

# THE PROFESSIONALISATION OF SOCIAL WORK IN THE UK: INDEPENDENCE, PRESCRIPTION AND REGULATION

## LA PROFESIONALIZACIÓN DEL TRABAJO SOCIAL EN GRAN BRETAÑA: INDEPENDENCIA Y REGULACIÓN

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### ABSTRACT

This paper describes the significant changes taking place in social work education and training in the UK. The development of service standards, professional registers and codes of conduct, together with the increasing levels of regulation and prescription of social work education and training, all aimed at improving service standards, are also diminishing the independence of educational providers. These changes are creating powerful regulatory mechanisms which may be used to discipline not only erroneous and poor practice, but also to quash or inhibit unorthodox and dissenting practitioners. This paper shows how the moves towards evidence based practice are part of a wider political project to regulate professional conduct.

### RESUMEN

Este artículo describe los cambios que se están observando en los programas de educación para el trabajo social en Gran Bretaña. Los estándares más altos, el desarrollo de códigos de conducta y el aumento de regulación y prescripción en los programas de educación para el trabajo social, todos se enfocan a la mejora de servicios; sin embargo, tienen también como consecuencia la disminución de la independencia de los educadores. Estos cambios están creando mecanismos que se pueden usar no solo para disciplinar a profesionales irresponsables sino también para inhibir a aquellos que tienen ideas diferentes sobre la profesión. Este artículo propone que el enfoque concentrado en la “práctica evidenciaria” es parte de una dirección política para regular la conducta profesional.

KEYWORDS: United Kingdom, Regulation, Registration, Professionalisation

PALABRAS CLAVES: Gran Bretaña, Regulación, Registro de trabajadores sociales, Profesionalización, Estándares

### INTRODUCTION

Considerable changes are taking place in social work education and training in the UK

and there are also major changes in the inspection of services and in the regulation of professional practice. The most important of these changes is the establishment of an independent regulatory body, the General Social Care Council. The Council will accredit and approve programmes leading to professional registration and also maintain a register of qualified social workers and approved social care workers. Additionally, in response to several well-publicised tragedies and scandals in practice and because of a shortage of qualified staff, a substantial expansion in the numbers obtaining social work qualification is planned. This paper briefly establishes the context in which these changes are taking place and outlines the new arrangements. It indicates some of the complex factors that are shaping British social work and discusses the significance of these changes. While the changes are broadly welcomed, some academics are concerned that some of the thinking which underpins them is mistaken and epistemologically and politically naive, because it fails to recognise the contested nature of many aspects of social work knowledge and practice.

#### SOCIAL WORK IN THE UK

Currently it is estimated that there are 60-70,000 people employed as qualified social workers (Ellinor, 2004). These are workers who are largely office based and who commission or provide services to children and families, and to adults with disabilities or mental health problems, living in the community. In addition, there are another 1.2 million people in the social care work force, who provide direct practical care to people living in their own homes and also provide residential care for those who cannot or are unable to live at home (Ellinor, 2004). Most of these workers are not qualified as social workers but many have obtained lower level vocational awards that are assessed upon their practical competence in the workplace.

The historical roots of social work in the UK are diverse, but over the last thirty years the dominant influence has been the state, both locally and nationally. More recently the role of local social service departments as providers of services has diminished - as there has been considerable growth in private residential care provision, and in the range of services contracted out to voluntary organisations. Thus, national government continues to set out the major service priorities and determine the ground rules for the provision of social services, though local government still wields considerable influence as it commissions and funds many of these services.

#### SETTING AND REGULATING STANDARDS OF SERVICE

National government through the Department of Health directly sets and enforces the standards it expects of social work services and social care providers through a number of mechanisms. The Department of Health sets National Minimum Standards for all forms of social service provision. For example, the minimum standard for care homes for older people provides detailed prescription on trial visits, user choice, privacy and dignity, facilities and protection and complaints. These standards apply to public and independent service providers.

The quality of services provided in the public and the independent sector is monitored by the newly established Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI), which inspects services against the national minimum standards, relevant legal regulations, and the Code

of Practice for Social Care Employers. The CSCI is an independent organisation but the Chair and the five Commissioners are appointed by a special health authority nominated by the Department of Health. Additionally, for public sector social services there is a complex and detailed range of performance indicators which they must address and report upon. Many of these performance indicators are geared towards developing efficient services and processes but they also include a number of indicators that are directed towards improving fair access to services for a culturally and ethnically diverse population.

