

SCRA response to the Scottish Social Services Council's consultation

Background

The Children's Hearings System is Scotland's distinct system of child protection and youth justice. Among its fundamental principles are:

- whether concerns relate to their welfare or behaviour, the needs of children or young people in trouble should be met through a single holistic and integrated system
- a preventative approach, involving early identification and diagnosis of problems, is essential
- the welfare of the child remains at the centre of all decision making and the child's best interests are paramount throughout
- the child's engagement and participation is crucial to good decision making

SCRA operates the Reporter service which sits at the heart of the system. SCRA employs Children's Reporters who are located throughout Scotland, working in close partnership with panel members and other professionals such as social work, education, the police, the health service and the courts system.

SCRA's vision is that vulnerable children and young people in Scotland are safe, protected and offered positive futures. We will seek to achieve this by adhering to the following key values:

- The voice of the child must be heard
- Our hopes and dreams for the children of Scotland are what unite us
- Children and young people's experiences and opinions guide us
- We are approachable and open
- We bring the best of the past with us into the future to meet new challenges.

Response

SCRA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this process and help to shape the content of the Social Work degree. In order to inform our response, we sought comments from our staff group, many of whom have a social work background. They were therefore able to comment not only from the perspective of professionals who work closely with social workers on a day to day basis, but based on their own experiences of having undertaken the degree and practised.

There were four main themes raised:

- The need to understand the law is critical for those working in the provision of statutory services
- Students should be taught at an early stage how to write robust, good quality, evidenced assessments
- Integration of the practical and theoretical elements of the course should be improved to better equip students for practise
- The structure of the course could be made more flexible by including elective modules and being offered on a part-time basis

We have set out each of these in more detail, along with the specific “campaigns” identified in the consultation webpage that we consider they fit into

Campaigns: Social work degree in the 21st century, Learning to practise

We recognise that social work education has always been provided through a combination of education and experience. The experiential part has largely been via assessed placements that are a requirement of qualification. There is a need to better connect those two key elements and in particular to ensure that the skills necessary for practice are integrated into the academic part of the course rather than students only beginning to learn those skills on placement. In relation to the Children’s Hearings System, it is widely recognised, most recently by the Scottish Parliament’s Education Committee, that robust, evidenced assessments are critical to good decision making about children. Social Workers must be able to explain their actions and recommendations in terms of reasonable justification and proportionality. There are excellent examples of social workers making good use of evidence and theory to support recommendations. However, this learning is nearly always gained post qualification. There is an opportunity to begin to develop the necessary skills and knowledge through teaching, which can then be reinforced on placement. Some areas of theory that feed into good quality assessments have expanded considerably in recent years and need to be kept under constant review, with permanence a particular example.

Campaigns: Social work degree in the 21st century, Learning to practise

The degree to which newly qualified Social Workers understand the law and in particular that relating to the Children’s Hearings System is a significant concern. Children’s Hearings are developing into complex and, on occasion, adversarial proceedings. The expansion of legal representation and the recent Edinburgh contempt of court case illustrate clearly the changing environment. We question whether enough focus is placed on ensuring that newly qualified social workers have a sound working knowledge of the law and of roles and responsibilities within the legal system. The impact of the European Convention on Human Rights and the importance of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child are particularly significant. They must also be equipped with the practical abilities necessary to complement this knowledge, including for example advocacy skills or appearing as a witness in court.

Campaigns: Social work degree in the 21st century, Learning to practise, Progressing an approach to post qualifying learning and development

We recognise that the areas outlined above represent a significant amount of content, despite being focused on children and families work and on the Children’s Hearings System. This leads us to wonder if the existing qualification is able to fully accommodate the level of detailed knowledge needed to equip newly qualified social workers for the fields in which they will be working. Key areas of more specialist knowledge include for example; child care, mental health, substance misuse, adult care, criminal justice and elderly care. It is essential that Social Workers practicing in communities across Scotland today have sufficient specialist expertise and knowledge on at least some of these necessary elements. For this reason, at least one local authority pre-qualification front line placement should be mandatory. Ensuring the necessary quality and quantity of placements requires collaborative work between higher educational institutions and employers. For similar reasons, support in the first two years of post-qualification practice is critical and should be provided both by higher education institutions and by employers working in partnership.

Campaigns: Social work degree in the 21st century

We understand that there are very few courses which enable students to undertake a Social Work degree on a part-time basis. This may be a significant barrier for some people with ambitions to move into the field. We would suggest that options be explored to see if it might be possible for more institutions to provide the degree on a part-time basis so that it could be combined with employment.

Conclusion



The role played by Social Workers in the Children's Hearings System is hugely valued and valuable. This consultation presents an opportunity to further strengthen the degree and to ensure that Social Workers begin their careers fully prepared for the complexity and challenges posed by front-line practice in the 21st century.

SCRA
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