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Better Together: Comprehensive Social Work Education in England

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Abstract

Prospective social workers in England are increasingly being segregated into different qualification routes. While the justification for this segregation relates to either academic achievement or the vocational nature of the course, students also end up segregated based on prior advantage, personal circumstances, context and experience. This article examines the three main routes into contemporary social work in England: fast-tracks, apprenticeships and mainstream programmes. It is shown that each of these approaches arguably have advantages and disadvantages, but that ultimately it is the segregation itself is doing the most damage to the profession. An alternative approach is suggested, based on comprehensive and social justice values, where the focus is on bringing students together, rather than splitting them apart.

Introduction

Social work education in England is increasingly segregated. While many students continue to graduate through established graduate and post-graduate university programmes (mainstreams), there has been a preoccupation in recent years with creating alternative routes into the profession, through fast-track training programmes (fast-tracks) and social work degree apprenticeships (SWDA). Each route into social work, when looked at in isolation, has potential merit; however, they also all have significant deficits, and the damaging impact that splintering social work education is having is becoming increasingly apparent. In the process the once vaunted English social work educational system is at risk of becoming an international aberration and cautionary tale for other jurisdictions who may be considering similar reforms.

This article will start by looking at the advantages and limitations of the various routes individually, followed by a deeper examination of how the current fixation on segregating students is damaging the social work profession. This will lead into a discussion on the value of prioritising diversity and inclusion in educational settings, in particular for social work. Some suggestions for how this could be implemented will be discussed. However, the most important aspect of any changes to social work education must be building alliances and becoming accountable to the service users and communities social workers should be supporting, rather than the current accountability that exists to those with the most power, money, influence and connections.

Fast-tracks

One of the most debated and discussed topics in relation to contemporary social work education in England has been the introduction and rapid expansion of fast-tracks, namely Step Up to Social Work, Frontline and Think Ahead. The stated aim of these programmes is to use large financial incentives and shorter qualifying times to attract academic high-achievers into social work (Children's Workforce Development Council, 2010; MacAlister et al., 2012; Clifton and Thorley, 2014). Commissioned reports into fast-tracks have found that they are capable of

developing capable and competent practitioners with strong potential to move into senior leadership posts (Maxwell et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2019). There are also indications that students on these programmes may have superior practice skills. For example, the evaluation of the Frontline pilot found that their students were rated significantly higher in a simulated practice exercise compared to mainstream students (Maxwell et al., 2016). It is important to note, however, that simulated practice exercises are used frequently in Frontline model of training, and so these findings could instead be related to process familiarity (Domakin and Currey, 2017). Perhaps the most impressive aspect of fast-tracks is that they have been able to consistently maintain cross-party political support, which for the habitually under-fire profession of social work in England, is an impressive feat in itself (Jones, 2014; Warner, 2018; Lavalette, 2019).

The concerns and criticisms that have been levelled against social work fast-tracks are too extensive to go into significant detail here, in particular as these have been dealt with comprehensively elsewhere. Issues raised have included the unnecessarily early specialisation (Jones, 2019), grade inflation (Domakin, 2019), elitist language (Hanley, 2019a), narrow curricula (Higgins, 2015), high costs and disproportionate financial support (Moriarty and Manthorpe, 2018), undermining of the research and theory base of the profession (Thoburn, 2017), a narrow focus on statutory settings (Dickens, 2018), the deprioritising of service user views and experiences (Beresford, 2019), and that graduates are unlikely to stay in practice (Duggan, 2017). Serious concerns have also been raised about the opaque policy networks, private financial interests and powerful players that maintain and promote these organisations despite all these deficits (Jones, 2019; Tunstill, 2019).

For the purpose of this article, the most significant criticisms relate to the lack of diversity and the exclusionary nature of these programmes. The selective approach taken by fast-tracks, combined with their targeted marketing, leadership focus, intensive nature and re-location

requirements, have unsurprisingly meant that they recruit a student population that is more likely to be white, middle class, male and not have caring responsibilities than other social work qualifying routes (Hanley, 2019a). The discourse that these programmes use, including that they attract and reward ‘talented students’ and the ‘best and brightest’, could therefore be considered a perpetuation of privilege, making the large financial incentives attached to fast-tracks all the more problematic (Moriarty and Manthorpe, 2018). Ultimately fast-tracks are educating social work students within systems and settings that do not adhere to core social work values of equality, inclusion, diversity and social justice.

