How does national context impact on social work professional identity?

(Themes emerging from a comparison between social work in Scotland and England)

Fran Wiles, EASSW-UNIFORIS 2017
Overview

- Part of research into cross-national meanings of professional identity
- Brief overview of UK social work education similarities/ differences
- Share work in progress – questionnaire responses so far.
Different meanings of professional identity

Professional traits

National context

Collective identity

Sense of being a social worker
(Inter)national context

Social work (and professional identity) do not mean the same thing in every country ... Since devolution, is this also becoming true in UK?

- Activities and tasks done by social workers
- Regulated or not?
- Working conditions – paid/unpaid/state agencies/charities
- Role of social work – focus on individuals/ families/ wider community
- Relationship between social work and State
Overview of some similarities and differences

- Degree structure
- Student registration with regulatory body
- Partnership model
- Assessment frameworks
- How practice learning is organised
- Number of practice learning days
- Placement criteria
- Other particular features
# Partnerships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HEIs deliver the Degree in formal partnership with local employers, service users and carers</th>
<th>Not a formal requirement, but local networks exist e.g. agreed common documentation and processes for practice learning. Some delivery models require employer-university partnership (Step Up to Social Work); Teaching partnerships.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Not a formal requirement but local networks exist e.g. Learning Network West (LNW) is funded by 13 Local Authorities and 5 HEIs to support practice learning in the west of Scotland.</td>
<td>The Northern Ireland Degree in Social Work Partnership (HEIs and employing agencies) ensures regional consistency in the development and delivery of degree.</td>
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### How practice learning is organised

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<tr>
<th>Local authorities are funded to host all social work students and organise all their practice learning opportunities (in all sectors). Student numbers are aligned with the availability of placements.</th>
<th>Placements are organised locally by each HEI (or by employer where partnerships exist).</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organised locally by each HEI, but some practice learning opportunities provided by the Learning Network West (consortium of employers and 5 HEIs)</td>
<td>Practice Learning Opportunities are coordinated by the NI Social Work Degree Partnership. Students are allocated to suitable PLOs (in all settings) throughout the Degree.</td>
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### How many practice learning days?

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<tr>
<th>Days Description</th>
<th>Days Required</th>
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<tr>
<td>200 days ...</td>
<td>200 days</td>
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<tr>
<td>20 day assessed practice at level 1 &amp;</td>
<td>170 days</td>
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<tr>
<td>180 days (2 placements) of at least 80 days each – i.e 80 + 100 or 90 + 90</td>
<td>30 skills development days</td>
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<td>200 days ... At least 160 days supervised and assessed direct practice; up to 60 days of supervised direct practice can be credited from prior experiential learning.</td>
<td>225 days</td>
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<td>Students must also undergo ‘assessed preparation for direct practice’ (not a set number of days)</td>
<td>25 days preparation for direct work</td>
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<td></td>
<td>185 days direct supervised practice: 85 days at level 2 and 100 days at level 3</td>
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<td>15 days to be used for individual practice development.</td>
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### Curriculum and assessment frameworks

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<tr>
<td>Code of Practice for Social Care Workers</td>
<td>Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) for students.</td>
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<tr>
<td>QAA Subject Benchmark Statements for Social Work</td>
<td>Knowledge and Skills Statements (KSS) for qualified workers.</td>
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<td>QAA Subject Benchmark Statements for Social Work (for social work education)</td>
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<tr>
<th>The Standards in Social Work Education - SiSWE (under revision; incorporate and replace QAA Benchmark Statement)</th>
<th>National Occupational Standards (NOS 2011)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Key Capabilities in Child Care and Protection</td>
<td>Code of Practice for Social Care Workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Codes of Practice for social service workers</td>
<td>QAA Subject Benchmark Statements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuous Learning Framework (CLF)</td>
<td>for Social Work (for social work education)</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Some) particular features</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Social work education must reflect the language, legislation, culture, geography and institutions in Wales.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Provision for students to be able to learn and be assessed through the medium of Welsh.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Policy expectations e.g. the integrated approach to social services</strong></td>
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<td><strong>A variety of delivery modes ...</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Fast track courses: Step-up to Social Work &amp; Frontline (both focused on Children and Families).</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Students required to meet learning outcomes and competencies in relation to child care and protection</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Up to 60 days of supervised direct practice can be credited from prior experiential learning.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Students required to learn about:</strong></td>
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<td>- Community development approaches</td>
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<td>- Direct work in group care (residential / day care)</td>
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<td>- Direct group work</td>
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<td>- Practice experience with at least two other professions (reflects integrated health and social care services)</td>
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Sense of oneself as a social worker: resources for identity work

