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How do we prepare students for the challenges of social work? Examples from six countries around the world

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we provide a descriptive comparison of the similarities and differences between social work education at six different universities situated in Australia, England, Finland, Northern Ireland, Sweden, and the United States. The aim was to begin an international conversation by examining the similarities and differences in these examples, around admissions and recruitment processes, professional training, and field practicum to prepare social work students for practice and to consider any implications that differing models of recruitment and training might have for the students' preparedness for the challenges of social work. The findings reflect common characteristics relating to the curriculum, such as skills training, reflective practice and application of theory into practice. Differences include a range of approaches to professional regulation, admissions and selection, duration of courses and practicum during training. The complexities of trying to measure similarities and differences across diverse models of education are recognised, including the difficulties stemming from different factors being relevant in diverse geographic regions across diverse contexts. The authors suggest that starting an international discussion allows us to learn from one another and may serve as a catalyst for future progress in this area.

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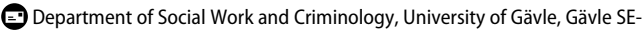
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Introduction

The difficulties facing newly educated social workers are a recurring theme in previous studies (Carpenter et al., 2015; E. Frost et al., 2013; Hussein et al., 2014; Kinman & Grant, 2011, 2017; McFadden et al., 2015; Pösö & Forsman, 2013; Russ, 2016; Tham, 2007, 2016, 2021; Tham & Lynch, 2014, 2019). As social work graduates often enter practice in a context where workforce turnover is a common concern and where there may be limited opportunities for a proper induction, the importance of offering students an education that increases their preparedness for the stresses and challenges of contemporary practice has been underlined in the research literature (Cortis & Meagher, 2012; Carello & Butler,

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2015; Moorhead et al., 2019b; Moriarty et al., 2011; Napoli & Bonifas, 2011; Nuttman-Shwartz, 2017; Tham & Lynch, 2014, 2019). Similarly, the importance of an effective induction and supervisory support have been noted (Carpenter et al., 2012; Moriarty et al., 2011; Moorhead et al., 2016; Tham & Lynch, 2019, 2021).

Related to stress, social workers engage with clients who have experienced trauma, face difficult situations, high caseloads, and crises (Hansung & Stoner, 2008; Newell & MacNeil, 2010). Stress associated with this line of work has been identified as having a negative impact on the professionals themselves, e.g. burnout and leaving the agency (Edwards & Wildeman, 2018; Mc Fadden, 2018a; McFadden, 2013; McFadden et al., 2015, 2019, 2018b), and negatively impacting the quality of service delivery (Dagan et al., 2016; Smullens, 2015; Wagaman et al., 2015). Additionally, many social workers begin their careers within child protection and welfare social work, often recognised as the most demanding practice field (Baldschun et al., 2019; Burns, 2011; Cummings et al., 2020; Gillingham, 2011, 2016; Healy et al., 2009; McFadden et al., 2019; Tham & Meagher, 2009). A recent study found that child protection workers mentioned developing unhealthy habits (e.g. substance use, self-neglect, lack of sleep, etc.) and problems associated with their mental health, physical health, and work-life balance. Further, they had a worse view of their own health and were more likely to leave (Griffiths et al., 2018b)

Against this background, and without downplaying employers' responsibilities to offer a proper induction, support and supervision, it is critical that we prepare future social workers by providing an appropriate education and the necessary tools to handle these challenges.

This raises questions of how social work education is organised in different universities and countries, and whether we might be able to learn from one another. These questions form the starting point of this paper.

Aims and objectives

The overarching aim of the paper is to begin an international conversation by examining the similarities and differences around admissions and recruitment processes, professional training, and field practicum to prepare social work students for practice. The study aims to consider any implications that differing models of recruitment and training might have for the students' preparedness for the challenges of social work.

Before the formulation of any longer-term goals in the global arena, obtaining an understanding of how different universities across different countries are preparing their social workers is necessary. To meet this goal, this paper will collect and compare information from the following areas at six different universities:

- (1) Admissions and selection
- (2) Curriculum/Pedagogy
- (3) Field practicum

Methodology

Conceptual framework

Much effort has been made to reach a consensus upon the most appropriate method to use when comparing educational systems (Theisen & Adams, 1990; Watson, 1996). For the purposes of this study, the authors used the descriptive criteria of classification for

comparative research (Phillips, 2006). Relevant factors associated with the preparation of social workers have been identified, and a descriptive and comparative approach will focus on the 'current status of the phenomena' and a 'description of the phenomena or conditions' while taking into account the relevant contributions of six unique universities located across six different countries (p. 306).