This drive towards common and higher standards of service is also supported by the work of the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) which is also funded by the Department of Health. SCIE is charged with developing and appraising the knowledge base for social work and issuing definitive guidance upon 'what works' in practice. It produces 'knowledge reviews' on topics such as long term foster care of children and adoption practice; position papers on topics such as service user involvement in service planning; and resource and practice guides. SCIE hosts the electronic library for social care (eLSC), and is also developing training packs such as one aimed at enhancing 'research mindedness' among social workers so that they may make more effective use of research findings. A fuller indication of its activities can be gained by visiting the web site ([www.scie.org.uk](http://www.scie.org.uk)).

The Training Organisation for Social Care, London (TOPSS) established in 2000 is an employer led organisation charged with developing a national training strategy for the social care work force, undertaking work force planning, and most significantly, with developing the National Occupational Standards for social care. The National Occupational Standards set out the expectations in terms of knowledge, skills and values that social care workers should exercise in their work roles. TOPSS states that the 'The starting point for the development of these standards is the Key Purpose of Social Work' (p 1, [www.topss.org.uk/\\_eng/standards/cdrom/England/Ket.htm](http://www.topss.org.uk/_eng/standards/cdrom/England/Ket.htm)). This key purpose is based upon the definition produced by the International Association of Schools of Social Work and the International Federation of Social Workers': *namely, that social work is a profession which 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 (IASSW/ IFSW, 2001)

Consequently, the National Occupational Standards for Social Work are set out in terms of six key roles for social workers, namely to:

- Prepare for, and work with individuals, families, carers, groups and communities to assess their needs and circumstances
- Plan, carry out, review and evaluate social work practice, with individuals, families, carers, groups, communities and other professionals
- Support individuals to represent their needs, views and circumstances
- Manage risk to individuals, families, carers, groups, communities, self and colleagues
- Manage and be accountable, with supervision and support, for your own social work practice within your organisation

- Demonstrate professional competence in social work practice

These key roles represent a statement of minimum competency for beginning social workers. It is a regulatory requirement for colleges and universities providing recognised social work awards to prepare their students to work in accordance with these service standards.

#### PROFESSIONAL REGISTRATION AND REGULATION

In 2001 the General Social Care Council (GSCC) was established in England. It took over the validating powers of the previous regulator of social work education, the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW), but has a much broader range of powers, including registration and discipline of registered workers. Its aim is to improve the quality of social services by acting 'as the guardian of standards for the social care work force ... to increase the protection of service users, their carers and the general public' (p. 1, [www.gsc.org.uk/about.htm](http://www.gsc.org.uk/about.htm)). The GSCC is a non-departmental government body whose 16 member council is directly appointed by the Department of Health.

Following consultation, the GSCC has issued codes of practice for social care workers and their employers, and in 2003 it began the process of registering all social care workers in England<sup>1</sup>. It also has the power to suspend or remove from the register, workers whose conduct makes them unsuited for practice. Allegations of misconduct will be judged against existing legal requirements and the Code of Practice for Social Care Workers. After years of lobbying and discussion the term 'social worker' is to become protected in law. In England, after April in 2005 it will be a criminal offence for anyone to call themselves a social worker if they are not registered with the GSCC. Similar arrangements will also come into effect in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, but on different dates.

To become registered social workers must:

- prove their identity
- possess a recognised social work qualification
- proved that they are a 'fit' person in terms of their character and to disclose any criminal record and record of disciplinary hearings, and also have established their physical and mental suitability for professional practice
- agree to work in accordance with professional codes of practice

The aims of registration are to protect the public, to improve standards of practice, and improve the public perception of social work. Initial registration will cost £30 and will be maintained upon payment of a £30 fee in subsequent years. Registrations will need

<sup>1</sup> The nomenclature of social care is confusing. A distinction is commonly made between social care and social work. Thus, the term social care worker has been generally used to describe those who provide direct practical domiciliary or residential care, while a social worker was typically someone who was office based and usually held a social work qualification. However, the government continues to use 'social care' as an overarching term for all forms of social service.

