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A chronology of the history and development of social work education in Northern Ireland

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ABSTRACT
This article presents a detailed history of the development of social work education in Northern Ireland from 1962 to 2020 as a chronology spanning 58 years. Policy mapping was used as a model to build the chronology. A brief examination of the social, political and geographical context of Northern Ireland outlining the distinctive nature of social work in a post-conflict context are discussed. The chronology is presented as a table detailing the development of social work education in Northern Ireland over the last five decades. This culminates in a discussion which highlights some key shifts in policy and practice developments as they relate to social work education in Northern Ireland at pre and post qualifying levels.

Introduction
In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic changed how social work education was delivered in Northern Ireland. This coincided with the first period of civic lockdowns and led to a decision to prematurely end social work placements on the 18th of March 2020. This unprecedented global health emergency required social work practitioners, students, and academics to adapt rapidly and acquire new skills and competencies in the use of digital technologies. These seismic changes also created an opportunity to reflect on the history of social work education in Northern Ireland to this point. This article presents a detailed history of the developments in social work education in Northern Ireland from 1962 to 2020 as a chronology spanning 58 years.

This article begins by briefly examining the social, political, and geographical context of Northern Ireland outlining the distinctive nature of social work in this post-conflict context. Policy mapping as a methodology (Burris et al., 2010) is explained as the model used to build the chronology of social work education (1968–2020). Next, the chronology is presented, the author proposes this chronology is an original and significant contribution to knowledge for social work colleagues, academics, practitioners, and students detailing the development of social work education in Northern Ireland over the last five decades. The discussion section briefly highlights some key shifts in policy and
practice developments as they relate to social work education in Northern Ireland at pre and post-qualifying levels.

**Geographical, political, and social contexts**

Northern Ireland experienced civil conflict for over three decades, resulting in people and communities being exposed to significant trauma and injuries (Breen-Smyth, 2012; Ferry et al., 2008). This period of political and civil unrest was known as ‘the Troubles’ and has been the focus of local, national, and international research (Hamber & Kelly, 2018; Kelly & Braniff, 2016; Muldoon, 2004). The Belfast Agreement (Good Friday Agreement) in 1998 set out a pathway toward reconciliation and a commitment to establishing a fresh start for the people of Northern Ireland. This was approved by 71% of voters in a referendum (Morrow, 2019).

The Belfast Agreement (1998) was a milestone in efforts to resolve the ongoing conflict in Northern Ireland, and it included the establishment of a devolved power-sharing government. From the outset, the new political arrangements challenged political parties to work together collaboratively. Several political controversies led to the collapse of the power-sharing arrangements, with two significant periods of direct rule from Westminster, 2002–2007 and 2017–2020. Throughout the years there have been continued difficulties, with smaller parties having little influence on key decisions and often being excluded from negotiations between the two dominant parties.

Northern Ireland has a growing population, estimated at 1.88 million in the most recent census (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency [NISRA], 2021). The ‘start-stop’ politics of Northern Ireland, which often result in legislative stagnation and continued difficulties in implementing policies on a range of social issues including health, education, and social care, are borne out as the ongoing failures of the government. Gray et al. (2018, p. 3) record in *Peace Monitoring Report 5* that socio-economic challenges remain for the people of Northern Ireland:

> There are persistent, and in some cases, growing inequalities in relation to socio-economic conditions, educational attainment, and health status in Northern Ireland . . . There has been little change in poverty rates over the past decade.

Burke (2016), highlights the potential fallout from Brexit for Northern Ireland, urging caution that withdrawal from the European Union could result in significant changes in the political, economic, and post-conflict landscape. Twenty-three years after the Good Friday Agreement (1998), divisions in Northern Ireland remain. Morrow (2019, p. 7) in a comprehensive survey of sectarianism in Northern Ireland, posits that sectarianism is shaped by identity, structure, behavior, and attitudes and thus is embedded into everyday life. At the time of writing, Northern Ireland is caught in the political negotiations that are taking place between the British government and the European Union; the Northern Ireland Protocol stalling political progress and resulting in a further collapse of power sharing arrangements.

At the time of writing, one in five people in Northern Ireland has a disability or long-term illness, with mental ill health recorded as the largest single cause of illness (Betts & Thompson, 2017). Bunting et al. (2013) indicate that there is an association between mental ill health and conflict-related trauma in Northern Ireland. This research
corroborates one of the key findings of Ferry et al. (2008, p. 63), that ‘PTSD is a specific and significant health need in Northern Ireland’s adult population’. O’Neill and O’Connor (2020) concur, adding that the continued elevation of PTSD rates in Northern Ireland exacerbates individuals’ mental health problems, resulting in the likelihood of experiencing suicidal thoughts. Early intervention programs are significant factors in mitigating these risks (McLafferty et al., 2019).