Contributors

The researchers that have contributed to this descriptive comparative study comprise an expert panel, chosen based on their significant professional and research experience and history with social work education. Expert panels have long been used as a viable method for seeking specialised input (Royse et al., 2016).

Materials

This paper is based on data found in national databases in the six countries and on the knowledge that the six authors have of social work education offered at their institutions by virtue of being involved in the training programmes.

Analysis

As it is difficult to compare results across countries due to different data collection and reporting arrangements, the data presented here should be regarded as examples that are descriptive in nature and intended to serve as an impetus for future investigation. The authors do not claim to cover all details in the countries or universities from which the information is drawn and do not claim generalisability to each country, but view the universities cited as case examples from the countries represented.

The regions included in this study (the United Kingdom, Nordic countries, Australasia, and North America) are recognised as having different professional and social services systems in which social workers practice. However, despite the acknowledged challenges of conducting international comparisons, the authors decided on the inclusion of these regions based on sufficient commonalities between the factors of interest (admissions and selection, curriculum/pedagogy, and field practicum).

The authors present a comparison across two phases. The first used a case-oriented approach examining brief case studies from one university in each country to draw out similarities and differences across jurisdictions. Key areas identified were then in the second phase developed through an examination and comparison of national data and accreditation/registration requirements for social work education for each jurisdiction. In advance of presenting the results from these comparisons, the paper will set out the policy context and consider the regulatory situation across the examples, and the duration of social work training. This is not a critical examination of regulation in countries, but a descriptive presentation for each example.

Table 1. Regulations concerning the professional title and duration of social work education.

	Australia	England	Finland	N. Ireland	Sweden	United States
Social Work is a legally protected title and a regulated profession	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Length of education (years)	2 or 4	1* to 3	5**	2 or 3	3.5	2 or 4

* 14–16 months

**These full five years are required for fully licensed social workers. Other social welfare professions require shorter programmes, such as social care (2 years) or social counselling (3.5 years).

The policy context(s)

As can be seen from [Table 1](#), there are some differences in both the course provision and regulations in the six countries. In four of the countries, ‘social worker’ is a legally protected title. However, even though the title is not protected in Sweden, most of the social workers in social services have a bachelor’s degree in social work as this is normally required (L. Frost et al., 2017; Tham, 2016, 2018), whereas in Australia only around 10% of those involved in client work in social services have social work education (Department of Employment, Skills, Small and Family Business, 2019).

Even though the qualifications needed to be eligible to work as a social worker vary to a large extent between the countries examined here, in all of the countries social workers are university graduates. Duration of training varies from five years in Finland to one year in England (fast track programme), although most common in England is an undergraduate (3 years) or postgraduate degree (2 years). All countries have specific eligibility requirements in place: in *Australia*, completing a 4-year bachelor or 2-year master level degree accredited by the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW); in *England*, obtaining a graduate degree and successfully completing courses approved by Social Work England; in *Finland*, a master’s degree in social work (300 ECTS) is required for social workers to be entitled to act as a licensed social welfare professional (although other related welfare professions require shorter training); in *Northern Ireland*, three years of undergraduate studies (or two when already holding a cognate degree, 360 and 240 ECTS respectively) are required; and in *Sweden*, completing a standard bachelor’s degree in social work (210 ECTS). In the *United States*, this occurs by completing a 4-year bachelor or a 2-year master level degree accredited by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE). After degree attainment, practicing social work generally requires the next step of obtaining a licence through each independent state. However, there are some circumstances where certain agencies are exempt from this mandate.

Results

Selection of students

In relation to the admissions process, there are some important differences between the six universities in the different countries ([Table 2](#)).

A difference between our six examples is that interviews are used as part of an entry suitability and selection process only in our Northern Irish and English examples and in the American university when deemed necessary, but not in the two Nordic and Australian examples.

Table 2. The admissions process.

Examples	Australia	England	Finland	N. Ireland	Sweden	United States (Kentucky)
Admission based on:	GE	GEPI**	G	GI	G	GEP(I)
Grades (G)						
Experience (E)						
Personal Statements (P)*						
Interviews (I)						

* *Personal Statements* are a written testimony related to motivation towards a career in social work with some understanding about the social work role and an area of social work practice (such as work with children or adults).

