Testing Partnership and Preparedness in Northern Ireland during COVID-19

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Abstract

Northern Ireland has partnership arrangements for qualifying and post-qualifying social work education that joins the regulator, universities and employers in equipping social workers to practice safely to a high-quality standard. Covid-19 highlighted the need for social workers to manage its impact on individuals, families and communities. Government restrictions meant prioritisation of service delivery and early graduation for student social workers with rapid recruitment into frontline practice.   This article considers the role of the regulator in governance of education and training whilst working collaboratively with government, employers and academics, supporting students entering the workforce and ensuring professional development for existing

workers. In telling the story we explore the dovetailing of functions that tested flexibility and rigour of existing systems and partnerships.

Keywords: social work; partnership; Covid-19; education; continuous professional development

Context

Northern Ireland (NI) is the smallest region of the United Kingdom (UK) with a population of 1.8 million. Its devolved government has an extensive public sector that includes an integrated health and social care system (HSC). Its land border and history with the Republic of Ireland provides both opportunity and challenge in making social, economic and political policy and decisions. Devolution means that unique arrangements are often in place to meet local need thus enabling some flexibility in responding to the COVID-19 coronavirus first reported on 27th February 2020 (BBC, 2020).

Distinct in NI, is the history of formalised partnership working in social work education, dating back to 1996 (Bamford, 1996; Wilson, 2014). NI has two universities, Queen's University and Ulster University with practice supervision provided by five Health and Social Care Trusts (Trusts), Criminal Justice, Education and Third sectors. The NI Social Care Council (Council), as the workforce regulator, registers social work students, social workers and social care workers[1]. The Council sets standards for professional conduct and practice and for social work education and training at both qualifying and post qualifying levels (NISCC, 2019a; 2012; 2020). Partnership is key and the model of regulation is premised on sharing decision making about what, where and how social workers and students learn and develop their practice. The profession's reflexivity and responsivity has been tested by the COVID-19 pandemic and reflective learning will be critical to the narrative that emerges as its legacy.

This paper presents the social work pathway from qualification to workplace transition to ongoing professional development. The significant role of the Council, its' partnerships and structures are explored in light of COVID-19 demands. A view from
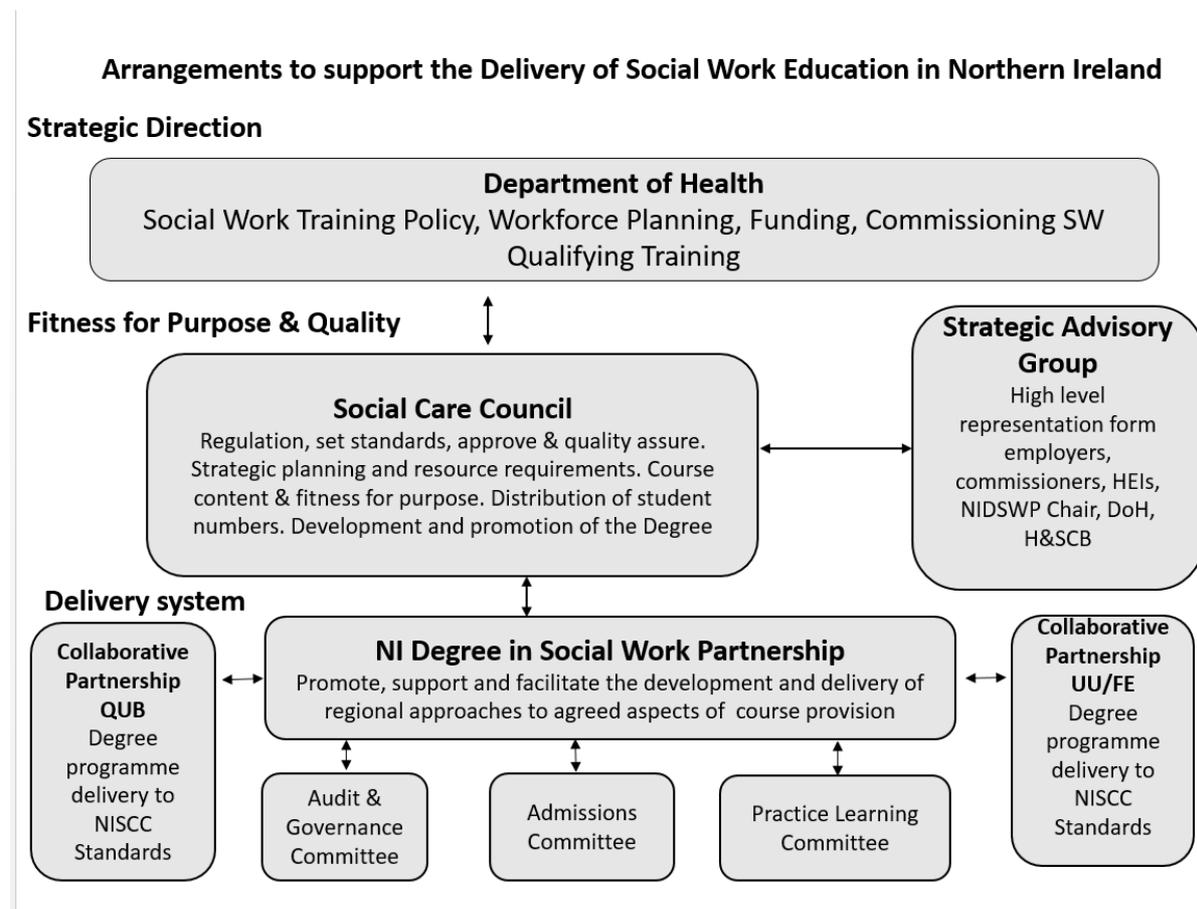
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[1] The NI Social Care Register comprises 527 student social workers, 6,577 social workers and 40,751 social care workers at 01/07/2020