Gray and Birrell (2013) lament the persistent inequalities of the social care system in Northern Ireland, which has been severely affected by funding cuts, austerity, and a complex system of eligibility and means testing. All of these elements have resulted in repeated calls for transformation, innovation, and a more equitable approach to social care for the people of Northern Ireland. Carers (2019) reported an increase in the number of family members providing unpaid care in Northern Ireland, inconsistencies in accessing carers’ assessments, and no resources being provided to address needs and risks when a carer’s assessment was completed. The report identifies carers in Northern Ireland as having significantly lower ‘life satisfaction and happiness and twice the Northern Ireland average of anxiety levels’ (2019, p. 12).

Northern Ireland has the worst hospital waiting times in the United Kingdom (Black et al., 2021; DoH, 2023). The absence of a functioning Northern Ireland Executive creates a decision-making vacuum which impacts on people and communities.

The development of social work education in Northern Ireland

The regulation of social work education is devolved across the UK, with each of the four professional councils, England (Social Work England), Wales (Social Care Wales), Scotland (Scottish Social Services Council), and Northern Ireland (Northern Ireland Social Care Council) adopting their own standards of conduct and practice. Banks (2012, p. 107) discusses the nuances of the UK-wide introduction of regulators for the social work profession in 2001 as a move toward recognition and status. However, she asserts that regulation came at a price: ‘increasing state control and a focus on controlling the conduct of individual social workers’.

Social work education in Northern Ireland is unique within the four nations owing to the contested histories and conflict associated with the Troubles. The introduction of the degree (2004) coincided with a new era in Northern Ireland as an emerging post-conflict society (author’s own, 2016). The introduction of the Framework Specification for the Degree (Northern Ireland Social Care Council [NISCC], 2003a) places a mandatory requirement on the social work curriculum to include learning and teaching on the impact of past and current violence ‘in the education and training of social work students’ (NISCC, 2003a, p. 6). Furthermore the creation of the Northern Ireland Post Qualifying and Training Partnership (1993) situated Northern Ireland as the first part of the United Kingdom to establish a post-qualifying partnership with employers and academic institutions. This partnership, now named the Professional in Practice Partnership Committee following several iterations, remains the bedrock of post-qualifying social work education three decades later.

Campbell et al. (2021) in their retrospective study of social worker’s experiences during the Troubles explore the significant challenges and trauma many practitioners encountered. Social workers were working in communities often polarized
by religion and sectarian violence, many reflected on the invaluable support from peers and colleagues as they tried to navigate and practice in communities with contested histories and identities. Campbell et al. (2019) posit that for some social workers, their experience of working through political conflict lends itself to more politically aware and activist approaches to social work. This resonates with earlier work (Pinkerton & Campbell, 2002, p. 724) which presents a tiered model of analysis of the ‘state’, ‘civil society’, and ‘professional ideology’ to debate how social justice can be embedded in the professional identity of social workers during ongoing and oftentimes stagnated processes of post-conflict resolution. Pinkerton and Campbell’s (2002) analysis illuminates the contrast between the national and international bodies in emphasizing and promoting social justice approaches which are core to the global definition of social work (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2014).

The Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC) is responsible for the overarching regulation and governance of the profession in Northern Ireland, including undergraduate and postgraduate education (NISCC, 2019c). Social work has been a regulated profession in Northern Ireland since 2005 and social worker is a protected title. In contrast, in the Republic of Ireland, the title of social worker has been a protected professional title since 2013 (Irish Association of Social Workers [IASW], 2020).

Heenan and Birrell (2011, p. 104) reflect on the compatibility of professional qualifications in social work with a specific emphasis on Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland which ‘share a common history and legacy’. At that time challenges and issues were noted in relation to recognizing the Northern Ireland social work qualification in the Republic of Ireland. These issues impacted cross-border employment mobility for social workers who qualified in the North. Brexit has had a further huge impact on cross-border registration with social workers on the Island of Ireland required to hold dual registration to practise legally in both jurisdictions (NISCC, 2022). This has required cohesive systems in place from universities, regulators, and employers to ensure regulations are met and all island services including safeguarding and protection of children are sustained.

The BSc (Hons) degree in social work in Northern Ireland is reviewed every five years by the Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC). Since the introduction of the degree in 2004, three periodic reviews have been completed and their results have been disseminated to key stakeholders (NISCC, 2009, 2014, 2019c, 2019a).

The Department of Health commissions the number of placements with each of the key practice learning opportunity providers, including all five Health and Social Care Trusts, the voluntary sector, the Education Authority, and the justice sectors (Probation Board for Northern Ireland and Youth Justice Agency). This consists of approximately 500 placements per year across level two (85 days) and level three (100 days) placements.