** *Experience* is usually only mandatory for MA entry, and desirable for other routes.

However, even when interviews are not used in the admissions process, students' suitability and readiness for practice is assessed in different ways prior to practicum, and interviews or individual assessments by tutors might be part of this assessment. Pre-placement checks around conflicts of interest, fitness to practice, criminal conviction vetting, or being known to social services for safeguarding concerns relating to children or vulnerable adults are in place in Australia, England and Northern Ireland. In Sweden and Finland an extract from police records is required only if students wish to do their placement working closely with minors. At American universities, pre-placement checks to ascertain the applicant's history of concerning behaviours (e.g. child maltreatment, adult abuse, criminal acts, domestic violence, etc.) might only be conducted by the field agency, but the university can initiate these steps as well. Health screenings where applicants are expected to declare if they have certain serious restrictions related to their health or ability to function as a social worker prior to entry are required in England, Finland and Northern Ireland.

To sum up, there are differences among our six examples concerning who is and who is not assessed as eligible for social work. One question is whether these different ways of selecting suitable candidates also protect the most vulnerable persons from being exposed to the challenges lurking in the profession? Or are the selection mechanisms mainly based on tradition and preconceived ideas? What is the role of unconscious bias in selecting for suitability for the social work profession? The possibility of determining 'suitability' for social work and gate keeping entry to the profession through the admission process has been questioned in earlier studies (see Holmström & Taylor, 2008a for an overview, 2008b). These questions are worthy of further consideration in future studies.

Standards and main features of the education

When it comes to how social work education is regulated in these six countries (Table 3), it is obvious that this differs from not being regulated at all (Finland), old legislation from 1993 (Sweden) to recently revised national standards set by the state (England and Northern Ireland).

Curriculum content regarding training in practical skills and core values

From Table 4 it is clear that core values and skills are prioritised in social work education in all these six universities. Even though it is not possible to display detailed information, common concepts frequently occurring across these examples are self-reflection,

Table 3. Standards and main features of the social work education.

Country	Professional Standards for Social Work Education on a National Level	Main features of the Social Work Education described in regulating documents
Australia	Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (AASW, 2012)	'Give primacy to the development of reflective and reflexive practice, structural analysis, critical thinking, and ethical professional behaviour as the core attributes to equip a social work practitioner' (Australian Association of Social Work [AASW], 2013, p. 9).
England	Social Work England Qualifying education and training standards 2021 (Social Work England, 2021)	Courses are aligned with the 'Knowledge and Skills Statements' for children & families (Department for Education, 2018), and for adult social care (Department of Health and Social Care (UK), 2018), and the 9 domains of the 'Professional Capabilities Framework' (PCF) (British Association of Social Workers, 2018).
Finland	Education not regulated. (Provisions for educational responsibilities among universities are given by decree of the Ministry of Education and Culture (1451/2014), which is prepared in collaboration with the universities.)	Universities are autonomous institutions and thus the faculties have the freedom to decide independently on the content of the programmes they offer.*
N. Ireland	Northern Ireland Framework Specification for the Degree in Social Work (2004, 2015)	The 'Six Key Roles' of social work combining knowledge and understanding, values and ethical principles, and Standards of Conduct and Practice, all of which remain a central focus of assessment throughout the curriculum and practicum.
Sweden	Higher Education Ordinance (SFS 1993:100) **	Main learning goals: 'Knowledge and Understanding', 'Competence and Skills' and 'Judgement and Approach'
United States	The Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS), established by the Council on Social Work Education's Commission on Accreditation (COA) and Commission on Educational Policy (COEP).	'Social work education is advanced by the scholarship of teaching and learning, and scientific inquiry into its multifaceted dimensions, processes, and outcomes' (CSWE, 2015, p. 5).

* Even though universities are autonomous institutions, national collaboration in social work between universities is active and plays a key role in developing and steering the contents and competency objectives of social work education (Lähteinen et al., 2017).

** Even if the legislation is old, in Sweden all university educations are revised and assessed (around every fifth year) by the Swedish Higher Education Authority.

Table 4. Pedagogy and practice learning.

Country	Pedagogy and practice learning (examples)
Australia	Enquiry and situation-based learning. Reflective practice involving reflection on personal and professional values, learning journals examining beliefs, values and experience, and reflective processes. Case studies.
England	Reflective practice and resilience embedded across all stages of the programme. Education in practice skills, professionalism, critical reflection and personal safety.
Finland	Focus on core professional skills, methods, ethical principles, self-reflection. Much emphasis on personalised learning plans and application of theory and research in practice.
N. Ireland	Mandatory modules on core social work skills, core social work values and ethics as well as developing and maintaining a professional social work identity. Focus on building resilience in social work, recognising burnout indicators and well-being.
Sweden	Professional development through self-reflection and self-awareness. Ethical dilemmas discussed. Training in conversation skills using video technology and playback with reflections.
United States (Kentucky)	Self-reflection and self-assessment, ethical and professional behaviour, developing and utilising self-care plans. Role play, simulations and case studies to enhance interview and practice skills, and to develop skills for de-escalation.