frontline practice illustrates the unfolding impact and highlights areas for continued appraisal. The stress test on the strength of partnership is examined and preparedness for improving into the future considered.

The Education Continuum

Social work education is supported by a strong weave of partnership that connect the Department of Health (DoH), as the sponsor department, the Council, course providers and employers. See Table 1. The NI Degree in Social Work Partnership (NIDSWP), appointed by the Council, co-ordinates delivery of the NI Degree in Social Work including the academic curriculum and practice learning opportunities to meet the Degree Framework Specification (DOH & NISCC, 2015). This is the required entry level qualification for the profession in NI.

Table One: Northern Ireland Degree in Social Work

Arrangements to support the Delivery of Social Work Education in Northern Ireland

Strategic Direction

Department of Health
Social Work Training Policy, Workforce Planning, Funding, Commissioning SW Qualifying Training

Fitness for Purpose & Quality

Social Care Council	**Strategic Advisory Group**
Regulation, set standards, approve & quality assure. Strategic planning and resource requirements. Course content & fitness for purpose. Distribution of student numbers. Development and promotion of the Degree	High level representation form employers, commissioners, HEIs, NIDSWP Chair, DoH, H&SCB

Delivery system

Collaborative Partnership QUB	**NI Degree in Social Work Partnership**	**Collaborative Partnership UU/FE**
Degree programme delivery to NISCC Standards	Promote, support and facilitate the development and delivery of regional approaches to agreed aspects of course provision	Degree programme delivery to NISCC Standards

Audit & Governance Committee	Admissions Committee	Practice Learning Committee

A compulsory Assessed Year in Employment (AYE) recognises that newly qualified social workers (NQSW) require additional support and supervision at this formative stage (Croisdale-Appleby, 2014; Bates, Immins, Parker, Keen, Rutter, Brown & Zsigo, 2010; Moorhead, Manthorpe & Baginsky, 2019). The AYE is challenging as NQSWs experience an increased, albeit protected, volume and complexity of work (Carpenter, Shardlow, Patsios & Wood, 2013; NISCC, 2019b). Flexibility of support beyond induction, with space for reflexivity is essential to professional identity and resilience (Kearns & McArdle, 2012).