Social work education and professional learning do not stop at the point of graduation, and students must complete an Assessed Year in Employment (AYE) in Northern Ireland. This is formal additional support for newly qualified social workers as they continue to form and shape their professional identity and complete the transition from education to employment; professional regulation is a condition of successful completion. The AYE should ensure that newly qualified staff caseloads are protected, supervision is frequent and space is created to promote and support reflexivity.
There is recognition by the profession’s regulators throughout the UK of the significance of the formative first year in practice as a newly qualified social worker. In England, newly qualified social workers must complete the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (AYSE) (Social Work England, 2020), and in Wales, the Compulsory Consolidation Programme is the designated requirement for early career social workers as part of their PQ framework of Continuing Professional Education and Learning (Social Care Wales, 2020). In Scotland, work is at an advanced stage to develop a supported year in employment for newly qualified social workers following a review and several pilot projects (Scottish Social Services Council, 2020).

Northern Ireland diverges from the rest of the UK regarding its Professional in Practice (PiP) continued professional development (CPD) framework. The pathways in the framework are integrated with practice-based learning and academic awards and are available to all registered social workers throughout their careers. This is embedded into registration, so, for example, the renewal of professional registration after AYE is conditional on successfully completing two requirements of the Professional in Practice consolidation award within three years (NISCC, 2020a). As a comparison, in the Republic of Ireland, the Social Workers Registration Board has mandated that social workers must obtain 30 CPD credits in every 12-month period as the requirement to evidence compliance with the Code of Professional Conduct and Ethics (Social Workers Registration Board, 2019).

**Methodology**

Policy mapping applies the techniques of content analysis as a research methodology which can be conducted with reports, regulations, legislation, and social policies (Burris et al., 2010). Brown et al. (2022) emphasizes the importance of policy mapping as a research tool for social work. The author adapted the eight-stage model presented by Burris et al. (2010). As the sole researcher policy mapping is a time-consuming process and requires deep reading of policy documents, legislation, occupational standards, Department of Health circulars and reports. The methodology employed six stages: (1) research question, (2) identifying data sources, (3) inclusion and exclusion criteria, (4) data collection, (5) reliability and accuracy and (6) dissemination. The author is a social work academic at a university in Northern Ireland and therefore acknowledges their ‘insider status’ (Braun & Clark, 2013; Bryman, 2016). Drafts of the chronology were shared with the Northern Ireland Social Care Council and the Chief Social Worker for Northern Ireland.

The chronology is iterative and will need to be consistently updated to maintain currency as a resource illustrating how policy, regulations, legislation, and professional frameworks have shaped the professional education of social workers in Northern Ireland at pre and post-qualifying levels.

