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A new distance learning national framework for social work continuing education: critical reflections on the first phases of implementation

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A NEW DISTANCE LEARNING NATIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR SOCIAL WORK CONTINUING EDUCATION: CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE FIRST PHASES OF IMPLEMENTATION

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Abstract

This article utilises a range of secondary research methodologies in an exploration of the challenges and opportunities that have arisen from the establishment and first years of delivery of a new single and predominantly distant learning national post-qualifying framework. The CPEL framework is directly commissioned by the professional regulator Social Care Wales (SCW, formerly the Care Council for Wales (CCW)), provided by an alliance of four universities (Bangor, Cardiff, Glyndwr and Swansea) and actively involves employers, practitioners and service users in their development. Critical reflections on the early implementation of the Experienced, Senior and Consultant Programmes that contribute to the CPEL framework will help understand the key characteristics, challenges and opportunities post qualifying education for social workers can bring.

The paper commences with an analysis of the moves to design a national post-qualification framework that is more accessible, flexible and responsive than the previous patchwork quilt set-up, including an examination of the increased role of distance learning and the teaching methodologies that support it. It then critically summarises the specific context and developments of the CPEL framework. This is followed by substantive analyses of the key messages. These messages are of the value of; provider collaboration, quality of e learning experience, employer commitment and student perceived competence/satisfaction.

Key words

Introduction

With the advent of more robust UK regulation regimes, social workers are now expected to actively meet and evidence post registration training and learning (PRTL) and continuing professional development (CPD) requirements (Higham, 2009a; Moriaty and Manthorpe, 2014). Laming (2003; 2009) drew attention to deficiencies within post-qualifying education following the deaths of Victoria Climbie and Peter Connolly. In this context continuing education opportunities have been steadily growing over the last two decades in the UK (Doel et al., 2008). This provision has gradually been subject to the same political, research and theoretical scrutiny as its qualifying counterpart (Preston-Shoot, 2008; Gilies, 2014). As such post-qualifying education programmes and awards have become an established and integral part of the overall composition of social workers' continuing education (Brown, McCloskey, Galpin, Keen and Immins, 2008), supported by an increased emphasis on flexible delivery of learning (Jones, 2010). Lifelong learning enables social workers to respond to consistently changing and complex environments, while substantiating their evidence-based practice within the context of an increasingly expansive information landscape (Nissen, Pendell, Jivanjee, and Goodluck, 2014). These learning opportunities are frequently valued as positive contributions to professional development (Doel, Nelson and Flynn, 2008). However, little research evidence exists (Moriarty and Manthorpe, 2014) and the political context for programme development and actual effectiveness on practice has been contested. Galpin (2009) and Golightely (2017) question the drivers behind post-qualifying education by considering how it tries to meet the demands of a range of stakeholders – social work practitioners, employers, citizens and government modernisation agendas- within a broader focus of marketization, neo-liberalism and globalisation. Galpin (2009) further argues that within this inappropriate business model, higher education is itself subject to managerialism as a product of trade increasingly dependent on the whims of its regulatory body for direction over what is deemed appropriate for inclusion.

This is perceived to undermine the roles of education and social work, reducing both to a series of performance targets and promoting conformity to policy rather than encouraging a critical approach and a commitment to social justice.

