

# Professional identity formation and voluntary sector social work: Messages from an evaluation of a 'flexible learning' programme in Northern Ireland

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**Summary:** At its core, 'Flexible Learning' provision in Northern Ireland lacks a coherent developmental focus. Conversely, this paper presents an evaluation of a dedicated Voluntary Sector 'Flexible Learning' Programme, which demonstrates the efficacy of facilitating student social workers in critically reflecting upon the formation of their respective professional identities with explicit reference to the economic determinants of social justice. Moreover, Programme participants registered their strong support for a strengthened role for the Voluntary Sector in formal social work education. Consequently, and modeling key design features of this Programme, this paper proposes a systematic reform of 'Flexible Learning' provision premised upon a dedicated focus on professional identity formation. The latter may usefully also inform a critical re-positioning of social work's core curricula, anchored by an explicit anti-poverty focus, to ensure that the profession's commitment to social justice is tangibly embedded in the developmental journeys of students.

**Keywords:** 'flexible learning'; professional identity formation; voluntary sector; social justice; social work education

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## Introduction

The development of social work students' professional identity is considered an essential learning process (Hackett et al., 2003). Social work education is premised upon the assumption that a coherent professional identity will emerge organically as an inevitable corollary of a broader generic process of professional socialisation (NISCC, 2003a; NISCC, 2003b). The contemporary 'crisis' in social work's identity challenges this belief. Some commentators, for example, cite the absence of a robust professional identity, when confronted with the complex challenges of contemporary practice, as a key contributory factor in the low morale and ethical disorientation of many frontline practitioners (Asquith et al, 2005). Moreover, the current emphasis on technical competence, stemming from the pervasive influence of the state, employers, and regulatory bodies in shaping the educational curricula, functions to discourage a critical consideration of professional identity formation in students' learning (Dominelli, 1997; Ferguson and Woodward, 2009). Conversely, this paper presents findings from an evaluation of a 'Flexible Learning' Programme in Northern Ireland (NI) (Extern, 2009), which utilised Malcolm Payne's (2006) discourse model, to explicitly align students' professional identity formation to a framework of distinct ideological paradigms. Furthermore, this Programme calibrated Payne's model through the lens of the social work profession's avowed commitment to social justice and the ethical dilemmas this generated in Voluntary Sector practice contexts.

In summation, this paper seeks to realise three interrelated objectives. First, key findings from an evaluation of a 'Flexible Learning' Programme in NI are presented as a basis to inform future provision. Second, the efficacy of Voluntary Sector practice contexts assuming a pivotal role in social work education is explored. Finally, and perhaps more ambitiously, this paper seeks to extrapolate upon the broader relevance of the findings to critically interrogate the role of professional identity formation and social justice in mainstream social work education throughout the UK.

## Mapping the terrain

In NI, the Honours Degree in Social Work is offered to students as a three-year undergraduate programme, sub-divided into three chronological stages. Level 1 corresponds with students' first year, Level 2 their second year, and Level 3 their final year of study. In addition, there is a 'accelerated route' that allows students with relevant primary degrees in social science subjects, to enter at Level 2 and complete the Degree programme in two years. Work-based practice learning is an integral part of the NI Degree in Social Work. Students are required to successfully complete a total of 240 days practice learning. The latter includes 25 days in preparation for direct work with service users, and 185 days of direct, supervised work-based practice learning – 85 days at Level 2 and 100 days at Level 3. Finally, and unlike other regions in the UK, social work students in NI are expected to engage in 30 days Individual Practice Development or 'Flexible Learning'. Students on the three-year undergraduate route are required to undertake 10 'Flexible Learning' days at Levels 1, 2 and 3, respectively. Equally, students on the two year accelerated route, undertake 15 'Flexible Learning' days at Levels 2 and 3, respectively (see NISCC, 2003a).

These 'Flexible Learning' days are student-led and aimed at providing opportunities to bridge any gaps in learning not covered elsewhere in their formal training (NISCC, 2003C). For example, guidance provided to students by the Queen's University of Belfast (QUB, 2007) cite attendance at court, volunteer work with charities, and participation in specialist training courses, as acceptable forms of 'Flexible Learning'. Completion of the required number of 'Flexible Learning' days is evidenced by formative, student self-assessments verified by individual tutors. Similarly, the University of Ulster (UU, 2007) utilises 'reflective logs' to evidence 'action learning' through student-led research, volunteer placements, and so on, culminating in reflective essays.