Table 5. Duration and timing of field practice.

	Australia	England	Finland**	N. Ireland	Sweden	United States**
<i>Days in field practice</i>	145	200*	75/100	185	75	53 /120
<i>Placement typically in two separate settings</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No/Yes
<i>Timing of field practice</i>	3 rd year 4 th year	2 nd year 3 rd year	3 rd year 4 th /5 th year	2 nd & 3 rd year 1 st & 2 nd year	3 rd year	4 th year 1 st /2 nd year

* Up to 30 of these days are delivered within university context as skills development days.

**In Finland and the US numbers are displayed for Bachelor/Master.

self-awareness, and reflective practice. However, not as frequently mentioned are resilience (only mentioned in Northern Ireland). Personal safety or developing and utilising self-care plans is only mentioned in the American example.

Duration and organisation of field practice

A significant difference between our six examples is the number of days in field practice (Table 5). Here the programmes in England and Northern Ireland include the largest number of days, while the American and the two Nordic examples offer the shortest field practice for the social work students.

Learning and assessment during field placement

Also when it comes to how learning during field practice is organised and assessed there are more similarities than differences between these six universities (Table 6). A portfolio is commonly mentioned and focus seems to be on integration of learning, developing professional identity and discussion of values, attitudes and ethics. However only from the American university recognising and responding to safety risks are mentioned.

Table 6. Learning and assessment during field practice.

Country	How is field placement learning assessed?	Who assesses and how?
Australia	A research, policy, or practice-based capstone project in the final stages of their course, demonstrating the integration of their learning over the course and the development of their professional identity.	The supervising social worker (qualified and experienced) in conjunction with an academic liaison.
England	A portfolio of competencies must be achieved. Behaviours, values and attitudes that are associated with a professional social worker must be shown.	Practice supervisor observes and assesses.
Finland	A research-related assignment (portfolio, questionnaire, report, etc.)	A licensed social worker supervisor.
N. Ireland	Six Key Roles demonstration that requirements are met. Also, reflection essays, case studies and evidence-informed projects. Reflective log kept by the student during placement.	Supervised and assessed by a qualified practice teacher. Direct observations of practice and tripartite meetings.
Sweden	Assignments on dilemmas pertaining to morals, values or ethics. A personal portfolio (personal journal) kept by the student.	Supervisor at the workplace and regular meetings with the practice teacher from the university. Tripartite meetings.
United States	Self-care, supervision and recognising and responding to safety risks. Reflective journals, video assignments, and traditional assessment approaches.	Support and feedback of field instructor (a social worker with experience) and an academic liaison.

Discussion

The overall aim of the paper was to begin an international conversation by examining similarities and differences around admissions and recruitment processes, professional training and field practicum in these six universities and to consider any implications that differing models of recruitment and training might have for the students' preparedness for the challenges of social work. It is important to note that the intention was not to take a deep dive into these factors, but rather to conduct a descriptive comparison and to set the table for future work. It is also important to recognise that the preparation of students might differ between universities in the same country. In addition, it is difficult to compare statistics from different countries as there are many contextual and cultural differences that confound any similarity.

However, the contributions of these six universities highlight several areas that might be worth considering. Firstly, we will discuss and reflect on how the admissions process and field education experience might prepare students to meet the challenges of the profession. Secondly, the need of preparation in relation to the commonality of new graduates working in child welfare will be highlighted.

The admissions process

One question arising from these results is: how might these different ways of selecting and preparing students and organising their training impact on their preparedness for the challenges of social work? While the question of preparedness is difficult to measure and varies between individuals despite the training context, it is an important question for students as well as educators, employers and not least for the service recipients.