Comprehensive reviews of social work often include recommendations for competency and competence (Short, 1984) based approaches to the continuing education of the profession often allied with a more explicit career structure (Pearce, Swift and Figget, 2015). Whilst making a positive difference to practitioners and organisations, subsequent frameworks are often driven by workforce development, including recruitment and retention considerations and modernisation agendas (Galpin, 2009). The UK frameworks which support post-qualifying education of social workers are approved and monitored independently by the relevant professional regulatory bodies – the Health and Care Professions Council (England), the Northern Ireland Social Care Council, the Scottish Social Services Council and Social Care Wales (Gilies, 2014; Higham, 2009b; Taylor Mullineux and Fleming, 2010). The common elements are provision by higher education institutions, post graduate levels of study and sequential (and competency based) structured frameworks (Higham, 2009b). Within this context Moriaty and Manthorpe (2014) note a more recent drift in England to include more emphasis on work-based and self-directed learning and some deregulation of the specific provision. Generally, these progressive structures reflect diversity in learning needs and outcomes, from those seeking to consolidate learning as newly qualified through to those with substantive experience or in managerial and highly specialist roles. While professional developments are often key motivations for individual participation, there is also an element of employer or regulatory mandating, and actual or perceived financial reward (career progression) that engenders programme enrolment (Bayley, 2009; Doel et al., 2008). Support in the workplace, individual worker motivation and the nature of programme delivery are all considered as factors that enable or hinder the effectiveness of any continuing education.

Supportive workplaces are a pre-requisite for effective continuing education (Gilies, 2014, Pearce et al., 2015). The provision of meaningful study time and work relief appears particularly important, and the lack of such is identified as a significant barrier to educational engagement and effective learning (Doel et al., 2008; Bayley 2009; Moriaty and Manthorpe 2014). Given much of the applied practice focus of programmes Doel et al. (2008) also evidence how strong mentors can make a positive impact on post qualifying social workers' educational experiences and learning. This can also be delivered through clear and strong line manager support (Bayley, 2009). The increasing use of distance learning and new technologies also require the need for appropriate resources and support to avoid technical problems and disengagement (Jones, 2010).

Post-qualifying education is progressively meeting the need for flexible approaches which accommodate time pressures through the use of distance learning and new technologies (Jones, 2010). This change has also been shaped by the need for continuing education to be accessible in terms of format, opportunities and location. There has thus been a growth in the use of distance approaches to the provision of continuing education (Jones 2010, Sawrika Lenette, McDonald and Fowler, 2015). The development of such on-line and blended learning and appropriate strategies for establishing supportive environments is becomingly increasingly common (Dawson and Fenster, 2015). Therefore it was important to reflect and draw upon the invaluable expertise of established providers like the Open University, for example, creating sustainable and flexible learning opportunities for those who would otherwise be unable to access them (Open University, 2018). This has been enabled by specific new technologies and their capacity to support innovative, creative and ultimately more satisfying approaches; the emerging evidence base articulates for the effective use of specific tools like podcasts, webinars, and wikis (Jones, 2010). It was vital that this new national framework built on current provision by extending into post qualifying education and ensuring that while the learning was

incremental and drew upon a high quality global evidence base it also maintained a strong local flavour, for example, through national stakeholder partnerships and collaboration at each stage of the process. Methods and strategies for delivery need to be supported by clear and consistent guidance from programmes (Doel et al., 2008), strong student support and curriculums that offer practical aspects and a clear relationship with experience (Pearce et al., 2015). Within this context programmes require genuine partnership working between the educational provider and employers, set within some clear leadership and policy directives (Taylor et al., 2010).

There remains a need to ensure evaluation of programmes, establishing their impact on the individual social worker, their team and their organisation (Brown et al., 2008). Frameworks for analysing the outcomes have been developed and research has evidenced that social workers perceive that their knowledge has increased as a consequence of post qualifying education (Brown et al., 2008; Doel et al, 2008). In the light of rapidly changing provision, it also becomes essential to ensure that they remain effective in shaping improved practice. Thus while it becomes important to quality assure the educational provision, the critical considerations become about the tangible and lasting impact upon direct service provision. Moriaty and Manthorpe (2014) and Pearce et al., (2015) both highlight in their reviews of the literature that there remains little research which has yet to establish benefits to service users and carers as a direct consequence of post-qualifying education. In addition Moriaty and Manthorpe (2014) suggest very little research has been undertaken into the cost-effectiveness of the various approaches.