Interestingly, social work's regional regulatory body the Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC) acknowledged fundamental shortcomings in 'Flexible Learning' provision in its recently published Five Yearly Periodic Review of the Degree in Social Work (NISCC, 2009). This report cited 'a lack of consistency in expectations about the learning to be achieved in the development of individual practice and a wide variation in perception amongst students and tutors about their purpose' (NISCC, 2009, p. 17). In essence, 'Flexible Learning' provision lacks a

core developmental focus, coherent themes and objectives, and a robust method of evaluating outcomes.

Turning to a central theme of this paper, the recent UK regional debates on the future roles of social work evidence a collective perception that contemporary professional identity is in 'crisis' (Social Work Task Force, 2009; Bogues, 2008; GSCC, 2008; Scottish Executive, 2006). It is well-documented elsewhere that this identity 'crisis' is intrinsically linked to the process of neo-liberal globalisation. It is beyond the scope of this paper to theorise or delineate the wider globalising trends at work. In brief, however, the latter may be characterised as an unfolding, hegemonic project premised upon the pursuit of unfettered global capital accumulation through free trade, deregulated labour markets, the retrenchment and/or privatisation of state services, and the dominance of transnational corporations and financial markets (see Harvey, 2000; Standing, 1999). For some writers, such as Mullaly (2001), this has had a profound effect on the context and content of social work activity:

Survival in the global economy now takes precedence over meeting the human and social needs of people. A nation or state appears to measure its success, not by the quality of life it provides for its citizens, but by how much it cuts costs to make it more attractive as an investment site for business ... The changes in the economic, social and political environment ... are seen to be fundamentally in opposition ... to such progressive social work values and ideals as egalitarianism, social justice and emancipation (Mullaly, 2001, p. 305).

Furthermore, a neo-liberal re-branding of social work as an explicit mechanism of social control has gained momentum in recent decades (see Dustin, 2008; Ferguson and Woodward, 2009). These processes have fuelled an identity 'crisis' among an increasingly disillusioned workforce, tasked with evidencing their technical competency and 'contractual value', against a backdrop of increasingly scarce resources and growing unmet need (see, for example, Garrett, 2002; Jones, 2005; Jordan and Jordan, 2000).

An explicit focus on professional identity formation is therefore apt and may act as a corrective to the absence of a dedicated focus on this important developmental theme in the core social work education curricula. Additionally, the formation of a robust professional identity may function as a philosophical and psychological anchor to underpin

and orientate students' resilience in the midst of the profession's current 'crisis' in confidence, moral and purpose (Asquith et al., 2005). Moreover, it offers a framework to explore a key Practice Learning Requirement of the Degree in Social Work that articulates an emphasis upon 'the contested nature, scope and purpose of social work in a contested society' (NISCC, 2003a; NISCC, 2005). Finally, it provides a useful conceptual framework to explore the links between theory and practice, and the tensions between care, control and empowerment.

This focus on professional identity formation may be usefully calibrated through Payne's (2006) three-dimensional discourse model that juxtaposes the therapeutic, transformational, and social order approaches to contemporary practice. The therapeutic approach is premised upon an interactive, collaborate relationship to facilitate service users in gaining personal power over their feelings and way of life, enabling them to overcome or rise above suffering, personal hardship and disadvantage. The transformational approach to social work focuses on egalitarianism with an explicit commitment to social justice. Finally, the social order approach is tasked with maintaining the social order and social fabric of society, and regulating people experiencing difficulties in their lives so that they can recover stability. Payne stresses the on-going dynamic tension between these three approaches that are not mutually exclusive. The prevailing model within any particular social work context will be largely determined by the political and organisational imperatives of the agency in which social workers are employed (Payne, 2000, pp. 16-20).

Some commentators, as noted above, detect a 'new professionalism' premised upon the emerging dominance of the social order or 'neo-liberal' approach, which is gaining ground in academia (Ferguson and Woodward, 2009) and practice (Jordan and Jordan, 2000; Jones, 2005; Dustin, 2007). In education settings, this may in part be attributed to the prevalence of a competency-based approach to professional development that neglects the development of critically reflective practitioners in tune with the structural properties of presenting need (Dominelli, 2002; Noble and Irwin, 2009). This social order bias runs contrary to the often stated 'Key Purpose of Social Work' cited in The National Occupational Standards for Social Work (NISCC, 2003b), for which the international definition of social work was adopted and endorsed:

The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being ... Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work (IFSW & IASSW, 2004).

