

# Educating the Professional Social Worker: Challenges and Prospects

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**Abstract.** *Changing organisational contexts and priorities will always have implications for social work education. From the emergence of the new profession, social work educators have adapted to new expectations of the social worker in the contemporary social and political context, expectations that have often been strongly influenced by the employing organisations. After a brief overview of the development of social work education in an organisational framework, this article explores the factors which have shaped social work in the United Kingdom in the past 30 years, particularly in relation to the rise of “managerialism”, and the impact this has had on the perception of social workers as professionals in their own right. Finally consideration is given as to whether the new ‘Professional Capabilities Framework’, to be introduced in social work education in the UK from 2013, offers the prospect of social workers strengthening their professional identity so they can work more effectively both within and across organisational boundaries.*

**Keywords:** social work education, organisations, profession

## Introduction

Social work education is inextricably bound up with the ideas and events that have driven changes in social work throughout its history. In the United Kingdom (UK), social work is preparing for a period of radical change as the work of the Social Work Reform Board (SWRB, 2010) is implemented. The SWRB was set up to take forward the reforms proposed by the Social Work Task Force (SWTF, 2009); although the Task Force was created in response to a specific event, the death of a child in 2007, the proposed changes are likely to have a profound impact on all aspects of social work and social work education. As part of the reforms, the current National Occupational Standards for Social Work (TOPSS, 2002) will be replaced with a Professional Capabilities Framework (SWRB, 2010), which offers the prospect of career-wide planning for social workers, from pre-qualification through to senior managerial level. This article will consider whether a move away from narrowly conceived “competence” based standards of assessment will enable social workers to develop a professional identity which will transcend organisational boundaries, and at the same time reposition the relationship of social work education to the employing organisations.

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## Building a profession – the organisational context

The education and training of social workers is inevitably linked to the type of organisation in which social work is carried out. Social work in the earliest years was a multi-faceted response to the social problems created in an increasingly urbanised and industrial environment (Harris, 2008). The Charities Organisation Society (COS) is regarded by many as epitomising the type of charitable body attempting to address these problems, although Burnham (2011) has noted that there were many other public service workers and organisations whose contributions are in danger of being overlooked. The type of training would have depended on the approach and working methods employed by these organisations. For example, as an emerging profession in the “modernist” era, COS workers focused on the moral character of the individual, using a “scientific” assessment method based on the work of Mary Richmond (1917), which included :

the applicant’s character, morals, habits, circumstances and lifestyle, culminating in a personal history and an assessment of the existing help available, together with recommendations about any additional help that was judged to be needed (Harris, 2008, 666).

This contrasted with the approach of the Settlement movement, with its focus on social change, by working with and within communities (Hugman, 2009). Later, the “psy” (psychiatric/psychological/psychoanalytic) complex enabled the nascent profession to align its status to that of the medical profession and so stake out its own areas of expertise and knowledge :

...it was a deliberate strategy on the part of social work educators and practitioners who were seeking a way of defining and organising social work which would distinguish it from every day common sense, and which at the same time would distance it from older, more punitive and moralistic discourses on social work (Cree, 1995, 88/9).

The Children Act 1948 brought further change in the organisational structure of social work with the creation of local authority child welfare departments, a development that was also in response to the death of a child (Curtis Committee, 1946), and brought with it a need for trained child welfare officers. Generic, community-based Social Services Departments were created following the Seebohm Report (1968), with a corresponding development of social work education in the form of the new Central Council for the Education and Training of Social Workers (CCETSW) which was established in 1971, bringing together a number of disparate training bodies that had existed before then (Dickens, 2010).

In 1989 CCETSW introduced a new “competency” based model of assessment which was intended

to achieve contemporary relevance for the [social work] qualification in the context of changing needs, legislation and service delivery (CCETSW 1989, revised 1995 : 4).