<sup>2</sup> The Research assessment Exercise (RAE) is a quality audit of research output in all academic disciplines

to renewed every three years. Members of the public and prospective employers will be able to check whether a person is recognised as a social worker and properly registered. Registration has started with existing qualified social workers but will later be extended to other social care workers. Registration will also be available for social workers who have gained their qualifications overseas. Their numbers have increased in recent years in response to the shortage of British social workers. Indeed some agencies have actively recruited social workers from Australia, Europe and Africa. Since 1990 CCETSW (the previous regulatory body for training) had issued nearly 10,000 letters of recognition formally approving the 'qualified' status of social workers who trained overseas.

Similar changes to the regulatory mechanisms for both service standards and professional registration are taking place in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, though the actual structure of the organisations differ. For example, in Wales the Care Council for Wales combines the functions of the GSSC and TOPSS.

#### EDUCATION AND TRAINING BECOMING QUALIFIED

In 1989 the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW) established the Diploma in Social Work (DipSW) as the qualifying award for social work throughout the UK. A key feature of the DipSW was the formal shift towards competency based assessment. That is, the adoption of assessment methods geared towards demonstrating the application of the knowledge, skills and values necessary for 'doing the job', and this shift required much more detailed evidence to support judgements about students' capabilities in practice. There has been continued resistance to any narrowly conceived notion of competency and most social work programmes continued to maintain more traditional methods of assessment for college-based work, generally reserving competence based assessment for practical work.

The DipSW was granted separately from the academic award that students received from the college or university where they undertook their studies. Programmes that were recognised in this way were required to provide study to an academic level at least equivalent to the second year of an undergraduate degree. However, there were a wide range of CCETSW approved programmes with the confusing result that while all successful students had achieved the DipSW, the accompanying academic award could be a Diploma in Higher Education, a Bachelor's degree, or even a postgraduate Master's degree. The minimum period of study for an approved award was two years. In 2002-3 there were 5721 registrations and 4266 completions of the DipSW across the UK. The majority of students (approximately 76%) obtaining the professional qualification could be described as 'mature' as 1739 of them were aged between 25-34 years of age, while another 1501 were between 35 and 44 years. Over 80% of those qualifying were women and just under 12% were self-identified as 'black'.

When the GSCC took over the responsibilities of CCETSW it made significant changes to the way in which social workers became professionally qualified. The main change was to end the practice of offering a separate professional award distinct from whatever academic award students' had achieved. Under the new arrangements colleges and universities first submit themselves for accreditation as a recognised provider of social work education, and then put forward their specific proposals for degree programmes. However, individual professional recognition can only come from a current registration

on the professional register that, as noted earlier, would be dependent upon a wider set of criteria than simply having successfully undertaken a recognised programme of study in social work. The second change was to determine that such recognised programmes must minimally be at Bachelor's degree level, typically lasting three years. This raising of the minimum academic standard was driven by three factors:

- a desire to improve the level and quality of social work training and hence improve social work practice
- harmonisation with other similar professions such as teaching and nursing, both of which had degree level qualifications
- a movement towards greater harmonisation of professional qualifications with other member states in the European Community to permit free movement of labour.

Although the majority of new entrants to social work will have obtained a Bachelor's degree from a newly approved programme, it is still possible to have a Master's level programme approved for professional recognition. Because Master's level programmes are predominantly located in the most research active universities, the possession of a Master's degree from these more prestigious universities is likely to continue to provide these students with a competitive advantage in the job market.

It was noted earlier that the majority of those qualifying in social work were over the age of 25, this was partly the result of the previous regulations which required that students had to be over 21 years of age at the point of qualification, but it also derived from the entry criteria which required relevant experience. Under the new regulations there is no age requirement and consequently, because younger students can apply, the requirement for prior relevant experience has been dropped by most programmes. The early indications are that this will result in a greater number of younger people entering social work. The Department of Health has been concerned about declining numbers coming into social work and ran a successful advertising campaign to stimulate interest in social work as a career. Furthermore, the extension of the availability of student bursaries to all social work students in England, and not just postgraduate entrants, together with the waiver of college fees, has made social work training attractive to those who do not wish to get into debt while undertaking higher education and value the good employment prospects upon qualification. This strategy of providing bursaries and exemption from college fees is also used in other professions where there are staffing shortages in the public sector, such as nursing, medicine, and post-graduate teacher training.