The latter privileges a social justice approach that seeks to identify and combat sources of inequality and oppression that generate social need (NISCC, 2005). As educators, we have a responsibility to facilitate the critical engagement of students with the contested and ambiguous nature of social work's multiple identities. However, many commentators content that if social justice is a primary goal of social work, then an overt ideological bias anchored primarily, although not exclusively, to a focus on the economic determinants of social change, must be reflected in our teaching approach (Weiss et al., 2006, Garrett, 2002; Bisman, 2004; Ferguson and Woodward, 2007).

Turning to another core theme of this paper, the Voluntary Sector offers an innovative, multi-faceted practice learning context that is under-utilised in social work education (Traynor et al, 2000). Moreover, as Woodcock and Dixon (2005, p. 970) suggest, 'we are currently training our social workers to espouse the statutory role'. Conversely, a unique feature of this Programme was its focus on the roles, tasks and challenges of Voluntary Sector social work. The latter provided a framework to address the perceived bias towards an identification of 'real' social work as primarily statutory fieldwork in social work education (Badham and Eadie, 2000; Traynor et al., 2000). Furthermore, there are a number of concrete trends that are 'pushing' the Voluntary Sector to the forefront of social work education. First, the total number of social workers employed in the Voluntary Sector throughout the UK has nearly doubled since 1996 (Clarke, 2007, p. 22). It is estimated, moreover, that 1 in 4 social workers are currently employed in the Voluntary Sector in NI (NISCC, 2009). Second, all major political parties and policy makers envisage an increased reliance upon the Voluntary Sector to deliver front-line services (Paxton et al., 2005). Finally, increasing numbers of students are availing of work-based Practice Learning Opportunities (PLOs) in the Voluntary Sector. For example, in NI, of the 87 Level 2 PLOs in January 2008, 32 students were placed in Voluntary Sector agencies (NISCC, 2009). In light of these developing trends, it is imperative that students develop an accurate understanding of the practice opportunities and challenges that currently exist in the sector and a more balanced understanding of social work's multiple roles and identities (Bogues, 1998).

In addition to functioning as a corrective to the statutory bias in formal social work education, and while remaining mindful of the constraints of the 'contract culture', an enhanced role for the Voluntary Sector has the potential to offer greater scope for students to cultivate their capacity for creative practice in tune with the profession's avowed commitment to social justice (Ferguson and Woodward, 2009). As Badham and Eadie (2000, p. 189) suggest:

The Voluntary Sector is a key player in delivering social care and promoting social justice and it should be actively seeking to influence the education and training of social workers to a greater extent.

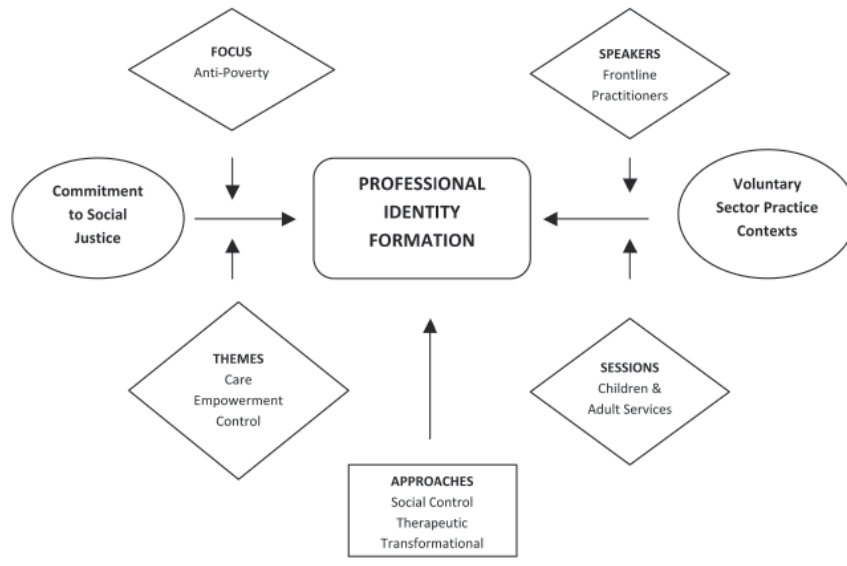
In summation, the thematic discussion thus far provided the rationale for a 'Flexible Learning' Programme in tune with contemporary concerns with professional identity, aligned to the profession's commitment to social justice, and calibrated through the lens of Voluntary Sector service provision.

