



# **Review of Social Work Education**

**Should there be a core curriculum and if so  
what should it include?**

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## **Introduction and aims**

Social work education in the UK has come under considerable scrutiny in the past decade. Perceived failings in social work practice, widely publicised through serious case reviews and related reports into child deaths (Laming, 2009; Munro, 2011), have precipitated significant and sometimes controversial changes to educational provision (Social Work Task Force, 2009; Social Work Reform Board, 2010). Debate is characterised by marked differences of opinion about how social work education should be delivered, with particular emphasis on the question of what the curriculum should contain (Social Work Reform Board, 2011; Moriarty and Manthorpe, 2013, SSSC, 2015). Moriarty and Manthorpe (2013, p.841) encapsulate this philosophical dispute as a matter of whether qualifying education "...should prepare students to work in regulated social work settings or if they should be provided with a wider repertoire of transferable skills and understanding".

Set against this background, Phase 1 of the Review of Social Work Education in Scotland (RSWE) (SSSC, 2015) identified a value in the further exploration of the subject of curriculum content to inform the design of social work education; specifically, to investigate if the content of qualifying programmes should be more prescribed than is the case at present, through the adoption of a 'core curriculum'. In seeking to answer that question, this small-scale study explored research evidence and perceptions about curriculum content from a range of stakeholders; it considered whether a 'core curriculum' has merit in shaping the design of qualifying degree programmes in Scotland. The study addressed the following aims:

- To review current knowledge about curriculum content in qualifying social work courses;
- To explore whether a core curriculum offers a means of supporting a generic approach to social work education;
- To explore what if any content might be core across social work programmes;
- To explore enablers and challenges to developing a core curriculum;
- To explore how creativity and diversity might be ensured across qualifying social work courses should a core curriculum be adopted;
- To consider best practice from other disciplines.

## **A note on terminology**

The literature reveals a diversity of definitions for the term curriculum (Kelly, 2009). Space precludes in-depth engagement with definitional

debates, but in short curriculum may refer variously to content, the learning process or how learning is experienced (Kelly, 2009). As indicated above, however, the purpose of this study was to explore the issue of content, i.e. what is taught, rather than how. As such, the term core curriculum here is interpreted to mean content that is prescribed across qualifying courses.

## **Methodology and methods**

The quality criteria for the study included engaging in partnership working with a range of relevant parties to explore their views about the research questions. Limitations, however, included the short timeframe for completion and the small grant awarded for the study. The following methods were adopted as the most effective means of meeting the project's aims within the context of these constraints:

- A brief literature review;
- Semi-structured questionnaires with academics;
- Focus groups with academics, employers, students, newly qualified social workers (NQSWs), service users and carers, and academics from other disciplines;
- Documentary analysis of degree programme revalidation papers.

Further details of stakeholder sample and data gathering methods are given in appendix 1. The research was underpinned by a qualitative methodology, consistent with the need to explore participants' perspectives and understand the reasoning behind them (Carey, 2012) (See appendix 2 for semi-structured questionnaire and focus group topic guide). A mix of purposive and convenience sampling (Carey, 2012) was used to ensure data collection activities met with timescales; for example, by arranging focus groups to coincide with other events and using existing networks to access participant samples. The study's findings were shared with stakeholders as they became available, with the aim of identifying common ground and potential solutions to the main research questions. Focus groups were audio recorded, transcribed and analysed alongside questionnaires using a qualitative software package (NVivo). Initial

thematic analysis of data sets was followed by comparative analysis across the data as a whole, leading to the identification of a series of main themes. Ethical consent for the study was granted by Glasgow Caledonian University's Ethics Committee.

The representativeness of the study findings is limited by its small size. Nonetheless, the findings provide a rich and valuable cross-section of knowledge and opinion from parties directly involved in social work education and who have a clear investment in shaping its future.

## **Literature review**

This brief literature review provides a snapshot of current knowledge relating to curriculum content in social work qualifying education. It is based on a limited search of published research and reports and, in line with the research specification, draws upon recent published and unpublished reports completed as part of Phase 1 of the RSWE. The selected sample comprised of journal articles (Moriarty and Manthorpe, 2013; Moriarty and Manthorpe, 2014; Domakin, 2014, McCusker and Jackson, 2015), reports related to Phase 1 of the RSWE (Grant et al., 2014; Dunwood and Gordon, 2014; SSSC, 2014; Welsh et al., 2014), and other reports including a small scale study (Hillen, 2013) and two national reviews of social work education in England (Croisdale-Appleby, 2014; Neary, 2014).