Social Work Degree Apprenticeships

In 2017 the apprenticeship levy was introduced in the UK, requiring employers with a wage bill of over £3 million to pay a 0.5% levy, which can then be retrieved (alongside a 10% government top up), but only to provide apprenticeship training and assessment to their employees (Department for Education, 2019). Smaller employers can also access a co-investment arrangement, whereby they pay 5% of the cost of training and assessing apprentices, with the balance paid out of unused apprenticeship levy funds paid by levy-paying employers. It is widely acknowledged that the main justification for the apprenticeship levy is economic, with the intention that the new system will make workers more effective and globally competitive (Augar, 2019; Evans and Domey, 2019; National Audit Office, 2019). However, additional justifications presented by the government include enhancing the skills of public sector workers and improving access to qualifications for people from disadvantaged areas (Department for Education, 2019).

In order to access levy funds for qualifying social workers in England, a SWDA Standard was designed by a trailblazer group of employers and education providers, and under this standard students achieve a degree level qualification taking place over 36 months of employment, with the maximum fee set at £23,000 (Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, 2018).

Like all apprentices, social work apprentices are required to spend 20% of their paid time on off-the-job training (Department for Education, 2019). There are some potential benefits related to SWDA. The practical experience of apprentices could support them in reflecting on their learning, and Wilson and Kelly (2010) found that social work students with more experience of practice were more likely to question their own competence in this way. The apprenticeship levy also provides access to funding for qualifying social workers at a time when the resources for mainstreams are becoming increasingly restricted (Moriarty and Manthorpe, 2018; Considine et al., 2020).

However, much like fast-tracks, the limitations and deficits of this new model far outweigh the potential benefits to the profession. An immediate concern is the complexity of the apprenticeship model, most notable through the addition of the SWDA standard to the already blurry assortment of standards and frameworks related to social work qualification in England (Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, 2018). The more pressing concern related to the SWDA is that many social workers are now undertaking their training through what is an inherently unstable and unsustainable system. By almost every metric the introduction of the apprenticeship levy has been a failure. A series of reports have identified a national levy overspend of over £1 billion, alongside an almost contradictory rapid decline in the number of apprentices being qualified, and a failure to meet almost all of the government targets associated with the levy, including those around increasing access to people from disadvantages areas (National Audit Office, 2019; Evans and Dromey, 2019; Richmond, 2020).

The expectation that many employers wouldn't spend all of their levy has not come to fruition, and in fact suggestions have been made that employers are accessing the levy fund to pay for employee development, often at a senior level, that they would have previously paid for with other funds (Augar, 2019; National Audit Office, 2019). A report from the Think Tank EDSK explicitly included the SWDA when calling out these expensive 'fake apprenticeships', making

the case that social work students can already access funding through student loans (Richmond, 2020: 31). Unfortunately, many of the suggestions to fix the system therefore involve ending higher level apprenticeships like the SWDA (National Audit Office, 2019; Evans and Dromey, 2019; Richmond, 2020). Considering the large amount of work and energy that has already been expended by employers and educators on the development and introduction of the SWDA, this would be a very tough pill to swallow. However, it is also important to not throw good money after bad, and to accept that social work may be too vital a profession to have its qualifying education beholden to the whims of ill-conceived government schemes like this. While it is too early to confirm any impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the SWDA, the Sutton Trust suggests that this has created additional challenges, including employers being less likely to take on apprentices, and significant disruptions to the majority of apprentices currently studying, in particular apprentices from disadvantaged backgrounds (Doherty and Cullinane, 2020).

