European and International Perspectives in British Social Work Education: Some Past Developments and Future Prospects

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Introduction

Wherever we practice as social professionals in the 21st century our interventions must reflect the increasing impact of globalisation and continental regional groupings on social issues and welfare systems. At a national political level, the UK has been an ambivalent partner in the development of the European Union and its associated mechanisms and aspirations. Attitudes towards wider international perspectives vary, but tend to have been more positively influenced by the UK’s colonial history and a consequent diversity in its population, ensuring continuing links with various countries around the world.

Inevitably, the wider political and socio-economic environment has had a bearing on trends in higher education, including how training for the social professions has developed. The British ambivalence regarding Europe has been reflected in the lower than average participation of higher education staff and students in European initiatives, such as ERASMUS and now SOCRATES programmes, a situation undoubtedly exacerbated by limited knowledge of European languages other than English. Meanwhile, different traditions regarding organisation of services and moral panics about ‘British problems’ (including child abuse) have tended to promote rather insular and prescriptive pressures on how education and training for social work (and to a lesser extent youth and community work) should develop in the UK, leaving little scope for the introduction of comparative perspectives or exchange opportunities at the initial training/professional qualification stage.

Despite this constraining environment, a small proportion of departments have actively tried to encourage comparative perspectives, usually through participation in collaborative arrangements with social work schools outside the UK, often over a decade or more. Such engagement has resulted in rich learning for the staff involved and stimulating opportunities for the students. This article reviews some of these developments and considers the implications of wider trends for future European and international thinking and activities in the field of professional education and practice. However, it seems appropriate to start with a consideration of what we understand by some of the terms used, which, while gaining currency among some social professionals, may introduce concepts unfamiliar to others.

Defining terms and a rationale for European and international perspectives

Starting from a consideration of the area of professional practice, social work is a diverse and often contested activity, strongly related to the historical, socio-economic, political and cultural conditions of particular nations and communities. However, it is also an activity that focuses on responses to social issues, through use of a constellation of skills and values that are widely shared and recognisable across national boundaries. While the organisation of services and the titles used for different roles vary widely, the actual range of interventions with individuals, families and communities, and the principles and knowledge on which these are based, show greater similarities.

This is not to minimise the different historical roots and philosophical bases of social work (as developed in the Anglo-American tradition) and social pedagogy (as developed in many North European countries) or community work (as
developed in some Latin American or African countries), nor to suggest that such differentiation is not important, but we can also recognise a common purpose. This was summed up in a recent definition agreed by the International Federation of Social Workers and International Association of Schools of Social Work (IFSW, 2001) which suggested that a unifying focus is the concern to promote human rights and social justice, whatever the practice context. More concretely, Van Wormer (1997) has described the concept of social work as a range of practices aimed at change or amelioration of social relationships and conditions at micro-, mezzo- and macro-levels.

The struggle to find a common title for the varied roles associated with social intervention, which will be 'inclusive' but not suggest the dominance of any one tradition, has perhaps been one of the concrete outcomes of dialogue within European partnerships. The term 'social professionals' was first publicly used at an ERASMUS Evaluation Conference in 1996 (Seibel & Lorenz, 1998) and subsequently publicised in the English-speaking world through its usage in the initial editorial of the European Journal of Social Work (Otto & Lorenz, 1998). As such, it deserves to have greater currency but is so far a relatively unfamiliar concept in the UK, where government and regulatory bodies have promoted the term 'social care'. This encompasses a range of activities associated with the care - or control - of a cross-section of service users in their own homes or in alternative living arrangements, though rarely signifies a community focus.

Turning to globalisation, this concept is increasingly discussed or referred to within the social sciences and media but has tended to be viewed as a process or phenomenon associated with economic activities and effects. However, economic factors clearly impact on social conditions and national and professional responses to them and globalisation is also increasingly recognised as having "social, political, cultural, demographic and other dimensions as well" (Midgley, 2000: pp.13-14). Various aspects of the process of globalisation are widely apparent, including the largely unregulated activities of multi-national or global corporations (Axford, 1995). These increasingly determine the availability of employment opportunities through the relocation of production from high wage to low wage economies; and also determine the supply and price of goods for local populations around the globe (as in the case of drugs for treatment of HIV/AIDS in East European or African countries). Another manifestation has been a trend towards convergence in political and economic policies in the western world that has impacted on thinking about the state’s role in the provision of or support for ‘welfare services’ (Teeple, 2000). Both these trends interact to affect adversely the socio-economic conditions of some groups within national populations who thus become the concern of social professionals. Other processes, such as the modern manifestations of migration (Castles, 2000), can be associated with globalisation, and the spread of Information Technology and rapid transport have changed the relationships between mobile populations and whole countries. There is also evidence of the increased interconnection, and even interdependence, of states and national populations; as in concerns about climate change; environmental degradation; and, most recently and dramatically, the events on and since 11th September 2001. I would argue that globalisation is a powerful force affecting all our lives that cannot be ignored by social professionals.

While the process of globalisation has been said to weaken the power of the nation state (Axford, 1995), another process with a similar effect and also largely based on an economic motive has also been at work, usually at the intermediate level of continents. The development of regional groupings of nation-states, evident, for example, in the growth in power and size of the European Union, has often also had a strong economic component. While peacekeeping and economic motives were a spur to the establishment of the forerunners of the EU, and economic considerations remain a strong driver, the subsequent acknowledgement of the need for social acceptance of its institutions and ambitions has led to some extension of its powers and concerns into civil and social areas. We have therefore witnessed, with varying degrees of national support or caution, a process of ‘Europeanisation’ through which trans-national agreements inform a wide range of member states’ policies, including those impacting on practices in the social professional field.