The overarching message from the review is that knowledge about the curriculum is limited and contested. Moriarty and Manthorpe's (2013; 2014) journal articles report on a scoping review of research evidence about qualifying social work courses in the UK since the introduction of the social work degree in 2003. The review was undertaken to explore whether recommendations produced by the Social Work Task Force (2009) and Social Work Reform Board (2010) were supported by published research evidence. A key finding was that a robust published research base was lacking. Evidence for many subject areas, for example, human development, was sparse. In addition, there was little known about knowledge and skills development in terms of outcomes for

students and service users and carers (Moriarty and Manthorpe, 2014). The study found evidence to suggest gaps in some subject areas, for example, substance misuse (Galvani and Forrester, 2008), but conflicting evidence in relation to other topics, including communication skills with service users and children (Lucknock et al., 2006, 2007; Lefevre et al., 2008;Koprowska, 2010; Lefevre, 2010).

Further research conducted since then in Scotland also presents a mixed picture. Grant et al (2014) and Welch et al.'s (2014) studies were designed to explore the qualifying curriculum in terms of how well it prepared NQSWs for practice. The former used a mixed methods approach to explore the views of over 200 NQSWs. Its conclusions were mostly very positive, indicating that social work education was adequate in preparing NQSWs for contemporary practice, with a majority of participants reporting confidence in meeting fifteen out of the sixteen National Occupational Standards for Social Work (NOS) (Skills for Care and Development, 2013). It highlighted differences, however, across subject areas; for example, participants reported having had adequate or good preparation in relation to understanding poverty and self-directed support, but a majority indicated that the integration of health and social care was not sufficiently covered in the curriculum (Grant et al., 2014, p.8). Welch et al.'s (2014) findings provide a contrasting picture. Their study employed an online Delphi approach (qualitative and repeated, i.e. in this case discussion at three stages) to explore the views of twenty-six front line managers. Key findings included that while NQSWs were well prepared in three of the NOS they were less-so in the others, including assessment of risk, report writing, managing complexity and coping with the daunting realities of service users' lives.

Perceived gaps in other areas of curriculum content are also identified in recent studies by Hillen (2013), SSSC (2014) and McCusker and Jackson (2015). Hillen's study explored barriers for black and ethnic minority (BME) social work students' in Scotland, through semi-structured interviews with BME students, lecturers and practice teachers. It found that qualifying courses were not sufficiently addressing multiculturalism in

the curriculum and recommended building in more content on culture and race. Educators indicated that anti-racist practice had largely been subsumed into teaching on anti-oppressive practice. The report suggested that these topics needed to be incorporated in the curriculum in order to facilitate the development of “culturally competent social workers” (Hillen, 2013, p.25). The SSSC study examined responses submitted to their ‘Challenge Social Work Degree in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century’ website, to which stakeholders including students, social workers and employers, among others, were invited to contribute. The report noted wide variation between HEI providers of qualifying courses in Scotland and listed topics perceived as requiring more attention, including: adult social work; domestic abuse; substance misuse; mental health, among others (SSSC, 2014, p.12). McCusker and Jackson (2015) looked specifically at the adequacy of teaching on mental distress at one Scottish university. Their study examined final year students’ views and experiences, and noted significant knowledge gaps, in particular, in terms of their preparedness for working with people experiencing mental distress across a wide range of social work practice contexts. This apparent lack of knowledge was contrasted with the pervasiveness of mental distress, which was reported by students regardless of social work setting. Teaching on mental distress was found to be largely limited to law modules and the study recommended that it needed to be attended to more comprehensively in the curriculum. Each of these studies acknowledged a range of limitations, including sample size and representativeness.

The literature review revealed that perceived deficiencies in curriculum content were also related to problems in the relationship between academic and practice learning. Domakin’s (2014) research into the experiences of practice educators echoed findings in Welsh et al’s (2014) work that practice and academic learning were often seen as being “worlds apart” or “separate entities” (Domakin, 2014, p724). Both reports conveyed frustrations about university-based learning, which was perceived by some as not sufficiently reflecting the realities of practice. Domakin’s (2014) findings also noted that practice educators wanted

more clarity about the curriculum and greater opportunity to work in partnership with academic staff in making decisions about its content.

Further research in the Scottish context focused on the adequacy of the framework that regulates the social work curriculum. The Standards in Social Work Education (SiSWE) (SSSC, 2003) set out the learning outcomes students must meet by the point of professional qualification. Consequently, academics are required to use this to inform decision-making about curriculum content and they must evidence this by mapping content to the standards. Dunworth and Gordon's (2014) study sought to assess SiSWE's adequacy for contemporary social work practice and did this by mapping them against NOS. They found that SiSWE were largely fit for purpose but needed to be updated in a number of areas, including: bringing to the fore the personal capabilities of the social worker across a range of areas, such as, self-assertiveness and dealing with resistance; facilitating the ability to look after their well-being and developing resilience; reflecting the distinctive role of social work within integrated services; and placing greater emphasis on supporting service users to participate in decision making processes, e.g. through co-production (Dunworth and Gordon, 2014, p.1). This study was used as the basis for a review of SiSWE that also forms part of the current Phase 2 of RSWE.