Continuing Professional Education and Learning (CPEL) in Wales

History and context of CPEL

Late in 2010 a Social Care and Social Work Workforce Task Group, commissioned by the Welsh Government (Welsh Government, 2010) recommended an all-Wales career pathway for

post-qualifying social work consisting of four levels: Newly Qualified Social Workers (those who had been qualified and practising for up to three years); Social Workers (those who had been qualified and practising for three years); Senior Social Workers (those who had been qualified and practising for a minimum of three years); and Consultant Social Workers (those who had been qualified and practising for a minimum of five years). In order to progress on such a career pathway, the need for a corresponding framework for continuous social work professional development was recognised and the Task Group outlined broad arrangements for this in terms of four level-specific programmes, referred to as the Continuing Professional Education and Learning (CPEL) Framework.

Social Care Wales (SCW) commissioned the specification of learning outcomes for the respective CPEL programmes and consulted on these through sector-wide engagement with a range of stakeholders, including representatives of citizens who use social care services. By 2012 SCW commissioned the development and delivery of the programmes.

The CPEL Programmes

The SCW consultation identified the aspirational benchmarks as being:

- strongly work based and experiential in orientation and assessment methods whilst strengthening the body of social work knowledge informing practice
- accessible, including through the use of open, virtual and on-line learning methods, to all relevant social workers across the whole of Wales
- sustainable
- based on core and optional modules, leading to awards, and to enable credit transfer and accumulation; and,

- Importantly, through the medium of Welsh and English.

The clear message from SCW was that the programmes should serve to raise practice standards by enhancing and extending professional knowledge, skills and expertise through embedding reflective, reflexive and evidence and research-mindedness within practice. Moreover, that the programmes should promote a culture of career-long learning that informs enhanced practice through incremental learning.

Assessment activities are regarded as important strategies for developing the professional skill set, rather than considered as ends in themselves. Feedback from citizens who use services, peers and managers also features within the programmes' assessment strategy. Common to all forms of assessment is the requirement for learners to demonstrate their capacity to use research evidence directly within practice contexts and to infer new knowledge from practice experience and related enquiry (critical and reflective thinking).

Methodology

This paper comprises two main approaches to create this contextual starting point. Firstly, it utilises a comprehensive literature review, programme performance data and commissioning perspectives. Secondly, it augments this picture with use of the reflections of the authors as programme providers, standardised on-line student module and programme feedback processes, regular consultative sessions with employers and the outcomes of two external evaluations.

One of these external evaluations is an independent longitudinal impact study undertaken by a specialist research and consultancy organisation. Five main areas are under examination, which are based upon the National Occupational Standards (Social Care Wales, 2011). These areas cover the general take-up of places and retention on the programmes, the impact on quality of

practice, career progression, retention within the profession and improvement for service users and carers. Data collection includes an initial questionnaire which is completed by students at the start of their studies, a second that is completed at the end of their studies, and a third which is completed twelve months after programme completion. In addition, there is an optional telephone interview at programme completion.

The second external evaluation (Lewis, 2016) was commissioned by the CPEL Alliance to explore the key learning considerations that can be extracted from the early phases of CPEL implementation and delivery. It focussed specifically on student retention and engagement through interviews comprising both open and closed questions with past and present students (including those who withdrew from the framework) and with employers. The essential questions of post-qualifying learning were asked: does it work, do students use it in their professional practice, and does it make a difference to citizens who use services (Carpenter, 2005).

Key Messages

A range of contributing factors emerged from this critical reflection. The four presented below have been selected by the Alliance as representative of the central tenets of the CPEL journey so far. These factors are considered to be of equal importance and therefore are not presented according to any position of rank. It is acknowledged that critical appraisal of these factors could easily equate to a journal article apiece, so the appraisal that follows is succinct by necessity. The four factors are:

●the nature of the collaboration between the four allied universities

●the quality and visual impact of the e-learning materials

●the importance of employer commitment and

●student competence and satisfaction with on-line learning.