These “changing needs” should be seen in relation to the prevailing social and political climate. The comprehensive social welfare model epitomised by the “post-war consensus” which had shaped social policy in the UK since 1945 (though see, e.g. Butler, 1993 for a different perspective), was replaced by ideas coming from the “new right” (Rogowski, 2010), which promoted the role of market forces within social welfare, and introduced a more “business”-oriented approach to social work. This led to an increased role for the private (for profit) and “voluntary” (charitable and not-for-profit) sectors, which increased markedly after the implementation in 1993 of the National Health Service and Community Care Act 1990. At the same time the role of the social worker changed from that of a direct provider

of services, to a “case manager”, one who “commissions” services (Postle, 2002). The subsequent “New Labour” government, which came into power in 1997, continued this trend towards a managerial approach, with “performance” targets (Clarkson, 2010), and the use of the new electronic technologies (Tilbury, 2004 ; Munro, 2004 ; White *et al.*, 2006). This shift in the balance of organisational power from the “professional” to the “managerial” (Harris, 2003, McDonald *et al.*, 2008) has prompted a debate about the extent to which professional discretion has been eroded by managerial control (see e.g. Evans and Harris, 2004 ; McDonald *et al.*, 2008 ; Evans, 2011). Some writers have described social workers in this context as “bureau-professionals” designing and implementing “care packages”, within the confines of a legal and organisational framework, but with limited professional autonomy (Lymbery, 1998 ; Harris, 2008) ; or asked whether the concept of “professional social work” is itself at stake (Rogowski, 2010). Demographic change has also had a significant impact on the demands for social work services, especially in the context of the current debate on the needs of an ageing and more dependent population, and on the balance between individual responsibility for social care and publicly funded provision (see Dilnot, 2011).

Taken alongside the organisational response to further child deaths (most recently those of 2000 and 2007 but at earlier times also), which led to tightened policies and procedures for work with children and families, these developments called into question whether social work education was adequately preparing students for the realities of the workplace, and contributed to an expectation that courses should take a more pragmatic or functional approach, as exemplified in competency-based models.

Kelly and Horder (2001, 689), define a competency-based approach as :

models of vocational or professional training which are based on acquisition of skills and their demonstration in relation to pre-determined outcomes, that is, competences, assessed through performance.

However the new approach faced some criticism. Triseliotis (1995, 44, cited in Kelly and Horder, 2001) commented that :

the competence driven functional analysis of social work (...) is leading to the fragmentation of tasks and losing sight of the person. This mechanistic approach may suit the factory assembly line, but it does not suit the needs of many services [*sic*] users of social services.

Dominelli (1996, 172) was concerned about the loss of a social justice perspective :

a competency driven, technicist approach to social work education... has bleached out the political nature of social work intervention and emphasized decontextualized practical skills.

Despite these concerns, since 2001, when CCETSW was disbanded and replaced by the Training Organisation for Personal Social Services (TOPSS), there has been a steady increase in the role of employers in setting the social work education agenda. Social work education was now seen as a training enterprise, closely linked to workforce planning, which could be assessed by “occupational” standards :

The National Occupational Standards for Social Work set out what employers require social workers to be able to do on entering employment (Dept of Health, 2002, 1),

a theme which the Home Secretary, Jacqui Smith, made explicit in her foreword to the “Requirements for Social Work Training” :

The emphasis must be on practice and the practical relevance of theory (Dept. of Health, 2002, p. i).

## Discussion

It is right that social work qualifying programmes should prepare students for the realities of practice. On the one hand students need to acquire the skills and knowledge for them to function effectively within their placement or employing organisations, but if they are also to be an effective advocate for service users, they need to be critically aware of the scope for oppression and unfairness within organisations, and be able to challenge policy and practice. If social workers are only “socialised” into the requirements of specific types of organisation, there is a danger that they will be required to implement national and local government social policies, even if these are perceived as oppressive or discriminatory, as in the case of immigration policy (Humphries, 2004) or neglecting to respond as a profession to the impact on local communities of the so-called “war on terror” (Guru, 2010).