#### DETERMINING THE CONTENT, STRUCTURE AND REGULATION OF SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

The regulations in regard to the content, structure and processes of social work programmes recognised by the GSCC are extremely prescriptive. These regulations also incorporate requirements that originate from other organisations, such as the Department of Health and the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). The QAA is the overall body responsible for monitoring academic standards in higher education.

The GSCC requires approved programmes of study to include:

- specific requirements in regard to the inclusion of teaching and learning on human growth and development, mental health and disability, assessment planning and review, communication, law, partnership working, and the commitment of resources
  - the National Occupational Standards for social care workers
  - practice learning in work placements of totalling at least 200 days. These must consist of at least two different settings and two different service user groups and must include at least one placement in a statutory setting
    - at least 1200 hours of study under the guidance of a recognised educator
    - input from service users and other stakeholders (such as agency staff)
    - interprofessional development in joint working and collaborative work
    - whistle blowing procedures to allow students to report unprofessional conduct
  - the academic benchmarks for the subject of social work issued by the QAA
  - compliance with QAA codes of conduct on such things as complaints, practice placements, recruitment, monitoring, and so on.

Most of these requirements are stated as a minima and those in regard to curriculum content are broadly stated, thus allowing universities some space to determine how they will teach, and what other elements they will include in their programmes. Nonetheless, one feature of the previous award (the DipSW) which is likely to continue in many programmes is the shift away from 'pure' academic subject modules such as sociology, psychology and social policy, to a more focused study upon the elements of these disciplines which bear most relevance for understanding social work. Long-standing debates about the merits of specialist vis a vis generalist approaches to practice appear to have been settled in favour of generalism in the new award, with the requirement for practice placements in two service areas and in the curriculum statements.

For educationalists, the most welcome change is the prospect of some diminution of the onerous burden of monitoring and report that were formerly required under the dual regimes of CCETSW and the University/QAA. Instead, the new arrangements presume that universities once they are accredited to provide social work education will use their own in-house systems to monitor the quality and efficacy of their programmes, subject to the broader scrutiny of the QAA. GSCC recognition and reporting systems are intended to be a 'lighter touch' with the removal of the requirement for a special annual quality report. Instead, the reports made by external examiner reports and the responses made to these, together with a general requirement to notify significant changes of programme or resources, will be the main vehicles for monitoring. If, however, the GSCC have concerns, they can request more information, visit, or order a full inspection of the programme.

Under the new arrangements universities are required to work in partnership with social service agencies, but there is marked shift in the formal structure of these partnerships. Previously, professional approval of a programme was contingent upon there being a joint management group or committee comprised of university and agency representatives. This was often a cumbersome and time-consuming system with a rather lopsided level of commitment often evident. As Parsloe (2001) noted just before the inception of the new award:

these partnerships have created more problems than they have solved not least



because they are, in many ways, a fiction. They have no legal basis [and] also are of very different importance to the partner members. For educational institutions, the work of the partnership is central to their purpose. For the agencies, social work education is a very small part of their concerns. (p.12)

Consequently, the GSCC now has a more focused conception of partnership as addressing the most pertinent aspects of social work education and training. That is, in planning and developing programme proposals, in selecting suitable candidates, and in delivering a practically relevant programme of teaching. However, the most important aspect of partnership will continue to be the provision of practice learning opportunities, i.e. student placements in local agencies. Throughout the UK most social work programmes struggled to meet the previous practice learning requirements as they found difficulty in securing enough suitable placements for their students. Despite the provision of specific funding to support practice placements, many agencies varied considerably in the levels of placements they provided. For the new award payments to agencies for placements continue and have been increased, but for local authority social service departments there is an added stimulus to provision, as they are now required to report their level of provision and their performance in this against government targets.

Currently there is a national post-qualifying framework for social work awards, which is premised largely upon moving towards greater specialism of practice at this higher level. This framework includes an advanced award that prepares people for undertaking their duties under mental health legislation, an award for social workers who assess students upon their practice placements (practice teachers), as well as advanced awards in child protection and child care. However, following on from the changes in the basic qualifying arrangements, the GSCC is conducting a review of this framework and some rationalisation of the existing two tier post-qualifying system is likely. It is also possible that the existing requirement for approved mental health workers to have an advanced award will become extended to other areas of advanced practice, such as child protection.