University collaboration

Producing a robust pan-Wales programme that would both meet the vision and expectation of key stake holders while covering a geographic landscape of 22 local authorities was an ambitious endeavour which required the commitment and willingness of four universities located in the North East, North West, South East and South West regions of Wales. The essence of programmes delivery is based on online distance e-learning in an attempt to maximise the potential for students to study anywhere at times convenient to them (Butcher and Rose-Adams, 2015). The geographic spread of the four institutions lends itself to the provision of an initial orientation to the module content, library facilities and tutorial support for students, within reasonable reach of their home locations. This is facilitated by the provision of face-to-face classroom-based Module Orientation days (MODs) at each of the institutions. Feedback from students has confirmed the value of these MODs in a variety of ways; for example, in addressing initial enrolment issues, in providing an introduction to Level 7 (Master's level) provision, and in demonstrating the module content and other related study-skills material delivered on-line. Other social work educators have reported the utility of holding classroom based initial orientation days (Bourn and Bootle, 2006; Webber, Currin, Groves, Hay and Fernando, 2009).

Within the UK, Bourn and Bootle (2006) evaluated their e-learning post qualifying Level 7 social work supervision and mentorship programme. The evaluation noted that individualist competition was counterproductive to the development of the programme. Instead, they espoused a more positive co-productive, team approach encompassing mutual trust, open dialogue and safe spaces for pedagogical development. Bourn and Bootle (2006) were referring

to collegiality within one institution. It could reasonably be assumed that sustaining this milieu across four universities poses even more opportunities and challenges. However genuine collaboration between the four universities was, and remains, a key requisite in the convening and delivery of teaching and learning materials, as well as ensuring smooth seamless CPEL programme functioning. This requires a willingness to share ideas, materials, intellectual property and collegiality, whilst recognising that each institution had its own identity 'sovereignty' and regulations. The smallness of Wales has allowed governmental and regulatory control, and as such provision, to be developed without subjecting it to open competition and market environments (Gillies 2014). It is likely in larger countries such close control and development of a single programme approach is only possible on a regional or state basis rather than a national one.

This collaboration continues to be a negotiated process that is aided by a motivation and sense of accountability to work towards a shared outcome. Module convenors are by necessity familiar with all modules on the programme other than their own. A noteworthy element of CPEL concerns the external examiner scrutiny of the development of the programmes, which revealed considerable admiration at the positive relationship that exists between the representatives of the four universities. Whilst from an external perspective this collegiality may appear unusual, it is interesting that from the start it has never represented a confounding issue for those involved. It may be true that competition between institutions for attracting students can rear its head at pre-qualifying levels, but this appears not to have produced a negative influence on the provision of CPEL. Interestingly, from an internal perspective, the four universities have taken this co-operation for granted. While this may be a factor of the individual personalities involved it is acknowledged that this co-operative approach is, if not unique, unusual within higher education. This unspoken but powerful allegiance between representatives of the different institutions (but the same profession) may eventually emerge to

be the unexpected secret ingredient within the successful provision of a national on-line distance learning suite of post-qualifying programmes.

E-Learning materials

The Open University has provided distance learning in the UK since its establishment in 1969. However, advances in information technology have opened-up an increasing range of distance teaching and learning methods, resulting in a growth of distance learning courses at post-qualifying level (Paardasani, Goldkind, Heyman and Cross-Denny 2012; Cummings, Foels and Chaffin , 2013). A growing body of research indicates that on-line learning can be as effective as traditional learning in relation to content (Cummings et al., 2013). However, there is a requirement for educators who deviate from traditional full- time delivery to consider carefully the student experience and to attempt to tackle any barriers that may hinder engagement (Pardasani et al., 2012). This is important when the learning model is characterised by separation of students and educators in relation to distance and time. A key factor concerns regular active interaction between students and educators, and between students themselves in order to develop and sustain a thriving learning community (Aguirre and Mitschke, 2011; Maple, Jarrot and Kuyini, 2012).

