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To cite this article: Alison Higgs (2021): The England degree apprenticeship: a lens to consider the national and international context of social work education, *Social Work Education*, DOI: [10.1080/02615479.2021.1873935](https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2021.1873935)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2021.1873935>



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Published online: 13 Jan 2021.



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The England degree apprenticeship: a lens to consider the national and international context of social work education

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the new English degree level social work apprenticeship scheme. Examining how it links and contrasts with modern and historical international apprenticeship models, it identifies how this route may offer new opportunities to open the profession to social care staff, while allowing employers to improve strategic workforce planning. In arguing that successful implementation of the new qualification pathway requires careful preparation and adequate resourcing, the paper highlights the importance of drawing on the extensive body of knowledge developed internationally in relation to social work education. The author discusses how this could prove challenging given the impact of government funding reductions to social care providers and other public sector bodies, and considers how long-standing debates about social work education reflect the context of global neoliberal socio-economic policies. Many of these can be seen to coalesce around the new training route.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 16 September 2019
Accepted 5 January 2021

KEYWORDS

Social work; degree apprenticeship; neo-liberalism; widening participation; employability

Introduction

In the UK, there are many possible routes into the social work profession, and these have increased in number since social work became a degree level entry profession in 2004. In addition to traditional undergraduate programmes, there are ‘fast-track’ postgraduate courses for graduates with the highest degree grades, such as the ‘Step Up’ and ‘Think Ahead’ programmes in England, as well as pre-university ‘Access’ courses that prepare students for degree level study. A new social work degree apprenticeship has recently been established in England, complementing the existing training routes. A funding mechanism for employers (known as the ‘apprenticeship levy’) has been put in place to support existing staff to train and qualify, potentially improving strategic workforce planning and thus targeting at a local level high vacancy rates in the sector (Skills for Care, 2019). Although each pathway into the profession has its own requirements, all combine academic studies with student learning from the field placement and vice versa. This integration of work-based and academic learning is usual in many international jurisdictions (Sims, de Chenu, Williams and Abye, 2014), although the apprenticeship offers employers opportunities to have increased involvement in social work training. It

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is therefore timely to consider how the apprenticeship relates to the current context of social work education in England and elsewhere.

This paper begins by discussing how the historical and modern apprenticeship systems developed in and beyond Europe, before looking in more detail at key and contested features of higher education, the resourcing of social work training and the neo-liberal context into which the new training route is emerging.

Apprenticeships: a mirror to social change?

Although degree apprenticeships are a new development in England, apprenticeship systems were prevalent throughout Europe since medieval times (Snell, 1996). In many parts of Europe, they have continued to be characterised by a dual system of vocational and academic learning for many decades (Epstein, 1998). The different forms apprenticeships have taken, the assumptions and principles behind their evolution and the variations in levels of state interest and regulation all relate closely to the vicissitudes of social and economic organisation and policies over many centuries. Epstein (1998) draws parallels between the British and continental guild organisations and supports Snell's (1996) analysis of a gradual process of regulation and centralisation of apprentice training systems, serving to protect trade and profit.

In Britain and in Europe, a social and moral dimension gradually became integral to apprenticeships. For example, independent living for young apprentices was restricted and other paternalistic arrangements meant that apprentices tended to continue to work for their 'masters' long after they completed training (Fuller and Unwin, 2001). In Britain the model eventually became directly associated with entitlements to early 'welfare' payments when, under the Poor Law, apprentices could be deemed to be 'deserving' of relief (Snell, 1996).

