Literature review for the curriculum development work stream

Jo Moriarty

July 2011
# Table of contents

Table of contents .................................................................................................................. 2
Acknowledgements & disclaimer .......................................................................................... 3
Summary ................................................................................................................................. 4
Introduction ............................................................................................................................ 6
Methods ................................................................................................................................. 6
Findings ................................................................................................................................. 7
  Expectations about what social workers should be able to do .................................. 7
  Basic knowledge and skills ........................................................................................... 10
  Practice and decision making skills ............................................................................. 16
  Gaps in the curriculum ................................................................................................. 17
  Gaps between what is taught and what is practised .................................................. 23
Number and quality of practice learning opportunities and practice educators ................ 24
  Performance of social work students graduating in England compared with
  internationally recruited social workers ..................................................................... 24
Discussion ............................................................................................................................ 25
References ........................................................................................................................... 27
Acknowledgements & disclaimer

I should like to thank members of the Curriculum Development Group, especially Helen Wenman and Hilary Burgess. This work was funded by the Department of Health. The views expressed in this review are those of the author and not the Department of Health.
Summary

This literature review was undertaken in order to inform the proposals for a review of the curriculum to be presented to the Social Work Reform Board. It uses a mixture of published and unpublished resources to compare the issues raised by the Social Work Task Force (SWTF) with what is known from published research looking at the way that the current Requirements for Social Work Training (Department of Health, 2002) operate.

The review found that the evidence base on which the key issues relating to the concerns about the curriculum in initial social work qualifying programmes was very variable.

The issue raised by the SWTF about a mismatch between employer and educator expectations is probably the area on which there is the greatest amount of research evidence. This reflects longstanding debates about whether the purpose of social work education is to prepare students to work in regulated social work settings (‘fitness for purpose’) or if there is a wider repertoire of transferable skills and understanding that social work graduates will need to work in a rapidly changing policy and service environment.

Although the review questions whether the proposed Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) (Social Work Reform Board, 2010) could in itself be enough to assuage these differences, the published literature does suggest strong support for revising the existing outcomes framework for social work education.

The SWTF called for greater consistency in the quality of social work qualifying education. Here, there is a clear gap in the literature in terms of what we know about the effectiveness of differing methods of assessing students and the operation of professional suitability procedures. We also know very little about the process of accrediting and regulating programmes beyond how many programmes are considered to be operating satisfactorily. These are important areas in which more information is needed in order to transfer successfully responsibility for regulating social work education to the Health Professions Council (HPC).

The transition into the workplace is always challenging for any newly qualified professional and whether or not it is successful is dependent both upon the quality of the qualifying programme that students have undertaken and the learning and support provided by their employer. On the whole, while most newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) feel satisfied with how well their qualifying programmes have prepared them for this transition, they would value more help in areas such as dealing with aggression and hostility, time management, communicating with children, and report writing. While there is considerable overlap between the views of NQSWs and employers about which skills are needed, there are some differences – most strikingly in terms of dealing with hostility and conflict.

Acquiring such skills as these is an incremental process and the emphasis on the development of expertise in the Munro review (Munro, 2011) highlights the
need to look beyond qualifying education in terms of the skills that social workers will need. Debates have taken place about the establishment of a ‘core curriculum’ in order to ensure that NQSWs do not enter the workplace lacking certain basic skills. Given that many students report that they develop skills such as these in practice settings, the SWTF’s emphasis on the shortage of high quality practice educators and practice placements is an important issue and one that is similarly reflected in the literature. A number of studies have looked specifically at how well certain topics such as communication skills and assessment are covered in the curriculum. These have broadly found that examples of good practice exist but are rarely written up. An important caveat is that many of these reports were written at the time that the social work degree was introduced and it is not clear if their findings would be equally true today.

There is very little published research about social work educators. While developments that help educators to update their practice, teaching, and research skills exist, these are rarely formally evaluated or written up.

Comparing the outcomes of qualifying programmes in the same country is challenging enough, let alone comparing internationally qualified social workers with those qualifying in the UK. The evidence suggests that most internationally qualified social workers move to the UK after acquiring some time in practice and so are not directly comparable with NQSWs in their first year of practice. However, the resources required to conduct cross-national research – the only fair way to compare the quality of qualifying education in the England with elsewhere would be considerable.

An important message from the review is the interconnectedness of many of the issues raised by the SWTF – for example, a shortage of practice placements has implications for students’ chances to learn about many aspects of social work practice including partnership working and developing assessment skills.

The other key message from the review is the need for greater precision in describing the difficulties identified in the current social work curriculum. Descriptions such as ‘unsuitable’ or ‘unprepared’ need unpacking in order to identify more clearly where changes may need to be made and whether such concerns are specific to local programmes or can be generalised across providers of social work qualifying education in general.

Overall, it must be acknowledged that the timescale and resources available to complete the review were limited. Given the variability of the evidence base, the review aims to highlight where more information is needed.
Introduction

This document has been prepared as an annex to go alongside the proposals for a review of the curriculum framework. It aims:

To look at the proposals made for a review of the curriculum framework in the context of evidence from published and unpublished resources and to compare these with the concerns raised by the Social Work Task Force (SWTF).

Specifically, the document is intended to cover the following areas:

- What expectations do social work educators, students and social workers, employers, service users and carers hold about what social work graduates should be able to do?

- Which areas of basic knowledge and skills should social workers possess in terms of communication skills, assessment, child development, assessment frameworks, risk analysis, managing conflict and hostility, and working with other professionals?

- Is a lack of knowledge and skills in the areas listed above leading to poor practice and decision making? What are the other factors that might contribute to such difficulties?

- Does the current curriculum for social work qualifying programmes in England contain any gaps? Are subjects taught in sufficient depth?

- What systems are in place to ensure that a gap does not exist in terms of what is taught on social work qualifying programmes and the realities of every day practice? Are social work educators and others involved in the design and delivery of social work qualifying programmes sufficiently able to ensure that the curriculum is not out of date?

- What evidence is there about the current number and quality of practice learning opportunities and practice educators?

- Is there any evidence comparing the performance of social work graduates from some qualifying programmes and the performance of internationally recruited social workers?