Importantly, the AYE is not the final step in the learning journey. Like most regulated professions, social workers are required to continue their professional development (CPD) to maintain their registration. What is unique in NI is that the regulator, as an awarding body, provides a professional framework for CPD: Professional in Practice (PiP), and requires all registrants in their first cycle of registration to engage with the framework.[2]

The construct of professional competence provides the social worker, their employer, and those tasked with governance, with a benchmark of safe and effective practice. The interdependence of academic and practice-based learning within PiP creates an imperative to work collaboratively and a partnership model is once more to the fore. Routes to achievement are flexible, adaptive and accessible to all social work roles and sectors, meeting developmental career objectives and are developed, delivered and managed, in partnership. Thus social workers across the career spectrum have the opportunity to demonstrate knowlege acquistion and evidence-informed practice, benchmarked against both post graduate academic and post qualifying professional standards.

The spectrum of social work education aims to support social workers to work with challenge, change and complexity across individual, family, community, societal and global contexts. An unprecedented test to the profession's resolve and resilience came early in 2020 with the appearance of the coronavirus, COVID-19.

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[2] Social workers in the first three year period of registration following successful completion of the Assessed Year in Employment shall complete a minimum of two requirements of the Northern Ireland Consolidation Award within the period of registration; (Registration Rules, Northern Ireland Social Care Council, 2017)

The Pandemic

In January 2020 approximately 335 students on the NI Degree in Social Work began PLOs across NI. More than 70% (N=253) were in their final year.

Commencement of the PLO coincided with identification of a new coronavirus by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in early January[3]. Four weeks later WHO declared the outbreak as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern. Governments were advised to prepare for global spread of Covid-19 (Scally, Jacobson & Kamran, 2020). The rapid and devastating spread across the world saw NI sit in an awkward juxtaposition for decision making by the UK and Irish governments based on its politics and geography. Sporting, religious and cultural activities responded early and closed down. Public services, including higher education continued as normal with the need for contingency arrangements becoming evident. The HSC prepared to protect its acute care provision from being overwhelmed. Social workers prepared to support individuals, families and communities to cope with the impact of restriction, isolation and loss.

The NIDSWP initiated contingency planning with its members prior to a public holiday weekend[4]. The HSC had commenced surge planning in preparation for a 'worst-case scenario' which included a significant proportion of the social work workforce being unavailable for work. As the government introduced plans to enable medical and nursing graduates to enter the workforce early the social work profession was asked to respond. The pace of decision making required, in response to this unprecedented situation, had the potential to undermine the delicate ecosystem of the partnership arrangements.

The NI Chief Social Work Officer at the DoH approved a decision to withdraw social work students from practice learning on 18th March and to work towards completing their degree some two months early to facilitate entry to the workforce. Any decision taken in a crisis that impacts on an interconnected system is liable to have unintended consequences. The role of the NIDSWP in coordinating the delivery of social work

[3] World Health Organisation reported a novel coronavirus, 09/01/2020
[4] 17th March, St Patrick's Day Public Holiday

education along with the Council's model of regulation has supported a democratic style of leadership. While the Council holds approval and regulatory functions the authority for decision making sat largely within the partnership. In light of the impending crisis it was more difficult to consult with NIDSWP members in the usual way and the regulatory approach described above needed to flex temporarily and adopt a more directive style. Most NIDSWP partners are familiar with business continunity planning and had their own plans in place. This process had not extended to the partnership arrangements, nor had there been prememptive discussion about how the partnership would operate in a situation where normal business was challenged. Learning from this has helped to inform planning for a potential second surge. Contingency measures have been agreed including weekly meetings to deal with practice learning issues as they arise.

While the decision to end practice learning created discomfort for the decision makers and partnership members, the strength of cohesion was evident in working together to maintain professional and academic standards.   Revised assessments and submission dates were agreed and exam boards brought forward. As students are required to register with the Council, advance planning enabled transfer to the social work part of the register within 48 hours of university exam board results being confirmed, meaning they could enter the workforce as qualified social workers immediately.

Impact on Social Work Students and AYE Social Workers
NQSWs entered workplaces that had implemented emergency measures due to Covid-19. Much of ordinary business had been stood down, many managers and frontline social workers were redeployed or self-isolating due to pre-existing health conditions as per government guidance, leaving teams depleted and working very differently to their norm. With PLOs for the 2020 cohort ending abruptly, and consequent 'fast tracking' as NQSWs, employers looked for ways in which they could support this new cohort of staff. At this time of flux, it was important to create an arena of safety, support and reflexivity whilst ensuring accountability and upholding standards.