While the connections between the original apprenticeship systems, the fluctuations in different nations' industrial base, and some residual moral and social features in modern-day apprenticeships vary across Europe and beyond, the model has endured and evolved in different forms (Epstein, 1998; Fuller and Unwin, 2001). Vickerstaff (2003) argues that while there is a perception in Britain that there was a 'golden age' of apprenticeships in Britain after the Second World War, the reality was more complicated. She explains that although some scholars correctly highlight the high numbers of apprentices in Britain during this period, others emphasise the unpopularity of 'moral' control with young people. Low wages made it impossible for apprentices to live independently and regulations tied them to employers for long periods of time. Snell (1996) highlights a deleterious impact on apprenticeship status during the period of Britain's industrial decline, even stating that 'the term itself lacks credibility, intermeshed as the institution has been with Britain's de-industrialization over an extended period' (p321). On the other hand, Lichtenberger (2018) suggests that in Germany the model has always been highly valued as a route to skilled and high-status employment, without the stigma that has been associated with the model in other countries (Ryan & Lőrinc, 2018). Graf (2017) further argues that even though the state's motivation for supporting apprenticeships differs between the USA and Germany, the model is an important one for both jurisdictions, where it is integral to strategies to improve productivity and employment levels.

Modern approaches to work-based learning

Over the second half of the twentieth century the apprenticeship model of work-based education evolved into one where in Britain and elsewhere, apprenticeships would incorporate ‘day release’ education in local colleges, rather than both theoretical and practical instruction being delivered in the workplace (Fuller and Unwin, 2001). In many European countries, this ‘dual system’ apprenticeship has consistently been well-resourced, popular and of high status. In the UK however, the move to partial college-based education was not unproblematic; reductions in the resourcing of further and higher education provision coincided with fewer opportunities for quality apprenticeships as industry declined (Fuller & Unwin, 2009). As Bellinger (2010) underlines, quality vocational training must allow for more than the simple transfer of skills and instead provide ‘resources to enable students to critique their own practice and that of others’ (p2460); adequate resources are therefore essential both in the workplace and in the partner educational institution to facilitate this complex process.

The reputation of apprentice learning was further undermined in the UK in the 1980s, when the Youth Training Scheme (YTS) was introduced. Established to address concerns about youth behaviour in a context of widespread unemployment and urban riots, and punitively linked to entitlement to state benefits (Bynner, 2010), it therefore embodied both the ‘moral’ features of earlier times and a focus on the needs of the job market. Quality YTS opportunities did exist, but these were the exception. The scheme was opposed by trades unions and others as a form of enforced, exploitative labour which offered little to most participants (Unwin, 1996).

Today, the operationalising and the perceptions of the apprenticeship model vary internationally. While Mueller’s (1992) analysis of the Japanese approach to apprenticeships shows how quality models are seen to enhance both productivity and interpersonal skills, Jørgensen (2017) suggests that apprenticeships are stigmatised and seen by many as ‘dead end’ in Denmark. European countries such as Germany, Denmark and the Netherlands have retained high numbers of apprentices and quality is measured against a number of outcomes (European Trades Union Congress, 2012), supporting arguments that the value of this model of learning needs to be evaluated using a range of measures that include but go beyond take-up figures (Baker, 2019; Fuller & Unwin, 2009).

Degree apprenticeships and social work

In Britain, different governments have attempted to develop and foster enthusiasm for ‘modern’ apprentice models and to remedy their associations with inconsistent quality and status (Bishop & Hordern, 2017; Campbell et al., 2005).

England’s ‘Skills for Care’, an independent organisation working to develop the standards, skills and qualifications of the social care workforce, emphasises that the quality of the new social work degree apprenticeship will produce ‘a capable and confident social worker with the skills, knowledge and behaviours ready to work with and support some of the most vulnerable people in society’ (Skills for Care, 2019). Although it is too early to evaluate the views of new apprentices, experienced care workers accessing this training route are likely to view their places on undergraduate social work programmes as important evidence of academic and professional recognition, rather than seeing a second-rate or

stigmatised model. Therefore, it is likely to be seen as part of the new suite of ways to qualify as a social worker in England. Here Frontline and other schemes have demonstrated many professional benefits of a greater focus on well-supported work-based learning, as compared with traditional university social work degrees (Baginsky & Manthorpe, 2016; Baker, 2019; Noble et al., 2009).