A final point to be made in relation to apprenticeships is that they are employer-led by design. While there is obviously value in involving employers in social work qualifying education, it is unclear why social work employers should be trusted with the primary responsibility for this education, in particular when reports consistently show they struggle to even effectively support the welfare of their current staff (Ravalier and Biochat, 2018; Johnson et al., 2019). Social work employers have also already found difficulty in providing newly qualified social workers with their required support and reflection time under the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) model (House of Commons Education Committee, 2016). It is therefore questionable whether they will be able to provide the required 20% off the job learning time required under the SWDA consistently. ASYE social workers in local authorities have also been found to be more stressed than average social workers, further suggesting that employers are struggling to adequately support those they are tasked with developing and

training in their early careers (Johnson et al., 2019). Moreover, research has found that social work practice settings can at times be hostile towards academic learning and theory for students (Higgins et al., 2016), and practice educators have described being afforded insufficient time and scope by their employers to adequately support students (Domakin, 2015). While there are myriad of complex reasons why employers can struggle to support their staff and students effectively, most notably the impact of a decade of austerity and under-resourcing (House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee, 2019; Cromarty, 2019), as it stands it remains questionable whether employers really have the capacity to take on this new lead role in social work education.

Mainstream Programmes

The arguments in favour of mainstreams have been made extensively elsewhere, in particular by Thoburn (2017), who among other things points to the value of being a ‘student’ who can take more learning risks and challenging stances than a ‘trainee’ or ‘apprentice’ in an employer led programme. However, there are also substantial contemporary challenges that make the education of social workers on mainstreams increasingly difficult. Universities in England are increasingly being judged based on narrow metrics of student satisfaction, value for money and employability statistics, rather than their broader personal and societal impacts (Naidoo, 2018; Forstenzer, 2018; Erickson et al., 2020). Despite claims in the recent Augar (2019) report that marketization of English higher education has ‘produced substantial social, economic and personal benefits’ (p.78), there is ample evidence that the opposite is in fact true. A survey of 14,000 UK students showed that only 38% believe that their degree is good value for money, despite the increased focus on student satisfaction that competition in higher education has created (Trendence UK, 2018). Significantly, when students are asked directly about why they feel there is a lack of value for money in higher education, most refer to rising fees and the financial difficulties they face, rather than teaching quality, as is frequently suggested in policy

in this area (Jones et al., 2020). The consumer focus is also having a negative impact on academic achievement, and Bunce et al. (2017) found that higher consumer orientation in students is in fact negatively correlated with academic performance. Shockingly, this increased focus on commercialising universities has not even led to an improvement in the financial circumstances of universities, and between 20-30% of higher education institutions across the UK are facing potentially unsustainable financial challenges (Hudson and Mansfield, 2020). This has also led to discontent amongst staff, prominently illustrated in a largescale survey of 5,888 university staff members across 78 institutions in the UK, where only 10.54% indicated that they were satisfied with the quality of their senior management (Erickson et al., 2020). Notably, these studies all took place prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, which has placed additional strain on market-driven university systems (Hall, 2020).

Naturally these issues extend to social work programmes, and Cleary (2018) found that social work educators see the negative impacts of marketization on most areas of their work, including admissions, placements, assessments, relationships with students and managing failing students. Academics in that study also described finding themselves caught between their dual roles as gatekeepers to the profession and meeting the expectations of consumer orientated students. As Forstenzer (2018) notes, this consumer orientation is likely to create educators who are focused primarily on instilling in students values that are directly related to feelings of satisfaction, such as passing a class and obtaining their desired employment. For social work, this means that employability within statutory agencies, the desired destination of most students, now dominates almost all discussions related to the education of social workers (Narey, 2014; Interface Associates UK, 2019; Social Work England, 2019).

Whatever ideological perspectives one holds about the value of market forces in higher education, and social work education, it is clear that at minimum something is not working in how these market forces are being introduced. However, more likely these issues are arising

because the consumer dynamic has no place in higher education. In fact, a commercial relationship, whereby consumers are provided with what they want in the short term with little concern for their long term welfare, is the exact antithesis of what a pedagogical relationship should be, whereby students are deprived of what they want in the short term precisely in the interest of their long term welfare (Deresiewicz, 2014). Furthermore, a professional educational relationship should involve not simply servicing the needs of students, but also defining those needs for the students (Biesta, 2017). These points are particularly pertinent to social work education, where students often come to the course with unrealistic and individualistic perceptions of the issues facing service users, and a key role of their education should be challenging these taken-for-granted assumptions and biases (Gilligan, 2007; Azzopardi, 2020).