One of the main differences in the admissions process pertains to the use of mandatory interviews, which could be found in two countries (England and Northern Ireland). Additionally, in the US example interviews are not mandatory but used if areas of concern rise from students' personal statements. The use of interviews, however, might involve difficulties and ethical dilemmas. While thorough selection processes can hinder individuals who may not be suitable for the profession from enrolling in social work education, the correctness and legal certainty of the process relating to seemingly subjective selection mechanisms may be questioned, which in turn could raise questions about rigour surrounding the selection of the most suitable candidates. Another aspect of using interviews to select candidates is that this puts pressure on the educators in assessing suitability. Additionally, there could be an issue around inter-assessor reliability. There might also be a risk that individuals who are unsuccessful are lost to the system but may have developed during the education journey to become excellent social workers. Also, the broad evidence suggests that regardless of how robust admissions processes are, there is continued concern about social worker burnout, workforce turnover and job exit (Ewart, 2019; McFadden et al., 2019).

Perhaps a more rigorous admission process protects clients from inept social workers rather than protecting persons who do not seem to be fit for the profession?

In a study among graduating social work students, a common reflection was how much the education had helped them to develop maturity (Tham & Lynch, 2014). From this perspective, further critical discussion on gatekeeping based on subjective tools can be warranted. Further international discussion and research on this question would be of value.

The length of the education, duration and organisation of field practice

A second question raised by the results concerns the differences in length of education. Here Finland stands out as having the highest educational requirements on social workers, where a master's degree is required for being entitled to safeguarding investigation and assessment work, while in England the routes to becoming a social worker vary from 14–16 months to 3 years. These differences raise questions regarding the impact on the social workers' skills and preparedness for practice. Furthermore, professional identity development with regards to 'fast-tracked' training raises concerns for social work educators, regulators, practitioners and service recipients (Cartney, 2018).

Also when it comes to field practice duration, there are significant differences between these six programmes where the students in England and Northern Ireland spend more time in field practice than in our other examples. Another difference is that in all countries, except Sweden, the field placements occur across different practice fields. In Northern Ireland, one of the two field placements focuses on children's services and one on adult-based social work, while in Sweden and Finland there are no requirements regarding the kind of setting, which means that some new practitioners—of which many begin work in child welfare—have no experience of statutory social services or safeguarding interventions. A question is if and to what extent courses and training offered at the university may compensate for this lack of experience from the field.

The results of our comparison also lead to questions about the importance of the organisation of field placement for students' preparedness and whether the shorter field practice in the two Nordic and the American examples offers enough time to implement theoretical knowledge in social work practice. In Dreyfus and Dreyfus's (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986) theory of skills acquisition, the importance of learning at the workplace is underlined. Although there is increasing reference to field education in social work as a signature pedagogy playing a significant role in the development of professional identity and skills (Boitel & Fromm, 2014; Wayne et al., 2010), this does not seem to be consistently reflected across all countries. That some of the skills required, especially in child protection, include managing complex risks and decision making which are only competently gained from experience (Healy et al., 2009; McFadden, 2013; McFadden et al., 2019; Radey & Stanley, 2018; Tham, 2007, 2016; Tham & Lynch, 2019, 2021) underlines the importance of educators to consider the acquisition of knowledge in social work training, including teaching students how to apply theory to practice (Teater, 2011; Trevithick, 2012).

While we did not compare curriculum content on theoretical knowledge within each university's teaching content, it is important to acknowledge the role of educators in introducing the application of theory to practice (Teater, 2011) with an ability for critical 'reflection in' and 'reflection on' practice (Schön, 1991; Thompson & Pascal, 2012), which

contributes to professional identity development (Moorhead et al., 2019b). To focus on this level of curriculum scrutiny between universities and/or countries could be another important area for future research.

Child welfare work as an introduction to the profession

A third aspect to discuss is that in all of the six countries represented here, child welfare work seems to have a high rate of new graduate workers, who face significant stress and high turnover rates. For example, in Australia child welfare work has high rates of young and newly qualified workers with difficulties in recruitment and retention, particularly of social workers, with high turnover rates within the first year of service reported (Gillingham, 2016; Lonne et al., 2013). In Northern Ireland 67% of graduates in 2019 went straight to child protection (Northern Ireland Social Care Council, 2019), yet vacancies in statutory social work increased from 151 to 508 between March 2017 and March 2019 (Ewart, 2019, p. 45). In a follow-up study in Sweden, the proportion of social workers in child welfare with less than two years' experience rose from 29% in 2003 to 47% in 2018, and the proportion under 30 years old from 17% in 2003 to 44% in 2018 (Tham & Kåreholt, submitted). In Finland, child protection is described as an entry job with high turnover rates, regardless of the fact that child protection social workers all have a master-level degree (Matela, 2009). Finnish studies show that newly educated social workers suffer the most from extensive workloads and role conflicts (Blomberg et al., 2015) and their difficulties in relation to their need for support and guidance are described (Pösö & Forsman, 2013). In the US research focusing on the experiences of recently hired child welfare workers has identified the stress of organisational factors (e.g. onset of large caseload, role ambiguity, administrative requirements, unsupportive colleagues) as negatively influencing their tenure (Schelbe et al., 2017; Wilke et al., 2019). In sum, these results further underline the importance of providing social work students an education that ensures that they are fully prepared to enter highly complex practice fields early in their career.