Whilst the frontline is bolstered by this 'fast tracked' generation of professionals, this has not been without its challenges and the need for innovative solutions. The main challenge was ensuring accountability and maintaining quality, effective services whilst providing support to new recruits who had been students in preceding weeks. What was being asked of them was extraordinary and effective mentoring, support and induction were crucial . Due to Covid-19 and the ensuing depletion of teams, this could not be left solely to managers under strain who ordinarily supervise, mentor and assess their AYE staff. In response to this challenge, the Southern Health and Social Care Trust led in developing a regional protocol. This protocol had 3 phases: appointing students to lower grade posts until qualification; Learning and Development Teams (L&D) mentored, complementing supervisory functions of the line manager; a system for accountability.

The protocol empowered L&D to use their experience of enabling and supporting staff. Mentors addressed gaps in knowledge and skills to ensure the requisite standard had been reached. The protocol supported mediation between the individual and the organisation. A three-way supervisory contract was used for professional supervision and line management accountability. Upon ratification of results and conferment of qualification, many NQSWs were appointed to professional social work posts and commencement of AYE. L&D further supported line managers by providing fortnightly supervision in accordance with the Council's guidance.[5] With best endeavor for regional consistency, implementation has been modified to suit individual organisations. Learning highlights the need for contingency planning for surges and review of the protocol. Partnership already provides the mechanism for this (See Table 1). The Strategic Advisory Group is already configured to advise on strategic direction for qualifying and post-qualifying education, policy and provision and will review and plan in light of specific Covid-19-related issues. Decisions made in this forum will cascade, as 'normal', to both educational and practice contexts.

Governance was a challenge in implementing the protocol, whilst operational managers appreciated support from L&D, lines of accountability had to be assured.

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[5] Assessed Year in Employment Guidance for Registrants and their Employers, 2015, NISCC

As practice teachers, L&D had a wealth of experience in relation to supervising across directorates and operational managers provided supervison on a rotational basis with clear lines of communication established between operational managers, professional supervisors and L&D mentors. Collaboration with universities helped to identify the initial learning needs of this new AYE workforce. Individual student transcripts were completed by tutors and mentors anticipated knowledge and skill gaps, targeted developmental needs and maximised support. The new climate brought new challenges where face to face induction was not possible. Mentors responded creatively by using videos to introduce the directorates, moving induction online and providing additional devised information/tutorials/supervisory sessions. For example, NQSW's in mental health had a series of introductory training adapted from full day training to 4 shorter sessions facilitated in a virtual learning environment with opportunity to discuss their learning with mentors and supervisors.

Concerns about specific gaps in knowledge acquisition and application to practice due to PLO's finishing early were also addressed; e.g. in one Trust, training on safeguarding, normally gained during the final PLO, was successfully delivered online with opportunities to shadow safeguarding leads and input into safeguarding processes.

A related challenge was L&D need for rapid learning of technologies and associated communication skills (Bowser, 2020). This created additional complexity, and for some, increased anxiety. IT departments responded quickly and effectively in ensuring that systems were fit for purpose and training support provided. Trial and error, with an opportunity for discussion and reflection, has been essential in adapting and delivering training sessions virtually. Review of all approaches to learning will be important in moving forward.

Entering the workforce in a time of flux has emphasised the importance of reflection for all with ethical dilemmas creating opportunity for debate. An example raised by NQSWs was where face to face visits were replaced with videocall/telephone with potential impact on relationship building and gaining meaningful consent. Governance and confidentiality issues were also highlighted. Innovation was essential in meeting these challenges and in one Trust, this led to the development of a guidance booklet

entitled 'Social Work at a Social Distance' (SHSCT, 2020). Partnership arrangements will be used to share the resource on a regional basis.