The chronology presented in Table 1 outlining the history of the development of social work education in Northern Ireland from 1962 to 2020 is a significant and useful contribution to knowledge offering a detailed history of the key developments in social work education.
### Table 1. The history and development of social work education in Northern Ireland from 1962 to 2020.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Overview</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>Social welfare officers mandated to hold a social work qualification.</td>
<td>Influence of the Seebohm report (1968), which recommended the establishment of a generic social work qualification. (Seebohm Committee (1968) Report of the committee on local authority and allied personal social services, Cmd 3703. London: HMSO)</td>
<td>The Troubles led to an increased demand on personal social services in Northern Ireland; Darby and Williamson (1978) noted that the number of social workers doubled between 1968 and 1974.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>CTSW was renamed the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW).</td>
<td>CCETSW was established by the Local Authority Social Services Act (1970). (Local Authority Social Service Act 1970, C42. London: HMSO)</td>
<td>This change brought the responsibility for social work training under one UK-wide organisation, replacing six separate training councils. Through CCETSW, two social work qualifications were provided: the Certificate in Qualification in Social Work (CQSW) and the Certificate in Social Services (CSS).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>Integrated health and social services established. Senior social services officers were recognised as part of corporate management at area and local levels.</td>
<td>The Seebohm report (1968) was a catalyst for creating a generic social services department in Northern Ireland similar to those of local authorities in England.</td>
<td>The introduction of Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972. (Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Order 1972, No. 1265 (N.I. 14). London: HMSO). Identified three key professional functions for Approved Social Workers: protecting civil liberties, providing an independent professional opinion and offering advocacy skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>Approved Social Worker status for mental health social workers.</td>
<td>Introduction of The Mental Health Order (Northern Ireland, 1986). (The Mental Health (Northern Ireland) Order 1986, No. 595, (N.I. 5). London: HMSO)</td>
<td>In 1989 the DipSW replaced the Certificate of Qualification in Social Work (CQSW) introduced in 1971 and the employer-led Certificate of Social Service (CSS) introduced in 1975 and required the delivery of the programmes through partnership arrangements between universities and employers, thus ensuring social work education met employer need. Alongside this were arrangements to approve employing organisations to deliver practice learning opportunities and a training program for social workers to become practice teachers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>CCETSW published Assuring quality in the diploma in social work: rules and requirements for the DipSW.</td>
<td>In the late 1980s the UK government carried out a review of social work education (Griffiths Report) prompted by concerns about the need to establish standards required for a competent workforce. (Griffiths, R (Griffiths, 1998). Community Care: Agenda for action: A report to the Secretary of State for Social Services by Sir Roy Griffiths. London: HMSO)</td>
<td>The review led to a new UK professional qualification, the Diploma in Social Work (DipSW), based on National Occupational Standards for social work.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>CCETSW published the requirements for post-qualifying education and training in personal social services: a framework for continuing professional development Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW) (1990)</td>
<td>CCETSW was responsible for the development of social work training and development in Northern Ireland. CCETSW approved the Northern Ireland Post-Qualifying and Education Training Partnership (NIPQETP) in January 1993.</td>
<td>Northern Ireland became the first part of the United Kingdom to have a post-qualifying partnership for social work. It was a CCETSW requirement that this partnership should comprise employers and academics to enhance ownership and increase involvement and participation in post-qualifying provision. This development put in place a professional awards framework for social workers, providing a continuum of social work education and training throughout a social worker’s career.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>CCETSW established the Northern Ireland Post-Qualifying Education and Training Partnership (NIPQETP).</td>
<td>CCETSW approved the Northern Ireland Post-Qualifying and Education Training Partnership (NIPQETP) in January 1993.</td>
<td>Northern Ireland became the first part of the United Kingdom to have a post-qualifying partnership for social work. CCETSW requirement that this partnership should comprise employers and academics to enhance ownership and increase involvement and participation in post-qualifying provision.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC) established.</td>
<td>Introduction of Health and Personal Social Services Act (Northern Ireland) 2001. (Health and Personal Social Services Act (Northern Ireland), 2001 C3. Belfast: HMSO) This included reform of current social work training in Northern Ireland.</td>
<td>The creation of a social work regulator in Northern Ireland with responsibility for strengthening safeguards and promoting high standards of professionalism, conduct and practice. Its aim is to ensure that the public in Northern Ireland have confidence in the social work sector.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>1. Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC) register for social workers and social care workers opens. 2. Northern Ireland Framework Specification for the Degree in Social Work. (Northern Ireland Social Care Council [NISCC] (2003a) Framework specification for the degree in social work. Belfast: NISCC).</td>
<td>1. Priority group one, identified as social workers, care workers in children’s residential facilities and managers in adult residential facilities, were registered first. 2. Single set of learning outcomes incorporating academic and practice requirements.</td>
<td>1. From May 2004 social work students were added to the register. 2. In 2003 the Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC), the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC), the Care Council for Wales (CCW), and the General Social Care Council (GSSC) in England agreed National Occupational Standards.</td>
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<td>2004</td>
<td>1. New BSc (Hons) degree is introduced in Northern Ireland following UK-wide reform of social work education initiated by the following: (Department of Health [DoH] (2019) Modernising social services: promoting independence, improving protection, raising standards, Cm 4169. London: HMSO).</td>
<td>1. This replaced the Diploma in Social Work.</td>
<td>1. The introduction of the new BSc (Hons) was replicated in England, Scotland, and Wales, repositioning social work as a graduate-level profession. The degree was recognised as the entry level required to register as a social worker.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. Formation of the Northern Ireland Degree in Social Work Partnership (NIDSWP).</td>
<td>2. A regional partnership comprising key stakeholders from statutory (there are five Health and Social Care Trusts in Northern Ireland) and voluntary sectors, HEIs and the NISCC.</td>
<td>2. The NIDSWP reports directly to the Northern Ireland Social Care Council and serves as a conduit for key stakeholders to engage in decision making relating to degree delivery in Northern Ireland. This includes a range of subgroups, e.g. the Degree Delivery Committee, Admissions, the Strategic Advisory Group, the Practice Learning Committee, Practice Learning Coordinators meetings, and Collaborative Forum meetings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>1. Protection of title of social worker.</td>
<td>1. As outlined in the Health and Personal Social Services Act (Northern Ireland), 2001 C3. Belfast: HMSO.</td>
<td>1. Only qualified social workers who are registered with the NISCC may use the title of social worker. Registering became a formal condition of practising as a social worker in Northern Ireland with the introduction of the protection of the title of social worker.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. Assessed Year in Employment (AYE) policy is launched. (Department of Health Social Services and Public Safety [DHSSPS] (2006b) <em>Assessed year in employment (AYE) of newly qualified social workers</em>. Belfast: Social Services Inspectorate).</td>