Methods

The review used a mixture of unpublished and published sources. A number of unpublished documents prepared for the SWTF (Social Information Systems Ltd, 2009 unpublished; Social Work Task Force, 2009 unpublished-a, 2009 unpublished-b, 2009 unpublished-c, 2009 unpublished-d, 2009 unpublished-e) were made available for the review. Published sources were identified through searches of the following electronic bibliographic databases: Education Resources Information Center, Social Services Abstracts, Social Care Online, Sociological Abstracts, and Social Policy and Practice. These
were selected as offering a broad coverage of the UK and international literature. In addition, the table of contents and list of advance access publications for two key journals – the *British Journal of Social Work* and *Social Work Education: The International Journal*, were hand searched to identify relevant items. Other material was retrieved through reference harvesting and internet searches, including searches of the Department of Health (DH) and Department for Education (DfE) websites.

There are difficulties in including unpublished material in literature reviews – mainly because they have not been subject to the peer review process in the same way as research published in peer reviewed journals or as part of a funder’s quality assurance process. However, it seemed important not to exclude all the information available. Each citation makes it clear the source of data reported.

**Findings**

*Expectations about what social workers should be able to do*

The *Requirements for Social Work Training* (Department of Health, 2002) state that at the end of a qualifying programme in social work, graduates will meet the standards laid out in the National Occupational Standards (NOS) for Social Work (Topss UK Partnership, 2002) and the subject benchmark statement for social work (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2000), subsequently revised (2008). In addition, providers have to demonstrate that all students have undertaken specific learning and assessment in the areas of:

- Human growth, development, mental health and disability
- Assessment, planning, intervention and review
- Communication skills with children, adults and those with particular communication needs
- Law
- Partnership working and information sharing across professional disciplines and agencies

(Department of Health, 2002, 3-4)

The interim report of the SWTF (2009b, para 1.48) noted the ‘lack of consensus and differing expectations about what the initial education and training of social workers is aiming to achieve’ while its final report (2009a, para 3.10) concluded that one of the main contributors to this situation was the existence of several different sets of standards and outcome statements, meaning that there was no ‘single, comprehensive account of what should be expected of social workers at each stage of their career – including what should be expected of new graduates and those participating in advanced social work education.’
This lack of consensus was one of the most frequently reported themes in the evidence presented to the SWTF. Analysis of written submissions and responses to an online questionnaire showed that while there was common agreement across all six themes identified by the SWTF in its first report (lack of time and feelings of overstretch, frustration with IT systems, levels of preparation among newly qualified social workers, lack of a national voice for social work, quality of performance management systems, and under-valuing of the social work profession), the greatest variation was found in responses to the statement that:

‘New social workers are often not properly prepared for the demands of the job. The education system does not support ongoing development and specialisation.’

Fifty nine per cent of respondents agreed with this statement – the lowest percentage of agreement across all six themes. Students and social work educators were least likely to agree with it (Social Work Task Force, 2009 unpublished-e, 4). Specifically, many social work educators have questioned whether employer expectations of graduates who have just completed a three-year generic qualifying programme are too high (Joint University Council Social Work Education Committee, 2009; Social Work Task Force, 2009 unpublished-a).

Other evidence to the SWTF commented on the need for greater clarity and agreement about what social workers should be able to do in different roles and at different career stages, for instance, NQSWs compared with advanced practitioners (Social Work Task Force, 2009 unpublished-a).

Alongside the picture presented above, there is an substantial body of evidence from empirical research highlighting the tensions between employer, educator, and graduate expectations in terms of what newly qualified social workers should be able to do (Moriarty et al., 2011 advance access). For the most part, many of these differences stem from a lack of agreement about how to measure what newly qualified social workers should be able to do reliably and objectively. Furthermore, it is striking that so little attention has been paid to seeing how well NQSWs meet the expectations of people using services and carers.

In the context of employer perspectives on qualifying education, it is important to recognise that similar concerns were also reported in studies of the predecessor social work qualification, the Diploma in Social Work (DipSW) (Marsh & Triseliotis, 1996; Pithouse & Scourfield, 2002). Furthermore, these tensions are not unique to social work and variations in employer, educator, and newly qualified worker expectations are also reported in the nursing (for example, Wolff et al., 2010) and allied health professions literature (for example, Barnitt & Salmond, 2000; Mackay et al., 2008).

Evidence presented to the SWTF recommended a review of existing requirements, and in particular the National Occupational Standards (NOS), so that they could be replaced with a single outcome statement (Social Work Task Force, 2009 unpublished-a, 2009 unpublished-b, 2009 unpublished-e).
The Social Work Reform Board (SWRB) (2010) has proposed replacing the existing outcome statements with a single *Professional Capabilities Framework* (PCF) which aims to provide a comprehensive set of expectations of what should be required of social workers at each stage of their career. These would stand alongside the Standards of Proficiency for Social Workers to be set by the Health Professions Council once it takes over responsibility for the regulation of social work.

Criticisms of the existing outcomes statements – and in particular the NOS – can be found outside the evidence presented to the SWTF. In particular, the notion of competence – influential on the content of the NOS (Lymbery, 2003) – has been criticised as inadequate for measuring professional knowledge and skills (Clark, 1995) and detrimental to the development of other desirable outcomes of social work education such as professional judgement (Lymbery, 2003).

McNay and colleagues (2009) expressed concerns that the NOS did not help students fully develop the analytical and reflective skills they would need in practice. They argued that students would not necessarily develop skills with people using services if the focus is simply on collecting evidence about their own functioning – hence their decision to introduce two separate proformas for students undertaking practice learning, the first of which was a Work Summary recording their work with a service user or carer, while the second, a Critical Self Evaluation, recorded their reflection on the process outlined in the Work Summary.

Based on discussions with practice educators, tutors and placement co-ordinators, Furness and Gilligan (2004) looked at the role of the NOS in assessing fitness to practise. They concluded that many practice educators made a distinction between achieving competence in each of the NOS requirements/key roles and ‘across the board’ competence. As a result, practice educators recounted situations whereby a student appeared to meet each individual practice and values requirement but they felt uneasy that student’s overall fitness for practice.