The general divergence of opinion about the social work curriculum illustrated in this literature review can be seen to reflect wider differences in views about the role of social work and social work education. In this way, students, academics, employers, practice educators and others' interpretations of the curriculum may be seen to differ depending on what they think social work should be and what knowledge and skills are required at the point of qualification. Such perceptual variations may also be seen to reflect particular ideologies. This aspect of the debate in social work education is brought into stark relief in two national reviews undertaken by Neary (2014) and Croisdale-Appleby (2014), both of which were commissioned by the Secretary of State for Education in England. Their findings reflect quite different analyses of the role of social work and consequently make different prescriptions for what the curriculum should



contain. In a strongly worded critique of social work education, Narey (2014) advocates for a core curriculum, with a particular emphasis on improving understanding of child protection. He also supports the introduction of specialist degree programmes, where learning takes place predominantly in practice settings. In contrast, Croisdale-Appleby (2014) supports the continuation of a generic social work curriculum, but with additional quality assurance for key aspects, including curriculum development. While accepting that degrees with specialist curricula may play a complementary role in the overall provision of social work education, he cautions against a slide towards early specialism and promotes a more expansive view of the social worker as “practitioner, professional and social scientist” (p.79). Narey’s (2014) report raises particular methodological concerns, based as it is on ‘private interviews’ with students, social workers, academics and employers, with no information on selection or analysis. Croisdale-Appleby (2014) provides details of a mixed methodology, including a body of literature as well as group and one-to-one interviews, and confirms participation of a much broader range of named participants.

In summary, this brief literature review reveals a mixed knowledge base regarding the social work curriculum at the present time. Its limitations include a restricted, albeit increasing amount of research and a wide range of often conflicting opinions about the subject, which also reveal wider political and ideological influences. Ultimately, it does not produce a consensus about the need for a core curriculum or otherwise.

Nonetheless, the evidence reviewed here provides important points of reference, which helped inform the subsequent stage of the project around engagement with key stakeholders. As such, key findings were included as prompts in the questionnaire and focus groups guides, allowing for further investigation of specific aspects of the qualifying curriculum, which are now explored.

## **Findings**

Thematic analysis led to the identification of four main themes: challenges to developing a core curriculum; benefits of a core curriculum; perceptions of curriculum content; and areas of consensus regarding curriculum content, which are explored below. In addition, definitional issues with the notion of a 'core curriculum' were evident throughout the data, which are addressed in brief.

## **Definitions**

Analysis revealed wide variation across all data sources about how stakeholders' defined the term 'core curriculum'. This ranged from a focus on curriculum content in university settings to an emphasis on practice learning contexts. For example, a core curriculum was perceived by some participants as a means of bridging gaps between academic and practice learning, and by others as something that in effect already existed within qualifying courses:

*I suppose my starting point is I feel that we do have a core curriculum and it's set by a whole number of other bodies including Scottish Government, the Scottish Social Services Council, it's set for us through policy, through guidance, through legislation, through what's happening in our local area (Academics' focus group).*

There was a similar diversity of views about what topics might constitute a core curriculum. These ranged from underpinning theories to social work values, contexts, processes, approaches and specific subject areas. While some topics appeared more frequently than others, for example, values, the analysis did not reveal a consensus regarding the composition of a core curriculum.

## **Challenges to developing a core curriculum**

More than two thirds of academics, a majority of services users and carers and a significant proportion of students were opposed to the introduction of a core curriculum. It is important to highlight, however, that a simple yes/no dichotomy gives a very misleading impression of the overall tenor

of responses, which were consistently nuanced and considered in nature. That said, there were clear arguments against formally adopting a core curriculum, which addressed a number of key challenges. Overall, there was a general consensus across all stakeholder groups about the high quality of social work education in Scotland, which led some to question the rationale for adopting a core curriculum. Critiques from academics and students referred consistently to the breadth of the social work role and raised concerns that a core curriculum would lead to it becoming more narrowly defined:

*Social work does not exist as a readily identifiable, singular entity - there is no one way to 'do' it - therefore we benefit from different perspectives to be brought to bear on its teaching - we cannot, nor should we attempt to train 'Stepford' social workers, pretending that they can fit seamlessly into whatever organisation they find themselves in (Academic questionnaire).*

Similarly, students expressed concerns about the potential of a core curriculum to lead to courses becoming overly standardised:

