concluded that social work education in Scotland is 'fit for purpose' but is facing significant challenges similar to those facing the profession as a whole. Linked to this, Phase One identified a number of areas for further enquiry, spanning: integrated learning; professional standards; selection; learning philosophy; curriculum; involving people who use services; community development; inter-professional learning; future skills; practice learning; university-employer partnerships and professional leadership. Though there is considerable activity around these themes, the review found that much activity occurs in a knowledge vacuum, leaving learning initiatives vulnerable to anecdote, political or professional whim and/or change for change sake. More broadly, Phase One concluded that social work education, properly conceptualised, is a shared endeavour requiring significant, sustained and joined up contributions from academics, professional leaders, practitioners, people who use services, learners and others (SSSC, 2015). Though a shared approach has long been written into Scottish social work education, initial findings suggested that sustained rationalisations across practice and the academy were resulting in partnership-light models of learning, to the detriment of learning and practice outcomes (Kettle et al., 2016a).

Informed by the above, Phase Two focussed on developing the evidence base for professional learning in Scotland and engaging a wider constituent group. Twelve inquiry strands were commissioned on the above-noted themes, to be taken forward as partnerships between universities, employers and people who use services. Through this work, participation, dialogue and alliances grew. Interviews, focus groups, and telephone discussions took place across the

country as many embraced the opportunity to deliberate and direct the future of professional learning in Scotland. While this work revealed diverse priorities for professional learning, there emerged considerable consensus regarding the required foundations and frame for professional learning in Scotland. Space precludes detailed discussion of the Phase Two findings however, broadly, Phase Two concluded:

1. The existing generic approach to social work education is the right one. This needs to be understood as a foundation for professional learning rather than the completion of it (McCusker and McCulloch, 2016).
2. Excellent professional learning outcomes require thorough, sustained and innovative integration of academic and practice-based learning opportunities, across the social work career. Each element of this integration needs to be strengthened and resourced (Kettle et al., 2016; McCulloch et al., 2016).
3. Academic curriculums need to more consistently manage the demands of an expanding and global curriculum while demonstrating leadership in sector and professional shifts (McCusker and McCulloch, 2016).
4. Practice-based learning requires development. Once celebrated models of partnership now rest on strained goodwill and require investment and infrastructure if they are to more consistently deliver the outcomes required of them (Gordon and Davis, 2016; Kettle et al., 2016).
5. Learning appears to occupy a marginal place in the professional identity of social workers and social work organisations. This needs to improve and via various routes.

Professional learning needs to become a central part of professional and organisational identities, across the social work career (Grant et al., 2016; Kettle et al., 2016a).

6. Achieving the above requires cultural and structural change. We need to move from a model in which learning partnerships rest on individual and/or organisational goodwill, towards one in which responsibility for professional learning is shared and enabled across social work organisations, communities and actors (Kettle et al., 2016a; Scottish Social Services Council, 2016).

The Review conclusions differ sharply from those reached by Narey (2014) who endorsed a move away from generic social work education towards fast-track, specialist, and training approaches situated mostly in the workplace. Yet, there are clear consistencies between the Review conclusions and those reported by Croisdale-Appleby (2014), particularly regarding the need to realise a more integrated and continuous approach to professional education and learning (messages also echoed within the professional learning literature, see Kettle et al., 2016). For example, recommendation 6 of Croisdale-Appleby's report (2014: 86) concludes:

The greatest opportunity to improve the quality of qualifying education lies in having a sufficient number of practice placements of the highest quality and the educational supervision necessary to ensure their potential is delivered.

Further, recommendation 20 identifies: 'a pressing need for a new comprehensive continuing professional development framework for the profession' (p.89). The assertion of social work education as part of a broader, shared and continuous process of 'professional learning' is important and challenges old and new dualities of education and practice, the university and

the workplace and the learner and practitioner. Yet, despite considerable consensus around these conclusions, it would be naïve to underestimate the challenge. While there exists broad support for the review findings in Scotland there remain considerable questions about if and how we can take these forward. For some, our conclusions and recommendations are overambitious. The challenge of a shared and continuous approach to professional learning is not new and has shown itself to be a difficult nut to crack (Kettle et al., 2016). The idea that we should try to crack it now, at a point when university and practice providers face 'significant challenges' (Accounts Commission 2016) is, for some, ill-timed. For others, our conclusions are not ambitious enough. In a political and fiscal climate where it can appear that something has to be found broken to justify resource to fix it, our language of improvement and enhancement may not quite 'cut it' in the corridors of power and fiscal competition. Most significantly, while the Review work has made important advances, there remain many professionals, across organisational levels and settings, who sit on the margins of this debate and are yet to be persuaded of the centrality of professional learning or of their role in contributing to that. This is arguably the greatest obstacle to realising a shared approach to professional learning and moves us into Phase Three of the Review work, that is, from questions of 'what' to 'how'?

Realising a shared approach?

On reporting on the Review findings at a national stakeholders event, specifically: the need for a shared approach to professional learning, a practitioner asked: 'do we not have that already?'