### Expectations

Evidence presented to the SWTF highlighted differing expectations between employers, educators, and NQSWs about what NQSWs should be able to do. Published research similarly recognises the tensions that exist when employers, educators, and newly qualified professionals hold different ideas about notions of ‘practice readiness’ or ‘preparedness’ but also confirms that concepts such as these are context specific and that changes to the way that services are organised or delivered result in changing expectations about what professionals should be able to do. It also highlights that these debates are not exclusive to social work.

Concerns about existing outcome statements for social work qualifying education can be found in responses to the SWTF and the wider
published literature. The SWRB (2010) proposes replacing them with the PCF which distinguishes between the capabilities of different social workers at different career stages, or levels, in the profession. Given the longstanding differences between employer and educator views about the outcomes of social work qualifying education, it may be more realistic to measure the PCF in terms of whether it represents and improvement upon existing outcome statements and its potential to reduce, rather than remove, differences in expectations between employers, educators, and NQSWs. It is worth noting that many of the areas registered as concerns for employers in terms of qualifying SW’s are included as specified outcomes in the PCF qualifying level outcomes.

Basic knowledge and skills

The extent to which current arrangements for qualifying education equips social workers with the basic knowledge and skills to undertake their work was an important theme of all three SWTF reports. The first report spoke of new entrants lacking the ‘the practical, analytical and report-writing skills they need to become effective professionals (Social Work Task Force, 2009c, 4) while the interim report cited evidence from two studies undertaken by CWDC (CWDC Research Team, 2009) and Bournemouth University (Brown et al., 2007) expressing concern that some NQSWs did not feel that their qualifying education had prepared them well enough for their current roles. At the same time, it recognised that there was an ongoing debate about who should take on the main responsibility for supporting the development of these skills: social work educators or employers (Social Work Task Force, 2009b, para 1.47). The final report concluded that:

Feedback from employers, practitioners, practice assessors, and from independent research strongly suggests that there are certain areas of knowledge and skills which are not being covered to the right depth in social work initial training. These include: assessment frameworks; risk analysis; communication skills; managing conflict and hostility; working with other professionals. An understanding of the research, legislation and policy basis for practice is also essential…The right knowledge and skills must be learnt to sufficient depth to provide a strong foundation for high quality practice and continuous development throughout a social worker’s career.

(Social Work Task Force, 2009a, para 1.19)

Evidence to the SWTF about newly qualified social workers’ basic knowledge and skills expressed concerns that ‘NQSWs do not have the skills, knowledge and personal characteristics they need to fulfil the main functions of their job’ (Social Work Task Force, 2009 unpublished-d, 2). It also included suggestions that:
• ‘The baseline for passing should be more rigorously established and applied, including [demonstrating] professional and professional qualities (Social Work Task Force, 2009 unpublished-e, 12).

• There are ‘numbers of students who are qualifying as social workers when they should not be’ (Social Work Task Force, 2009 unpublished-a, 10).

• There is ‘evidence that some social work students are being awarded the social work degree who are neither competent nor suitable and [the existence of] disincentives in the system to support robust assessment (Social Work Task Force, 2009 unpublished-b, 2).

• There are ‘gaps in the knowledge and skills base of NQSW in key areas such as assessment, mental health and substance misuse’ (Social Work Task Force, 2009 unpublished-b, 2).

• Students are ‘not being taught the essential knowledge, skills, methods and values to become a social worker in some courses’ (Social Work Task Force, 2009 unpublished-a, 4).

In a similar vein, the former Select Committee on Children, Schools and Families (2009, para 65) commented in its report on the education of social workers working with children and families that: ‘It is unacceptable that social work courses, or any element of them, should have a reputation for being ‘difficult to fail’.

Taken together, these concerns can broadly be seen as covering related but separate issues:

• the skills and knowledge that graduates should acquire during qualifying education.

• systems for accrediting universities to run social work qualifying programmes;

• assessment methods; and

• the application of professional suitability procedures.

Basic skills and knowledge

Evidence to the SWTF suggested consensus in the main skills, knowledge, and personal characteristics that social workers were thought to need in order to do their jobs effectively. When entering the profession, social workers were thought to need a good working knowledge of:

• the legislative framework;

• local systems and resources;

• roles and responsibilities of other professionals; and
new research.

They were also thought to need the following skills:

- decision-making skills;
- interpersonal skills;
- effective communication skills;
- drafting skills;
- analytical skills; and
- the ability to strike a balance between sympathising and challenging.

(Social Work Task Force, 2009 unpublished-d, 1)

Other skills included the ability to ‘think on their feet, be proactive and creative’ (Social Work Task Force, 2009 unpublished-e, 5).

The most commonly cited gaps were opportunities to develop more practice-based skills and application of theory to practice and the analytical skills needed to analyse risk and decide on the most appropriate interventions. Some of these difficulties were attributed to gaps in the qualifying curriculum (to be discussed later) (Social Work Task Force, 2009 unpublished-e, 13-15).

Other submissions to the SWTF expressed concern about the literacy skills of graduates (Social Work Task Force, 2009 unpublished-a, 2009 unpublished-e). It is not clear from this material whether the gaps highlighted here are specific to particular programmes or whether they are thought to be widespread.

Research undertaken with NQSWs suggests that they themselves share some of these concerns. The largest and most detailed study published to date (Carpenter et al., 2010) looks at the experiences of over 1,100 graduates employed in 87 local authorities and two voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations who were enrolled on Newly Qualified Social Worker (NQSW) programmes run by the Children’s Workforce Development Council (CWDC). In terms of areas in which they wanted more training, NQSWs identified that they would like to know more about topics such as family assessment, the law, courtroom skills, the management of conflict and dealing with violent behaviour, domestic violence, and intervention skills. They also wanted help with aspect of personal development, such as time management and assertiveness. While the authors acknowledged that these topics are included in social work qualifying programmes, they concluded that skills such as these take on an added dimension when graduates enter full time professional practice. They also reported that ‘at baseline the NQSWs reported a mean rating of self-confidence of 6.6 out of 10. This indicated a reasonable level of self-confidence at that stage and, by implication, that they saw room for improvement’ (Carpenter et al., 2010, x). The study also shows
the impact of variation in role clarity, availability of supervision and high caseloads on students satisfaction and efficacy levels – this shows that ‘readiness for practice’ requires good practice by both educators and employers.

