

## **POST-QUALIFYING FRAMEWORK FOR SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION AND TRAINING in NORTHERN IRELAND**

### Consultation on The Review of the Post Qualifying Framework

As part of the reforms of, professional social work training we have been asked to advise the Department and the NISCC on any changes that are required in post-qualifying education (PQ).

This consultation paper is being widely circulated in Northern Ireland. Although the PQ Framework is generally reckoned to have worked well, the introduction of the new degree in social work (and other associated reforms) makes it desirable to review post-qualifying education for social workers.

We would be pleased to receive any written comments as explained at this end of this paper. These will be taken into account as we draft our advice to the Department and the NISCC.

**The deadline for replying to this consultation is Friday 14  
November 2003.**

## **Background**

The framework of the current PQ system has two main awards which were developed by CCETSW.

The Post Qualifying Award (PQSW) was designed to be achieved by most social workers and encompasses the pre-existing PT and ASW awards (and subsequently to the Child Care award introduced more recently). The PQSW has six requirements (or modules) and can be achieved by a flexible mixture of formal courses and portfolio evidence. It is assessed at honours degree level.

The Advanced Award (AASW) at Masters degree level was seen as an award that only some social workers would attain. They could do so through any one of or any combination of four pathways: research, practice, training, management.

The system in Northern Ireland reflects these arrangements. It is managed by the Northern Ireland Post Qualifying Education and Training Partnership, a consortium which brings together voluntary and statutory social work agencies and educational institutions. In general, PQ has been more successful than in other parts of the UK in terms of the numbers of social workers participating and gaining awards. As at early 2003, the Partnership had made a total of over 700 awards, more than 10% of the UK total, and proportionately more than in the rest of the UK.

However, there remains a significant proportion of social workers who have not engaged with PQ.

## **1. Context for the review**

While PQ works relatively well in Northern Ireland, the reforms in social work education and training will impact on the existing PQ framework and arrangements. We expect that our report will build on the good foundations that have been established (there is certainly no reason to seek radical change for its own sake). However, there is an opportunity now to reaffirm the purpose and objectives of PQ, and to set out a new strategy for the future.

Key points that we would identify in this context for change include:

- **The relatively low status and self-esteem of social work** as a profession. There is a need to raise the status and achievement of the profession, and to be outward looking and collaborative with other professions. Multi-disciplinary training and practice is an important element in this. Social work also needs to recognise, value and reward high levels of achievement as other professions do.
- **The contribution that PQ can make to improving service delivery.** Employers want a trained workforce, but they do not always value post-qualifying training, or support it. Agencies need to develop as learning organisations and to value the contribution that a more qualified, and analytical profession can make to their operational needs. Of course, the PQ Framework needs to involve employers (and service managers, not just their training departments) to ensure that it fully reflects their needs.
- **The new degree will change the qualifying level** and, over time, the status of new social workers. The Framework needs to adapt in obvious ways (e.g. change in PQ1 and in academic levels) to the new degree, but also to build on the broader intentions behind the degree of creating a more confident, competent, analytical and reflective profession.
- **The new registration requirements will include compulsory CPD** for all registered social workers, and it would be a wasted opportunity if appropriate learning done as CPD was not properly integrated within the new PQ Framework.

*QUESTION 1. Do you agree with our analysis of the key factors which should influence the design of any new PQ arrangements?  
YES/NO*

*Are you aware of any other problems, barriers or issues in the present arrangements which we should bear in mind?*

## 2. Purpose of PQ framework/partnership (suggested)

It is worth restating the purpose of PQ which we suggest is as follows.

To support the continuing professional development of social workers; develop the workforce and provide benefit to service and clients, through:

- promoting the value and contribution of relevant organised and assessed professional development;
- benchmarking and quality assuring professional development activities;
- providing a framework for social work professionals to continue personal and professional development in a structured and supported environment;
- providing a focus for line managers and employers to contribute to and engage in the development of their staff;
- ensuring links between practice, teaching, research, management; and service development.

*QUESTION 2. Do you agree with the suggested purposes of PQ?  
YES/NO; please comment*

## 3. Objectives for change

In the light of the views we have received so far, we suggest that the main objectives that should influence the design of the future framework for PQ should be as follows. These are not in an order of priority.

**Objective 1. The PQ framework should be comprehensive.**

i.e. it should in principle be able to recognise and accommodate all serious development activities done post-qualification (including compulsory CPD).