*...we don't want everybody tae be coming out like robots, you know, the SSSC codes, you know?..., like carbon copies, [like] "cookie cutters", as somebody said...(Student focus group).*

All stakeholder groups saw currency of curriculum content as an imperative for the quality of social work education. Thus the curriculum's ability to respond to changing social trends and issues, such as immigration and an ageing population, was seen as vital. For those participants opposed to it, the idea of a core curriculum presented challenges to maintaining currency. Academics from social work, nursing and physiotherapy saw it as inhibiting responsiveness both to local needs and wider political developments:

*...if we had a core curriculum that was created, you know, five years ago, then how much emphasis would there be in that around, for example,*

*working with children and families, you know, seeking refuge and asylum?*  
(Academic focus group).

Relatedly, some academics and students critiqued the idea of 'fixing' knowledge through a core curriculum, both on grounds that it would become dated and because as a learning philosophy it fails to reflect the ways in which learning occurs:

*The idea of a core curriculum reflects a very particular (and unsustainable) idea of knowledge as something that 'just exists' and is uncontested and just needs to be transferred from an 'expert' teacher to a novice learner - this isn't the way learning works - it is co-constructed*  
(Academic questionnaire).

The perceived rigidity of a core curriculum was contrasted with SiSWE, which academics classified as an "outcomes based" approach. This was felt to provide the degree of flexibility courses required in order to adapt to changing demographics, policy and knowledge, while still affording an appropriate level of regulation for the profession. It was suggested that the current review of SiSWE would provide a helpful update and address gaps in the standards related to their age. The academic focus group also discussed the possibility of emulating practice in England, by developing guidance around curriculum content that might be included for a range of subject areas. Academics also proposed that more use could be made of the Subject Benchmark Statement for Social Work (QAA, 2008), which is aimed at ensuring that social work education across the jurisdictions of the UK covers broadly similar areas in relation to knowledge, skills and values, and is also currently being updated. Both proposals were considered to be preferable to a core curriculum in that they offered direction about content rather than stipulating what should be included.

Students with reservations about a core curriculum also commented on the benefits of having different qualifying courses with their own particular slants on content. For example, this was seen to facilitate learning between students on placement:

*I think that's quite a positive thing in a way though, because there's all, like, you might know more about mental health than what I do, so I can speak to you about that, I can learn from you. But there may be things that I know, that I've been taught, that you don't know. So we can learn from each other more. Whereas if it's all this kinda core curriculum, we're all gonna learn the same thing (Student focus group).*

Academics and students also raised concerns about the ideological influences behind the notion of a core curriculum. It was linked to a sense of increasing centralisation and regulation of Higher Education in general and to the impact of 'neo-liberalism' on recent changes to social work education in England:

*The appetite for a core curriculum is motivated by market regulation factors and worrying developments in England and Wales. While Frontline has yet to be evaluated early street wise reports suggests the narrow curriculum is leaving newly qualified social workers exposed to an overly restrictive understanding of practice work (Academic questionnaire).*

Students, academics and NQSWs also took issue with the logistics of implementing a core curriculum. Academics critiqued it as an attempt to "shoe horn" in more content as opposed to focusing on developing critical thinking skills. Students and NQSWs acknowledged that qualifying programmes were already full and struggled to see how more content could be accommodated. Moreover, academics queried how a core curriculum would be delivered in under- and postgraduate courses, given their different lengths, which raised questions about what would be left out of existing content.

### **Benefits of a core curriculum**

There was broad support for the idea of a core curriculum from employers and NQSWs. The idea was received favourably by one student focus group and less so by the other. A minority of social work academics and service users and carers supported it. As indicated previously, however, most responses were qualified; for example, there was frequent acknowledgement of the importance of striking a balance between

regulation and creativity in curriculum design. Similarly, employers spoke of line managers/employing agencies having unrealistic expectations of NQSWs and agreed there were limits to how 'prepared' qualifying courses could make them for practice. Nonetheless, those advocating for a core curriculum argued that some standardisation of course content was required. This was based in part on a shared premise that the content of qualifying courses differed markedly across HEI providers, and that greater consistency was needed:

*There is a need for consistency across programmes. Social Work does change, but at the same time there are recurrent themes (Academic questionnaire).*

A perceived lack of standardisation of curriculum content was considered to have a negative impact on student learning, resulting in gaps in knowledge:

*I think if there's not a core curriculum then there's the potential for real gaps in the education that students can receive, depending on which university they go to. There will be areas of preference and interest within academic teams and I think you see that already (Employers' focus group).*

For example, one employer spoke of the possibility of a qualifying course being dominated by knowledge relating to children and families if the staff team's experience and interests lay in that area of practice and research.