Additional concerns have been raised about mainstreams, including a significant black student attainment gap (Fairclough et al., 2014) and high student stress levels (Grant et al., 2015). It is important to acknowledge, however, that apprenticeships and fast-tracks are still run through universities, or at minimum have to maintain close ties to university programmes, and so all of the issues discussed in this section apply to those routes as well, alongside the additional concerns that were raised in the earlier sections. However, an important distinction is that while apprenticeships and fast-tracks are receiving increasing financial support, mainstreams have seen the financial circumstances of their courses and students decline substantially, including the introduction of a cap on bursaries, the removal of first year undergraduate bursaries, a rise in student loan interest rates and an increase in tuition fees (Moriarty and Manthorpe, 2018). Considering these changes are occurring at the same time that universities are becoming preoccupied with marketization and income generation, it is inevitable that some long-established mainstream social work programmes have had to shut down (Moriarty and Manthorpe, 2018; Cleary, 2018). For the sake of their own survival, the programmes that remain are increasingly having to expend time and resources competing over pots of money

related to apprenticeships, fast-tracks and other government led initiatives, regardless of their pedagogical value or harm to the profession.

Damage of Splitting

Social workers in England experience some of the worst working conditions in the country, and many see themselves leaving the profession in the near future as a result (Ravalier and Biochat, 2018; Johnson et al., 2019). As noted above, there are a number of reasons for this current state of affairs, most notably chronic underfunding of services (House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee, 2019; Cromarty, 2019). However, there are also indications that the segregation of social work qualifying education is exacerbating these problems, including a House of Commons Education Committee (2016) report presenting evidence that social work in England is becoming too dependent on fast-tracks to solve ‘endemic retention problems’ (p.25), and the Association of Directors of Children’s Services (ADCS) (2019) reporting that the creation of new routes into social work have ‘largely been at the expense of the wider workforce’ (p.2). Unfortunately the existing evaluations into fast-tracks tend to ignore or marginalise these broader systemic factors, remaining tactfully restricted to the technocratic outcomes and targets set by the organisational aspirations of the programmes themselves, or the government departments that commission them (Maxwell et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2019). This section will therefore explore some of the damaging impacts that these evaluations have overlooked, suggesting that many areas that seem to be accomplishments are actually indications of a deeply flawed system.

The segregation of social work education means that we now have a situation where not only are different universities competing for students, but also different routes are competing for students, a status quo that discourages collegiality and coordination between providers, and promotes negative marketing campaigns. An example of this is demonstrated in Think Ahead (2019) marketing that states that 100% of their placements are in full-time mental health

services, compared to just 8% of existing programmes. While this may seem an impressive accomplishment in isolation, it also suggests that Think Ahead are using their political connections and financial power to monopolise these placements to the detriment of students from other routes, while also openly disparaging mainstream programmes in a way that may discourage applicants. This is a real concern, and the negative impact that fast-tracks are having on the availability of placements and practice educators for students on mainstreams has been recognised in research (Baginsky et al., 2019). As another example of this competitive marketing approach by fast-tracks, Frontline utilise a strategy of hiring university students as ‘brand managers’, who actively recruit for the Frontline programme on university campuses, including universities that have social work programmes themselves (Frontline, n.d.). While proponents of marketization in education would suggest that this competition is a positive, creating an incentive for education providers to provide a better programme to attract students, as has been discussed already, the introduction of competition into education is more likely to have a negative impact on the experiences and outcomes of all involved.