Widening participation in university education

Skills for Care (2019) explains that the social work apprenticeship is ‘open to all so there are no formal entry criteria’, suggesting that it could be an important means of widening access to the profession. This fits with a key objective of other English higher degree apprenticeships, that of making access to university possible for more of the population (Office for students, 2019). It also aligns with the drive in social work and other helping professions to provide a more inclusive and representative workforce (Heaslip et al., 2017; Masocha, 2015).

For most of the twentieth century, access to university in Britain was associated more with class and other privilege than distinguishing academic qualities, despite significant moves to increase university places in the post-war era (Hamilton, 2019; Heaslip et al., 2017; Sims et al., 2014). The extent to which higher education is resourced by the state as a public good differs across the world; this means that there are considerable global variations in the extent to which access is restricted to particular social groups (Speight et al., 2013). Britain’s New Labour government adopted a strategy of encouraging higher levels of university attendance for school leavers from 1997, targeting people without a family history of higher education (Jones, 2006; Kelly and Cook, 2007). Similar policies exist in the USA and internationally (Atherton, 2017).

‘Widening participation’, lived experience and social work

The social work profession has a history of attracting significant numbers of ‘non-traditional’ students that pre-dates the New Labour project. These students include older people who may have missed out on formal education or who return to study in later life; and Black and other minoritized groups who have qualified as social workers for decades. (Dillon, 2011; Hillen & Levy, 2015). The impact of Access to Social Work courses for students without the formal school-leavers’ qualifications required by most British universities, and the opportunities provided by many ‘post-1992’ institutions, have been significant (Fairtlough et al., 2014). These students’ personal experiences often resonate with those of users of social work services, enriching the educational experiences of teachers and students in universities in the UK and elsewhere (Dillon, 2011). Cultural and other assumptions have been challenged and increased student diversity has contributed to critical thinking in the field and the classroom (Heaslip et al., 2017) with students better reflecting the populations they will serve when qualified. Teaching and course production have also been opened to service users and carers in the UK and elsewhere (Laging & Thomas, 2017), widening participation in creative ways and facilitating the kinds of reflective learning that are essential features of social work education (Higgins et al., 2016).

Hamilton (2019) argues that because English ‘fast-track’ qualification routes often restrict entry to graduates with the highest degree classifications, progress in widening participation may be stalled. However, it is important to avoid assuming that requiring high undergraduate degree grades would exclude or reduce applications from people of colour and/or others with lived experience of using services. Indeed, the publicity aimed at high-achieving graduates reflects this, often speaking directly to a Black and Asian audience (Think Ahead, 2019).

The student experience: moving beyond ‘widening participation’

However, it is important not to ignore the substantial improvements that still need to be made to students’ experience once they enter the university. An offer of a place does not do enough to address disadvantage or to ensure that students from often excluded groups reach their potential; failing to support black and minority ethnic students given the body of research evidence about their needs could be considered a form of institutional racism (Phillips, 2011). In Britain and the USA, the strategy of widening participation has begun to move beyond quantifying admissions data to analysing how students of colour experience racial discrimination in higher education. For example, in the UK, attention has been directed to the disproportionate representation of Black and other minoritized students in the post 1992 universities, which are often seen as less prestigious (Boliver, 2013), although they have been at the forefront of inclusive educational practices (Fletcher et al., 2015).

Even though the composition of some universities is changing, there is evidence that students of colour and those from other non-traditional groups (including those on social work programmes) often feel marginalised, facing discrimination and microaggressions throughout their training (Fairtlough et al., 2014). Masocha (2015) furthermore argues that ‘... the increased numbers of Black social work students has very little to do with achieving social justice for a marginalized group but rather has been geared towards addressing the acute shortages of frontline social workers’ (p. 645).