Croisdale-Appleby (2014) described the first year in practice as *"the most formative part"* of the journey of professional development for social workers (pg. 16). The challenge of providing a supportive learning environment for NQSWs in the context of increasing operational demand is significant (Bates et al., 2010). The 2019 Review of the Degree in Social Work (NISCC, 2019b) noted a variation in assessment of confidence in decision making and autonomy between practice teachers, working with soon to qualify students, and first line managers, working with NQSWs. The review concluded that, *"the profession has not yet achieved a shared understanding about what can be expected of a social worker at qualifying level and then built upon within a framework for continuous professional development"* (pg. 21). The revised expectations of this cohort as a result of the COVID-19 experience, together with increased levels of support and mentoring, may create a shift in the axis of expectation of NQSWs in the future.

Impact on Social Workers and PiP Framework

From a perspective of self-care it is anticipated the 2020 'fast-tracked' NQSWs will require additional support in terms of the reflexive concepts of well-being and resilience. It is reported that the impact of Covid-19, even on 'experienced' social workers, has been immense as rapid adaptation to social distancing measures and workforce shortages alongside personal safety concerns has been required (Allen, 2020; BASW, 2020). The post-qualifying PiP framework, due to the nature of the partnership with education providers and employers, is accessible and flexible and can readily embrace the additional longer term, and possibly more complex needs of *all* social workers incorporating a salutonogenetic approach (Antonovsky, 1979). However, we must consider the possibility that the 2020 cohort, as a result of their personal developmental pathways and response to Covid-19 related experiences, may actually develop an enhanced resilience and adaptability (Walsh, 2006; Theron, 2016; Van Breda, 2018). In August 2020 the Chief Social Work Officer, in congratulating 171 social workers on receiving their PiP Awards at a virtual online ceremony, paid tribute to their commitment to professional development during the pandemic:

"It's a real testament to social workers' resilience and determination to care for people, to see how they've managed to adapt to all of this….Wanting to improve your practice is probably one of the greatest ways to demonstrate respect to the people you work with, in whatever setting you are."[6]

This sentiment resonates with research which documents that social workers in NI, through their practice, both during and since, 'The Troubles' have a recorded history of responding at times of crisis (Duffy, Campbell & Tosone, 2019a, 2019b; Pinkerton, 2004). This aspect of response in the face of adversity may be worth further attention. In NI there is, however, the knowledge and confidence that the PiP framework will be there to provide any additional scaffolding required for the current cohort of social workers. The unmet learning needs originally identified from the supervising practice teachers (2020), picked up then by employers during the bespoke AYE (2020/21), will be reviewed and reassessed as these workers move through their PiP journey (2021/22).

Conclusion

As Covid-19 restrictions progressed at a fast pace across NI, timely decisions ensured 211 early-finishing social work students could join the frontline with the necessary support and accountability to the organisations and service users with whom they would be working. The regulatory framework, supported by partnership arrangements, ensured that qualifying education equipped students to enter the profession as competent NQSWs. The compulsory AYE linked to registration, provided reassurance that any unmet learning needs will find an environment of support, supervision and continuing education (NISCC, 2015; Croisdale-Appleby, 2014).

The pandemic has tested the education/training arrangements and social work partnerships in NI. It is apparent that the continuum from qualifying to post-qualifying is robust, yet sufficiently flexible, to accommodate the changing learning and development demands of social work in such circumstances. The partnership arrangements, always valued, have come again to the fore through a trusted, well-

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[6] Professional in Practice Virtual Award Ceremony 3rd August 2020

trodden pathway of communication, support and creativity in meeting the shared common goal of ensuring safe and effective services for people, whilst at the same time, ensuring the well-being of social workers now and throughout their careers. The 2020 NQSWs will have experienced more challenges than most, it is hoped their practice will in some measure profit from this time of crisis, challenge, increased reflection and need for flexibility and adaptation.

The imperative to capture this chapter and learn is critical if education and training across the professional spectrum is to support the development of confident, competent and compassionate social workers. Covid-19 has accentuated the need to develop a workforce who will promote social change and empower people to meet life's challenges and enhance their wellbeing.[7] The partnerships that lead and support education and training, alongside people who use social work services, and the registered social workers, must apply their creativity and ingenuity to reflection, learning and continuous improvement as we emerge from this global emergency caused by COVID-19.

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[7] Taken from the Internal Federation of Social Work global definition of social work, www.ifsw.org

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