The introduction of a core curriculum was also seen as a means of addressing perceived problems with 'professional identity' and role definition in social work. Comments from employers and students' reflected concerns about the status of social work in relation to other professions. For example, one employer made a comparison with teacher education, which he perceived as fostering a more cohesive professional identity. All stakeholder groups spoke of a need for social workers to more ably articulate their roles to other professionals and to the general public. For employers and NQSWs, issues of professional identity and

status were also raised in the context of their experiences of the integration of health and social care. For some this presented a threat to the social work profession:

*I think that this is an absolutely crucial time and if we don't get this right now then I think we – as a profession – we will become subsumed into health and I think we will lose our identity...* (Employer focus group).

Relatedly, answers to questions about what should be 'core' included philosophies and approaches that distinguish social work from other professions; including social justice, relationship based practice and social work values. Employers also spoke of the importance of students engaging with the political context of social work as a profession, with some reporting a lack of political awareness among recent student cohorts. Employers, students, NQSWs and some academics also indicated that inter-professional education (IPE) was important in helping students prepare for working in integrated services, however, they also expressed concerns about variations in the quality of IPE delivered currently in qualifying courses.

Other professionals also acknowledged a relationship between curriculum content and changing professional roles. For example, Podiatry had recently reintroduced a core curriculum (The College of Podiatry, 2015), partly in response to an increase in responsibility for prescribing medications. The associated increase in public liability provided an imperative to ensure coverage of core subjects in the curriculum.

### **Perceptions of curriculum content**

A series of questions about specific subject areas (see appendix 2) revealed marked differences in perceptions about curriculum content across stakeholder groups. This variation is perhaps unsurprising given participants' different vantage points and varying levels of connectedness to knowledge about curriculum content. In addition, it reflects differences in subject coverage across the eight qualifying courses in Scotland. Broadly speaking, however, all participants accepted there were topics that would benefit from more coverage within respective courses, for

example, skills to cope with the demands and stress of social work. A majority of academics believed that most of the subjects were adequately covered, whereas students, NQSWs and employers were more likely to report gaps. The findings also revealed differences in opinion about how much coverage should be given to particular subjects and where it should take place. For example, generally academics believed that policies like self-directed support and the integration of health and social care were attended to with an appropriate level of detail in university teaching, and they expected students' learning in these areas to be developed in placement settings. In contrast, employers and students felt that more preparation in these and other areas was required before students attended placement.

Analysis of programme re-approval documentation also revealed wide variation in how HEIs reported on curriculum content. Some gave specific details of the topics covered in modules and a rationale for making changes to this or introducing new subject areas, whereas others discussed programme development in broader terms. This finding raises questions about how knowledge about curriculum content is recorded and shared across stakeholder groups.

### **Areas of consensus around curriculum content**

The broader data analysis did, however, highlight two key areas of consensus among participants about curriculum content. The first relates to the integration of practice and academic learning, which emerged consistently across the data. All participants referred to the importance of practice learning. Students and NQSWs repeatedly spoke about it, noting that high quality placements were essential for integrating the knowledge and skills they had covered at university. Employers, students, NQSWs and academics shared a perception that placements were not subject to sufficient quality assurance processes. Students believed that HEIs did not have enough oversight of what placements actually offered, or knowledge of students' placement experiences. Students also identified a need for better preparation for placements, which led to a proposal for a core curriculum for practice learning, or a 'practice-learning curriculum'



(PLC). There was a sense that going on placement felt like being “thrown in at the deep end” and it was suggested that a PLC could better prepare students for engaging with the range of roles and tasks they were required to perform. Students and NQSWs advocated for more coverage of applied skills and knowledge, which included the “logistics of practice” - how referrals are made, case conference procedures etc. - and opportunities to visit different social work settings and service users groups. A PLC was considered to have the potential to facilitate this kind of understanding and address some of the perceived gaps in curricula. Students also saw a PLC as an important counter to the reported absence of a ‘learning culture’ in placements, which meant that their learning was inhibited by an emphasis on ‘doing’ rather than ‘making sense of’.

The other main area of consensus related to partnership working in developing the curriculum for qualifying courses. Students, NQSWs, employers and service users and carers attested to the value and importance of contributing to making decisions about content. Examples of good practice in this regard included participation in programme re-approval through consultation events. In addition, academics reported that while sceptical about some aspects of the RSWE, the process was generally felt to have facilitated better partnership working between HEIs. This had led to helpful outcomes, such as learning about different approaches to developing curriculum content and to the setting up of a regular forum for academics to share knowledge about social work education. However, participants also highlighted limitations to their involvement in dialogue regarding curriculum content and barriers to accessing knowledge about it. For example, service users and carers indicated that in the main their contributions to teaching and learning stemmed from a pre-set curriculum, meaning they had limited involvement in decision-making processes about content as a whole. This was reported as a source of frustration for some:

*We can suggest and we can come up with very sound suggestions from our point of view because we’ve experienced it, but then you can get the*

*educator on the other side who say well we don't quite agree, we don't want to do that...*(Service user focus group).