Five hundred and two NQSWs working in Children’s Services completed an online survey carried out by the Children’s Workforce Development Council (CWDC Research Team, 2009). Two per cent of respondents thought their ‘degree course had fully prepared them for their current role, 30 per cent thought it had prepared them ‘quite a lot’, 54 per cent thought it had prepared them ‘just enough’, and 14 per cent thought it had ‘not at all’ prepared them. Practice placements and ‘support to translate theory into practice’ were the ways in which respondents felt the degree had helped them most. Where they felt least prepared were in ‘managing difficult service users’, ‘conducting assessments’, ‘time management and court work’.

An online survey of first year graduates working in both Adult and Children Services (Sharpe et al., 2010 unpublished) found that 13 per cent of respondents considered that they were ‘very well prepared’ by their degree programme for their current job, 60 per cent felt ‘fairly well prepared’, 18 per cent felt ‘not very well prepared’ while two per cent felt ‘not at all’ prepared. The areas in which they wished they knew more about were dealing with hostility, aggression or conflict; assessing risk; the services and resources available in their locality; the evidence base for their area of social work practice; and the legal basis for social work interventions. The areas in which they felt they were expected to know more about than they did were preparing reports for legal proceedings; child protection and safeguarding; refugees and asylum seekers; child development milestones; communicating with children and young people; and mental health conditions and their likely progress. It is more likely that respondents’ wish to know more about asylum seekers and refugees related to needing to understand their position in terms of their legal entitlements and eligibility for services than an understanding of their background and culture. More positively, 86 per cent of respondents agreed with the statement that their degree programme had helped them to become a reflective practitioner, 78 per cent felt they were ‘able to analyse a case critically’ and 76 per cent felt it had enabled them to empower service users to gain more control over their lives.

Another study (Bates et al., 2010) followed up 22 newly qualified social workers working in Adult and Children’s Services, surveying them at three points in time in the nine months or so after qualifying. It also obtained the views of line managers, people using services and carers. Overall, about three-quarters (n=16) of newly qualified social workers in the study and their line managers agreed or strongly agreed that the degree had provided them with the right knowledge, understanding and skills for their current post. Over three-quarters of the newly qualified social workers participating in the study agreed or strongly agreed that they had been well prepared in areas such as communication skills, social work methods, responding to cultural differences, social work law, critical perspectives, evidence and research-based practice, social work values, working in an organisation, inter-professional working, and
the role and responsibilities of a social worker. However, about a quarter did not feel prepared in such instrumental areas of social work practice as assessment, report writing, record keeping, time management, case management, dealing with conflict, and care management and contracting; over half did not feel prepared in the use of court skills - a finding that remained constant over the three questionnaires and was reinforced by nearly a third of line managers. Respondents’ experiences of induction were varied and service users and carers emphasised the need for structured induction and regular supervision for social workers in their first year of practice. Access to training was also variable. Looking back on their experiences, newly qualified social workers in the study emphasised the importance of good quality statutory placements while training and of help in dealing with the instrumental aspects of their work such as report writing, time management, and dealing with conflict.

Basic knowledge and skills

Taken together, there is evidence that some NQSWs feel that they lack some of the basic skills and knowledge needed to undertake their roles as practitioners. The greatest consensus seems to revolve around court skills, dealing with hostility and aggression; communicating with children and young people, mental health; and time management. However, differences in question wording make it hard to compare ratings of how well NQSWs are prepared for practice across studies. It is also important to note that, while there is considerable overlap between the views of NQSWs and employers, their opinions are not identical. In particular, employers may underestimate how challenging it is to deal with hostility and conflict as a qualified social worker, compared to experiences while a student.

Accreditation and regulation of programmes

The General Social Care Council (GSCC) requires universities accredited to run social work qualifying programmes to show they have ‘systems in place to make sure that all candidates who achieve the qualification have the skills and knowledge they need to practise’ (General Social Care Council, 2002, 19) and that ‘they have effective procedures for ending a student’s involvement in the social work degree, where appropriate, to make sure that unsuitable people do not have the qualification to allow them into the profession’ (General Social Care Council, 2002, 21).

However, evidence presented to the SWTF expressed concern that:

• ‘Social work staff are often not supported by their HEI in removing unsuitable students from social work training due to fear of litigation and financial penalty. This reflects a move from student to consumer culture.

• Social work educators operate on an enhancement model and some find it difficult to make tough decisions and fail students.
• There are particular concerns about decisions made about the assessment of practice.'

(Social Work Task Force, 2009 unpublished-b, 8)

The submission to the SWTF from the Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Social Policy and Social Work suggested that most problems 'are not systemic or structural, and could be enhanced by tighter monitoring and quality control'. It also called for more training to be made available to those inspecting programmes (SWAP, 2009 unpublished, paras 7.1 and 7.4)

In terms of the overall quality of individual programmes, the 2008-2009 annual monitoring report (General Social Care Council, 2010, 22) found that the number of higher education institutions (HEIs) whose performance was thought to be 'not satisfactory - where one or more of our requirements are not evidenced in the annual return and immediate remedial action is required, entailing an agreed action plan, has dropped from 11 per cent (9 HEIs) to 3.4 per cent (2 HEIs).

Assessing academic performance and suitability

The GSCC (2010, 46) has reported that since the start of the degree in 2003, the number of students failing to gain a social work qualification is 2–3 per cent while the withdrawal rate is 17 per cent, meaning that 80.9 per cent of students enrolling on social work degree programmes have passed. In 2008-2009, academic failures outnumbered those removed for reasons of misconduct considerably (238 compared with 25) (2010, 40).

However, the failure rate on its own may not give the most accurate picture of whether it is 'easy' or 'difficult' to achieve a social work qualification. Some students recorded as having withdrawn from a programme may have been counselled to leave in preference to initiating procedures into their academic performance or professional suitability. In this sense, the distinction between those failing and withdrawing may be less clear cut than it appears. It is also worth noting that the number of students failing or withdrawing from social work degree programmes appears to be slightly higher than on DipSW programmes where the number of students failing or withdrawing amounted to 12 per cent of full time students (Hussein et al., 2008).

