Teaching Partnerships in Neoliberal Times: Promoting Collaboration or Competition?

Erin King & Patricia Cartney

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Erin King ⓘ *and Patricia Cartney*

In 2015, Social Work Teaching Partnerships launched into a turbulent political and policy arena where a repositioning of social work education was taking place alongside the adoption of neoliberal ideologies promoting the operation of market forces within higher education nationally and globally. This paper presents findings from 11 respondents to an online survey undertaken in England to explore factors that support and hinder partnership working between universities in Social Work Teaching Partnerships. Findings suggest some merit to partnership working, with closer working relationships in practice education, student placements and research. Data suggest that some Social Work Teaching Partnerships were able to form collegiate relationships despite the competitive positioning of universities. However, respondents also commented on operational barriers, such as communication problems and size of Social Work Teaching Partnerships that created difficulties for collaboration. Tensions resulting from working in a competitive market driven environment clearly emerged from the data with some partnerships not able to engage fully in collaborative working as a result. This paper reflects on how the broader political and policy context influences the operationalisation of partnership working within Social Work Teaching Partnerships and suggests key avenues to explore further.

Situating Politics and Policy

All new policy initiatives launch in their particular social, political, and eco-nomic context - affecting their initial adoption, the course of their journey and their ultimate demise or sustainability. Social Work Teaching Partnerships emerged in a particularly turbulent and contested period within social work edu-cation in England and the broader higher education arena. To understand their

contributions, challenges, and future trajectories, it is helpful to contextualise the experience of Social Work Teaching Partnerships on this broader canvas.

Heightened politicisation processes concerning social work education were increasingly visible prior to the launch of Social Work Teaching Partnerships. The new social work degree in England launched in 2002 but concerns were raised early about whether it adequately prepared students for practice (Higgins, Popple and Crichton, 2016).

Singh and Cowden (2009) analysed statements from the coalition government of the time encouraging social workers to become more 'practical' than 'theoretical'. Singh and Cowden saw this reconceptualisation of practice as a series of 'untheorised' technical tasks as threatening the broader emancipatory role of social work and argued strongly that a 'battle for the soul of social work' (2009, 485) was being waged. They argued that social work practice was increasingly required to adopt the language of consumerism and managerialism and that attacks on social work's critical intellectual contribution was part of the wider neo-liberal reconstruction of the role of the public sector. Such conceptualisations of social work clearly have implications for both the teaching and practice of social work.

Significant tensions were operating simultaneously within higher education more broadly that were – and are – likely to impact on the work of Social Work Teaching Partnerships. Commentators increasingly identified global economic forces leading to higher education's 'marketisation' (Sanyal and Johnstone, 2011), with students increasingly repositioned as consumers rather than learners and universities as 'businesses' rather than 'civic institutions'. Within England, the Browne Review (2010) recommended withdrawing substantial public funding for higher education, replacing this with student fees to create a 'market' within higher education. Harris documents the global advancement of neoliberalism and stresses that 'social workers are not observing the impact of neoliberalism from afar. They are caught up in the processes of the marketisation, consumerisation and managerialism of social work'(2014, 18). Neoliberal doctrines were simultaneously gaining traction both within higher education and sites of social work practice.

Qualified Concerns

As the global context shifted, fundamental debates continued about the nature of social work and the future of contemporary practice (Higgins et al, 2016). The Social Work Reform Board 2010 was established to review social work in England with their recommendations implemented in 2013. Rather than evaluating the impact of these recommendations, however, the government appeared eager to instigate more rapid change. The Department for Education responsible for children's social work in England and the (then) Department for Health, responsible for adult social work in England, both commissioned separate reports to further explore whether additional changes were needed in qualifying social work students.

Higgins, Popple and Crichton (2016) argued that the two separate reports to Government in 2014 by Sir Martin Narey to Department for Education and Professor David Croisdale-Appleby to Department of Health represented competing paradigms of the social work profession in England. Narey (2014) interpreted child protection and safeguarding as the major social work priority supporting a specialist rather than generic educational focus for social work education as a result. Cartney (2018) argued Narey's underpinning assumptions could lead to a narrow interpretation of social work which could impact restrictively on the curricula and purpose of social work education. Croisdale-Appleby (2014) presented a broader vision portraying social workers as 'social scientists' engaging in theorised praxis with commitments to human rights and social justice. The two reports presented different visions of what social work is – and should be. Educationally, Narey (2014) emphasised social workers needing to be prepared for the task, whereas Croisdale-Appleby encouraged the preparation and development of a professional (Baginsky and Manthorpe, 2015).