While Lewis' (2016) evaluation acknowledges that the IT skills expected of CPEL students do not exceed those routinely expected by employers, some students have pointed to 'technical difficulties' as a reason for non-engagement or withdrawal. A number of different strategies have therefore been used to increase student retention. The way in which learning materials are presented and organised have evolved to meet the student and employer requisite for manageable bite-sized chunks of learning. Three main themes have emerged under this sub-topic – the core bilingual element of the programmes, preparation time and presentation. These themes will now be considered in turn.

As a national framework, an essential element of CPEL has been that materials must be accessible regardless of language choice. A core principle, and one that is enshrined in legislation and policy including the Welsh Language Act 1993, the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011 and the Welsh Language Strategy 2012-2017 (Welsh Government, 2012) has been that material should routinely and equally be in English and Welsh. Furthermore, students should be enabled and encouraged to work through the materials and to submit in Welsh and English according to their personal need and preference. This essential pre-requisite was identified early-on as non-negotiable.

Bourn and Bootle (2006) cautioned that time resources should not be under estimated in developing materials. This is reflected in our experience. The time involved in preparing on-line material can be challenging for academics more used to traditional face-to-face delivery of material. We have continued with a mutual understanding that the programmes should be more than fit for purpose in their own right and not represent mere adapted versions of full-time traditionally-delivered programmes. In effect, new material must be researched and created, proof-read, translated and then posted for student access. This process requires, as a minimum, double the lead-in time of regular material. This has implications for timing and work-load planning. In addition to this, learning from the first year of delivery revealed that students themselves required more time to process learning material than originally estimated by academics, resulting in a significant pruning of learning materials. This accords with the finding of Lewis (2016) regarding the pivotal nature of not only the provision by employers of supportive interventions including ring-fenced study-time, but also a proactive nature and a realistic ability to put such time to good use within a busy work environment. Even with support and a generally positive attitude towards post-qualifying study, Lewis (2016) reported that some students identified that nothing could alleviate the negative impact of time-poverty.

Presentation of on-line material has proved to be integral to the programme. While the quality of content has always been paramount, the style of materials is also of importance to students' access and enjoyment of the online experience. Initially, learning materials were released on a weekly basis in a manner that aligned closely with traditional weekly face-to-face module delivery. However, it became apparent through student and employer consultation that this method of delivery did not always sit well with the busy and typically unpredictable working lives of social workers. Both student engagement and performance are impacted upon negatively by a lack of time (Butcher and Rose-Adams, 2015). One significant amendment has been to divide and group module content into topics with suggested completion dates rather than weekly instalments. In addition, topics are released early to accommodate different working patterns, sickness or other student absences. This introduces more flexibility and autonomy within certain parameters for each professional/student, which has already proved to be more palatable than the original traditional stance. This ability to adapt suggests that the programmes are flexible and are responsive to a more user-friendly approach based on key-stakeholder feedback, representing a "mission-driven" rather than a "market-driven" value base (Butcher and Rose-Adams, 2015, p.132).

In addition, lessons learned have resulted in a complete revamp of the presentation of learning materials into a style that is much more aligned with contemporary expectations of on-line material. As a result, students have evaluated the new style as being much more visually attractive, easier to navigate within, and more accessible for those with specific learning needs (for example, dyslexia) due to the ability to set individual accessibility settings. The addition to the delivery team of a specialised e-learning officer, with their specific pedagogical understanding, has been an essential investment to ensure effective on-line learning is created and supported. These developments acknowledge the requirement for academics to move away from the 'sage on the stage' role (Maple et al., 2012, 352) to engage with students who are

more outcome focused than traditional learners as a result of time-poverty. For example, the materials have to be clearly structured, as students simply do not have the luxury of time to explore any lack of clarity, regardless of whether their engagement is typically characterised as a 'trickle' or a 'spurt' (Maple et al., 2012).