Educators have noted the variety of methods used in social work programmes for assessing students, including self-assessment (Burgess et al., 1999) and it has been suggested that a mixture of assessment methods is to be preferred (Crisp & Green Lister, 2005). However, there appears to be very little literature evaluating the effectiveness of different forms of assessment in social work education (Crisp & Green Lister, 2002; Green Lister et al., 2005; Kealey, 2010), although many universities report using the advent of the social work degree as a way of reviewing the ways in which they assess students (Evaluation of Social Work Degree Qualification in England Team, 2008; Cartney, 2010). One successful example of this is the reported success of people using services (Voices of Experience) in predicting student performance over time (Fletcher & Sangha, 2011) and this highlights how
student assessment extends beyond social work educators but also includes people using services, practice educators, and students themselves (Crisp et al., 2006). Green Lister and colleagues (2005) also highlight the need to make learning outcomes realistic and avoid ‘wish lists’, which make it impossible to align them with assessment.

There is also very little published research on how universities operate their suitability procedures. One survey (Currer & Atherton, 2008; Currer, 2009) found considerable variation in procedures between universities but was unable to offer any information in terms of whether these procedural differences actually resulted in differences between universities in terms of the circumstances in which students would be asked to leave.

Programme accreditation & assessing performance and suitability

Although the quality of some qualifying programmes and some students was a source of concern among those commenting to the SWTF, there is very little published information on how programme accreditation and suitability procedures operate in practice operate in practice or the effectiveness of different methods of assessing students. Without these, it is difficult to make a judgement about the effectiveness of such procedures in ensuring that only graduates possessing the right knowledge, skills and personal qualities are able to become a social worker.

Practice and decision making skills

The final report of the SWTF commented on the need for students, ‘through taking the degree, to begin developing into social workers who reflect critically on what they do and the decisions they make (Social Work Task Force, 2009a, para 1.26) while the One Year On Progress emphasised that there was ‘strong support for proposals to ensure that those entering social work courses have the intellectual capacity for complex decision making’ (Social Work Reform Board, 2010, para 3.11). At the same time, the final report of the SWTF acknowledged the negative impact that high workloads could have on social workers’ judgement and decision making (2009a, para 2.5). The interim report of the Munro review has highlighted the need to understand more about the role of supervision and decision support tools in enhancing or detracting from effective decision making (Munro, 2010a) while the final report stresses the need to know more about the constituents of professional expertise and how they may be developed (Munro, 2011).

Most of the resources aimed at helping social workers improve their decision making (for example, Taylor, 2010) are aimed at those on post-qualifying awards and we know very little decision making skills are acquired during qualifying education. Fook and colleagues (2000), in their longitudinal study of students in Australia which extended into their first years in practice, noted how most newly qualified social workers engage in context free decision making. This contrasts with the contextual rules applied by ‘experts’. They
also point out that substantive knowledge (knowledge about ‘facts’, concepts and relationships) is easier to achieve than procedural knowledge (information about how to use substantive knowledge in areas that are unpredictable and ‘conflictual’ (p.201). The Evaluation of the New Social Work Degree Qualification in England found similarly that, based on answers to two vignettes, or scenarios, students seemed to find it easier to demonstrate substantive rather than procedural knowledge (Evaluation of Social Work Degree Qualification in England Team, 2008).

Although the outcome statements for social workers working in Children’s Services (Children’s Workforce Development Council, Undated) do not include information on NQSWs’ decision making skills, inferences about the processes of skill development can be made from the study of NQSWs following the NQSW induction programme (Carpenter et al., 2010). This showed that, at the end of the programme, there was strong evidence of a substantial increase in self efficacy among participants and that three-quarters of NQSWs were ‘very confident’ about their self-efficacy in relation to the NQSW outcome statements. Their ratings were higher than those for social workers in the contrast group of local authorities which did not participate in the programme and their supervisors generally agreed with their ratings.

### Decision making

The limited evidence that there is suggests that decision making skills improve with practice and that it is unrealistic to expect NQSWs to acquire complex decision making skills until they have spent some time in practice.

### Gaps in the curriculum

The SWTF directly attributed some of their concerns to gaps in the curriculum for social work qualifying education. One of the 15 recommendations of the SWTF was for an overhaul of the content and delivery of social work degree courses on the basis that:

Feedback from employers, practitioners, practice assessors and from independent research strongly suggests that there are certain areas of knowledge and skills which are not being covered to the right depth in social work initial training. These include: assessment frameworks; risk analysis; communication skills; managing conflict and hostility; working with other professionals. An understanding of the research, legislation and policy basis for practice is also essential.

(Social Work Task Force, 2009a, para 1.19)

In addition to this, the SWTF interim report also called for more input on child development and communication with children and young people; ICT [information communication technology] skills; and the impact of substance abuse and mental health problems on individuals, families and communities.
It also noted that frontline social workers working with the SWTF also mentioned: stress management; risk management; court performance; and reflective practice (Social Work Task Force, 2009b, 26). The House of Commons Committee on Children, Schools and Families (2009, para 79) advocated the development of a common core curriculum, agreed by universities and employers ‘which should not preclude flexible and innovative delivery’ and included more content on child protection, child development and communication with children (2009, para 79).

Unpublished evidence to the SWTF also referred to the need for more consistent input on child development and expressed concern that ‘many social workers do not have sufficient knowledge about child development to inform their judgements about children’s well being and safety or to give credible evidence in court.(Social Work Task Force, 2009 unpublished-a, 8) and the need for more input in qualifying education on the ‘role of mental health issues and drugs alcohol misuse in children’s welfare’ (Social Work Task Force, 2009 unpublished-a, 7). However, it also recognised that the involvement of service users and carers in designing and delivering the curriculum was a positive development (Social Work Task Force, 2009 unpublished-a).