However this debate needs to be widened beyond the question as whether social workers are just employees or whether they are autonomous professionals. The concept of “stakeholders”, those who have an interest or concern in the activities of the organisation, enables the use of a wider evaluative framework than is possible with a simple dyadic model such as employer/employee (Freeman, 1984). Given that social work is a multifaceted and complex activity, the statutory social work employers are just one of a number of stakeholders in the social work enterprise. The “Requirements for Social Work Training” (Dept of Health, 2002) identifies the two key stakeholders of social work education programmes (which are accredited by a regulatory body, such as the General Social Care Council (GSCC) in England), as “service users” and “employers”, and they are required to be involved in all aspects of the course. From the above, it can be seen that the employers have had a dominant role in setting the outcomes for social work education; it is fair to say that considerable progress has been made in involving service users, although the quality of this is variable (Branfield, 2007).

Dickens (2010), building on the work of Lorenz (1984), argues that if social work is not to lose its “critical voice”, it needs to retain a balance between the four “dimensions” of social work, which he identifies as “the profession” and “the State”, as well as “service users” and “organisations”. However each of these “dimensions” are complex entities, as Dickens (2010) acknowledges. Service users are not a homogeneous group. Depending on the type of service being provided, social workers have to engage in complex ethical and legal issues that are not readily addressed by standardised procedures and codes of practice. Securing the cooperation of “involuntary” clients at the same time as ensuring service user participation is a task that requires considerable skill and expertise. The concept of the “personalisation” policy (Dept. of Health, 2007), under which service users are supported in self-assessing their needs, with the social worker taking on the role of “advocate” or “broker”, has complexities which social workers have to negotiate. Service users are (by definition) not in a position to engage in true markets, and scarce resources limit choice. The social worker’s traditional skill at undertaking assessments, in which the needs, risks and resources are carefully considered could be undervalued; social workers have to find a balance between promoting service user autonomy, and safeguarding them from harm, which in some cases could create tension in their relationship (Leece and Leece, 2011 ; Ferguson, 2007).

The “State” and “organisations” are also multi-faceted entities. Within government, the objectives of different departments do not always coincide, each having distinct priorities, funding, and status. At central government level, social work in the UK is not sponsored by a single national department. Since 2006, in a change intended to provide a more unified and preventative approach to services for children and families, social work for children

became the responsibility of the Department for Education, with the Department for Health retaining responsibility for social work with adults. This was a major “split” in the organisation of services, leading to the question as to whether social work education should also be divided on similar lines, with different qualifying courses for each sector. The Social Work Task Force recommended that training should continue to be generic, on the grounds that to split the profession within higher education would force students to make a premature choice about their preferred area of expertise, and would inhibit movement between the two sectors (SWTF, 2009, 19). This was a significant decision, as the separation of the social work education into “adults” and “children” services would have given the impression that the social work profession was defined by the employing organisations rather than being a distinct entity in its own right.

Social work crosses such organisational and departmental lines, and now has increasingly occupied the “private”, “voluntary” (not for profit), and statutory sectors. The old pattern of a local authority provider setting the template for the outcomes of social work education no longer applies, since the unified Social Services Department (Seebohm, 1968) no longer exists. Instead social work is delivered through a range of different organisational systems both within and outside the public sector. Statutory mental health services are now largely integrated within the National Health Service (NHS), with many mental health social workers now employed directly by NHS Mental Health Trusts, managed or supervised by colleagues from the health professions, rather than from a social work background. Services to Family Courts are provided through the specialist Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS). Services to individuals and families are provided by large and small organisations in the “voluntary” sector, often under contract to local authorities, (often termed “service level agreements” or similar), although in some cases this can limit the scope for creativity and innovation (Cree, 1995). Following the implementation of the NHS and Community Care Act 1990, and requirements under the “best value” policy that public services should put out to tender, social workers are now employed within a wide range of private (“for profit”) organisations, including residential care for older people, residential and therapeutic services for children, support for foster carers, and even privately owned psychiatric hospitals with powers to detain patients under the Mental Health Acts. The inclusion of commercial business models, with a duty to protect the interests of shareholders, could mean a conflict of loyalties for social workers with a primary concern for the welfare of service users (Carey, 2008). Within England and Wales the new “social work practices” currently being piloted, which are run by collectives of social workers or as a private business (Le Grand, 2007) are intended to offer a more flexible and creative approach to services than in a “bureaucratic” local government department, add to the range of organizational models. Each of these models will have different administrative systems and business plans, which means that in setting “competencies” for social workers, newly qualified social workers will need high level, generic skills to apply in different settings, depending on where they find employment.