Employer support

The cooperation of employers is a particularly important factor of CPEL, as identified by the Lewis (2016). The willingness of employers to commit to releasing their employees from practice in order to complete the academic requirements of the programmes is central to the success of the framework. This requires more than the simple (if often impossible) provision of ring-fenced time through workload relief. The required commitment from employers consists of student support, time to study guarantees and provision of equipment to facilitate on-line module engagement. This flexibility must encompass both the 'when' and the 'how' of student engagement in an attempt to maximise learner potential within an environment where competing priorities of learning, work and home life are constantly being juggled (Bourne and Bootle, 2006; Butcher and Rose-Adams, 2015). In addition to the provision of timely practical support is the essential but often underestimated provision of employer encouragement in order to complete tasks that are above and beyond already heavy workloads.

Another challenge is retaining student focus on the programmes in the face of understandable interruptions from day-to-day social work practice emergencies. This challenge is apparent despite the flexible and accessible online content. In conjunction with other interruptions comprising sick leave and holiday leave, this risked affects students being inadvertently left trailing. Students who feel they miss too much material may have find it difficult to catch-up, and are more likely to withdraw from the programmes. The impact of professional influences is heightened when personal challenges are also present, and if students hold a view of over-

rigidity and inflexibility of academic processes that are supposed to be supportive eg, procedures for applying for additional time (Lewis, 2016).

Despite these challenges, it is important to record the vital position of key stakeholders in ensuring consistent adherence of the programmes to the previously mentioned strong experiential focus of the teaching and learning materials. Students reported feeling better prepared for blended learning when they felt supported by their employer eg, study time allocation, and workload relief (Lewis, 2016). Another key feature of future provision will be to address the current low uptake of places from the voluntary and private sectors, and independent social workers. This discovery has led to further exploration of strategies designed to encourage further engagement of employers from outside of the statutory sector.

Student competence and satisfaction with online distance learning

The development of on-line distance learning in the UK has created mixed opinions, ranging from the critics' stinging perception of "narrow, mass produced, 'assembly line', mechanistic, isolating, individualistic approaches", to the proponents' satisfaction with "flexibility and individual choice in pace, time and place of learning" (Collins, 2008, p.422). Distance learning was originally conceptualised to offer choice and flexibility to learners, to encourage take-up by non-traditional students, to ameliorate for barriers to learning (including employment, distance etc.) and to make best use of resources over large geographic areas (Pardasani et al., 2012).

However, the gap between traditional and on-line distance learning programmes is not as vast as might once have been the case, as contemporary traditional learning routinely comprises a variety of methods and tools once considered to be the sole requisite of online approaches in order to enhance the student experience (Ayala, 2009); for example, the use of virtual learning platforms. Maple et al. (2012) reflect on a qualifying social work programme comprising both

traditional and distance learning which was designed to address the limited ability for accessing face to face learning in rural settings. This reflection acknowledged initial reluctance to embrace new technologies within social work education, but further identified the need to break with tradition introduce in order to balance education provision with the increasingly technologically-savvy requirements of the profession.

A key barrier is the students' overriding familiarity, if not outright preference, for traditional face-to-face learning and live interaction with educators and other students (Jones, 2010). Difficulties associated with student unfamiliarity with and discomfort in interacting with information technology may result in limited access to learning materials, as will   poorly-functioning equipment (Kelly and Papadopoulos, 2009). In addition to the mode of study, the programmes are offered at post graduate levels of study wherein research mindedness is a key requisite. Amongst students the variability in the recentness and academic level at which students engaged in social work pre-qualifying education, (some students possessing several years post qualifying experience and a diploma level qualification, while others are more recent graduates with degree and postgraduate level qualifications) appears to impact on their understanding of some of the programme expectations. In essence, students who are longer qualified may have undertaken more ad hoc/ fragmented work based training or portfolio CPD via the auspices of the previous Post Qualifying system. This presents two main challenges in terms of students' familiarity with expected academic competence and secondly, confidence to study a formal academic module or programme at post qualifying levels. Although the EPSW programme is offered at levels 6 and 7, to date the uptake for level 6 has been low (less than 5%). Amongst some students there is evidence of their grappling, and sometimes struggling, with academic conventions and integration of research evidence. In part this could also be attributed to the legacy of low levels of research competence and research mindedness amongst the social wok profession and, until more recently, a general neglect of research training on

social work pre-qualifying programmes (Huxley Evans, Mayo, Ball, and Maegusuku-Hewett, 2009; Webber et al., 2009).