Following devolution different arrangements have been made for both regulation and student support in Scotland and Wales. While the Department of Health in England is providing additional funds for practice-based learning placements, paying college fees and providing student bursaries, the National Assembly in Wales has at the time of writing this paper, not yet decided what its arrangements will be. In Scotland, the regulations for the new award are already different in allowing a 'fast-track' approach for suitable students which could see them gain an award in less than three years.

## DISCUSSION

### *Public policy: regulation and the professions*

One of the core themes of Labour government policy has been the notion of 'joined-up thinking'. That is, a conscious effort to ensure that policy developments in one area of public life match up and co-ordinate with developments in other areas. It should be evident from the descriptive material summarised so far that in regard to the modernisation of social services, considerable efforts have been made to articulate all of the different



elements that contribute to the supply, training and quality of social workers and social care services. For example, developments in care standards have been matched to codes of practice, and changes in social work education have taken account of the pre-existing mechanisms for assuring quality in higher education generally. However, this approach to public policy does not intrinsically suggest any particular direction in regard to the professional status of social work. Indeed current developments are strongly influenced by some of the policy themes that emerged from the Conservative governments of the 1980s and 1990s.

Successive Tory governments were keen to increase competition for professional services and especially keen to make it very clear that they, not the work force, governed public services. For example, in the National Health Service the power of doctors to determine service priorities and conditions was eroded. Tory governments took the view that professions were prone to self-serving practices that were not in the wider public interest. This suspicion of professionalisation together with the perception that the public (or rather the government) could not have confidence in social services that apparently could not provide safe residential care nor adequately monitor the welfare of children at risk, has been extremely influential in deciding the future status of social work.

The second aspect of Tory policy which has been inherited is the belief that the state cannot and should not be a monopoly supplier of public services. For example, during the Tory era the state funded a massive expansion of private residential care for elderly people and latterly developed mechanisms for inspection and regulation (Means, Morbey, & Smith, 2002). This notion that the public purse might fund but not directly supply services, and would instead regulate a more open and competitive market through new independent bodies has been applied to many developments in public services. Furthermore, in medicine, the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) also makes pronouncements as to which treatments and interventions are most effective, and thus, legitimates the restriction of clinical freedom. This can be seen in the way in which its pronouncements support restrictions in the autonomy of doctors to prescribe drug treatments freely. The culture of management and regulation by performance indicators is woven throughout every aspect of public services and the publication of league tables of performance are commonplace throughout every public service (Newman, 2001).

Given these developments, it is not surprising that the leitmotif of current developments in social work is the notion that the way to achieve better standards is through greater regulation (Higham, Sharp, & Booth, 2001), accompanied by a distrust of professional self-regulation. Consequently, in most of the new organisations charged with determining the future of social work, the government has reduced the possibility of 'occupational capture' by social work professionals. For example, the membership of the General Social Care Council includes qualified social workers and professional representatives but its rules require that the majority of the council are lay members (i.e. not social work professionals) and that the chair must also be a lay member. Furthermore, many of the appointments to these bodies are made by the Department of Health, with the result that at the CSCI (the inspectorate for social care) the Chair and the Chief Inspector are from social work backgrounds but only two out of the five Commissioners are. While at the SCIE, the chair is not a social work professional but a disability rights commissioner well known for her work in promoting independent living.

The final strand of policy that follows on from the Tories but has been more broadly developed by Labour, is the importance attached to consumer perspectives, or in contemporary jargon, stakeholders. Stakeholders are defined as those who have a vested interest in the outcomes of social work education and training, specifically employers and service users. Service user representation can be found at the highest level in all of the new organisations, and their involvement in local social work programmes is a formal requirement of GSCC regulations. Thus, service users have been involved in course planning, student recruitment and selection, teaching, and student assessment. Social work programmes have received some additional funding to support this engagement with service users. Typically, this money has been used to reimburse users for their travel costs and to pay for their time. These initiatives have been widely welcomed by user groups, who though wary of being used in any tokenistic fashion, are in some instances beginning to formalise their relationships with social work programmes by means of formal contracts and training. The increasing participation of service users in social work education is currently seen by the government as a valuable model for other public services.