Another damaging marketing technique used by fast-tracks is the ‘attract to reject’ strategy, based on aggressive marketing campaigns that encourage many people to apply with no real chance of ever being admitted (Deresiewicz, 2014: 35). For example, Frontline (2018) have declared that they have had a 10:1 application to acceptance ratio, and Think Ahead (2017) have stated that theirs is as high as 23:1. While these low acceptance rates could definitely be considered a marketing success, they are decidedly not an indication of the quality of the courses themselves or any positive impact on the social work profession. This point is driven home by recent revelations that despite maintaining this large application/rejection ratio, Frontline have increasingly struggled to fill their cohort since they took their teaching provision in house (Turner and Blackwell, 2019). We should not be celebrating this or encouraging people who are showing a willingness to enter the profession to waste their time and energy in

this way. Once rejected, the competition that exists between programmes acts to discourage fast-tracks from helping these students to access or apply to alternative routes, and they are more likely to be encouraged to re-apply next year in order to further bolster the application/acceptance ratio going forward. Notably, the students who are most able to recover from this type of rejection and either apply elsewhere or re-apply the following year, are those with the social and financial capital to repeat the often onerous application process (Isopahkala-Bouret, 2020), generating additional concerns about the way these programmes impact on student cohort diversity.

The segregation extends beyond social work education, and different routes explicitly seek for their graduates to move into different areas of social work. For example, fast-tracks have consistently declared that their programmes are geared towards creating future leaders, and these issues are exacerbated by the exclusive fellowship and alumni groups that their graduates become members of upon graduation (Think Ahead, 2017; Frontline, 2018). In contrast to having these supportive and well-financed professional networks of support, many social work students on mainstream programmes will instead have their early careers mired with paying back debts and getting over the stress of being on a course without such large financial incentives attached (Considine et al., 2020). The uniquely English decision to segregate social work education in this way also risks devaluing English social work overall, and the point has already been made that fast-track social workers will not be sufficiently qualified to practice social work outside of England (McNicoll, 2017). This shows that while within England those who complete fast-tracks may be considered future leaders and the ‘best and brightest’, that is not the sentiment internationally.

The introduction of SWDA creates another layer of segregation in the social work landscape that needs to be acknowledged. It is particularly concerning that that this group of prospective social workers, likely to be composed of a large number of individuals from non-traditional

educational backgrounds, is subject to additional oversight and control through the apprenticeship standard and requirements, including having to specifically account for all their off the job time, and being directly employed by the main gatekeeper of their eventual qualification (Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, 2018). Once qualified, these social workers could also face disadvantages related to their qualification, as despite attempts to raise the profile of apprenticeships in recent years, both nationally and internationally apprenticeships continue to be seen as a second class qualifications (Lambert, 2016; Ryan and Lorinc, 2018).

The splitting of social work education has also opened up the system to the highly problematic domain of government procurement in a way that wasn't previously the case, as both apprenticeship and fast-track contracts typically go through procurement processes. Government procurement processes are recognised to be a long, opaque, resource intensive and ultimately uneconomical, done in the name of fairness, while in fact being highly skewed towards favouring large, established and well-connected organisations, who have little incentive to improve except for in relation to their contract acquisition skills (Lasko-Skinner et al., 2019). This procurement process has facilitated large, and at times problematic, private interests to earn a financial stake in social work education in a way that wouldn't otherwise be conceivable. For example, Boston Consulting Group (BCG) were a founding partner of Frontline, and continue to work closely with them, despite recent scandals implicating them in corruption and exploitation in Angola (International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, 2019), and working closely with the controversial Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia (Forsythe et al., 2018). Similarly, Think Ahead continue to be supported by Deloitte, who were fined for their role in the 2019 UK prisoner tagging scandal (Kollewe, 2019), as well as being implicated in illicit profiteering in South Africa (Henderson, 2020). The interest of these large global firms in social work education should not be surprising, and they have a clear business agenda to

push for the opening of the public sector to the involvement and control of for-profit provision (Naidoo, 2018). However, what is surprising is that these large financial organisations that have shown little regard for social justice have been supported by social work leaders to get such a foothold in the education of social workers, a profession that should have social justice at its heart at all times.