The question is important and references the longstanding model of partnership framing the delivery of pre-qualifying education in Scotland, which prescribes that learners spend a minimum of 200 days in structured academic learning and 200 days in practice-based settings (Scottish Executive, 2003). The answer is: perhaps, in part. Academic and practice providers contribute to pre-qualifying education principally through the provision of academic and practice-based learning respectively. The challenge is that the Review found that once celebrated models of partnership are now often 'more rhetoric than reality', that responsibility for pre-qualifying learning rests almost entirely with university providers, that the provision of 'placements' is increasingly reliant on 'strained goodwill', and that for these reasons and others the quality and consistency of practice based learning varies significantly. In addition, responsibility for practice learning was found to be almost entirely devolved to a diminishing number of practice educators and learning development leads, with limited engagement from those in senior roles (Kettle et al., 2016; McCulloch et al., 2016). As one Local Authority lead for training and development put it:

I do think the model works really well. But I do think it's a wee bit the Rolls Royce model, it's a wee bit the fabulous experience. And I don't think everybody gets that.

Opportunities vary across the service. (Author et al., p80-81)

Added to this, the above speaks only to qualifying learning. There exists no shared approach to the learning and development of newly qualified social workers in Scotland or to post-qualifying learning more broadly (Gillies, 2016).

The Review's vision of a 'shared approach' to professional learning extends beyond the provision of 'placements' or inter-organisational contribution. A key argument of this paper is that we need to approach social work education outcomes in more integrated and joined up ways. Social work education is not an end in itself, nor can it achieve desired 'ends' by itself. Qualifying education provides an important *foundation* for professional learning, but it is only a foundation. It needs, therefore, to be constructed, critiqued and advanced accordingly. This means advancing social work education in ways that strengthen learning relationships across academic and practice communities. It means developing professional identities and capacities that enable co-ownership of professional learning across social work career paths. And it means developing organisational cultures, structures and environments that do the same. These have long been difficult issues for social work, across the UK and beyond, and current cultures of austerity and reform carry new challenges. But challenge also brings opportunity. The relationship between professional identity, professional learning and practice outcomes is significantly under-explored in the social work literature, yet these issues are now surfacing in reviews of education and practice. Similarly, the need to work collaboratively and across boundaries has become a defining feature of public service reform in Scotland and beyond. Croisdale-Appleby touches on these themes in his call to 'revision' social work education and the social worker's professional identity, as does the Scottish Review in its conclusions around re-centring professional learning within professional and organisational identities. As social work enters a new world of integrated services there is much we can learn from our health and education colleagues in this respect, and from the cultures and infrastructures that support them. In each field professional learning appears to have a more secure foothold in received

constructions of professional identity and practice. This appears to pay dividends in terms of professional and public confidence, and in enabling the profession to negotiate seasons of reform. Social work education has an important part to play in improving learning and practice outcomes, but it is not the whole story. Improving learning and practice requires us to look more critically at the place of learning within the profession and across professional career journeys, and it requires us to develop more integrated approaches to improvement.

Linked to the above, if we wish to encourage a shared approach we need to move debate beyond potentially stymying discussions of social work education towards a more inclusive and synergising discussion about professional learning. This is about more than semantics. There now exist multiple drivers for strengthening professional learning within the identity, culture and practice of professional social work, many of which extend beyond the frame of qualifying education. Consider, for example, recent initiatives around supporting newly qualified workers (Grant et al., 2016; Gillies 2015); workforce development (Scottish Government, 2015); professional leadership, (Tafvelin et al., 2014); organisational learning cultures (Munro, 2011; Macrae et al., 2016), improving the use of evidence (Scottish Government, 2015); service innovation, and practice-led service improvement. Professional learning runs across these initiatives, as does a call for collaboration across professional and practice communities. There is opportunity to better connect these interdependent initiatives through a shared focus on professional learning. Some of this work has begun in Scotland, triggered by the Review and related activity. But at the time of writing progress is slow and appears constrained by a lack of joined-up leadership, infrastructure, incentive and resource.

Relatedly, there is a need to develop a clearer picture of the nature of social work career pathways and the implications for professional learning and development. Attention is now turning to the experience of newly qualified social workers but we know relatively little about what happens to these workers after that. Are social workers staying in the profession, or are they following in the footsteps of other professionals and making career changes at pivotal point in their lives? (Curtis et al., 2010). Further, to what extent are the changing contexts of professional practice affecting career decisions? The *Guardian Social Lives* surveys speak to some of these questions, as does IRISS's (2016) recent work in this area. However, understanding of these issues remains emergent. Developing strategy for professional learning needs to better reflect an understanding of contemporary labour markets, patterns and trends in professional mobility, and where social workers are positioned in this. Importantly, this will require attention not only to 'what is', but also 'what will be'.