<td>2. Designed to ensure newly qualified social workers consolidate knowledge and have sufficient professional supervision and support.</td>
<td>2. Condition of registration for AYE remains mandatory and must be completed by all newly qualified social workers in Northern Ireland. This is embedded across all sectors and supported by employers.</td>
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<td>3. Introduction of the Standards for Practice Learning. (Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety [DHSSPS] (2006c) <em>Standards for practice learning for the degree in social work</em>. Belfast: DHSSPS).</td>
<td>3. These standards required statutory, voluntary, probation, youth justice, and independent providers and the Education Authority to obtain Designated Status to provide social work placements in Northern Ireland.</td>
<td>3. Social work agencies were required to apply for Designated Practice Learning Provider Status to the NISCC. This set out the quality assurance and governance framework for practice learning provision in Northern Ireland. Agencies that could not fulfil these requirements had the option of becoming an Associate Provider under the supervision of a Designated Provider; several smaller voluntary and community agencies chose this option.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>Northern Ireland Framework for Post Qualifying Social Work Education and Training is launched. (Northern Ireland Post Qualifying Education and Training Partnership [NIPQETP] (2007) <em>Partnership Handbook</em>. Belfast: NIPQETP).</td>
<td>Revision of the existing post-qualifying arrangements to provide more flexibility in using the framework to achieve post-qualifying awards. Aligned PQ social work with an accredited postgraduate structure in Northern Ireland.</td>
<td>Provided social workers with a framework within which to achieve requirements and build towards the achievement of professional awards using both taught programmes and experiential learning. A range of taught programmes was developed and approved at Ulster University and Queen’s University Belfast as part of a wider strategy to engage social workers in Northern Ireland in continued professional development.</td>
</tr>
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<td>2008</td>
<td>The Principles and Quality Standards for Participation published. (Northern Ireland Social Care Council [NISCC] (2008) <em>The principles and quality standards for participation</em>. Belfast: NISCC).</td>
<td>This set out six overarching principles to facilitate meaningful involvement and participation of service users in social work.</td>
<td>These principles led to the creation of the NISCC Participation Partnership, which seeks the views of service users and experts regarding the lived experience of policy and their reviews of the degree-related and participation initiatives.</td>
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<td>2009</td>
<td>Five Year Review of the Degree in Social Work published. (Northern Ireland Social Care Council [NISCC] (2009) The five year periodic review of the degree in social work, Belfast: NISCC).</td>
<td>This was the inaugural review of the BSc (Hons) degree.</td>
<td>The review highlighted that there was an adequate supply of practice learning opportunities but it identified issues concerning the quality of provision. More childcare placements were required, as was a wider geographical spread of placements. The North West region had been historically under-represented regarding the provision of placements. The periodic review was used to inform and map the Regional Strategy for Practice Learning Provision in Northern Ireland 2010–2015.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>1. Strategic Advisory Group (SAG) for the degree established by the NISCC.</td>
<td>1. The SAG was established to provide strategic oversight of the degree.</td>
<td>1. The SAG comprised the NISCC, academic institutions, employers from the statutory, voluntary, and independent sectors, the NIDSWP and the DoH to provide strategic oversight of the degree to ensure that the curriculum takes account of policy and practice development.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. Regional Strategy for Practice Learning Provision in Northern Ireland 2010–2015 launched. (Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (NI) (DHSSPSNI) (2010) Degree in social work: a regional strategy for practice learning provision in Northern Ireland (2010–2015), Belfast: NISCC).</td>
<td>2. Set out collaborative arrangements and strategic priorities to ensure the quality and continuous supply of social work placements in Northern Ireland.</td>
<td>2. Practice learning was embedded in the core business planning models of the Health and Social Care Trusts as a strategic priority. The voluntary sector was given a specific strategic priority to ensure support is available for providing placements. Funding was provided by the Department of Health as part of its workforce planning and development strategy.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3. Practice Learning Requirements for the Degree in Social Work (revised) published. (Northern Ireland Social Care Council [NISCC] (2010) Practice learning requirements for the degree in social work (revised), Belfast: NISCC).</td>
<td>3. Provided the definition, principles, and requirements of practice learning in Northern Ireland.</td>
<td>3. Requirements in relation to placement component of the professional degree, for example social work students to have at least one placement in statutory social work children’s services, with all final-year placement students having a social worker to shadow on the placement site. These requirements are reviewed periodically to aligned with review of the degree.</td>
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2. 10-year strategy for social work launched. | These rules set out the content of the degree in NI (Framework Specification) and the regional partnership arrangements facilitated by the NIDSWP. | All social work course providers in Northern Ireland are required to adhere to the rules and must provide evidence to the NISCC via regular reporting and annual subject monitoring. |
| 2013 | NISCC Readiness to practise report.  
(Northern Ireland Social Care Council [NISCC] (2013) Readiness to practise: A report from a study of new social work graduates' preparedness for practice: An analysis of the views of key stakeholders. Belfast: NISCC). | This report examined the views of new social work graduates and their preparedness for practice. | The report includes an analysis of the views of a range of key stakeholders and was instrumental in identifying areas to explore in the second periodic review of the social work degree in Northern Ireland. |
2. Croisdale-Appleby report.  
2. Report commissioned by the Department of Health and Social Care focusing on the quality of social work education (February 2014).  
3. The degree is reviewed every five years to ensure it is fit for purpose. | 1. Advocated a specialist approach to social work education and championed the ‘fast track’ model of Step Up to Social Work for graduates to achieve a postgraduate diploma in social work in 14 months.  
2. Argued in favour of a generalist approach to social work education to ensure that qualified social workers are equipped to practise in all settings of social work. This report was referenced in the second periodic review of the degree in social work (NISCC, 2014).  
3. Key recommendations included improved service users’ and carers’ involvement in the degree delivery, recruitment, selection, and admissions processes. The review also highlighted the progress made by Designated Practice Learning Providers within the context of the Regional Strategy for Practice Learning Provision (2010–2015). |
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<td>2015</td>
<td>2. First social work research strategy devised as part of the Social Work Research Strategy (2015–2020) launched.</td>
<td>2. Provided a roadmap for the development and delivery of social work research in Northern Ireland.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>3. Revised and updated educational framework for the degree in social work launched.</td>
<td>3. Extended and updated the framework for the degree in social work in Northern Ireland.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>4. NISCC and NISPPNI published Standards of conduct and practice for social work.</td>
<td>4. Replaced the original codes of conduct for social workers employed in the Northern Ireland Care Council (NISSC) (2002) and the Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISPPNI) (2002).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2018