‘Participation’ is now being addressed as an issue with several complex dimensions. One of these is degree award gap that has been acknowledged (Mahmud and Gangon, 2020): for example, despite Black and Asian students entering higher education with qualifications equal to or higher than their white counterparts, universities are failing to support all students of colour to achieve equal or better grade outcomes. Research in this area has demonstrated that higher education is not yet a level playing field for all students, undermining its effectiveness as a force for social mobility (Hillen & Levy, 2015). The employer and university partners delivering the social work degree apprenticeship will need to attend carefully to these issues in order to recruit, retain and support all students with achieving their full potential.

Degree apprenticeships for social work: opportunities and challenges

There are many potential benefits associated with the new apprenticeship. First and foremost, employers could be more able to strategically develop the local workforce they need, rather than reacting in *ad hoc* ways to social work vacancies (Open University, 2020). Offering existing staff the opportunity to gain a social work qualification while

working is likely to improve staff recruitment and retention and could promote a more stable workforce with a less rapid turnover in social work staff. This is important at a time when many social workers leave the profession only a few years after qualifying (Community Care, 2018; Department for Education, 2019).

Research evidence also suggests that the new apprenticeship could address gender inequality in the English social care sector, where women predominate and often find themselves unable to move out of low paid and increasingly precarious roles. Moore and Tailby (2015) identify how the privatisation of home care services away from local authorities has ‘transformed a previously permanent, unionised stable female workforce, with a workplace, into isolated, unrepresented labour dependent upon zero-hours contracts’ (p. 714). For such workers, who in England include many highly educated migrant workers (Independent Age, 2019) the English social work degree apprenticeship route promises the chance to earn while training and to achieve higher pay and a wider range of work once qualified as social workers. Furthermore, there is no evidence that an instrumental motivation to become a social worker undermines the calibre of entrants to the profession. Burns (2011) for example, analyses the experience of Irish social workers who embarked on social work training in order to improve their material circumstances. His research found that while their initial motivation was determined mainly by a wish to earn more money, they made a positive choice to remain working in child protection because of the satisfaction and stimulation they found in the work.

Nevertheless, the new entry route needs careful planning and resourcing if it is to be successful. Much is known already about what support many work-based learners without formal qualifications need, particularly in relation to social work Access students. Dillon (2007) identified how Access courses for potential social work degree students require adequate support across many dimensions if they are to offer genuine equality of opportunity. These include study skills advice, confidence building, and acknowledgement of the value of mature students’ life experience. Apprentice learners may face the kinds of similar challenges experienced by older Access and other social work students who often need to ‘unlearn’ and critically analyse assumptions about existing work practices (Cooper & Pickering, 2008). Their work-based learning needs may be similar in these respects to those of participants on schemes whereby employers sponsor existing staff to undertake social work degrees (Noble et al., 2009); clarity about adequate support needs and careful planning will be important.

Dillon (2007) also examines how the higher education environment can be experienced as alien and ‘can lead to non-traditional students feeling isolated, with a sense of not “belonging” and concerns about their academic capability’ (p830). Reay et al. (2010) make similar observations about working class students while Fletcher et al. (2015) highlight the experience of many students of colour. If they do not feel comfortable in the university environment, their ability to develop a student identity will also be undermined; social work students also need to develop a professional identity during training (Hamilton, 2019; Wiles, 2017) and apprentice learners will need support during this complex process. As Deepak et al.’s (2015) analysis of the North American context demonstrates, the trainee needs time and space away from the practice setting to reflect on their learning, and to support the student learner identity that is part of professional identity formation.

Employers are working closely with education providers to prepare and operationalise apprenticeships across England; the partnership between employers and higher education institutions in designing and delivering the apprenticeship curriculum is already allowing social work educators to draw on and develop their experience in supporting students and employers with work-based learning.

Even given the existing expertise of employers and social work educators in supporting work-based learning, there will be many challenges for employers, most of whose resources have been severely restricted as a result of years of UK governments' economic austerity measures. Apprentices' needs for support and supervision may be difficult to address in workplaces where cost-cutting measures result in 'hot-desking' instead of social work team offices, reductions in in-house face to-face training minimise opportunities to discuss professional complexities and an increase in stressful and procedural working practices reduces colleagues' and managers' availability (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2013; Garrett, 2010; Masocha, 2015). There will be a need to not only plan carefully to make the apprenticeship successful, but to evaluate its effectiveness over time.