The decision to commission two separate reports appeared indicative of the different ways social work practice was developing in children and adult services with particular concern focused on perceived failings in the arena of child protection practice. Munro's review of child protection services (2011) recommended the appointment of a Chief Social Worker to advise the government. The government adopted the recommendation of the role but appointed two separate Chief Social Workers – one for Children and one for Adults. The appointment of two separate Chief Social Workers alongside commissioning two separate reports may suggest that government thinking focused more on emphasising differences than similarities in the two practice arenas.

The marketisation agenda became increasingly apparent within social work education in England, particularly as new government funded fast track programmes – operating outside universities – expanded in the field of children's social work (Frontline and Step Up to Social Work) and mental health (Think Ahead). Cleary (2018) highlights how a marketised neo-liberal environment in education is changing the nature of social work education as universities are required to generate their own incomes and operate in an increasingly competitive market environment with a focus on market principles rather than public service. The existence of the fast track qualifying social work programmes intensifies such market competition. Baginsky, Manthorpe and Hickman (2019, 977) acknowledge that such developments are 'changing the reliance of the profession's qualifying training on higher education providers'.

Unacknowledged Tensions

Social Work Teaching Partnerships emerged as a government initiative in this particularly complex, contested policy terrain where neo-liberal constructions around the global marketisation of higher education alongside the new

managerialism influencing public services informed competing paradigms for the direction of social work education and practice in England. Baginsky, Manthorpe and Hickman (2019) note that the Department for Education and the Department of Health's launch of Social Work Teaching Partnerships heralded them as 'the key delivery vehicle' to address the recommendations of the reports by Narey and Croisdale-Appleby, even though the reports appeared to have very different conceptions of social work. This unlikely parentage of Social Work Teaching Partnerships essentially pulled the project in two competing directions at the start although this tension was not made explicit. Narey's equation of social work with statutory activity, however, was clearly evident in the initial Social Work Teaching Partnership requirement for students to undertake two statutory social work placements.

Social Work Teaching Partnerships were established to enhance partnership working between social work employers and universities to improve social work education and practice. The potential tensions universities may experience working alongside their 'economic competitors' in the increasing marketisation of social work education was another unacknowledged tension, however, and one that was noted but not explored in the subsequent evaluations of the performance of Social Work Teaching Partnerships (HOST, 2016; Interface, 2020).

The small-scale research project presented here explores factors that help and hinder partnership working with Social Work Teaching Partnerships within a framework that acknowledges the broader political and policy contexts in operation.

Study and Methods

Data collection was via an online questionnaire that included 12 non-leading open and closed questions designed to gather Social Work Teaching Partnership demographics (i.e. number of universities in Social Work Teaching Partnership) and explore factors that support and hinder partnership working between universities over the lifespan of the Social Work Teaching Partnerships. The questionnaire was distributed across the 23 Social Work Teaching Partnership networks in England to seek the perspectives of University Leads – senior academic staff involved in Social Work Teaching Partnership governance, University Employees – academic staff involved in Social Work Teaching Partnership working groups (e.g. social work placement leads), and Social Work Teaching Partnership Project Managers – employed by Social Work Teaching Partnership to support strategic goals. Questions were designed to maintain the anonymity of respondents ($n = 11$), thus meeting university ethical approval. The eleven respondents were composed of six Project Managers, four University Leads and six University Employees, with the majority involved in a Social Work Teaching Partnership involving a combination of pre- and

post-1992 universities. Anonymous demographic responses suggest a minimum of seven Social Work Teaching Partnerships were represented.

Respondents' qualitative answers were thematically analysed using an inductive approach influenced by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases of thematic analysis. Themes emerging from initial coding were analysed to discern patterns to respondents' experiences of partnership working between universities involved in Social Work Teaching Partnerships.

Limitations

The questionnaire had a low response rate with responses having limited content, so the findings may have limited generalisability. The sample omits the views of local authorities – who may have different perspectives.

Findings

One University Employee suggested a shift in dynamics across the lifespan of their Social Work Teaching Partnership, which resonated across data. Consequently, the presentation of findings reflects how a shift in dynamics supported and hindered partnership working between universities (Higher Education Institutions) involved in Social Work Teaching Partnerships across three themes emerging from the limited data: relationships, engagement and focus of work.

Relationships

Four respondents identified pre-existing relationships between universities as supportive factors for partnership working, enabling a good transition and 'foundations to build on' (University Employee). Collaboration and commitment are evident regarding the initial stages of Social Work Teaching Partnerships, with respondents using the phrases 'make it work', 'making things work', and 'making sure everyone engages'. Four respondents refer to closer collaboration between universities as a benefit of Social Work Teaching Partnerships, leading to consistency and achievement of outcomes. One University Lead states:

> Since joining the partnership we have developed stronger relationships … through working together on committees and delivering activities.