## **The future of the profession – using the Professional Capabilities Framework**

Given the diversity of social work provision in the “real” world, it is therefore not desirable that social work education should seek to meet the needs of just one sector of stakeholders, the local authority “statutory” services. The challenge for social work education is how to

develop a future generation of social workers who can assert their claim to professionalism. The Final Report of the Social Work Task Force (18) stated that there should be greater consistency in how social work education programmes addresses key areas such as assessment frameworks, risk analysis, communication skills, managing conflict and hostility, and interprofessional working. All of these are high-level skills, not specific to any one organisation, but which the practitioner can bring to any social work setting. The Social Work Reform Board, set up to oversee the implementation of reform, recommended a new “Professional Capabilities Framework” (SWRB, 2010) to replace the National Occupational Standards (NOS) for Social Work (TOPSS, 2002). The NOS set out the standard to be achieved by the social worker in six “Key Roles”, each representing a set of functional competences. These can be summarised as :

1. Preparing for direct work with service users, and assessment of their needs ;
2. Planning, implementing, and reviewing an agreed action plan,
3. Advocating on behalf of service users, and participating in decision-making forums that affect their lives ;
4. Assessing and managing risk ;
5. Working within an organisation, including using supervision and being accountable for resources ;
6. Working as a professional (e.g. working within, and contributing to the development of “best practice” models, engaging with complex ethical and practice issues).

In contrast the Professional Capabilities Framework places the emphasis on generic attributes rather than specific tasks and skills, as shown in the table below.

**Table 1.** *Professional Capabilities Framework (SWRB, 2010, 10/11)*

<b>PROFESSIONALISM</b>	Identify and behave as a professional social worker, committed to professional development
<b>VALUES AND ETHICS</b>	Apply social work ethical principles and values to guide professional practice
<b>DIVERSITY</b>	Recognise diversity and apply anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive principles in practice
<b>RIGHTS, JUSTICE AND ECONOMIC WELL-BEING</b>	Advance human rights and promote social justice and economic well-being
<b>KNOWLEDGE</b>	Apply knowledge of social sciences, law and social work practice theory
<b>CRITICAL REFLECTION AND ANALYSIS</b>	Apply critical reflection and analysis to inform and provide a rationale for professional decision-making
<b>INTERVENTION AND SKILLS</b>	Use judgement and authority to intervene with individuals, families and communities to promote independence, provide support and prevent harm, neglect and abuse
<b>CONTEXTS AND ORGANISATIONS</b>	Engage with, inform, and adapt to changing contexts that shape practice. Operate effectively within own organisational frameworks and contribute to the development of services and organisations. Operate effectively within multi-agency and inter-professional settings
<b>PROFESSIONAL LEADERSHIP</b>	Take responsibility for the professional learning and development of others through supervision, mentoring, assessing, research, teaching, leadership and management

It can be seen that the first six address the “higher order” concepts that mark out the social worker first and foremost as a professional worker, with the emphasis on moral character and a commitment to justice. This is not to say that social workers will be trained only in broad terms; specific “Intervention and skills” can be applied to specific organisational settings (“Contexts and Organisations”), ensuring that students are socialised into the norms of the *profession*, rather than just to those of the organisation. White and Featherstone (2005) suggest that the process of professional socialisation sometimes takes place through the patterns of discourse or narrative that take place within the organisation, but for social workers to develop a pan-organisational perspective, they need to see themselves more as part of a wider community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991), in which knowledge and learning is situated and contextual. The following four headings, which reflect the themes of the Framework, could form the backbone of a social work curriculum.