## **A 'flexible learning' programme**

The 'Flexible Learning' Programme was entitled 'Professional Identity Formation and Voluntary Sector Social Work'. It emerged from a partnership between Extern's Practice Learning Centre (a major Voluntary Sector Practice Learning Provider in NI) and the Department of Sociology, Social Policy & Social Work at the Queen's University of Belfast. The author of this paper assumed sole responsibility for the design, delivery and evaluation of the Programme. This paper therefore reflects the author's perspective and should not be viewed as representative of the views of either partnership agency.

The aim of the Programme was to enable students to critically reflect upon their professional identity formation through a strengthening of their knowledge base on the roles and tasks of social workers and services in the Voluntary Sector. The Programme was delivered across the academic year 2008-2009. A core design feature was the utilisation of several front-line practitioners as session speakers. In addition, one session was facilitated by the Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network. The target audience was a combination of Level I and 'accelerated route' Level II Social Work Degree

Figure 1. 'Flexible Learning' Model: A thematic representation



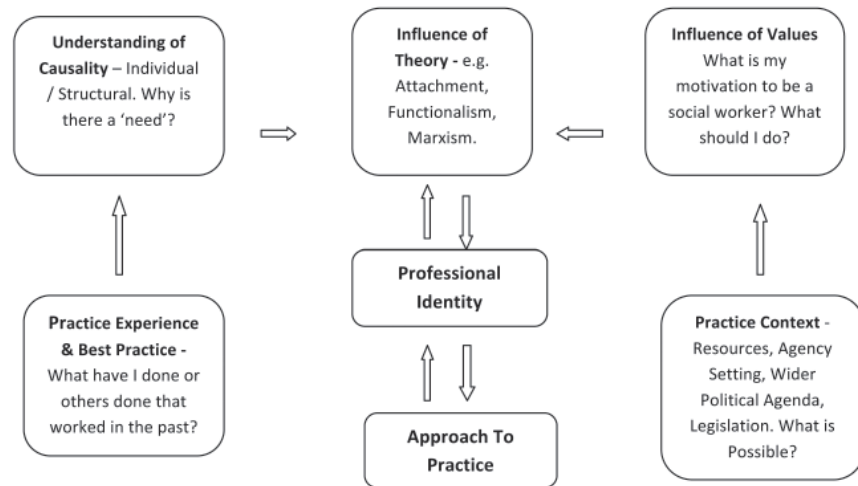
students attending the Queen's University of Belfast.

The 'Flexible Learning' Programme was delivered in two distinct modules, premised upon a consideration of service provision and practice in Extern's Adult Services and Children Services, respectively. Each module contained four sessions. Each session followed a set format, divided in three segments. The first segment introduced students to the key characteristics of the Voluntary Sector and its role in social work education. In addition, students were afforded the opportunity to reflect upon the importance of professional identity formation and the profession's commitment to social justice. Finally, students were introduced to Payne's (2006) 'discourse model'. Segment two was facilitated by front-line practitioners focusing on agency-specific interventions premised upon their respective roles, tasks, working practices, opportunities and challenges of working alongside socially excluded service users in the Voluntary Sector. The latter afforded students' the opportunity to critically engage with the 'practice wisdom' of experienced practitioners. Each session concluded with a structured critical reflection on the application to practice of participants' learning (see Figure 1).

A number of themes were considered. This included a discussion on the factors shaping agency-specific ethical dilemmas, particularly



Figure 2. Factors influencing professional identity



in regard to the tensions between care, control and empowerment in frontline practice. In addition, the dominant approaches to practice in the Voluntary Sector were compared and contrasted with the dominance of the social order approach in statutory social work. Finally, a critical exploration of the key variables that shape professional identity, amplified by agency-specific practice examples, was facilitated utilising a systematic framework (see Figure 2).

This approach to teaching amplified the ‘politics of practice’ at both micro and macro levels, underpinned by contemporary social policy analysis (Weiss et al., 2006) and sociological perspectives that seek to understand societal and structural influences on human need, in order to, ultimately, enhance participants’ commitment to social justice (Dominelli, 1997; Cunningham and Cunningham, 2008)

## Methods of data collection

Time constraints and lack of finances dictated a method of data collection that was cost effective, yet capable of eliciting the data required. This task was achieved through the use of two student-led, self-assessment questionnaires (see Appendix 1). The first questionnaire

was distributed at the start of the session and provided an empirical baseline, self-assessment of the presenting knowledge of participants. This baseline data was compared with data gleaned from the second questionnaire distributed at the end of each session. This comparison deployed a scaling method that ranked responses to arrive at a standardised empirical measure of the effectiveness of the sessions in meeting the Programme's learning objectives. In addition, a section in the second questionnaire invited respondents to record further comments on the session's effectiveness to add a qualitative dimension to the data. The overall qualitative depth of the data was strengthened further by verbal feedback provided by several respondents and written feedback received from respondents in e-mails. The sample was essentially self-selecting, drawn from those students who attended sessions and agreed to engage in the evaluation process. In total, ninety students completed the questionnaires, with fifty also providing more detailed verbal and written feedback. The outcome of this 'triangulation' of data collection methods was the production of fairly standardised data, supplemented by data with qualitative depth and meaning. In methodological terms, an empirical bridge was established between data reliability (i.e. replicable) and validity (i.e. accuracy) (Bryman, 1988).