Public narratives

- Official documents, reports, professional standards / guidelines, media reports.
- Stories and talk shared by social workers in a team (community of practice)

Personal experience

- Gender, social class, personal values etc

Practitioner narratives

- Stories and talk shared by social workers in a team (community of practice)
Public narratives: regulatory discourse
Questionnaire to social work practitioners and educators (Scotland, Wales and England)

• 18 responses: Scotland 3; England 11; Wales 4
• All are qualified social workers and practice educators/ tutors.
• 12 current practitioners; 2 recently retired; 3 lecturers; 1 training manager.
• Qualified between 1974 and 2012.

• Work in progress ….
What does the term social work ‘professional identity’ mean to you?

A range of views, with no nation-specific differences (yet).
All respondents see professional identity as bigger than their workplace role.

Main meanings for respondents (in order of frequency):
1. following the standards of competence, code of ethics and conduct set by the regulatory/professional body
2. working in a particular social work role; working in a particular organization or team
3. Developing your own style: an individual interpretation of your role, codes, standards – in a way which is compatible with your own values and beliefs.

“Doing my job according to specific personal values while also adhering to standards of competence set by a regulatory organisation.”
Which factors have influenced your professional identity?

Strongest influences:
- the nature and/or requirements of your work role
- Being part of a team with social work colleagues
- Feeling proud of your work
- professional code of ethics/ conduct set by a professional /regulatory organization.

Other influences
- Own social work training course; and the nature of own work/ team.
- Professional standards set by a professional /regulatory organization.
- A ‘distinctive national approach to social work’ – but no respondents said this was a strong influence.

“My professional identity is shaped by me and my version of the kind of social work I want to practice. I feel constrained by practice and inspired by my education role.”
Does the country/nation that you work in have a distinctive approach to social work?

Most respondents in Scotland and Wales replied ‘yes’. In England, 6 out of 11 respondents replied ‘yes’ (but 3 gave their country as ‘UK’)

Main distinction is that Scotland and Wales show awareness of ‘nation’.

Reasons given:

• Devolved legislation in Wales and Scotland
• Ideological difference in Scotland and Wales – stronger commitment to service user involvement.
• In England, professional bodies seen as potentially distinctive (but continual change!)
• In England, focus on statutory duties
• Scotland – more support from government, social workers able to connect and influence
• In Wales, practicing in a rural setting seen as distinctive.
Are social workers respected by other professionals/ the government/ the public?

• Unanimous view: all respondents in Wales, Scotland and England replied that they were only respected a little, or not at all, by others.
• The majority mentioned the media contributing to low respect for social work (both on part of public and other professionals).
• Some respondents in both England and Wales presented social work as having reached a low point (compared with the past).

“Media demonization, public ignorance and sly politicians looking for a scapegoat (for a few extra votes) have transformed this field of work in one despised by the public and not respected by other professionals.”

“There has been some progress since the Reform Board changes - the professional identity / image of social work is improving and is gaining more respect from others.”
Additional comments

Common themes across respondents in Wales and Scotland (provided as additional comments):

• Respondents express support for measures and reforms which have been introduced to raise standards – professional registration and social work degree. In England there is support for Social Work Reform Board and College of Social Work - focussing on professional responsibilities and relationships rather than the legislative and organisational context of social work.

• Disappointment with erosion of ‘hope’ – in Wales, of having equal pay with other public sector workers; in England, closure of College of Social Work.

• Desire for a regulatory/ professional body which ‘fights for’/ provides a voice for social work.
Questionnaire

Please take part in my research …
‘A cross-national comparison of what professional identity involves for social workers’.

• Questionnaire (and/ or conversation via skype or email

Email for details:

• fran.wiles@open.ac.uk

Thank you!