Value of Together

Advocates of the SWDA, fast-tracks and mainstreams all see the value of bringing a diverse group of individuals into the social work profession. This reflects social work values and as Duffy (2010) notes, 'diversity brings change, beauty and interest to human life, creating opportunities for meaningful exchange in a way that sameness never can' (p.259). However, if this diversity is recognised as being necessary in our social workers, then it stands to reason that it is also necessary in the systems that develop and educate social workers. A move to comprehensive social work education is therefore being proposed here, an approach that would retain the focus on bringing a wide diversity of individuals into the profession, but also look at how to bring students together rather than segregating them, placing a premium on inclusion in the social work qualification process. Essential to this would be developing a system of funding support that ensures that anyone with the potential and motivation to become a social worker can avail themselves of the support they need, rather than focusing financial support on those who have qualified through a particular route. This would also ensure that social work students are being educated in settings that epitomise the values of social justice, diversity and equality, rather than telling those who are 'talented' or 'vocational' that they should be trained separately.

Fundamental to this proposal is that having a diverse student cohort is valuable to all involved. The fact that fast-track students are more likely to have experienced social advantage than other social work students (Hanley, 2019b), combined with the strong correlations between

deprivation and social work involvement (Bywaters et al., 2020), suggests that these students are more likely to have developed their understanding of social work through media and government interpretations, where social work is typically portrayed as focused on individualistic issues and social control (Jones, 2014; Warner, 2018). The impact of this can be seen manifest in the fast-track students who have described the difficulty they have in contextualising their early learning (Maxwell et al., 2016). This could also explain why educators have found that when students are selected based primarily on prior academic attainment they can also experience difficulty in working in partnership with service users and showing empathy for the problems they are facing (Bogo et al., 2006; Dillon, 2007). One way of overcoming this for these students would be to ensure that all students are exposed to a diverse peer group, an approach that has been shown consistently to reduce prejudice, and create an appreciation of difference (Davies et al., 2011; Gair, 2013). However, fast-tracks instead focus on supporting students in small and closed practice groups of about four students (Domakin and Currey, 2017), an approach that has led some students to complain of feeling isolated from the rest of the team (Smith et al., 2019). On courses that are already disproportionately white and middle class, these small groups are unlikely to present the range of diversity that would be desired to promote learning around inclusion and respect for alternative perspectives (Hanley, 2019a). These issues are further exacerbated by the condensed nature of the fast-track approach that reduces the potential to engage in depth with complex issues like institutional racism and white privilege (Cannon, 2018), something that was seen borne out in recent revelations from Frontline students that the programme is struggling to engage with these issues effectively (Turner, 2020).

Having students on the course who have personal experience of social work involvement can be particularly important, and can support their peers to not see service users as the ‘other’ (Newcomb et al., 2017: 686). For these students themes like inequality, discrimination and

emancipation are likely to have a deeper meaning (Jones, 2006). Through bringing this experiential knowledge to social work courses, these students can also help to reduce the current gap that exists between social workers and service users, thereby promoting partnership working and alliance building (Beresford, 2019). Unfortunately, while students with prior academic attainment are celebrated for the contribution that they can make to social work, those with experience of using services can feel shame and stigma, and can be reluctant to even disclose their previous social work involvement (Newcomb et al., 2017). This is likely to be exacerbated under the new Qualifying Education and Training Standards in England, where, rather than listing lived experiences of social work services as a potential benefit to a programme, having this experience is instead listed alongside having a disciplinary or criminal record as a reason for potentially finding a student unsuitable to study (Social Work England, 2019).

Students who have lower prior academic attainment can also benefit from being on a course with students with strong academic records. Notably, when educational segregation occurs at any level, it is the students with lower prior academic attainment who bear the brunt of the negative impacts, as a result of lowering expectations, perpetuation of disadvantage and de-prioritisation of resources (Gorard and Siddiqui, 2019; Francis et al., 2020). Blackman (2017) also describes how the top 20% of academic achievers in an educational cohort are vital in providing peer support to other students, bringing academic benefits for both groups in the process. More importantly bringing students together would also ensure that resources and funding are not disproportionately directed towards certain programmes, as all students work and learn alongside each other, meaning everyone has a common stake in improving the system. This would also send a clear message to all students that they are valued and appreciated as they enter the social work profession.