Discussion

The operationalising of the social work apprenticeship is not an outcome in and of itself, but an additional means of training effective professionals. People using social work services require thoughtful, analytical and proactive social work professionals (Munro, 2011). As Bellinger (2010) argues, quality learning 'assumes the presence of resources to enable students to critique their own practice and that of others in order to develop the meta-skills of learning' (p. 2460). The partnership between employers and education providers will be crucial in ensuring that academic learning is of high quality. Social work education needs to address the complexities of the work itself: it is about much more than telling students how to carry out specific tasks. Ethical dilemmas and the balancing of competing interests can rarely be 'resolved' but rather, need careful identification (Higgs, 2015). Social work education also has many affective dimensions. Deepak et al. (2015) refer to the strong emotions social work learning engenders; they emphasise how students need to develop 'the skills and self-awareness to navigate these challenging moments' (p. 110). The new apprentice route allows for completion at a faster and more flexible pace than the traditional degree and it would be unfortunate if deep learning in such areas was undermined for students who (unlike those on some graduate routes) may have little experience of this kind of learning.

In England the case is now being made that the apprenticeship model is 'more robust than other models' (Skills for Care, 2019). Such confident assertions would benefit from longitudinal examination. It is also worth considering whether and why such statements resonate with criticisms of the traditional university social work degree in England and university education in general. The terminology used to promote the apprenticeship is interesting in this regard: academic learning is termed 'off the job learning' in much promotional material (Skills for Care, 2019). Regardless of the position taken by individual apprenticeship partners, it is worth considering whether and why the role of the university in social work teaching and learning is absent from much of the apprenticeship policy and publicity material (UK Government, 2019; Skills for Care, 2019).

Social work education in the UK and elsewhere has long been contested and politicised, and the apprenticeship emerges into this context. The UK curriculum has been subjected to political and media scrutiny for decades and usually intensifies in response to child abuse tragedies (Forte & Mathews, 1994; Shardlow et al., 2012). There have been numerous changes to social work education and to the professional requirements (Higgins et al., 2016). Cleary (2018) asserts that the attention paid to social work education is directly connected to the neo-liberal agenda of increasing privatisation, competition and expansion in higher education. She describes difficult teaching environments where ‘conflicting demands and competing values’ undermine reflective learning’ (p. 2264).

It may be significant in this context, that the England apprenticeship makes it possible for employers to significantly reduce the proportion of non-work-based learning for social work apprentices to a minimum requirement of only 20%. Social work education requires academic content to prepare students for the complexities of the role (Bellinger, 2010; Higgins et al., 2016). Regardless of individual apprenticeship arrangements the language used and minimal requirements raise questions policy-makers’ position on theoretical content and critical reflection and the neo-liberal higher education agenda. Shardlow et al. (2012) discuss these issues in the international context: ‘employers may be more concerned to see social work students trained to meet the requirements of particular posts than to see the development of students’ critical awareness of social welfare’ (p. 222). Such important questions about higher education and the professional role of social work need to be scrutinised as the apprenticeship is developed across England.

The significance of the social work degree apprenticeship in widening participation would also benefit from closer examination. Inside the academy and beyond, although the field is developing, definitions of ‘widening participation’ remain contested (Stevenson et al., 2010). Some researchers argue that the public policy shifts in recent decades from identifying and addressing structural discrimination to promoting and valuing ‘diversity’, has resulted in a stalling of organisations’ efforts in tackling racism and confusion about what is needed for social work education and social work services. Rather than (for example) addressing how Black, Asian and other people of colour face racial discrimination in relation to recruitment and staff development within organisations, a focus on diversity can lead to the superficial quantifying of workforce composition (Berman & Paradies, 2010). Prioritising promoting diversity, rather than challenging institutional racism can also allow for access and participation issues to be conceptualised in localised ways. A focus on the demographic composition of workforces in relation to the communities they serve may allow the different manifestations of racist practices that restrict job and promotional opportunities to people of colour to continue. In relation to recruiting and retaining social work degree apprentices, employers may also need to develop strategies which go beyond opening access to the qualification to consider why and how apprentices have previously been excluded from professional development and higher educational opportunities.