The latter notwithstanding, and in common with all small-scale studies, this research may be conceived of as lacking concrete external validity and representativeness (Murray and Lawrence, 2000). However, whilst a claim cannot be made to be representative, the evaluation did generate a set of empirically-based contentions of relevance not just to promoting quality standards in 'Flexible Learning' provision in NI, but also to the development of practice-relevant social work education throughout the UK.

## **Analysis of findings**

The data evidences the success of the 'Flexible Learning' Programme in meeting its overarching aim of enabling students to critically reflect upon their professional identity formation through a strengthening of their knowledge base on the roles and tasks of social workers and services in the Voluntary Sector. For example, the collation of questionnaire returns indicated that 28.6 per cent were 'very

satisfied', 45.1 per cent were 'satisfied', and 22 per cent were 'quite satisfied', with the overall effectiveness of the Programme. In regard to the content being stimulating and informative, moreover, 25.3 per cent of participants presented as 'very satisfied', and 42.9 per cent presented as 'satisfied', in regard to this key benchmark. In respect of the Programme's relevance to students' professional development, 44 per cent of participants presented as 'very satisfied', 37.4 per cent as 'satisfied', while 13.2 per cent presented as 'quite satisfied'. Additionally, 81.4 per cent of participants presented as 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied' that the sessions had purposefully contributed to their professional development. Furthermore, written feedback confirmed participants' general satisfaction with the Programme:

*It addressed a lot of questions in my head about my worry of relating theory to practice ... Very pleased as presentation talked about practical experience ... Great knowledge and skills of speakers was very useful in developing as a critical reflective practitioner ... It was really interesting and challenging, and a great basis for informing practice ... Well thought out, presented and delivered.*

Finally, the following written feedback reflected the view of a number of participants that the Programme should be delivered as part of the core curricula:

*The focus on professional identity was excellent and relevant, and it should feature as a core part of our learning in University.*

Participants' learning in respect of the different professional identities of social work demonstrates the general efficacy of the central theme of the Programme. For example, 74.8 per cent of participants presented with a 'fairly developed', or 'poorly developed', understanding of professional identity at the start of the session. By the end of the session, however, 59 per cent of participants indicated that their knowledge of professional identity was either 'good' or 'very good'. Furthermore, Payne's (2006) contention that all social work practice, to a greater or lesser extent, embodies a complex juxtaposition of the three discourses, found considerable purchase with participants in group discussions. So much so, that the practice themes and challenges that shape professional identity formation provoked a wide-ranging debate and a very positive learning experience for the vast majority of participants. For example,

85.8 per cent of participants began the session with a 'fairly developed', or 'poorly developed', understanding of the practice influences on professional identity formation. By the end of the session, however, 66 per cent of participants presented with either a 'good', or 'very good', knowledge of the themes and challenges that inform their respective professional identities.

The utilisation of front-line Voluntary Sector practitioners in the delivery phase proved crucial to the effectiveness of this Programme. The 'practice wisdom' of speakers, for example, exposed the dissonance between students' preconceived aspirations and the challenges of practice, and facilitated meaningful connections between abstract theory and concrete practice.

This Programme also challenged any preconceived biases among participants towards viewing social problems as the outcome of individual causes or pathology, and encouraged a more balanced appreciation of the complex interplay of individual and structural causality. In contrast to other research on the motivations of student social workers (see Gillian, 2007; Hackett et al., 2003), moreover, feedback from participants evidenced an intellectual curiosity to develop the knowledge and skills required to meet the practice challenges associated with the profession's avowed commitment to social justice. More concretely, the majority of participants indicated that the maintenance of their professional ethical integrity demanded that they align themselves with a synergy of the therapeutic and transformational approaches. Reflecting disquiet in the critical social work community (see Ferguson and Woodward, 2009), and unease among student social workers surveyed elsewhere (see Woodcock and Dixon, 2005), participants expressed concern that the social control discourse has become so institutionally embedded in professional practice that their discretionary scope for creative interventions has become severely curtailed. The following comments of two participants are fairly typical of the views expressed:

*We are constantly being told that our practice has to be anti-oppressive and based upon principles of empowerment. Yet, it is never made clear how we can achieve real social justice for the majority of service users who are poor and oppressed by the system.*

*The ethical commitment to social justice feels tokenistic. It is as if people are afraid*

*to confront the reality that, as a profession, social work is failing to challenge the major structural problems that cause people to have contact with social workers in the first place.*

To paraphrase Garret (2002) and Jones (1983), furthermore, a recurring theme in discussions was the sequestration of class, poverty and economic inequality from social work education's dominant discourses. The vast majority of service users are benefit recipients on low incomes who belong to either the 'working' or 'detached' classes (Standing, 1999; Barry, 1998). Moreover, there is compelling evidence that causally links a broad spectrum of presenting unmet need to income inequality and poverty (see, for example, Hills et al., 2010; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009; Wilde, 2008; JRF, 2008a). Yet, as Davis and Wainwright (2005, p. 260) argue:

The implications of poverty for social work practice continues to be largely ignored on social work education programmes despite stated commitments to combating social injustice and engaging in anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practice.

The practice challenges associated with this empirical reality were brought into sharp focus in the session facilitated by the Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network, premised upon the use of their interactive board game 'The Poverty Trap'. As these comments from various participants illustrate:

*The Sociology and Social Policy modules teach us about the history and theory of poverty and inequality, but nothing about how this directly impacts on our practice.*

*You have talked about the impact of poverty on the lives of service users and what that may mean for us in developing working relationships with them. This is the first time that the focus on poverty has made sense.*

*'The Poverty Trap' brings it home to you what it actually means to live on very low benefits and how that limits the choices people can make. It has made me look at the whole issue of poverty in a new light. This game should be a compulsory part of our training.*

A key message to emerge from this evaluation is the developmental desire of participants for social work education to become more poverty-

focused in order to equip them with the knowledge and skills to facilitate practical, positive changes in the lives of marginalised service users. This resonates with the view expressed in the broader NI social work community that was documented in the recent NISCC consultation report (Bogues, 2008, p. 23) on the future of the profession:

A recurrent theme is that social work must rediscover its passion for social justice and the core role of working to combat poverty, both individually and systematically.

This is exemplified by the specific omission from the social work curriculum, highlighted by participants, of bespoke training on social security benefits and welfare rights (see also Weiss et al., 2006). This learning need resonates with contemporary policy drivers that envisage a greater role for social workers in ‘activating’ benefit recipients to strengthen their employability and promote their financial inclusion (DWP, 2008; JRF, 2008b). In the absence of dedicated training, newly-qualified social workers may struggle to facilitate vulnerable service users in ‘navigating’ this progressive strengthening of benefit conditionality, and they may consequently practice in ways that serve to compound institutional exclusion (see Jordan and Jordan, 2000).

This concern with inequality and class has become increasingly important because of growing economic inequality and endemic poverty in recent decades (Hills et al., 2010; JRF, 2009; NIAPN, 2007). For this reason, the profession’s commitment to social justice remains an important ethical benchmark at a time when social work is struggling to establish its credibility as a profession working to ensure that the interests of the vulnerable and disadvantaged in our society are promoted and protected (see Asquith et al., 2005)

On another level, feedback from participants was extremely positive in regard to the utility of the Programme in providing them with an insight into Voluntary Sector social work. For example, 57 per cent of participants indicated that they had a ‘poorly developed’ knowledge of the Voluntary Sector, at the start of the session. This fell dramatically to 6.6 per cent by the end of the session. Equally, at the start of the session, only 6.6 per cent of participants presented with a ‘good’ knowledge of the roles of Voluntary Sector social workers. By the end of the session, however, 41 per cent of participants presented with a ‘good’ knowledge base, and 16.5 per cent with a ‘very good’ knowledge base. A further

indicator of the success of the Programme in engaging the professional curiosity of participants in regard to Voluntary Sector social work, may be gleaned from the 74.8 per cent of respondents who would consider pursuing a career in the sector post-qualification, up from 53.9 per cent at the beginning of each session. This echoes other research that suggests UK students generally hold a strong preference to working in the Voluntary Sector (see Woodcock and Dixon, 2005).