1. Change in focus for the degree in social work. | 1. Change in focus for the degree in social work. |

2019

1. Third periodic review of the degree in social work completed. | 1. Third periodic review of the degree in social work completed. |

2020

1. Revised and updated educational framework for the degree in social work launched. | 1. Revised and updated educational framework for the degree in social work launched. |
Table 1. (Continued).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Overview</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>1. Publication of NISCC good practice guidelines for service user involvement in social work education. (Northern Ireland Social Care Council [NISCC] (2019a) Standards of conduct and practice for social workers. Belfast: NISCC).</td>
<td>Following a period of consultation with social work educators, service users, and placement providers, regional guidelines were produced.</td>
<td>1. These regional guidelines provide clarity regarding “continuing to value and encourage the vital and creative involvement of service users’ lived experiences in helping to prepare future social workers for the challenging world of practice” (NISCC, 2020a, p. 5).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. Six strategic priorities to support social workers to continuously improve their practice to meet the changing needs of communities in Northern Ireland (Department of Health, 2019, p. 17):</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1. Relationship-based Practice</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. Highly Skilled, Resilient, and Confident Workforce</td>
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<td>3. Continuous Learning and Improvement</td>
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<td></td>
<td>4. Effective Leadership and Management</td>
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<td></td>
<td>5. Collaboration and Partnership</td>
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<td></td>
<td>6. Practising in a Digital World</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Discussion: (re)shaping social work education in Northern Ireland

Building on the descriptions of the policy, law, and practice developments included in the chronology (Table 1) this section will briefly highlight some key shifts in policy and practice developments as they relate to social work education in Northern Ireland.

Philip (1978, p. 93) argues that social work originated between the discourses of wealth and poverty. Many commentators have considered the evolution of social work as a profession since Philip’s (1979) work, including Jordan (2004), McLaughlin (2005), and Singh and Cowden (2009). Parton’s earlier work (Parton, 1996, 1998) suggests that the bifurcation of the profession meant that it moved away from being concerned with the relations between those perceived to be deserving and the undeserving, and this was largely attributed to capitalism and the role of the markets. It has been suggested that continuing levels of bureaucracy and administration continue to diminish the relational aspect of social work (BASW, 2012; Ingram & Smith, 2018). Managerialism and increasing levels of bureaucracy have also been linked to weakening the professional identity of social workers (MacDermott, 2019; Ball, 2016; Laming, 2005; Munro, 2011; Singh & Cowden, 2009). Ioakmidis and Wylie (2023, p. 17) posit that ‘social work should draw its legitimacy and recognition from the communities it works with, rather than the artificially prescribed hierarchies it operates within’. Figure 1 represents the author’s interpretation of the constellation of voices and communities collaborating in social work education in Northern Ireland.