#### A SOCIAL WORK ACADEMY?

The position and identity of those who teach social work in the UK is changing, as they become much more mainstream academics and less isolated within their own academies. Until comparatively recently, the proportion of social work academics regularly writing and undertaking research was small. One of the most commonly cited reasons for this was the relatively high teaching loads that tutors had on social work programmes. These high loads arose from longer course calendars than on other 'straight' academic programmes, and also from the need to supervise students upon practice placements. University managers were generally accepting of this situation because they received higher funding for social work students. However, there are two other less well recognised reasons for this non-engagement with the broader activities of academia.

The first arises from the widespread tendency to anti-intellectualism in UK social work. Parsloe (2001), a respected figure in British social work in a valedictory reflection upon a career spent in social work education noted the anti-intellectual context of local authority social work practice and suggested that social work agencies were most concerned about procedural training rather than education for a professional practice. This is evident in the commonplace assertion made by many practitioners and their managers of a theory/practice divide between what is learned in college and what is learned 'on the job', with of course, the implicit premise that the latter is superior to the former. While there is not space here to explore this strange situation further, it will suffice to note here that I do not think that there is any such thing as 'theoryless' practice. Rather, various practices have different levels of explicitness of theorisation.

The second reason for the somewhat isolated position of social work in higher education derives from the uncertain academic position of social work as a discipline. Many tutors are former practitioners who have a strong identification with their professional roots. Furthermore, because it is 'practice' that has helped them to achieve their academic positions and this practice focus has been the signifier of social work within their universities, 'practice' has both justified and maintained their separate position. Social work tutors, like those in nurse education and teacher education have not generally

been perceived as mainstream academics within universities, and they have not generally perceived themselves as such. This strong commitment to a practice base has also been reinforced by a reluctance to engage in the less pragmatic forms of academic activity which are perceived by some to lead to a rather sterile and self-serving intellectualism. It is hardly surprising then, that many tutors have in the past been ambivalent about their role as intellectuals.

British social work academics are not alone in experiencing some uncertainty and ambivalence about their subject area, for as Lyons (2003), writing from a broader European perspective, noted:

a central tension in establishing social work as a separate discipline is the relationship between the subject area and the professional field... [as well as] on-going tensions associated with separating social work from other disciplines... (p. 561)

Furthermore, in European countries where social work education is not located in the traditional research based universities, those wishing to undertake doctoral level qualification are not usually able to be located in a department of social work, but have to be located in another discipline. A consequence of this is that some writers have doubted 'the capacity of an applied discipline to take responsibility for its own research' (Lyons, 2003, p. 558).

While concerns remain about the use of the term 'the social work academy' in the UK because of its potentially arrogant and elitist resonance (Parton, 2001, there is increasing recognition of this as a descriptive term for the location of tutors in universities and increasing confidence and recognition of social work as a separate discipline (Butler and Pugh, 2004). Social work tutors are becoming much more like academics in other disciplines as they increasingly participate in the normal intellectual activities of academics, such writing, research and consultation.

Perhaps the most significant factor driving this change has been the Research Assessment Exercise<sup>2</sup>, but it is also the case that the sorts of issues that social work academics have spent much time and thought upon, such as equal opportunities, fair assessment of practice, power and inequity in professional relationships, have become less marginal within their academics. Indeed, arrangements and processes that have been widespread and well-developed in social work, such as the protection of students from arbitrary and unfair practices by academics and practice supervisors through the use of explicit practice learning agreements and assessment processes, student rights and representation, and fair selection of candidates, are now increasingly seen as markers of good practice for other programmes and activities within universities.

#### UNIFIED AND UNCONTESTED KNOWLEDGE?

Within the UK, social work academics are not alone in their increasing interest and participation in research. The post-qualifying framework for social workers required candidates to engage with research; the Department of Health has been striving to create a much more 'research-minded' environment for practice; and local authority social service departments have begun to forge research partnerships with universities to commission research and to disseminate findings. Throughout health and welfare policy the drive

towards evidence-based practice is paramount. This can be seen in two of the initiatives noted earlier, the National Institute for Clinical Excellence in Health, and the Social Care Institute for Excellence for social work.