This was not the experience for all respondents, with one University Employee regarding their Social Work Teaching Partnerships as 'a waste of time' involving no 'additional partnership working with agencies that was not

there before anyway'. Relationships between universities became a challenge for eight respondents. One University Employee, who found relationships between universities initially positive, states there emerged:

> Some lack of trust between Higher Education Institutions. Something new - working together in what is a competitive market - so a cautious approach I guess

Building further on this theme, another University Employee stated:

> Universities are in competition with each other so it is hard to work together - bottom line.

For a further two respondents, a competitive market between universities became a hindering factor to sustaining relationships as their Social Work Teaching Partnership progressed:

> factors hindering partnership were factors to do with competition and business – Higher Education Institution pressured environments (University Employee)

> There has always been a competitive nature to Higher Education Institution relations. These were heightened by our involvement in the Teaching Partnership (University Lead)

Organisational culture was another influencing factor on relationship sustainability in some Social Work Teaching Partnerships. For two University Employees, the organisational cultural differences between universities, and universities and employers – usually Local Authorities – adversely affected their Social Work Teaching Partnerships, leading to relationship breakdown:

> We were hindered by systems - different universities have different ones and culture - not all universities are the same.

In contrast, one Project Manager regards organisational challenges between universities and Local Authorities as helping to 'aid the Local Authority's understanding behind the reasons why certain things happen in Higher Education Institutions'. Although sometimes regarded as a challenge to relationships in Social Work Teaching Partnerships, organisational cultural differences did not always result in a negative outcome, with several respondents mentioning finding 'common ground', 'purpose', or 'themes' between partners to maintain relationships and work with organisational cultural differences.

Some of the other challenges to Social Work Teaching Partnership stakeholder relationships identified by respondents are the size of Social Work Teaching Partnerships (eight Social Work Teaching Partnerships included three or more universities), different procedures between stakeholders, and explored next, stakeholder engagement.

Engagement

Over half of respondents identified collaboration as a supporting factor across the duration of Social Work Teaching Partnerships. Four respondents identify a consistent engagement by universities throughout their Social Work Teaching Partnerships, whereas others identify a disproportionate shift in engagement:

> Some Higher Education Institutions contribute more consistently than others at times (University Lead)

> Work within the Teaching Partnership was very intensive at times and not always evenly shared between Higher Education Institutions (University Lead).

There was an example given from one University Lead that one university in their partnership had engaged in separate discussions with an employer within their Social Work Teaching Partnership to secure funding for work previously identified as a collective university deliverable in their jointly agreed Social Work Teaching Partnership plan:

> The external discussions had the effect of undermining decision making within the (Social Work) Teaching Partnership and resulted in disengagement from some employer and Higher Education Institution representatives

Other respondents relate institutional pressures, either financial or workforce, and the size of Social Work Teaching Partnerships as reasons for some universities' disengagement.

Two respondents regarded the size of Social Work Teaching Partnerships as a hindrance to partnership working. They reference 'too many emails and lack of time to do follow-up work' (University Lead) or a 'Challenge in taking on too many objectives across too many partners within timescales' (University Lead). This suggests the size of Social Work Teaching Partnerships may not only influence the level of engagement by universities within Social Work Teaching Partnerships but may potentially affect the focus and subsequent outcomes for the Social Work Teaching Partnerships.

Focus of Social Work Teaching Partnership

Respondents indicate two main areas of focus for Social Work Teaching Partnerships as research and practice placements. Project Managers were the primary respondents regarding the embedding of research as a critical development throughout Social Work Teaching Partnerships:

> Academics have had the opportunity to support the development and embedding of research and we have a practitioner research conference.

Respondents acknowledge the development of closer relationships between universities and employers– with examples of academics going into practice and practitioners involved in collaborative research. One respondent suggests these closer relationships have focused research more effectively for employers resulting in universities '…now undertaking all the research that we require' (Project Manager).

Similar to the development of research, five respondents saw closer relationships between universities and Local Authorities as crucial in enhancing quality practice placements. For example:

> Clearer focus and process for Practice Education - quality and consistency is improving (University Lead)

One University Employee references how embedding practitioner input in the practice curriculum has led to improved student outcomes resulting in 'more effective preparation for practice placements'. Two further respondents illustrate improved student outcomes across the life of an Social Work Teaching Partnership – from a focus on the student experience in teaching, leading to better preparation for practice placement and potentially an increase in quality of Newly Qualified Social Workers.