Social work education and political conflict in Northern Ireland

An awareness of the impact of conflict, sectarianism, and trauma is critical to developing a more nuanced understanding of the realities and the learning landscape occupied by social work students in Northern Ireland (NISCC, 2015b). In Northern Ireland, negativity toward ethnic minorities and immigrants is a societal problem, and a strong correlation has been identified between sectarianism and racism (Doebler et al., 2018, p. 15). Human rights are not explicitly mentioned in the Northern Ireland Framework Specification (NISCC, 2015b). It can be argued that the social work profession’s commitment to social justice and human rights remains an anchor of credibility to ensure that the most disadvantaged in society have their rights and interests protected and promoted. The importance of human rights in social work education and practice, especially at a time when human rights and civil liberties are increasingly under threat from Brexit and a political landscape where conservative ideologies sustain an increasingly hostile environment for refugees and migrants (Harms-Smith et al., 2019; Luthra, 2021).

Learning to become a professional in social work in Northern Ireland has the added complexity of trying to navigate our contested histories and understand the impact of sustained political conflict on citizens and communities. Brewer et al. (2010) write about the culture of silence that exists in Northern Ireland as a means of avoiding dealing with the legacy of the past. However, there is rich learning to be gained for social work students, practice teachers, service users, and experts by experience and academics from the conduct of research in a society wrestling with issues associated with conflict, social division, and trauma.
Campbell et al. (2021) call for increased opportunities in qualifying social work programs for dialogue and debate on people’s and communities’ experiences of the conflict and the wider context of identity. Creating ‘safe spaces’ to explore contrasting experiences and how this shapes identity. Within social work education in Northern Ireland, exploration of our shared histories and the conflict in and about Northern Ireland are often only done by individual champions in higher education institutions (HEIs) or practices who are prepared to grasp the nettle and discuss complex intergenerational histories and identities with students (Campbell et al., 2021; Duffy et al., 2019).

Campbell et al. (2013) return to neutrality as a practice approach for social workers working in conflict, yet this is not without challenge and can create a disconnect between internal identities which can impact meaningfully engaging in wider social justice and human rights issues. This resonates with Ioakmidis and Wylie (2023, p. 14) commenting that ‘practitioner complicity in oppressive practice usually operates under the guise of
technocratic neutrality’. Duffy et al. (2019) explore the role of social workers during the Troubles between 1969 and 1998. This innovative research explores the impact of sectarianism, racism, and prolonged inequalities during this period and the occupational space encountered by social workers. Many of them were struggling to engage in social justice and human rights approaches whilst trying to adhere to apolitical, neutral stances to remain safe and reduce the risk of threat or harm from paramilitaries.

Campbell et al. (2019), in their comparative study of social work and political conflict in Northern Ireland, Cyprus, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, identify contested histories, politics, and social divisions, and the nature of the conflict as key factors to explore in their effort to understand social work and political conflict. In earlier work by Smyth and Campbell (1996), the impact of sectarianism on social work education was explored. Examining the ways in which political conflict impacts personal and professional identities in Northern Ireland is presented in the work of Campbell and Healey (1999). Social work education in Northern Ireland has a significant and innovative contribution to make to the wider national and international profession. The issues of sectarianism and the divisions and silos in which many remain entrenched can influence a wider understanding of the complexities of practicing social work in other fractured, contested, and conflicted societies.

Reforming social work education

The MacDermott and Campbell (2015) reflects on the ongoing reforms of social work education which were taking place in the United Kingdom (Croisdale-Appleby, 2014; Narey, 2014). Carpenter et al. (2015) analysis of newly qualified social workers concludes that their experiences of placement varied significantly and that experience of a fieldwork placement in a statutory children’s team did not necessarily prepare students for postgraduate employment in child protection teams. These reports and publications were significant in preparing for the third periodic review of the Degree (NISCC, 2019b) specifically tries to clearly define stakeholders’ expectations on the core competencies and skills required at the point of qualification in Northern Ireland. Meaningful service user involvement in social work education has been the focus of sustained emphasis in the delivery of the degree and was included as a recommendation (again) in 2019.