Other authors have highlighted the widespread and multi-faceted discrimination against working class women in social care roles (Moore & Tailby, 2015; Reay et al., 2010). Here, a focus on ‘diversity’ in areas of practice numerically dominated by women could suggest a need to attract more men into these roles. This would be ineffective as

a strategy to address the generalised structural causes and manifestations of discrimination against women.

Stevenson et al. (2010) analyse the discourse of ‘widening participation’ and find that academic staff are also confused about what it means in practice. In seeing the task as being in general terms about inclusivity and increasing the diversity of the student group, ‘faced with inconsistencies at the local level and a lack of clear institutional policy [they] ... fall back on their own repertoires of values and meaning making ...’ (p. 112). Dependent on individual decisions, these kinds of *ad hoc*, localised approaches are unlikely to address the different and varied needs of students who experience racism.

Furthermore, not only may micro-level interpretations of ‘widening participation’ undermine impact, but there are no agreed national or international methods of measuring the success of initiatives (Archer, 2007; Mahmud and Gangon, 2020). In England, the metrics used may therefore have limited value in identifying deprivation, social class and racial discrimination, and in relation to the social work apprenticeship, its effectiveness in this area will need further research (Bishop & Hordern, 2017).

Regardless of the impact of the new apprentice route on structural inequality in the sector, its overall objective of enhancing social work services must be critically analysed over time. The curriculum—including both work-based and academic content is critical here in influencing what social workers do and how they understand their roles. As Deepak et al. (2015) put it from the North American perspective, ‘it is important to appraise whether social work education is preparing social workers with the knowledge, values and skills related to diversity and social justice that are needed to practice in a rapidly changing world’ (p. 111).

Globally, social work education has been affected as much by market-driven decisions about course and institutional closures as the rest of the higher education sector (Dash, 2018; Higgins et al., 2016; Morris, 2011; Spolander et al., 2014). While social work requires professionals who have developed what Morris (2011) calls ‘the rich analysis on which change-making practices can be built’ (p. 248) there is no consensus about the detail of the curriculum either in England or internationally. Karpetsis (2018) describes a ‘theoretical confusion’ (p. 610), calls for new approaches to theory and argues for social work education to continue to develop rigorous research in the academy. Sims et al. (2014) assert furthermore that in the UK the focus needs to become more and not less global, and that practice should move away from its focus on assessment. Such an approach is perhaps unlikely to be supported by employers who themselves are under enormous pressure to ‘process’ and resolve complex work.

In the UK and internationally, marketisation and privatisation have greatly reduced public services and service users have become increasingly marginalised (Dominelli, 2010; Ferguson & Lavalette, 2013). In the workplace, managerialist policies mean social workers find it increasingly difficult to challenge such policies and practices (Sims et al., 2014). The same employers who engage in apprenticeship teaching partnerships are often implementing cuts to services and in many cases undermining social workers’ working conditions (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2013; Garrett, 2010). The kinds of critical practice espoused by the international code of ethics may have little appeal for many employer partners (Deepak et al. 2015; IFSW, 2014). There are, therefore, numerous factors which

will affect in complex ways, the ability of employers to use the apprenticeship in strategic ways.