Similarly, out of the eight participants in the employer's focus group, only one had received programme re-approval documentation, whereas another had been unable to access it. All indicated that they would welcome having greater access to information about and more involvement in decision-making about curriculum content.

## **Summary and discussion**

This study has gathered and reflected in-depth perspectives from a wide range of stakeholders. While clear differences of view have emerged in relation to the question of a core curriculum (summarised below) the findings point to a broad consensus on the quality of social work degree programmes in Scotland overall. The tenor of the responses and discussions also conveys a commitment from all stakeholders to social work education and to working collaboratively towards building on its strengths. This positive context therefore sets the tone for consideration of the findings and for identifying potential ways of realising shared objectives.

In essence, the study has highlighted that the concept of 'core curriculum' is heavily contested, a finding that is echoed in the existing literature. This was a pervasive theme throughout focus group and questionnaire data, raising questions of definition, rationale and perceived merit. Before considering these points, however, it is important to reiterate that a yes/no dichotomy fails to capture the tone and content of participants' responses and discussions. These were often comprehensive and considered, some tentative and others emphatic, but they consistently reflected a willingness to engage with the research question and to propose ways forward that might address some of the issues raised. A central tenet that emerged from all stakeholder groups was of social work as a political and contested activity, which needed to be reflected in the content of the curriculum.

There were clear definitional problems with the term 'core curriculum', which was variously interpreted to refer to curriculum content, module design, teaching and learning approaches, learning philosophies and a mix of each. It is therefore difficult to quantify or neatly delineate exactly how each stakeholder group viewed the idea. Broadly speaking, however, and when asked to focus on the question of subject content, the findings do indicate that a majority of academics were opposed to having a core curriculum, as were service users and carers. Students and other academics appeared to be split, whereas NQSWs and employers were generally in favour.

In broad term, key reservations about the idea were:

- A lack of evidence both for needing a core curriculum and for its efficacy;
- Concerns about prescribing knowledge in a way that would limit responsiveness to changing social and political contexts and inhibit academic freedom;
- A sense that the content of social work education across HEIs in Scotland was already broadly similar; in effect representing a shared curriculum, whose differences should be celebrated as strengths, reflecting the diversity of the social work role, research expertise and local need;
- Concerns that a core curriculum represented a move towards a procedural model of education, reflecting a narrow neo-liberal view of the social work role. This was seen as contrary to the diversity of social work as a profession and in contrast to wider educational trends that place value on critical thinking skills;
- The current regulatory framework, including SiSWE, was considered to offer the level of responsiveness courses needed to reflect changing social and political trends;
- A core curriculum represented a threat of over-regulation and of ceding control to the regulatory body;
- The apparent difficulties of deciding what should be core and a related philosophical critique about 'fixing' knowledge;

- Pedagogical concerns in respect of 'shoe-horning' more content into already busy degree programmes;
- Practical concerns about how a core curriculum would be integrated within degree programmes of different lengths and formats.

The need for and advantages of having a core curriculum were identified as:

- The requirement for more standardisation across degree programmes to ensure students' gained knowledge of 'core' subjects;
- The need to address perceived gaps in current curriculum content;
- The need to mitigate against imbalances in curriculum content related to the composition and research interests of academic staff groups;
- The importance of consistency in content for articulating a clearer message about social work's role, particularly in the face of the challenges of the integration of health and social care;
- The advantages of having parity with other professions in terms of clearer educational provision and an associated enhancement of professional identity.

In summary, these positions reflect clear tensions between a wish for greater standardisation of the curriculum and a view that it represents a regressive step on educational, philosophical and practical grounds. The level of disagreement about a core curriculum in principle and what it would consist of suggests that it would be very difficult to realise in practice. Despite this apparent stalemate, the findings highlight areas of agreement, along with proposals as to how curriculum content might be enhanced, (discussed below). This discussion needs to be seen, however, in the context of the acute financial pressures now facing practice and university providers. Accordingly, the proposals that follow need to be considered with an eye to the resource requirements needed to realise and sustain them.