Superficially, these developments are to be welcomed but there are dangers, for in this:

*apparent cosy coincidence of interests between policy makers, social work practitioners, and researchers... there lies the potential for social work research to be transformed into a much-reduced, colourless, and almost entirely depoliticised form of practice. (Butler & Pugh, 2004, p. 55).*

The problem arises from the assumptions and expectations about what sorts of knowledge can be produced by these activities. The government in its desire to achieve 'best practice' has embraced some remarkably simplistic and positivistic assumptions about social knowledge and is in danger of creating an orthodoxy of practice. Social researchers in their eagerness to demonstrate their usefulness and practicality to policy makers and service agencies, that is, to produce 'real' solutions to 'real' problems, tend to become "more 'scientific'; more methodologically rigorous and above all more quantitative" (Lewis, 2002, p.3) and so may collude in this oversimplification of the messy and contested realities of social life. The point is that not only are the epistemological assumptions underpinning some versions of evidence-based practice questionable, but so too, are the political ones. While space does not permit a fuller examination of these problems, briefly:

there are fundamental problems surrounding the assumptions by the proponents of evidence-based practice regarding the 'objectivity' - not to mention the certainty or reliability - of observation itself, of assessing different bodies or sorts of evidence, and of the processes of inference which lead from evidence to explanation... all judgements of what constitutes evidence, or what is 'good enough' in this regard, or what is 'evident' from data, are in our view perspectival, both informed by normative prescriptions about values and interests as well as by conceptual and theoretical frames of reference, and inevitably bound by context (including the political context). (Butler & Pugh, 2004, p. 61).

Moreover, what some exponents of evidence-based practice fail to recognise is that the answers to many of the dilemmas that face social workers in their practice are not to be found in such technical-rational forms of enquiry but lie in different domains altogether, that is, in the fields of politics, ethics and morality.

Fortunately, some writers are keenly aware of the risks of oversimplification and orthodoxy (Lovelock, Lyons, & Powell, 2004; Webb, 2001) and recognise that 'some of the central characteristics of social work are its inherent ambiguity, complexity and uncertainty' together with its 'raison d'être ...[a] commitment to practice' (Parton, 2001, p.170). For Parton, the uniqueness of social work comes not from particular knowledge

in higher education undertaken every five or six years. Subject specialists submit their best work for peer-assessment and this is graded. These grades are then used to allocate government research funding to universities. Consequently, because the criteria also relate to the numbers and proportions of staff submitting for assessment, there is great pressure for all tutors in all departments to be 'research active'.

but from the practice location that also shapes the form of its disciplinary location. He argues that because social work lies at the intersection of various academic disciplines (such as law, social policy and sociology) and a range of professional activities (such as medicine, the law, education), its disciplinary uniqueness derives from this location rather than from possession of a specific body of knowledge.

#### TOWARDS A NEW PROFESSIONALISM?

Hugman (2001) in a wide ranging analysis upon the developments in social work noted that one of the significant shifts taking place in countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the UK is the “greater separation of ‘professional’ social work from para-professional, ancillary or support functions” (p. 325). Certainly, in the UK the registration and protection of the title ‘social worker’ would seem to support this observation. However, the extent to which these changes can be taken as being indicative of a shift towards professionalism is less certain. In the UK, the prospect of the professionalisation of social work has always been viewed with mixed feelings. While there have been enthusiastic exponents of the merits of registration and self-regulation, there is also a long-standing suspicion of claims for professional status for social work. Typically, those who have resisted professionalisation have stated this in terms of a resistance to any movement away from the social activist position which they believe social work should embrace. From this perspective, when social workers pursue professionalisation they become a self-serving occupational group who are likely to lose sight of their role as champions and defenders of the poorest and most marginalised sections of society. This position was exemplified many years by Simpkin when he stated that it was ‘absurd that social workers should seek to ape the very characteristics that many of us have found so objectionable in doctors, merely so that these very doctors should treat us as equals’ (Simpkin, 1979, p.120). However, in recent years this resistance has diminished, largely because, as Parsloe (2001) noted:

the risk for users today is not the self-serving nature of supposed professionals but the tendency for social workers to be agents of their employing organisations and little more. (p. 15).

The wider acceptance by social workers and social work academics of some degree of professionalisation is, of course, still hedged by caveats about the risks of professionalisation, but it is underpinned by the realisation that the increasing managerialism and marketisation of social welfare threatens the very notion of social work as a public service. This concern is noted by James (2004) who contends that; increasingly, social work has come to exist only as part of particular organisational structures .. increasingly defined on the basis of particular functions... For social workers as professionals this has generated a growing sense of uncertainty - being located in an organisational context in which their practice has increasingly been defined and regulated not by the values, theories and methods of their profession but by the requirements, concerns and accountabilities of their employers and the political concerns of both the central and local state. (p.46/7).