Many of the arguments perpetuated for and against comprehensive educational approaches are economic in nature (McCulloch, 2016; Kosunen and Hansen, 2018). It may be tempting to utilise these types of economic arguments to support and promote a move towards comprehensive social work education, and indeed I am guilty of doing just that in multiple places throughout this article. However, a move towards comprehensive social work education would need to be justified primarily on social justice grounds, steeped in the internationally recognised social work values of diversity and inclusion (Azzopardi, 2020; McNabb, 2020). If economic or market orientated justifications are instead utilised, then the project would be doomed before it begins, as it will perpetually open to the manipulative deployment of decontextualized metrics and measures, where blame for wider systemic, resource or social issues are shifted to the ever-easy target of social work education, as has been done effectively in the recent past (Narey, 2014). An example of this occurring can be seen in relation to the introduction of comprehensive nursing education in Australia, where the marginalisation of the social justice values underpinning the approach has facilitated it to be critiqued instead based on dubious performance indicators and metrics (Happell and Cutcliffe, 2011).

Therefore, some very basic principles for comprehensive social work education could include:

- Students should not be actively segregated once they have shown the potential and motivation to become social workers.
- Social work education should, first and foremost, be underpinned by social work values, including diversity, inclusion and social justice. These value should also guide the financial support students receive.
- Collaboration and collegiality should be promoted amongst social work education providers, including around recruitment, placements, marketing and rejecting oppressive market and government incentives.

Beyond these very general recommendations I am reluctant to provide or suggest a specific roadmap or blueprint. There has been too much focus on the specific visions and projects of egotistical leaders and short-sighted futurists in social work and social work education in recent years. Indeed, if anything a move towards comprehensive social work education should be accompanied by a corresponding acquiescence of the privileged role that social work educators and leaders hold, and instead move towards building alliances and becoming accountable to the individuals and communities we support. This should include pro-actively recruiting people with experience of using services into the profession and academic teams, as there is arguably a far more robust evidence base for the value of this experience in social work than anything else, including prior academic attainment. A move towards comprehensive social work education would likely also require a level of distance from the current approach of handing over control to statutory employers through apprenticeships, fast-tracks and other initiatives that have not been discussed here, such as teaching partnerships (Interface Associates UK, 2019). As Singh (2019) notes, moving away from the focus on statutory employers does not mean dismissing their value, but instead not allowing the requirements of certain powerful employers to control the priorities of the profession and professional education.

Conclusion

In response to concerns raised about their graduate retention rate, in a recent statement Frontline (2020) highlighted the importance of students having a ‘choice’ of how to qualify, and suggesting that the range of routes are a ‘strength’ of the England system. This article has argued that this is decidedly not the case, promoting an alternative vision based on comprehensive and social justice values. Rejecting marketization and competition in favour of collegiality and cooperation would allow social work education providers and the professionals they educate to more confidently challenge existing systems of oppression. Education providers could also resist governmental financial incentives that come with huge strings

attached, confident that they will not be undercut by another education provider more willing to sell-out. Students would benefit from being able to work and learn alongside each other, and not have their educational outcomes hindered by being forced into a consumer orientation. Social work programmes could come to be judged not on expensive marketing, political support or financial balance sheets, but instead on how they epitomise social justice, and support all learners to meet their full potential. Most significantly, through building alliances with service users, the power and support of social work education could start to come from those we should be focusing on, those who experience social work involvement and support, and as a profession we could gradually becoming beholden to their needs and wishes.

For many reading this, in particularly those currently trapped within the twisted world of market driven higher education and social work in England, these suggestions may seem a pipe dream, and dismissed as scholarly fantasy. In order to overcome this predilection, it is important to recognise that the segregation of social work education in England is not normal, and in most countries, this has sensibly not been the path taken. It is also helpful to consider historic examples where the segregation of social work education has been taken to its extreme, such as in apartheid South Africa, where white and socially advantaged social workers were segregated into different schools and received different qualifications and training based on the areas they would be working in (Shokane and Masoga, 2019). The idea that social work education in England is now more clearly moving in this direction than towards a model based on social justice and inclusion should set off alarm bells and compel action for all those with a stake in social work, social work education and social justice.

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