### **Enhancing the commitment to partnership working**

Analysis of the study's rich narratives has identified partnership working as an obvious and overarching means of addressing many of the issues that have arisen. The study revealed clear differences in perceptions about what the social work curriculum currently consists of and what topics it should contain. These issues raise questions about the adequacy of current processes for sharing decision-making and information about curriculum content. Stakeholders reported examples of good practice but the findings clearly indicate that further efforts are required to achieve and realise the potential of more effective partnership working. This may include consideration of a national approach, examples of which are found currently in other jurisdictions, including Northern Ireland (The Northern Ireland Degree in Social Work Partnership, 2013).

### **Enhancing the outcomes based approach**

The requirement to develop more effective partnership working is also based on the finding that an outcomes based approach to regulating social work education, on its own, does not appear to be enough. SiSWE were viewed as effective in many respects but did not address the need for an on-going, shared and holistic development of social work education. Thus there was a perceived need to commit to a shared ownership of the curriculum through partnership working. Furthermore, the study indicated that better and more explicit use should be made of the Benchmarking Statement (QAA, 2008) - which forms part of the regulatory framework and is also currently being renewed – to inform decision-making about curriculum content. In addition, innovations in social work education in other jurisdictions, such as subject guides, were seen as worth exploring for a Scottish context.

### **Further development of integrated and practice learning**

The application of knowledge and skills in practice was repeatedly identified as of central importance for effective social work education. Findings indicated a perceived gap between academic and practice learning, which was reported as a source of significant frustration. The

general desire for a greater integration of learning was reflected in a call for a 'practice-learning curriculum' - a specific learning and teaching framework aimed at preparing students for and facilitating sense-making over the course of placements. Programme documentation indicates that some HEIs are enhancing teaching and learning in this area and it represents an obvious area for further development. It also offers opportunities for enhancing integrated learning through increasing the contributions of practitioners to university-based learning and teaching. The successful achievement of a much more integrated approach to learning would also appear to be predicated on practice learning being seen as part of the curriculum; this seems essential to address the "worlds apart" perceptions reported in the study. In addition, the findings indicate numerous concerns about the current provision of practice learning, ranging from the suitability of some practice learning sites to the emotional demands of practice learning and a resultant need for opportunities to learn ways of managing them. Practice learning thus needs to be given further detailed and considered attention within social work education as a whole.

### **Enhancing professional identity**

Lastly, the study highlighted a clear concern among a number of stakeholders about the current status of social work. This was related specifically to the integration of health and social care services. While views differed about how to address it, there was consensus on the importance of enhancing professional identity in social work education for countering the threat of losing a professional sense of 'self'. Dialogue suggested a need to better distinguish and celebrate the distinctive professional contributions of social work. Thus, teaching on professional identity in general, and in the context of inter-professional education, was seen as important in avoiding the potential of identity-fragmentation and status anxiety in an increasingly integrated world. Clearly, however, this issue also requires on-going attention in the post-qualifying period.

## **Recommendations**

1. Explore the potential of a national approach to enhancing partnership working between key stakeholders for facilitating shared decision-making about the curriculum; consider merits of existing models, e.g. The Northern Ireland Degree in Social Work Partnership (NIDSWP, 2013);
2. Make more explicit use of the Subject Benchmark Statement for Social Work (QAA, 2008) to inform decision-making and mapping of the curriculum and explore the merits of subject guides;
3. Further develop integrated learning by conceptualising practice learning as part of the curriculum;
4. Further develop integrated learning by increasing emphasis on applied knowledge across the curriculum; consider adopting a 'practice learning curriculum';
5. Review the current resourcing, regulation and quality assurance of practice learning;
6. Review, share and build on good practice around developing professional identity across the curriculum, including the role of inter-professional education.

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## **Appendix 1            Data collection methods and sample:**

- Due to academics' pivotal role in developing curriculum content, two data collection methods were employed – questionnaires and a focus group. Questionnaires were sent to staff with responsibility for curriculum design. Sixteen academics, representing all eight HEI providers of social work education nationally, completed the questionnaires, comprising of five Heads of School of Social Work, three programme leaders, five senior lecturers and five lecturers. There were nine focus group participants, representing seven HEIs, including three Heads of School of Social Work, three programme leaders, one lecturer, one senior lecturer and one PhD student.
- Two student focus groups were held, the first comprising of sixteen participants, representing three universities from the West of Scotland; twelve from third and fourth year BA (Hons) programmes and four final year MSc students. Fourteen students from one university in the East of Scotland participated in the second focus group, all were final year MSc students.
- There were six participants in the NQSWs' focus group; all had graduated between July and December 2015 and were based in one local authority, across children and families, justice and adult teams. Five had undertaken BA (Hons) programmes and one an MSc, across three HEIs in the West of Scotland.
- Ten participants from Glasgow Caledonian University's Employer Liaison Forum took part in the employer focus group. Eight were drawn from seven local authorities and two represented one voluntary organisation. All had experience of the practice teacher role and/or associated responsibilities for workforce development including NQSW training. Two were in senior management positions.
- There were six participants in the service user and carer focus group, five of whom identified as service users and one as both a service user and a carer. They represented six Scottish HEI networks developed to support the participation of service users and carers in all aspects of social work education.

