

A Joint Statement on the ‘Frontline’ Proposal by JUCSWEC and APSW
(Joint University Council Social Work Education Committee and
Association of Professors of Social Work) 11th February 2013

1. Introduction

1.1 The Joint University Council Social Work Education Committee (JUC SWEC) is a membership organization of over 80 Universities across the UK offering social work education at qualifying and post-qualifying levels and engaged in social work research linked to professional practice. JUC SWEC has contributed for many years to developments in social work practice, education, research and strategic policy within the UK. Many of the staff in its member Universities are qualified in social work, have considerable practice experience prior to becoming educators, continue in direct practice and/or maintain professional registration. The Association of Professors of Social Work (APSW) is a membership organisation open to all those eligible in the United Kingdom. It has a mailing list of 100+ members – representing the key knowledge generators in the sector. APSW contributes to the promotion and development of the discipline of social work education and social work research and related matters in the UK.

1.2 All the individuals and organizations represented here are committed to supporting excellent research, education and practice in social work, a flourishing profession attracting diverse new recruits/students, and a strong workforce to deliver high quality practice to our most vulnerable communities. In promoting high quality social work, we anticipate and look forward to new models for social work education, while ensuring social work as an academic discipline is protected if long term quality is to be enhanced.

1.3 The Higher Education community has over the last five years been strongly supportive of and involved with the national social work reform programme following the Social Work Taskforce Report (2009) and the establishment of the Social Work Reform Board (2010-12) – which has led to recent, wholesale positive changes in the sector.

1.4 The ‘Frontline’ proposal of a fast track (13months), post graduate route through qualifying social work training is currently developing at a pace with a view to a pilot project for commencement in summer 2014. The project is led by Josh McAllister, with support from Morning Lane Associates. JUC SWEC and APSW have engaged with the developments in a constructive manner (including attending the Advisory Group).

1.5 Drawing on our considerable breadth of experience we are taking this opportunity to express views on the Frontline development in the hope, before finalization, that we may be able to influence the direction and integrity of a programme that stated it set out to improve the standing and quality of social work. The views expressed here are based upon members’ contributions assembled from discussions and meetings. While highlighting serious concerns around these developments we are also suggesting some ways forward.

2. Our key concerns:

2.1 There is a clear mismatch between the proposed Frontline model (a specialist route for child protection workers) and the national, generic qualification leading to a profession with a protected title supported by the national social work reform programme (2009-12). Social workers need a broad training because they deal with a broad range of problems, families and communities, and to be prepared as members of a profession. The Social Work Reform Board, representing all related sectors, unanimously agreed this approach.

2.2 Fundamentally, the focus on a narrow child protection programme presents the greatest risks to the Frontline project and participants – but more importantly to children. Underestimating the value of considered preparation for this area of practice leads student social workers out into the most dangerous of scenarios with a minimum of awareness. Such a narrow curriculum and limited knowledge and experience means students know next to nothing about issues such as adoption, fostering, youth offending, mental health, disability and aging. The potential for mis-assessing risk and factors impacting on children and families makes this scheme a high risk policy

2.3 Frontline presents significant cost to the public purse for which it has so far failed to make a good enough case. It overlaps extensively with the current (just two years old) ‘Step Up’ /Masters programme – which already receives extensive government funding and only adds a notion of ‘student units’ – which already exist in various forms in existing provision. At a time when real financial challenges are faced by the social care sector as a whole, the need for another funded, minor variation on an existing theme seems limited.

3. Related Concerns

3.1 The ‘fast track’ nature of Frontline also challenges equivalence and achievability with Masters/Post Graduate Diploma level programmes¹ and the approach to Masters level training that emphasises research, reflection, creativity and the ability to deal with complex situations. This speeded up process seriously threatens the development of the very skills that child protection social workers need most (research mindedness and evidence based practice) as promoted by the Munro review.