Arguments:

- Staff want recognition for effort put in
- It is too restrictive to limit PQ to programmes accredited by the partnership (or to social work programmes)
- A broader interpretation will add status and influence to the partnership and PQ

**Objective 2. PQ should be closer to a continuum.**

This was the intention, but in practice there is a perceived “huge gap” between the current two levels (PQ and Advanced)

**Objective 3. Broader opportunities at each level**

There should be more “breadth” as well as more progression levels. Staff may develop by widening their portfolio, not just be advancing through levels

**Objective 4. Assessment needs to be more flexible**

The principle should be assessment on quality and relevance of experience, not on quantity of documentation (and certainly not requiring re-presenting existing documentary evidence in a different format). Some steps have been made in this direction through improved guidance, and more can be done.

**Objective 5. Accreditation should be streamlined**

Again, the principle should be to have a process which is proportionate to the need. Programmes (e.g. in universities) which are already audited by several other bodies are unlikely to need the same depth of monitoring and review, and this should only cover objectives which have not already been covered by other reputable agencies. If PQ is to be more comprehensive, it will have to develop some “lighter-touch” processes for “recognising” a wider range of learning experiences without the full rigour of the current accreditation.

**Objective 6. Closer links to service**

Improving communication and political support to get more buy-in from agencies to an enhanced and more influential PQ programme

which really should have some broader representation on its management board. (See also section 6 below.)

**A figure showing how the Framework might evolve in the light of these objectives is attached. This is indicative only at this stage. It may be desirable to wait to see what changes are proposed in other parts of the UK before finalising a new framework.**

*QUESTION 3. Do you agree with objectives 1-6 and the possible evolution of the Framework shown in the Figure?. YES/NO*

*Do you have any suggestions on this?*

#### **4. Broadening the appeal and take-up of PQ**

Despite the good statistics, there is a significant group of social work professionals (perhaps particularly those longer in the service) who do not believe that PQ is relevant or necessary for them.

*QUESTION 4. Do you have any suggestions that could help to make PQ more attractive and relevant to those not currently engaged?*

## **5. Management of PQ**

The PQ Partnership is funded by the department through the Northern Ireland Social Care Council and also through registration fees. It has its own staff and offices.

The Partnership will have to continue to work very closely with the NISCC and with the new regional body which is being established for qualifying education.

It seems likely, if the objectives above are pursued, that the work of the Partnership will become more rather than less significant in the future. It will potentially need to cover a broader range of activities, and to work even more closely with employers and with education providers and other professions.

At present, the NISCC accredits three PQ programmes (those formerly managed by CCETSW, i.e. PT, ASW and Child Care). There could be value in bringing all accreditation into the one organisation which could potentially be either NISCC or the PQ Partnership, but probably more logically the Partnership, leaving NISCC to regulate, rather than accredit education programmes.

In general, the current management arrangements seem to work well and there is value in avoiding uncertainty and change except where it offers real benefits. The main changes that have been suggested are to strengthen the independence and role of the Partnership, although in the longer-term, it may be appropriate to reconsider its relationship to the new regional body for qualifying education.

*QUESTION 5. Do you have any comments on the future management arrangements for PQ?*

## **6. Broader points**

A point that has been made by many who are involved with PQ is that agencies do not always give continuing professional development the priority it needs, and that there is a danger that the PQ agenda is too dominated by the voices of “the converted” i.e. training interests and award holders.

At Question 4, we have asked for how PQ could change to offer more value to a wider range of professionals.

More generally, we believe that agencies (like most employers) need encouragement and help in creating a learning environment within their organisations in which professional skills and development are valued and promoted and supported by all senior and line managers. This means not just providing opportunities for formal training, but also creating a culture which encourages reflection and analysis, and which supports a wide range of development activity.

Equally, it is important that professionals take responsibility for their own development. They can legitimately expect their employer to facilitate relevant development, but they should not expect everything to be organised for them.

The Department and the NISCC can help this process by using their influence to promote good practice. Are there any particular things they could do to encourage better political support and profile for the importance of human resource development in social work and the role of PQ in this?

Is there anything else the Partnership could do?

*QUESTION 6. Do you have any suggestions that could help to ensure better recognition by employers of the value of professional development?*

Thank you for your attention. Please reply by 14 November 2003  
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