- **Social justice**

Social workers need to demonstrate a commitment to identifying and addressing examples of social injustice, in order to reclaim the role characterised by the early years of social work. This means feeling confident and competent in their own role so that, whilst working in partnership with other professions, they can also challenge “taken for granted assumptions” within their own and other organisations. There are significant barriers for social workers attempting to challenge unfairness within organisations, so newly qualified social workers need the knowledge, skills and value base to develop critical reflective practice (Taylor and White, 2006, 950) and “ethical and legal literacy” (Preston-Shoot, 2011, 188).

- **Working in partnership with service users**

Social work in the UK, in common with other aspects of public policy, has become increasingly focused on the individual, and sometimes the individual pathological level. Social workers also need to re-engage with communities, given that this is where the reality of service users lives is to be found. Social workers can help to build motivation for change at the collective level, a process described by Postle and Beresford (2007) as “capacity building”. On an individual level skills gained through critical reflection will enable social workers to support service users using individual budgets to purchase and negotiate their own support networks, especially in those cases where the service user experiences challenge from others who are unaccustomed to service users exercising their new freedoms and lifestyles.

- **Relationship-based social work**

At the heart of the social work enterprise is a commitment to “respect for persons” and valuing individuals in their own right irrespective of personal feelings. It is encouraging that, in response to the unremitting turn towards the technical and the informational approaches to social work (Parton, 2008), there has been a resurgence in the value of relationship based approaches to social work (Ruch et al., 2010), and has been acknowledged as essential to effective child protection, not least as a means of gaining full and accurate understanding of the needs and risks of a family (Munro, 2011).

- **Working with risk and uncertainty**

Social work operates within values of inclusion and empowerment, but at the same time is often the primary agency for safeguarding people who are vulnerable and socially marginalised, which includes the very young, older people, people with disabilities, and people with mental health problems. This safeguarding role has undergone considerable change in emphasis as each new crisis (often the death of a child) occurs. Social workers walk a very difficult tightrope between these “public” responsibilities and social work values of “respect for others” and self-determination. Parton (2011) has argued that we need to develop our understanding of the relationship between early intervention, safeguarding, and child protection if by widening the “safeguarding” arena, we bring even more children and

families with the “surveillance” net. This requires social workers, whether their “home” agency is in a “children and families” or “adult” social services arena, to develop high level risk assessment and decision-making skills which are applicable across organisational boundaries (Lyberty and Postle, 2010).

## Conclusion

Many of the changes to social work in the UK have been reactive rather than anticipated, driven as much by tragic “events” as by the force of ideas. At each turn, the role of social work (and in the public perception, often its shortcomings) has come into question, and social workers themselves have felt demoralised and deskilled (SWTF, 2009). Social work education has a central role to play in helping current and future social workers reclaim the profession from the organisations reacting to short term pressures. Whilst there is little evidence that new entrants to the profession are motivated by “radical” rather than “individual-reformist” motives (Gilligan, 2007), nonetheless they do come with a commitment to work creatively with people who are marginalised and want to bring about change. Social work education has to continue to be generic, thus enabling social workers to work across disciplinary boundaries, and to give an emphasis to transferable skills such as reflective practice, and using skills and approaches derived from social work values, such as communicating with difference, shared decision making, and working in partnership even with involuntary clients. In this sense, good quality social work is as much about values and approach as “technology and process” (Beresford et al., 2011).

Organisational change, such as the move to privatised services, or “social work practices”, will not succeed in reinvigorating the profession unless students are given a lead in terms of high level knowledge, skills and values which they can build on and use throughout their careers. Whether the Professional Capabilities Framework will succeed in capturing the commitment and enthusiasm of social workers and social work students, or whether it will become reinterpreted as another form of “tick-box” set of competences to be achieved, remains to be seen.

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