Previous research has highlighted the responsibility and also the shortcomings of employers to offer newly qualified social workers a proper induction, including regular supervision and support (Baldschun et al., 2019; McFadden, 2013; McFadden et al., 2019; Moorhead et al., 2016; Tham, 2007, 2016, 2021; Tham & Lynch, 2019, 2021). Given the problematic situation for many newly educated social workers described in earlier research, the responsibility for educators to offer the best education possible is underlined.

So, how could we better prepare social workers for the demands of the profession?

One suggestion is to focus on formation of professional identity during the whole education (Moorhead et al., 2019b). To include courses in how to manage demanding conversations with clients, collaboration in work groups, coping with stress, resilience and well-being as mandatory in social work education could also be a way to increase social workers' resilience. Potentially using simulations (e.g. face to face, virtual, etc.) to create an experiential atmosphere where students can explore these challenges before they are responsible for making these decisions in a professional capacity

could be one way forward (Bogo et al., 2014; Goulet et al., 2020; Griffiths et al., 2018a; Havig et al., 2020). Kinman and Grant (2011) found that trainee social workers whose emotional and social competencies were more highly developed were more resilient to stress.

The importance of helping social work students to develop their emotion management and social skills in order to enhance well-being and protect them against future professional burnout is underlined. Even though these topics were included to some extent in the six programmes described here, courses in coping with stress or resilience and well-being were not, except for in Northern Ireland.

While post-qualifying support is a helpful development, the pressure on the workforce remains a challenge. Previous studies have illustrated the difficulties of newly educated social workers (Healy et al., 2009; Moorhead, 2019a; Russ, 2016; Russ et al., 2020; Tham, 2016; Tham & Lynch, 2019, 2021). In a recent study, social workers with more than 5 years' experience reported higher resilience than workers in their first year (McFadden et al., 2019). These findings are important in relation to younger workers and more research is needed to be able to understand their specific needs to support their transition into and sustainability in the social work profession. This would suggest implications for how students are prepared for and supported during their transition into the workforce as social work professionals, which need to be considered by both educators and employers.

Limitations and strengths

The difficulties in comparing these issues concerning social work education across differing social and geographic contexts and countries needs to be recognised. Educational models are different, especially around admissions processes and training and practice learning duration and concepts are differently defined and used across countries. In addition, the examples are not representative of each of the countries as approaches may vary within as well as between countries. Also, consideration of additional countries and regions would contribute to a more global understanding of the similarities and differences.

Nonetheless, the authors consider the strengths of the paper to be in a novel examination of a descriptive comparison, employed to examine differences and similarities across these examples. It is hoped that the paper may contribute to the generation of ideas or alternative approaches relevant to improving existing practices and creating wider discussion about international differences around how social workers are prepared for the profession.

Concluding comment

This paper has focused on the contributions of six universities in six countries, wherein a team of researchers has conducted a descriptive comparison about the key aspects of how they are preparing social workers for the challenges of the profession. Internationally, a question raised by this comparison is whether the differences in student selection to programmes, contents of educational provision, and duration and organisation of field placements influence the preparedness of newly educated social workers. Is there any difference in levels of postgraduate practitioner well-being or their early career experiences of practice? These are not only questions of retention and social worker well-being, but also

of quality in social work, which directly impact on the clients' needs and legal rights. These results also emphasise the responsibility of employers to offer newly qualified social workers a good induction, including regular supervision and support, which has been emphasised for many years (Baldschun et al., 2019; McFadden, 2013; McFadden et al., 2019; Moorhead et al., 2016; Tham, 2007, 2016, 2021; Tham & Lynch, 2019, 2021). Without a prepared and consistent workforce, we undermine the essence of social work and what it aims to achieve on behalf of the most vulnerable individuals and groups in society.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Ethical approval

This paper was based on a desk-top methodology and human subjects were not part of this research. Data presented is available in the public domain in all countries and institutional data was obtained with permission from the host universities.

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