However, other areas of focus within the Social Work Teaching Partnerships may not have been as collegiate as research and practice placements. For example:

> Some activity we are doing with each Higher Education Institution in their own right and then looking for common themes (Project Manager)

> Higher Education Institutions have benefitted financially through the provision of Continuing Professional Development and other activities. It would be fair to say that this has not been of equal benefit to all Higher Education Institutions (University Lead)

Similar to the themes of relationship and engagement, the competitive nature of universities underlies the nature of the work undertaken by the Social Work Teaching Partnerships. As such, the significance of this necessitates further discussion.

Discussion

In the introduction to this paper, we presented the argument that the current pervasive neoliberal environment influences the contemporary operation of higher education, (including social work education) and public services, (including social work services).

Issues of market competition between universities appear threaded through themes within the research data. Responses suggest that the underlying impact of the commercially competitive behaviour of universities can negatively affect partnership working within Social Work Teaching Partnerships.

This was most evident in respect of collaborative relationships and trust issues operating in some Social Work Teaching Partnerships where collegiate relationships did not develop. Where universities are in direct competition for 'business', this appeared to create tensions in some institutions' ability to work collegiately. For some respondents, the 'bottom line' of existing in a competitive market appeared to foster a cautious approach to engagement and potentially prevent trusting relationships forming. This appeared to be particularly the case where some partners perceived others as negotiating 'business' inappropriately outside of the partnership boundaries and seeking to gain competitive advantage at the expense of others within the partnership. Such findings resonate with concerns raised by researchers exploring the impact of neoliberal working environments and highly marketised approaches on social work education and practice for example, Harris (2014) and Cleary (2018).

Interestingly, however, this experience of competition resulting in insurmountable barriers to partnership working was not the case for all universities operating in Social Work Teaching Partnership. Some were able to negotiate this complexity and engage in effective collegiate work. Some respondents highlighted how working together on specific tasks had effectively strengthened partnership relationships between different agencies. Joint working around practice education; practitioners and academics being involved in collaborative research; academics going into practice and embedding practitioner input into teaching are examples of where collaboration worked effectively in some partnerships. It is interesting to reflect on whether such engagement in collaborative tasks enabled positive working relationships and/or whether the initial working environment had a collegiate base that enabled such collaboration to flourish. Research by Beesley and Devonaid (2020) reported on one Social Work Teaching Partnership who found that the collegiate and trusting relationships partners had built enabled them to respond effectively in their joint decision- making during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Research emerged as one of the primary focuses of work across Social Work Teaching Partnerships in our study and responses with Project Managers suggesting that within Social Work Teaching Partnerships universities now undertake research local authorities 'require'. Only one academic commented on the benefits of working with practitioners on research projects. Given the relative silence of university respondents here it is unclear whether academics also saw the research being undertaken for local authorities as a positive outcome of Social Work Teaching Partnerships – or not. Research to explore this area further is suggested.

Conclusion

Social Work Teaching Partnerships had a challenging start as they launched during a period of turbulent change in both social work education and the broader higher education landscape. Prevailing ideologies of neoliberalism also influenced the trajectory of these changes and increasingly privileging and

promoting the values of the market rather than the values of the social work profession (Spolander et al, 2014).

This paper has identified how eleven participants across several Social Work Teaching Partnerships in England navigated these challenges, with some able to overcome barriers to collegiality whilst others found commercial competitiveness in particular prevented effective collaborative working. Commercial and social/ civic responsibility agendas co-exist in all contemporary universities in England – although the balance between these may be different in different institutions. Even where marketisation is operating and universities are sited in competitive spaces, some Social Work Teaching Partnerships have been able to transcend barriers created by this and have worked effectively and collaboratively. Further research is called for to explore how this collaboration has been possible and what factors have acted as enablers in this process. Our study highlights that collegiate collaboration and partnership working between Higher Education Institutions is possible but cannot be assumed in a competitive market.

Disclosure statement

Teaching Partnerships are now the main delivery mechanism for pre-qualifying education and most universities are attached to a specific Teaching Partnership. Both authors are members of different Teaching Partnerships. This has not created a conflict of interest but we would like to declare this for information.

Data availability statement

Data is available on request from the corresponding author.

ORCID

Erin King http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8362-0859

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Erin King is a senior lecturer in social work at Canterbury Christ Church University. She is a qualified social worker, having worked in adult social care for 8 years prior to her academic role. Email: erin.king@canterbury.ac.uk

Patricia Cartney is Head of Social Work at the University of Manchester. She is a qualified social worker with a background in child and family social work. Her research interests focus around pedagogy and higher education.