- Two academics took part in the other professionals' focus group: a professor of Nursing and a programme leader in Physiotherapy. Subsequently, a telephone interview using the same focus group topic guide was held with a lecturer in Podiatry, who had led the development of a national core-curriculum for that profession.
- A documentary analysis was undertaken of qualifying BA (Hons) and MSc programme documents submitted for HEI and SSSC re-approval for the period 2013-2014, for seven of the eight HEIs in Scotland. As both researchers had been directly responsible for producing some of the documentation for their respective HEIs, a research assistant with no prior knowledge of the documents or the re-approval process was enlisted to undertake the analysis.

## **Appendix 2 Semi-structured questionnaire and focus group topic guide**



### **Questionnaire**

1. Please note your job title
2. In your view, how well do the Standards in Social Work Education (Scottish Executive, 2003) address the question of curriculum content? Please give reasons for your answer.
3. In your experience of designing social work degree curricula, how do you make decisions about what content to include?
4. How are changes in knowledge, for example in relation to policy and service user groups, factored in to your degree programme/institution's curricula?
5. How are such changes to curriculum content tracked currently? (e.g. discussion at meetings, development events, mapping tools, etc.?)
6. In respect of your programme/institution's curricula, do you think there are gaps in content, for example, in relation to specific service user groups, policy or other areas? Please give reasons for your answers.
7. A brief literature review, which included findings from phase 1 of the review of social work education, identified the following subject areas as perceived gaps in social work curricula. Could you comment on their coverage in your programme/institution?
  - a. Substance misuse (Galvani and Forrester, 2008)
  - b. Anti-racist practice and cultural sensitivity (Hillen, 2013)
  - c. Mental health (McCusker and Jackson, 2015)

- d. Integration of Health and Social Care (Grant, Sheridan and Webb, 2014; Crosidale-Appleby, 2014)
  - e. Well-being and resilience (Celcis, 2014; Dunwood and Gordon, 2014)
  - f. Personalisation/self-directed support (Dunwood and Gordon, 2014)
  - g. Risk assessment, management and positive risk taking (Dunwood and Gordon, 2014)
  - h. Skills, including report writing (SSSC ideas platform, 2014; Celcis, 2014)
  - i. Managing complexity (Celcis, 2014)
  - j. Use of self/relationship-based practice (SSSC, LA consultations, 2014)
8. In your view, do qualifying social work degree programmes in Scotland need a core curriculum? Yes/No (delete as applicable)  
Please give reasons for your answer.
9. If 'yes', could you indicate what subject areas should be core?
- 10.If 'yes', how should curricula be designed to retain sufficient reflexivity in order to:
- (a)reflect particular research & teaching expertise at each HEI?
  - (b)respond to changing knowledge and practice?
- 11.If 'no' how should curriculum content be decided?
- 12.In your view, are there other approaches that would help in making decisions about the content of social work curricula?
- 13.In your view, what can social work learn from other disciplines?

### **Focus Group guide**

1. Introductions, incl. current roles and context of knowledge of SW curricula.
2. In your view, how adequate is the content of social work degree programmes?
3. Do you think there are any gaps in content, for example, in relation to specific service user groups, policy, skills or other areas? Please give details.
4. In your view, how well are the following areas covered?
  - a. Substance misuse (Galvani and Forrester, 2008)
  - b. Anti-racist practice and cultural sensitivity (Hillen, 2013)
  - c. Mental health (McCusker and Jackson, 2015)
  - d. Integration of Health and Social Care (Grant, Sheridan and Webb, 2014; Crosidale-Appleby, 2014)
  - e. Well-being and resilience (Dunwood and Gordon, 2014; Celcis, 2014)
  - f. SDS (Dunwood and Gordon, 2014)
  - g. Risk assessment, management and positive risk taking (Dunwood and Gordon, 2014)
  - h. Skills, including report writing (SSSC ideas platform, 2014; Celcis, 2014)
  - i. Managing complexity (Celcis, 2014)
  - j. Use of self/relationship-based practice (SSSC, LA consultations, 2014)
5. In your view, do qualifying social work degree programmes in Scotland need a core curriculum? If yes, could you indicate what subject areas should be core?
6. If 'yes', how should the curriculum be designed to retain sufficient reflexivity to respond to changing knowledge and practice?
7. If 'no' how should curriculum content be decided?
8. What might we learn from other disciplines?
9. Do you have other comments/suggestions about the content of social work degree programmes?