A key message to emerge from participants was the lack of formal teaching on Voluntary Sector social work. As one participant commented:

*We are taught very little about the Voluntary Sector and the roles of social workers working in there. How can we be expected to work in any area without being taught the basics of what social workers do in voluntary agencies?*

In essence, students related their sense of frustration that the generic aspirations of the Degree programme is being undermined by a statutory bias in formal teaching. The latter is premised upon the transferability of competences across settings, yet this outcome will not be realised if the bias towards statutory social work processes is maintained.

A significant omission in the design and delivery of the 'Flexible Learning' Programme was the absence of input from service users and carers. On an ethical level, this omission runs contrary to the principles of egalitarian social work. On a practical level, the lack of input from service users and carers deprived participants of exposure to a crucial reservoir of expertise (see Duffy, 2006; Ager et al., 2005).

## **Application to practice learning**

A core message of this paper is the urgent need to reform 'Flexible Learning' provision in NI. Current arrangements are ad hoc, haphazard, unsystematic and lacking in credibility. Instead, 'Flexible Learning' has to be anchored to a coherent set of learning objectives that are amenable to robust evaluation. In light of the evaluation of the 'Flexible Learning' Programme presented here, this paper proposes a learning model with an explicit focus on professional identity formation utilising Payne's discourse model, aligned to Voluntary Sector practice contexts, and calibrated through a critical exploration of the social work profession's

commitment to social justice. The latter privileges a strengthening of participants' knowledge of the economic determinants of social justice, linked to an explicit anti-poverty practice focus. Furthermore, the inclusion and active participation of Voluntary Sector front-line practitioners, service users and carers, would serve to strengthen the ethical integrity and effectiveness of the learning process. Finally, the quality assurance of future practice-relevant learning demands the introduction of a robust evaluation framework.

Adult learning theory's emphasis on the importance of self-efficacy suggests that the focus on flexible, student-led learning should be retained (Kolb, 1984). Consequently, students should continue to be afforded the option of selecting from a menu of 'Flexible Learning' opportunities. This may include participation in a structured programme such as the model presented in this paper, project visits, and/or bespoke methods training. However, irrespective of the precise forms that future 'Flexible Learning' provision takes, the focus should be on the cultivation of their professional identity in Voluntary Sector practice contexts, linked, in turn, to a practice-relevant application of social justice approaches.

The utility of Voluntary Sector practice contexts informing students' learning has a broader relevance for curriculum planning throughout the UK. In essence, as the findings in this paper suggest, the bias towards statutory social work processes in formal social work education throughout the UK needs to be addressed proactively by introducing a dedicated focus and equal weighting on Voluntary Sector practice, therein strengthening the generic aspirations of the Degree. The latter may usefully include the utilisation of a critical mass of front-line practitioners to function in academic settings as positive role models in promoting students' understanding of Voluntary Sector social work. Logic dictates that the increasing numbers of social workers gaining employment in the Voluntary Sector throughout the UK, noted above, must be reflected in the content of the core curricula guiding professional training.

Maintaining this focus on the wider application of this paper's findings, a third key message to emerge is the potential benefits to be derived from the mainstreaming of a dedicated focus on professional identity formation in social work education throughout the UK. This paper demonstrates the potential of professional identity formation to function as an important conceptual vehicle to orientate the development



of critically reflective students attuned to the contemporary realities of practice. More concretely, it provides a framework to critically interrogate and elaborate upon the tensions between care, control, and empowerment, premised upon a juxtaposition of the ethical dilemmas generated between theoretical abstracts and concrete practice realities.

The importance of cultivating a robust professional identity also featured prominently in a succession of reviews on the future of social work (see for example, Bogues, 2008; GSCC, 2008; Scottish Executive, 2006; Social Work Taskforce 2009). As noted above, the well-documented decline in many front-line practitioners' morale and the deep-rooted sense of ambiguity about their purpose, may, in part, be attributed to the absence of a robust professional identity (Asquith et al., 2005). Professional identity formation is therefore a crucial learning process that needs to be at the heart of social work education. Leaving aside for a moment the debate on whether this identity should be premised upon a social order, therapeutic, or a transformational paradigm, the cultivation of a secure identity is a vital ingredient in building a confident and secure workforce for the future.

The latter point notwithstanding, a final key message to emerge from this evaluation relates to the desire of students to engage with an egalitarian social work narrative in order to meaningfully cultivate their experiential knowledge of anti-oppressive practice. This resonates with the view articulated elsewhere that a reconfiguration of social work education's core curricula is required in order to reconnect the profession to the core moral purpose of promoting social justice (Ferguson and Woodward, 2009). Given the highly contested and politicised nature of contemporary debates on social justice (Standing, 1999; Baker et al., 2004; Thompson, 2003), and the pervasive influence of neo-liberalism (Dustin, 2008; Dominelli, 2002), it is perhaps inevitable that this process of reform, if it is to proceed at all, must do so incrementally.