Overall, evidence to the SWTF suggested that the content of the curriculum was ‘too variable and needs to be delivered with greater consistency’ (Social Work Task Force, 2009 unpublished-b, 1) but opinions varied as to whether achieving this might best be achieved by introducing a national prescribed curriculum or whether a national curriculum would stifle innovation and diversity and that it would be more effective to give examples or guidance about good practice (Social Work Task Force, 2009 unpublished-a; 2009 unpublished-e, 13). At the same time, it was recognised that too prescriptive an approach might stifle creativity and flexibility (Social Work Task Force, 2009 unpublished-a). The development of a common core curriculum was suggested as one compromise option which would allow more detailed descriptions of the areas to be covered in initial qualifying education than exist currently (Social Work Task Force, 2009 unpublished-b). While recognising that the level of detail required in some areas might be too difficult to cover in an initial qualifying programme, there was a feeling that greater clarity was needed about what should be covered in initial qualifying programmes and what should be covered in more specialist post qualifying training (Social Work Task Force, 2009 unpublished-a, 2009 unpublished-b). The example of statements detailing the curriculum content on mental health and child wellbeing which are part of the Australian Association of Social Workers Education and Accreditation Standards (2010) were given as an example of what might be expected on a qualifying programme.

Evidence to the SWTF also recognised that attention also needed to be paid to ways of delivery as well as curriculum content as there is less individual and small group teaching than in the past (Social Work Task Force, 2009 unpublished-a).

A number of published studies have looked at the curriculum content on social work qualifying programmes and their results are discussed in more detail...
below. However, it is important to recognise that some of these (for example, Crisp et al., 2003; Braye & Preston Shoot, 2004; Trevithick et al., 2004; Crisp et al., 2005; Luckock et al., 2006) were published very soon after the start of the social work degree and may have used information from DipSW as well as social work degree qualifying programmes. The DH Requirements (2002, 4) stress that programmes must ensure that teaching and learning are continually updated to keep abreast of developments in legislation, Government policy and best practice but there are no more recent studies evaluating if programme content has changed as part of the process of programme revalidation. It is also important to note that interviews with social work educators have highlighted the challenges of ensuring that all the topics included in the current curriculum are taught in sufficient breadth and depth – described by one person as like ‘trying to fit a quart into a pint pot’ (Evaluation of Social Work Degree Qualification in England Team, 2008) so it will be important to identify if some content could be omitted in order to permit greater coverage of other topics.

Partnerships between employers and educators are seen as important in reaching agreement about the key components that must be learned through the initial degree, and what skills can be acquired while in employment (House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee, 2009, para 79). However, creating such partnerships requires sustained and detailed work between all those involved (Taylor et al., 2010).

Assessment

Assessment is almost universally agreed to be a core skill for social workers (Crisp et al., 2003; McDonald, 2006) and the ability to conduct assessments requires not just knowledge about the assessment process, but also the ability to draw on a broader repertoire of skills and knowledge. For this reason, assessment tends to be taught embedded within the curriculum rather than as a distinct module in itself. Unless these links are made explicit, students may report they have learned little about assessment (Crisp et al., 2003), particularly when students express concerns that they are unfamiliar with the assessment proforma used in different agencies. There are a number of different ways of teaching assessment skills, although case-based learning and ‘learning by doing’ (for example, in practice settings or skills labs) predominate. Other learning can be obtained from the numerous textbooks on assessment that exist or standardised assessment frameworks (such as the Framework for the assessment of children in need and their families) but the evidence bases on which these are based, the extent to which they are up to date varies (Crisp et al., 2005). Many of them lack clarity about the purpose of assessment and this may help explain why some line managers in one study commented on some NQSWs lack of understanding about the purpose of assessment (Sharpe et al., 2010 unpublished).

While limitations with current teaching on assessment on social work qualifying have been identified, it is important to recognise that limitations with the process that assessments are undertaken in social work settings have also been identified (for example, Horwath, 2010 advance access). Perversely, assessment frameworks may not necessarily improve practice or
aid decision making (Kemshall, 2010) if they lead to a 'text box' mentality (Crisp et al., 2007). Furthermore, the variation in the content of different frameworks (Crisp et al., 2007) means that it is important not to mistake familiarity or lack of familiarity with one framework as an indication of good or poor assessment skills overall.

The difference between the level of skills in assessment that could be expected at qualifying and post qualifying level is an under-researched area. However Crisp and colleagues (2003) suggested that good practice in a qualifying programme would involve:

- teaching students the principles of assessment, and in particular avoiding only using a single framework that prevents students from learning transferable skills so they can assess other client groups in other circumstances;
- where assessment is part of an embedded curriculum, making it clear how the learning objectives on each module relate to assessment;
- enabling students to apply theoretical learning on assessment in practice placements and in university settings;
- work in partnership with employers and people using services and carers so that students can understand other perspectives on assessment;
- ensuring they have the social work skills and social science knowledge that they will need to draw on while undertaking assessments.

(Crisp et al., 2003, vii)

Communication skills

A literature review of the way that communication skills are developed on social work qualifying programmes (Trevithick et al., 2004) concluded that the theoretical underpinning in relation to the learning and teaching of communication skills is underdeveloped but that a considerable amount of innovative practice was being undertaken in this field but not being transferred into the published literature.

There are also debates about whether communication skills are best acquired in classroom or practice settings (Diggins, 2004). An evaluation of a communication skills module with two groups of students (Koprowska, 2010) found that students evaluated the module positively but that skills were not acquired evenly and that other factors, such as the timing of practice learning in relation to the module could have influenced the result. Another study (Moss et al., 2007) looked at the use of skills labs in which people using services and carers role played scenarios for students and practice educators were involved in providing feedback to students on their performance. The experience was positively evaluated by the students, people using services and carers, and the practice educators.
Other studies have looked at social work students’ skills in communicating with particular client groups. Strikingly, this seems to exclusively consist of students’ ability to communicate with children despite the high prevalence of people with communication difficulties, such as people with dementia, in adult services. Goodyer (2007) points out that teaching communication skills with children was often confined to post-qualifying programmes with the DipSW. Lukock and colleagues (2006; 2007; Lefevre et al., 2008) concur with this viewpoint, arguing that there is still a lack of agreement about the skills that students on qualifying programmes will need in order to communicate with children. They are also concerned at the priority given to communication skills in terms of information gathering, rather than its therapeutic role or purpose in promoting children’s rights.