Just as the effectiveness of social work training is subject to scrutiny, so the worth of university education is increasingly judged according to neo-liberal outcome measures across the globe. In India the fragmented nature of social work training and widespread programme closures undermine the nation's ability to meet service delivery needs (Dash, 2018). Struggles over the role of the academy and employers' roles have been associated with global neoliberalism; in the UK and beyond, universities compete with one another in a market where students use different kinds of 'league tables' to decide where to study, albeit that the metrics used for outcomes are contested (Goglio, 2016). University education is scrutinised across the world and in many jurisdictions, policy and media discourses undermine the value of a liberal education in favour of one tied closely to labour and workplace requirements (Arora, 2013). Employability measures are generally portrayed as authentic indicators of the suitability of courses for finding work (Speight et al., 2013) and as Arora (2013) asserts have 'become a form of common sense' (p. 636). In the UK and internationally this 'employability agenda' has turned the spotlight onto all university courses, not only those which have always had a significant work-based education component, such as social work (Arora, 2013; Irons, 2017; Speight et al., 2013). In Australia criticisms of the 'worth' of degrees have led to calls for new 'vocational universities' to address skills gaps in industry (Times Higher Educational Supplement, 2019). The university is however crucial in fostering the kinds of complex employability skills needed in social work and other professions that require analytical and critical thinking skills (Anderson & Lees, 2017). The apprenticeship delivery will build on the success of English schemes like Think Ahead and Frontline and teaching partnerships between universities and employers (Baginsky et al., 2019), but it may be useful to view its emergence from a critical perspective, rather than as a neutral development, given the wider socio-political context, would merit further analysis. Perhaps Hamilton (2019) is overly pessimistic in arguing that the reduced role of the university in educating social workers could lead to 'practitioners becoming 'focused more on technocratic learning . . . than critical and radical thinking' (p. 768). Nevertheless, social work educators may wish to keep a watching brief on discourse and practice in relation to their expertise in academic learning.

Conclusion

This paper has identified some key issues for discussion, at an early stage in the operationalising of the social work degree apprenticeship in England; many of these would benefit from further analysis in the immediate and longer term. It is suggested here that the experiences of social work students and their teachers could enhance planning and delivery of the scheme, drawing on the body of research evidence about the needs of 'non-traditional' students as well as the success of existing work-based qualification pathways (Cooper & Pickering, 2008; Gordon et al., 2010).

This paper has argued that older questions about the role and remit of social work and the place of the university coalesce around the new training route. While it is unlikely that the English social work degree apprenticeship will carry the kinds of negative associations that have historically dogged the model internationally (Fuller & Unwin,

2009; Ryan & Lórin, 2018) it will be important to ensure that adequate remuneration as well as high practice and academic standards are maintained. Just as employers can (should they choose to) reduce the proportion of academic learning, they can also (should they choose to) pay social work degree apprentices very low wages (Skills for Care, 2019). The choices apprentice partners make about these features will have a critical influence on whether the model is as 'robust' as is claimed (Skills for Care, 2019).

The degree apprenticeship may offer significant potential benefits for organisations and individuals, albeit that the ability of employers to support the qualification is dependent on wider external political and economic factors. These go beyond funding issues to include the role and remit of social work and policy in relation to higher education and again, will benefit from further scrutiny as the apprentice learners progress to qualification. As Bellinger (2010) puts it, 'If practice learning is a site where the identities of future social workers are developed, the resilience of the profession can be supported through a critical and evidence-based approach that is wary of seeking strength through alignment with transient government agendas' (p. 2453).

Finally, this paper has suggested that the England apprenticeship should be examined from an international perspective. This is because social work is an international profession. Across the globe, social workers are struggling to address the consequences of neo-liberalism and its devastating impact on service provision and their own working conditions. Political and management agendas also affect the extent to which social work's international professional identity and code of ethics is and will be embedded in workplace learning (Arora, 2013). A focus on local workforce development and local requirements, which the apprenticeship route arguably encourages, could dilute trainees' understanding of and commitment to national and international standards, their political and ethical remit and a collective professional identity (Wiles, 2017). The different perspectives of social work educators and employers on these issues suggest fruitful areas for research as this new training route develops.

Disclosure statement

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

Notes on contributor

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