As the role of local authority social workers as direct providers of social service is reduced and as they increasingly become little more than purchasers and assemblers of ‘care packages’, there is considerable disquiet about the nature of social work. Consequently,

professionalisation is seen as offering some possibilities for establishing an identity and preserving forms of practice that are being squeezed out of the public sector. James' concern about the political determination of what social work is about, is well founded. This was evident right from the inception of local authority social work departments back in the 1970s when community development work was organisationally separated from personal social services. Thus, the social activist tradition was not only separated from casework, but was marginalised into another branch of local government service, the youth service. More recently in England and Wales we have seen the reclassification of probation work from a social service to a correctional service concerned less with the rehabilitation of offenders than with monitoring their behaviour and their compliance with court orders. Indeed, many of the measures which are currently raising concerns about the direction of social work, especially the increasing managerialism, were noted in the probation service during the 1980s where there was a drive to, 'reduce the complex activities of probation officers to a set of formalised moves within a series of prescriptive guidelines' (Oldfield, 1994, p.187).

In response to these trends, there are some efforts at trying to restate or reframe social work, most notably from Parton and O'Byrne (2000), and there is clearly a growing reaction against a narrow instrumentalist vision of social work in academic circles. But perhaps the most significant counter to excessively prescriptive managerialism is likely to come from the growing involvement of service users in service planning and development. I noted earlier their representation on the GSCC and the requirement for them to be involved in the new social work qualifying programmes. The Department of Health having overseen the new regulations and provided funding for user involvement is reportedly pleased with the progress that has been made and there are some indications that these initiatives may be expanded. What began as a development from the 'consumerism' fostered during the Thatcher years may become further transformed by user involvement and activism. Additionally, while the main impetus to the development of registration has been the government's desire to 'protect' the public through the formalisation of service standards and codes of practice, which can then be used to discipline errant practitioners, these measures can cut both ways. In future, social workers may utilise these standards and codes of practice to defend their own notions of good practice against the strictures of poor management and inadequate resources.

#### CONCLUSION

It is rather too early to come to any conclusive judgement as to whether the plethora of initiatives and advisory and regulatory bodies have actually improved the standards of social work services. The new arrangements for social work qualification build upon some sound developments from the previous qualifying Diploma in Social Work which had established detailed and transparent arrangements for the assessment of students' practical work, a strong curriculum in regard to inequality and discrimination, and addressed some of the problems that can arise in unequal power relations, such as those between workers and clients, and tutors and students.

What we have now is a complex picture in which some elements of professional independence have been established (register, title, council) but without independent self-regulation. This lack of professional independence is not universally regretted in social work



circles, and some see the prevalence of user involvement as a necessary counterbalance to any tendency of the social work profession to self-serving or defensive behaviour. Even with strong lay and service user representation, the new regulatory bodies for standards and inspection of services remain very susceptible to direct government influence, though, in time, they may establish a more independent role and critical perspective on social work practice. There is a curious paradox, in that at the point at which the legal identity of social work is being secured, its distinctive institutional base in local government practice is becoming weaker as some social work departments are being merged with other departments such as education and health.

The increasing level of regulation, standardisation and prescription, especially in the curriculum and its delivery, is diminishing the independence of educational providers and tending to create a 'one size fits all' approach to professional education and training. Furthermore, the development of professional service standards, professional registers and codes of conduct, all ostensibly aimed at providing better and safer services for the public, are also creating powerful regulatory mechanisms which may be used to discipline not only erroneous and poor practice, but also unorthodox perspectives and dissenting practitioners.

What is clear, is that despite the occasional reference to the broad IASSW/IFSW definition of social work or the rhetorical recognition of the importance of 'community', social work in the UK is still largely defined in a rather narrow fashion. That is, with little reference to social development and broader social policies (Humphries, 2004). Moreover, there is relatively little interest in developing a more internationalised perspective upon social work. The extent of professional and academic engagement with international social work, either through its literature or participation in conferences and events, remains limited.

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