Law

A systematic review of the literature on teaching law (Braye et al., 2005) concluded that the majority of literature offered descriptive and conceptual accounts rather than research-based evidence of inputs and outcomes. Empirical evidence on the effectiveness of different approaches is limited. In the context of a crowded timetable, beyond a common core looking at the legal frameworks for community care, mental health and children’s services, there was a wide range in what students were taught. There was some evidence that students should have some input on the law before undertaking their first practice placement. This work also emphasised the tensions between those who saw teaching law as a way of enabling students to become critical thinkers who can engage in critical analysis of the relationship between law and professional practice, interrogate the role of law in the lives of service users and use it to promote social change and those who thought it should produce skilled technicians, with reliable technical competence in the roles and tasks for which they are responsible (Braye & Preston Shoot, 2004).

Human growth and development

Le Riche and colleagues (2008) looked at how human growth and development in relation to older people was taught. They found that there were no UK-published accounts on this topic but a practice survey undertaken alongside the literature review identified a number of examples of good and innovative practice. Blewett and Tunstill (2008) found that human growth and development in regard to children tended to be integrated across the curriculum, rather than taught in a separate module. They suggested that different programmes used different methods to teach this topic (for example, using published research versus experiential learning) but that there was no evidence that this diversity had a negative impact upon students’ teaching and learning experiences.

Partnership work

The main evidence on this stems from work looking at interprofessional education. Until the implementation of the social work degree, interprofessional education tended to occur more often in post qualifying awards than in qualifying programmes (Sharland et al., 2007), although some
DipSW programmes did have well-established opportunities for interprofessional learning (Whittington, 2003). Sharland and colleagues’ (2007) systematic review also concluded that there were a number of methodological limitations within the published literature on interprofessional education but that it appeared that less attention had been paid to preparing social workers for interprofessional practice with children and families. A study of a small sample of programme providers found that they tended to recognise the limitations of their current learning resources materials and that more could be achieved with greater involvement of people using services and carers (Low & Barr, 2008). Students are often reported as rating interprofessional education less favourably than other aspects of their programmes but it is important to clarify that this mainly refers to the practice of joint teaching and not learning about partnership working as a whole (Evaluation of Social Work Degree Qualification in England Team, 2008). Resources describing other teaching and learning methods for delivering interprofessional learning exist (Whittington, 2003; Low & Barr, 2008).

Substance misuse

Galvani and Forester’s (2008) survey of NQSWs concentrated specifically on whether their qualifying programmes had prepared them for practice with people using alcohol or drugs. While most of the 248 respondents to a questionnaire circulated to all those qualifying in England during 2006 and 2007, a response rate of 8.5 per cent, estimated that on average half of the clients they were currently working with had issues relating to drugs and/or alcohol use, the majority did not consider themselves prepared for working with people with alcohol and/or drug issues. In some areas, such as mental health and children and families, the proportions of clients with alcohol or drug issues were estimated to be even higher. While emphasising the variability in the extent to which social work qualifying programmes covered drug and alcohol misuse, the authors also drew attention to the lack of training in this topic that respondents had been able to access in their post qualifying training. The authors concluded that employers and social work educators needed to give greater consideration to improving social workers’ ability to support clients with alcohol and/or drug issues both at qualifying and post qualifying levels.

Gaps in the curriculum

The SWTF and the former Select Committee on Children, Schools and Families advocated greater consistency in the curriculum, with one alternative being to develop a more prescriptive ‘core’ curriculum. Research on how the social work curriculum is delivered highlights the diversity in what is taught and the existence of many examples of innovative ways of delivering learning. Unfortunately, many of these are not written up and, even when they are, descriptive accounts predominate, making it hard to decide which ways of delivering the topics on the curriculum are most effective. While attention has focused on gaps in terms of communication skills with children, mental health,
and substance misuse, other omissions have been identified, such as human growth and development in relation to older people. However, in the context of initial qualifying education, debates about the right balance between breadth and depth will continue. There needs to be more work linking perceived gaps in the curriculum to work on the basic skills that newly qualified social workers possess. The work defining the qualifying outcomes for the PCF and the development of curriculum guides is intended to help this process.

Gaps between what is taught and what is practised

The SWTF reported that ‘strong concerns have been expressed to the Task Force about the calibre of some lecturers and tutors. These concerns touch on, in particular, their understanding of how theory is applied in practice and of the current realities of frontline social work (Social Work Task Force, 2009a, para 1.25). It supported the establishment of joint appointments and secondments as a way of enabling this to be achieved. This viewpoint was also expressed in some of the unpublished evidence to the SWTF (Social Work Task Force, 2009 unpublished-a, 2009 unpublished-e) which also drew attention to the lack of younger social work academics and the desirability of following a career in social work education.

Existing published research has confirmed the age profile of social work academics (Mills et al., 2006; Moriarty et al., 2008). It also shows that it can access to continuing professional development in terms of undertaking research is variable, with many social work educators undertaking research in their own time (Moriarty et al., 2008; Madmutt, 2009). Moriarty and colleagues’ survey of social work educators suggested that they undertook comparatively little pedagogical research but initiatives such as the Outcomes of Social Work Education project (Burgess & Carpenter, 2010) show how much can be achieved for a comparatively small financial investment.

What needs greater clarity is whether perceptions of the extent to which academics are up to date relate to the subject matter of what they teach or to perceptions that social work educators share a different value base from employers. Concerns have been expressed as to whether the content of programmes should be solely restricted to regulated state social work activity or whether they should maintain a broader perspective in which social work is seen as a political activity concerned with social justice and individual and social change (Bellinger, 2010b).

There is very little information on this topic and it may be simpler to focus on the relevance and topicality of curriculum content which is easier to document. Accounts of the workings of developments such as secondments and joint appointments appear to be written up rarely, although it is clear that these arrangements are not unusual.
The need to develop ‘new arrangements to provide sufficient high quality practice placements, which are properly supervised and assessed, for all social work students’ was one of the SWTF’s 15 recommendations and evidence to the SWTF (Social Work Task Force, 2009 unpublished-a) and the former Select Committee on Children, Schools and Families (House of Commons Children, 2009) both highlighted concerns about the quality and quantity of existing provision.