There is also a need to develop the evidence base supporting social work education and professional learning. Despite recurring policy attention in this area, improvement and innovation remains constrained by a paucity of robust research and evidence (Kettle et al., 2016; Wilson and Kelly, 2010). The Review has acted as a catalyst for inquiry in this area and initiated an approach to knowledge development that aligns well with Scotland's participatory lean. However, investment remains meagre and existing knowledge and debate is significantly under-developed. Equally important is improving access to existing UK and international research and evidence, and improving mechanisms of knowledge transfer. This challenge is not

beyond us. The SSSC has recently invested in a five year longitudinal study which aims to develop a national picture of how newly qualifying social workers navigate their first years in practice (<https://nqsw2021.wordpress.com/>). This study has much to contribute to understanding of processes of professional learning, transition, socialisation and development. In addition, the 'Improving the Use of Evidence' strand of the Social Work Services Strategic Forum is working to develop strategic priorities for research and evidence for social services. Similarly, the Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services regularly invites calls for areas of knowledge development and exchange. Professional learning needs to feature amongst social work's identified research priorities. If we mean to improve professional learning outcomes, across education and practice, then we need to develop the evidence base to support that. Again, this is a shared challenge. As Coutts and Brotchie (2017:1) observe, discussing the need to develop an evidence-led approach to policy development:

The research, policy and practice communities must work together to ensure that the diffuse learning that this kind of policy context favours can be collated, shared and translated into different contexts.

Lastly, there is a need to position and progress the above within broader messages about co-production in public and social services (Bovaird, 2007; Scottish Government, 2011). The recent Accounts Commission (2016) report 'Social Work in Scotland' concludes:

Social work in Scotland is at a watershed and the public and service users must be more involved in shaping future provision.

Much of the above discussion has focussed on achieved greater co-ownership across academic and practice communities. The meaningful involvement of people who use services is implicit in this narrative; this needs to be explicit. It is now understood that effective social work outcomes require the meaningful involvement and contribution of people who use services (Beresford, 2016; Scottish Government, 2011). The same holds true for professional learning. This is about more than ticking a box, it is about ensuring that professional learning and practice is informed and shaped by the expertise of people who use services. It is also about harnessing the progressive potential that these alliances can bring. Since the establishment of the new degree in 2003, UK social work education providers have been required to ensure that people who use services are involved in all stages of the degree. Beresford (2014) describes this as 'a quiet revolution ... taking place in social work education in the UK', one that has arguably aided education's ability to resist some of the managerial and regulatory pressures currently dominating in practice. It may also go some way towards explaining Narey's criticisms around education's apparent over-identification with the needs and experience of people who use services. This is a strength that we need to build on. Discussing pressures towards both regulatory and liberatory reform of social work services, Beresford and Croft (2004:62) argue that recent movements of health and social care service users 'perhaps constitute the most important and far reaching force for more liberatory social work and social services so far'. Further, charting the impact of these movements upon policy, research and practice, the authors observe that these movements represent 'a valuable counter to pressures in philosophy and practice, which social work has not been able to successfully mobilise against from within' (p.63). There are issues to unpack here, however, Beresford and Croft's

observations perhaps bring us full circle. This paper began by questioning recent top down, politically driven and polarising preoccupations with social work education which appear, often, to function as a mechanism for regulatory reform. It concludes by arguing that social work education has an important part to play in social work reform and improvement, but not as a detached academic silo. The potential of social work education rests in its capacity to foster a shared and co-productive approach to professional learning that is realised in professional identities, delivers in practice and spans the social work career. It goes without saying that social work education cannot realise these outcomes by itself, but it does have a key role to play in articulating and, if necessary, defending this agenda. As the recent Accounts Commission report (2016:5) cautions, echoing the Christie Commission report that came before it:

Social work in Scotland is at a watershed ... current approaches will not be sustainable in the long term ... there is a need for all partners to work together more closely and collaboratively in ways that makes best use of the resources and experience available.

The above offers the beginnings of a strategy to advance a shared approach to professional learning in Scotland and beyond. To summarise: (i) we need to communicate a clear vision for professional learning, attending clearly to the professional challenges it seeks to respond to; (ii) we need to frame that vision in language that encourages and incentivises shared ownership; (iii) we need to develop the evidence base supporting a shared approach to professional learning; and (iv) we need to locate this vision within broader public service priorities around co-production. This is however just a beginning. The detail of a shared approach to

professional learning needs to be developed collaboratively and on the ground by the people who can make it work.

Conclusion

Like social work, social work education operates amidst considerable political and public scrutiny. In periods of change, social complexity and economic conservatism, political and public scrutiny can prompt top down and regulatory approaches to reform. These approaches can act to polarise and demoralise professional and public communities who, together, hold the keys to public service improvement. This paper has sought to unpack recent reviews of social work education in the UK with a view to understanding facing challenges and opportunities. Focussing on the Review in Scotland, the paper concludes that we need to realise a shared approach to professional learning, across the social work career path. This means moving beyond recent preoccupations with social work education, and polarising approaches to reform and improvement, towards a shared vision and practice in which professional learning is a foundational feature of what it is to be a social work professional. The paper argues that the capacity to advance such a shift, and the improvements associated with it, resides within the profession and its partners. Our challenge, which is not to be underestimated, is to realise the potential of these partnerships.

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