Conclusion

This paper has outlined the context, developments and early lessons to be learnt from a new national distance learning post-qualifying framework and associated programme provision. Developments in pre and post qualifying education within the UK are taking increasingly divergent regulatory and framework approaches, with the latter including the provision of innovative online opportunities. Yet despite the obvious limitations of reflections on a very specific context, the learning to be gained from the bold move to develop and implement a single national programme primarily delivered online offers a range of transferable considerations for post qualifying social work education not only across the UK borders, but world-wide. These can be summarised as the importance of institutional collaboration and partnership working in developing e-learning pedagogies and on-line presence that meets the needs of employers and of busy practicing social workers as students.

It is possible to suggest that all of these considerations highlight the importance of creating a positive learning culture, regardless of the medium of delivery. This includes understanding specifics of identity, motivation and barriers within online learning, and where time pressure can negatively impact on student engagement and performance (Butcher and Rose-Adams, 2015). The challenge for higher education providers, employers and students all working in busy demanding contexts is to develop strategies for improving satisfaction with and retention on distance learning programmes. Critically these early experiences have required all stakeholders, but especially the academic staff employed within these innovative programmes to adopt a can do approach and go out of their way to be helpful and problem solve. It has further required the regulator, employers and students to have a faith in this pioneering co-

productive online development from an Alliance of universities which could be considered as potential competitors in the context of qualifying education. Additionally those programme providers have demonstrated a commitment to continually listening and responding to feedback about online provision, whilst applying caution in relating to student and employer time constraints/workload issues with academic expectations and standards.

One of the potential limitations or specific contextual considerations is that of the funding of distance learning programmes. The SCW provides funding for up to 100 programme places annually, distributed across the three programmes, in a manner that reflects the social work sector in Wales. Thus 88 of the 100 annually funded programme places are allocated between the local authorities in accordance with the size of their workforce. 12 programme places annually are allocated for use by voluntary/third sector social workers. The extent to which such an ambitious and comprehensive establishment of these distance learning programmes could have been established without such funding, almost certainly reflects the very existence of the central funding.

These initial reflections on the experience of online education have suggested to the authors some future critical considerations. Firstly there is the issue of overall sustainability and viability of such highly central government activity. So will the centralised funding be required to continue beyond the initial six year period or will the programmes establish a more open market validity? Associated with this, is the prospect of mandating programme completion through registration or work based appraisal requirements. SCW has ambitions to try to mandate engagement with training and levels of qualification with registration, which have received mixed support through recent consultation processes. The anecdotal evidence suggests that different employers place different emphasis on the extent to which they mandate progression through CPEL to progression through organisation promotional and pay structures. Connected to these considerations is then the challenge of broadening student base to include

voluntary, charity and private sectors, especially if this reflects the trends in changing service provision landscapes. There appears the need to continue to develop a culture of research and showcasing practical social work research as a matter of course (i.e. CSW's influencing SSW and EPP's and so on), thus ensuring the online programmes directly impact on an improved knowledge base and effective practice. There is formal (internal and external) programme evaluation taking place but it is too early to report on that at present. It is anticipated that employers and social workers will see the (priceless) benefits and impact on practice, and thus be more willing to invest in study as the programmes gain momentum.

In order to be confident that all candidates experience post qualifying education positively, Doel et al., (2008) offer the following checklist for online programme evaluation; clear guidance with exemplars of successful work, practice focus with new and relevant research findings, and obvious progression from qualifying studies rather than a replication of them. This paper has highlighted developments in an online framework and programmes that are consciously working towards and meeting these criteria, and as such are providing some invaluable lessons about how to most effectively support social workers through their continued professional development.

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