Existing research (Doel et al., 2007; Evaluation of Social Work Degree Qualification in England Team, 2008) has highlighted the shortage of practice placements, largely attributable to the increase in the number of social work students and the increased length of time spent in practice. However, it has also been suggested that there has been a long term erosion of the infrastructure for practice learning in England over the past two decades (Bellinger, 2010a).

The SWRB has proposed that from October 2013 all practice educators of social work students should be registered social workers and demonstrate that they have met the new practice education benchmark standards (Social Work Reform Board, 2010, para 4.4). In this context it is important to recognise that earlier attempts to ensure social work students were supervised by social workers holding the practice teaching award proved to be impossible to achieve (Shardlow et al., 2002).

While some research has emphasised the skills and experience to be found among many practice educators and their confidence in making decisions about students’ progress (Moriarty et al., 2010), other work has suggested that some practice educators may find it difficult to fail students (Finch, 2009) and need support in this aspect of their work.

**Performance of social work students graduating in England compared with internationally recruited social workers**

Reports to the SWTF (Social Work Task Force, 2009 unpublished-e) stated that some local authorities had not appointed ‘UK qualified social workers for some time because international students are of better quality’ (Social Work Task Force, 2009 unpublished-a, 11) and that ‘international workers were a much higher quality than English trained NQSW’ (Social Work Task Force, 2009 unpublished-e, 5).

Globalisation and evidence of increased international migration among social workers are likely to create increased interest in comparisons between different systems of social work education in the future (Spolander et al., 2011 advance access). However, although attempts have been made to compare social work education in terms of describing different ways of delivering support to families (Boddy & Statham, 2009) or by looking at the impact of differing policy priorities in different countries (Spolander et al., 2011 advance access), there is currently a complete absence of studies comparing the outcomes of social work education internationally. A further important issue is
the need to make like-for-like comparisons. There is no information on the number of years that internationally recruited social workers have spent in practice before migrating but a study obtaining data on the total population of internationally qualified social workers in England (Hussein et al., 2011 advance access) found that internationally recruited social workers were, on average, in their mid-30s. While there has been a downward trend in the median age at which internationally recruited social workers arrive in England from 33.2 before 2004 to 30.5 in 2007, their overall age profile suggests that the overwhelming majority of internationally qualified social workers have experience of paid employment as a social worker before arriving in England and so cannot be directly compared with UK-trained newly qualified social workers (NQSWs).

Furthermore, critical accounts of social work education in other countries can also be found – for example, the extent to which social workers are prepared to work in child protection services in Australia (Healy & Meagher, 2007), their knowledge of ageing in the United States (Lun, 2011), and their knowledge of substance misuse in Canada (Graves et al., 2009). There are also accounts of changes to qualifying programmes in order to help resolve perceived gaps in students’ knowledge, for example in changes to social policy teaching in Israel (Weiss et al., 2006) and Australia (Zubrzycki & McArthur, 2004).

### International comparisons

Overall, the complexities of comparing social work qualifying programmes across different countries and the absence of any published data comparing internationally and UK qualified social workers with similar lengths of academic attainment and experience in employment suggests that comments comparing the performance of UK and internationally recruited social workers can only be viewed as having the status of a personal opinion and that new research would be required in order to test this further.

### Discussion

It is important to acknowledge that this review was limited by the timescale and the resources available for its completion. Some published research had to be omitted for reasons of space. It is also possible that other published research that could have informed the review was not retrieved in the searches. Nevertheless, the review provides a starting point from which to reach a consensus on those issues for which there is an established research evidence base and those where research is lacking or where opinion is more contested. It could also be used to consider priorities for new research.

The review found that the published research evidence base is very variable. Many of the issues raised in the SWTF and SWRB recommendations represent longstanding concerns that are clearly reflected in the published research literature – for instance, the differing expectations between employers, educators and newly qualified social workers about what NQSWs
should be able to do or a shortage of high quality practice placements and practice educators. Another area in which there is a comparatively large research evidence base is on the basic skills that NQSWs possess. Here, there appears to be a consistent picture that NQSWs would value greater assistance in some areas, such as assessment skills, dealing with aggression, communicating with children and young people, mental health; and time management. This raises issues about the extent to which new policy and legislative changes, service developments, service user and carer expectations, and technological change should influence the content and delivery of social work qualifying programmes at the expense of other topics such as psychology or social policy.

However, there are other aspects of the SWTF and SWRB recommendations for which it is harder to find evidence from published research. For example, there is much less information on how students are assessed, programmes accredited, and the operation of suitability procedures. There is a limited evidence base on gaps in the curriculum and what there is seems to suggest that examples of good practice and innovative teaching methods exist but that this is not recorded systematically, making it difficult for programmes to identify how they can make improvements. It is also important to acknowledge that changes to curriculum content and teaching methods mean that pedagogic research can become outdated very quickly.

The literature also shows how so many aspects of social work qualifying programme are interlinked – a shortage of good quality practice placements has implications for how students learn about working in partnership (Whittington, 2003) or developing their assessment skills (Crisp et al., 2003). There is limited evidence looking at professional development once students have entered the workplace but what there is illustrates the need to understand how learning takes place within the workplace.

The review also highlights the need for greater precision when describing the outcomes of social work qualifying education – does ‘unsuitability’ relate to a person’s unsuitability to enter the social work profession or a lack of basic knowledge and skills? This would help clarify where improvements are most needed.

An important issue which is outside the remit of this review is the extent to which the issues presented here are likely to change in the light of important policy developments such as changes resulting from the Munro review (Munro, 2010a, 2010b, 2011) or the changes to adult social care (Department of Health, 2010). These are likely to shape both the content and desired outcomes of social work qualifying programmes.
References


Joint University Council Social Work Education Committee (2009) *Call for Evidence to the Social Work Taskforce: Submission from Joint University Council Social Work Education Committee (JUC SWEC).*


McNay, M., Clarke, J. & Lovelock, R. (2009) 'The journey towards professionalism in social work: The development and assessment of


Social Work Task Force (2009 unpublished-b) *Section from initial policy paper for SWTF on curriculum content and delivery*.