3.2 The over specialization of the approach within the proposal does not reflect breadth even within the ‘children’s’ area of social work, and can barely equip social workers to manage “*the complexity and uncertainty*” of child care work with an overreliance on one specific model of practice. There is no evidence that compliance to a single process fits all families or “*protect(s) children from harm*”² (Munro 2012)

3.3 The regulatory framework may present some challenges for Frontline. HCPC Standards of Proficiency (SOP) and the College of Social Work (TCSW) Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) for social work reveal particular gaps in the Frontline proposed curriculum around ethics, rights and values. In particular the ‘systemic

¹ PG Diplomas require 1200 hours of student effort, which with 200 days practice learning totals 350 days for a programme. See evidence from the Evaluation of the ‘Fast Track’ programme initiated in Scotland in 2005/6 indicating that 18 months proved unrealistic for many candidates.

² Munro E (2012) *Progress Report: Moving towards a Child Centre System* 1.5, p 6

practice' focus of the draft curriculum (apparently to the exclusion of all else) is directly against the SOP 13. "Social workers need to learn more than one way of assessing and understanding complex family scenarios".

3.4 The Social Work Reform Board, (chair: Dame Moira Gibb) of which JUC SWEC and APSW were members, worked collaboratively across the sector on major, wide ranging reforms for social work education, practice and continuing professional development – with ministerial support for their conclusions. All Higher Education Institutions who are social work education providers in England are currently engaged in re-writing new social work programmes for September 2013 based on the reforms, including the PCF and TCSW curriculum guidance. Candidates following the proposed Frontline model may not be able to meet the same transferable minimum standards through the proposed programme.

3.5 Generic qualifying social work was interrogated and assessed throughout the reform process – employers, academics, policy makers and students endorsed generic qualifying training for highly credible and robust reasons. A shift to child protection training as qualifying social work training will deplete the nature, portability and rigour of practice - particularly in the medium to long term (which is where ultimately the impact of Frontline will be judged).

3.6 The minimal attention to 'adults' orientated aspects of curriculum (mental health, learning disability, disability, ageing and so forth) will present many challenges in seeking support from the broad sector (adult social care being, of course, a huge area of local and central government spending). It is likely that organisations connected to the area of adult social work (such as Association of Directors of Adult Social Services) will struggle to support this venture.

3.7 Qualifying social work, through the work of the SWRB and the whole sector, is currently being carefully revised to support continuing professional development – a holistic model is being sought; Frontline's 'short-termism' will not sustain change for families or useful practitioners in years to come.

3.8 Current social work education benefits from clear evidence of close working partnerships between local HEIs and local employers. The impact on existing partnerships, placement availability and range and location of programmes has not yet been properly evaluated or taken into account.

3.9 The threat of destabilising existing partnerships and making existing programmes vulnerable may remove from social work the capacity for the development of knowledge (using theory, research and evidence) that allows confidence in the appropriateness and efficacy of chosen practices and models.

3.10 The sector is very able to work with new models – and in many partnerships such discussions are taking place. It is unclear why Frontline would want to act in a manner paying scant attention to agreed reforms and using a market process to drive forward its plans in a way that may clearly negatively impact on other educators/programmes.

4. Ways Forward

4.1 JUC SWEC and APSW have already engaged with the ‘Frontline’ project and are contributing to its development in a constructive manner. We will continue to support this dialogue. Its risks are significant and its timescales are challenging given the problems we have outlined above. However, we would be happy to contribute to the evolution over a more measured period of new models of social work education that take account of our concerns and reflect the principles of the Taskforce, the social work reforms and the Munro Review.

4.2 It would be helpful to consider any new developments in the context of other provision, eg the proposed pilot projects in Manchester and London might be reconsidered, especially given the evidence that the North West already has a significant supply of post graduate social workers. There is also overlap in that region (and elsewhere) with the Step Up programme, of which Frontline is a variation. It would be helpful to clarify the relationship with Step Up programmes and, though we are still awaiting the evaluation of Step Up, there may be important lessons that could inform the Frontline project development.

4.3 We would particularly support a reframing of Frontline as a post qualifying programme tailored for social workers wanting to specialize in children’s social work and systemic family work. A strong programme for social workers after qualifying with government and employer support building on the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) will have higher potential for promoting job satisfaction, stress reduction and retention³ at the “frontline” of family work.

On behalf of
JUC SWEC and APSW

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³ See evidence from evaluations of Teach First by Hutchings M, Maylor U, Mendick H, Menter I and Smart S (2006), and systematic review of the impact on retention of social workers of workforce interventions by Webb C and Carpenter J (2012),