Service user involvement

In the United Kingdom, service user involvement in the delivery of social work degrees has been a requirement since 2003 (NISCC, 2003a; Social Care Institute for Excellence, 2004). Service user involvement has remained a recommendation, and there has been repeated emphasis on it in subsequent reviews of social work degrees in Northern Ireland (Northern Ireland Social Care Council, 2009, 2014, 2019b). In Europe, service user involvement and inclusion is a central component of social work education and is noted in the literature. Examples of this are the use of participatory action projects in Sweden and Norway (Angelin, 2015), the creation of conceptual frameworks for service user involvement in Germany (Laging & Heidenreich, 2019), social change projects in Italy and Slovenia (Ramón et al., 2019) and participatory approaches to service user research and service user narratives in social work education in Ireland (Flanagan, 2020;
In Northern Ireland, Duffy et al. (2019) Quality Improvement Plan to Widen the Involvement of Service Users and Carers in the NI Degree in Social Work (2018–2021) reflected on the legislative, policy, and research contexts in addition to core messages from a co-produced conference ‘Learning through listening: Service User and Carer Involvement in Social Work Education’ (May 2018). These formed the basis for the Good Practice Guide for Service User Involvement (NISCC, 2020) establishing a benchmark for meaningful involvement and the importance of shared responsibilities from all stakeholders to ensure that the service user voice is central to educating social workers in Northern Ireland.

Meaningful involvement of service users in social work education (Cabiati & Levy, 2021; Doel & Best, 2008; Driessens et al., 2016; Pearl et al., 2018; Robinson & Webber, 2012; Tanner et al., 2017) and the challenges that can hinder their involvement (Davis & Mirick, 2021; Doel & Best, 2008; MacSporran, 2014; Rooney et al., 2016) are central themes in the wider literature.

Practicing in a digital world

The significance for social workers to develop skills to practice in the digital world was cited as a strategic priority in the Learning and Improvement Strategy (DoH, 2019–2027). In Northern Ireland, the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) established the Digital Capability Framework (HSCB, 2014) as part of an ongoing ten-year transformation project. However, the Department of Health, Northern Ireland Social Care Council, social work placement providers, families, communities, and HEIs could not have anticipated the accelerated pivot to online provision of social work education in Northern Ireland by the spring of 2020. Boin (2009) writing about the implications for policymaking in responding to crises, identifies technology as a potential threat agent, albeit one that creates accelerated and potentially revolutionary possibilities to impact humanity.

The coronavirus pandemic has impacted the ways in which social work education and placements have been delivered, prompting opportunities for alternative and creative ways of delivering professional education. Safe remote working and digital skills were identified as the top two capacity-building and innovation needs of the voluntary and community sectors during COVID-19 (NICVA, 2021). The respondents to the research published in the MacDermot and Harkin-MacDermott (2021) indicated a willingness to use technology when it became clear that remote delivery of social work education was a certainty. Reamer (2013) writing about the use of technology for social work education suggests that educators must be aware of ‘technology-based pedagogy’ (Reamer, 2013, p. 423). Finlay et al. (2022) set out the distinction between virtual and blended learning. Virtual learning takes place outside the traditional lecture environment, in contrast, blended learning is defined as the integration of virtual learning with opportunities for in-person teaching. Social work is an applied degree and the Covid-19 pandemic required a seismic shift in learning delivery models in universities and with placement providers. Pink et al. (2022, p. 413) posit ‘hybrid digital social work should be a future-ready element of practice, designed to accommodate uncertainties as they arise’. Their important study moves beyond a polarized view of face-to-face versus digital learning, acknowledging the opportunities offered by a hybrid approach, and the increasing reality
that in citizen’s lives ‘there is a digital element to almost everything we do’ (p. 419). Pink et al. (2022) suggest building on learning from the pandemic and specifically social workers’ use of technology to create a framework that is agile and adaptable and one that can support practitioners and students to ‘better evaluate when and how digital technologies and media will best support their practice and judgements’ (p. 427).

This shift in policy relating to the initial impact of the pandemic is reflected in the revised Practice Learning Requirements for the Degree published by NISCC (2020b). Social work education in the post-pandemic world will face many new challenges in utilizing technology in applied professional education.

Conclusion

This article has focused on the specificity of social work education in Northern Ireland, including the distinctive social, political, and geographical context of social work in a post-conflict context. Using an adapted model of policy mapping (Burris et al., 2010) the author presents an original outline of the development and history of social work education from 1962 to 2020 (58 years) including an author interpretation of the constellation of voices collaborating in social work education in Northern Ireland (Figure 1). The chronology offers a valuable summary of social work education and can be used by others to build and develop as Northern Ireland enters a further period of change and uncertainty in a post-pandemic world.

Disclosure statement

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

Notes on contributor

Denise MacDermott is a Senior Lecturer in Social Work at Ulster University. Her research interests include social work education; specifically collaborations for learning with experts by experience and voluntary sector social work in Northern Ireland.

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