The findings presented in this paper suggest a number of key building blocks that may inform the incremental construction of an egalitarian social work education agenda. In echoes of the work of a number of critical writers, a useful starting point would be the mainstreaming of a dedicated anti-poverty focus that seeks to cultivate the practice-relevant knowledge and skills of students' to engage empathically with economically marginalised service users (Garrett, 2002). The latter also necessitates a strengthening of the practice relevance of sociological and social policy teaching, in order that students may accurately

contextualise presenting need (Cunningham and Cunningham, 2008; Weiss et al., 2008). Finally, given the empirical reality that the vast majority of service users are benefit recipients and/or are on low incomes, benefits rights training should be mandatory on all Social Work Degree programmes (see Weiss et al., 2008).

Perhaps more ambitiously, curriculum planners across the UK may usefully replicate the core design features of the 'Flexible Learning' model presented in this paper to inform the construction of a dedicated social justice module to be incorporated into the Social Work Degree syllabus. A critical synergy between professional identity formation and Voluntary sector practice contexts, offers a basic thematic framework to conceptually anchor this mainstreaming of social justice in social work education. UK curriculum planners may also draw upon international exemplars of good practice that posit social justice as a pivotal feature of their core social work curricula (see, for example, McFadden, 2007; Polack and Chadha, 2004; Strug, 2006).

## Conclusions

Drawing upon an evaluation of a 'Flexible Learning' Programme in NI, this paper presents a number of messages for social work educators. The unifying theme that connects these messages relates to the contention that a systematic focus on the interrelationship between the professional identity formation of students, and the profession's commitment to social justice, linked in turn to a strengthened role for the Voluntary Sector in practice-focused learning, carries the potential to re-invigorate social work education throughout the UK.

First, 'Flexible Learning' arrangements in NI require urgent reform premised upon the introduction of a coherent set of learning objectives, anchored to the robust evaluation of learning outcomes. The model presented in this paper offers the prospect of reviving 'Flexible Learning' provision with the aim of fostering students' social justice consciousness. More broadly, and to paraphrase Ferguson and Woodward (2009. p.67), a second message to emerge from this paper is that statutory-focused, competence-based approaches, that currently hold sway in formal social work education, may usefully be combined with Voluntary Sector-focused creative and critical learning approaches

to ensure that students 'acquire more than just training by numbers'. Finally, this paper presented a case for the introduction of a dedicated focus on professional identity formation, within an explicit anti-poverty framework, in the UK's core curricula. The latter is predicated upon providing students with an opportunity to engage with an egalitarian social work that offers the prospect of tangibly equipped them with the prerequisite knowledge and skills to generate robust social justice outcomes.

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## Appendix

### **(A) KNOWLEDGE SELF-ASSESSMENT**

#### **PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY FORMATION & VOLUNTARY SECTOR SOCIAL WORK**

**1. Using the scale provided, how do you rate your knowledge base in regard to the following themes drawn from the learning objectives for the session:**

Very Good	Good	Fairly Developed	Poorly Developed
1	2	3	4
Learning Objective			Knowledge Self-Assessment
The range of services provided by the voluntary sector to meet the needs of vulnerable service users.			
The roles, tasks, and opportunities for social workers working alongside socially excluded service users in the voluntary sector.			
The challenges and ethical dilemmas of working in voluntary sector as a social worker.			
Understanding of the different professional identities of social work.			
The practice themes and challenges that shape professional identity formation.			

**2. Would you consider working with a voluntary sector agency upon qualification?**

YES		MAYBE		NOT LIKELY		NO	
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**2. Using the scale provided, how do you rate your knowledge base in regard to the following themes drawn from the learning objectives for the session:**

Very Good	Good	Fairly Developed	Poorly Developed
1	2	3	4

Learning Objective	Knowledge Self-Assessment
The range of services provided by the voluntary sector to meet the needs of vulnerable service users.	
The roles, tasks, and opportunities for social workers working alongside socially excluded service users in the voluntary sector.	
The challenges and ethical dilemmas of working in voluntary sector as a social worker.	
Understanding of the different professional identities of social work.	
The practice themes and challenges that shape professional identity formation.	

**2. Would you consider working with a voluntary sector agency upon qualification?**

YES		MAYBE		NOT LIKELY		NO	
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