I would therefore argue that the various processes associated with globalisation and ‘Europeanisation’ (or continental regionalism in its other forms) result in effects which require social professionals to have an increased understanding of:

- events and institutions outside the confines of the nation-state;
cultural differences between populations, which may include different assumptions about provision of social care and control; the desirability - and sometimes the necessity - for trans-national, European-or global-level activities.

It is for these reasons that social professionals should be developing comparative or more specifically European or international perspectives in education and training programmes.

Introducing comparative perspectives into British social work education

The idea of comparative study and research does not have a strong tradition in social work since this has tended to be regarded as an essentially ‘local’ activity. There are traditional and current cases of the use of textbooks and research studies, often derived from the USA, but these might be seen as a form of cultural imperialism (Midgley, 1995), rather than a conscious attempt to engage with comparative or international perspectives.

However, early moves towards the concept of a ‘Social Europe’ in the 1980s produced a climate more conducive to the development of European partnerships that sought actively to ‘compare and contrast’:

- national assumptions and practices with regard to social issues of public concern;
- organisation of ‘social’ services;
- ‘naming’ and training of different kinds of social professionals;
- forms and scale of interventions.

The formal establishment of a range of network activities and exchange schemes was facilitated by the advent of European funding for the ERASMUS programme (1986-96) and by 1990 about a quarter of UK social work departments claimed to have some association with European programmes (Cannan et al., 1990). A number of studies reported in the 1990s identified the value to students of a range of activities, including individual placements abroad and multi-lateral intensive study programmes, as well as some of the difficulties and criticisms associated with operationalising schemes (see for instance, Bradley & Firth, 1998; Cemlyn, 1995; Davis, 1995; Horncastle & Brobeck, 1995). A strong interest in ‘Europeanisation’ was also suggested by the struggle to achieve parity with other European countries when the EEC issued a Directive (EEC, 1989) declaring common recognition for all courses of minimally three years study in higher education at degree level leading to entry to a regulated profession (Barr, 1990).

Unfortunately, the British government of the time was unsympathetic to calls for a minimum three year period of training and establishment of a regulatory body. Requirements for course revision and a new qualifying award, to be introduced from 1989, made no mention of comparative perspectives and only gave limited scope for further development of European dimensions and activities.

However, perhaps partly in recognition of the short qualifying training period, a ‘Continuum of Training’ announced in 1991 (CCETSW 1991) included the requirement that students undertaking courses at Advanced award level (equivalent to Masters level) should include reference to European policies or examples from other countries in a selected area relevant to social work in the UK. This has led to some development of units on Masters programmes focusing on European or international dimensions, for example in relation to Child Care or Community Care (interventions with elders and/or people with mental health problems or a disability).

In general the more prescribed nature of the Diploma in Social Work curriculum in the UK and a move to assessment based on the demonstration of competencies in practice placements, coupled with requirements for formalised partnerships with local agencies and increasing resource constraints in higher education institutions, led to a considerable sense of pressure on social work academics through the 1990s. This pressure left little scope for developing or maintaining European or international perspectives, a situation reflected in the results from two surveys carried out in the mid-nineties.

The first was a postal survey of all university social work departments in England and Wales, carried out in 1994 as part of a wider study of social work in Higher Education. The survey found that only four institutions had introduced modules specifically aimed at introducing a European dimension to their programmes, though a larger number (19 out of 64 respondents) reported involvement in ERASMUS programmes. The findings gave rise to an estimate that about 20% of UK social work departments were involved in some way in ‘European’ activity (Lyons, 1999a). This estimate was confirmed by the second survey carried out in 1996. The survey was part of wider study aimed at evaluating the impact of the ERASMUS programme on social
The percentage of ‘social profession’ departments claiming to be active in educating for European or international dimensions seems to have remained remarkably stable since that time, judging by the responses to a third survey carried out in the UK in 2000, as part of the IASSW World Census (Lyons, 2000a). While these surveys have not generally given much information about the nature of European or international involvement and perspectives, associated work or other developments, they have identified specific examples and also suggested trends in the level and direction of interest. Among the latter, we can note the establishment of two English language journals in the past decade, Social Work in Europe in 1994 and European Journal of Social Work in 1998. Both provide a growing body of literature, some of it research based and properly described as comparative, to inform readers in both higher education and the field, and suggests some ongoing interest in matters European among (British) social professionals.

The actual range of activities or curriculum developments reflected in the broad concept of Europeanisation of British education for the social professions is similar to models described in the Synthesis Report presented in 1998 to the Concluding Conference of the ECSPRESS Thematic Network (Lyons, 1999b). Thus, we find examples of British participation in multi-lateral seminars; of European modules offered in home institutions to British and any visiting students, in courses leading to academic awards; of curricula which are jointly developed and then offered in both UK institution and in another country; and of a varied range of individually focused initiatives. In the case of ‘courses’ of whatever length, the common focus is on a topic of shared concern, such as drug abuse, responses to elder or child care problems or migration, including refugee issues. Attention is given to both European and international level policies and conventions, as well as national or local examples of service development and practice. In the case of individual projects the form and focus is much more varied and often ‘case specific’, but research and e-learning developments are generally based on shared and agreed concerns and themes not dissimilar from those of courses. Such projects may offer students opportunities for placement or study periods abroad or may build on staff research interests or on the availability of the Internet and e-learning.

Examples of developments of international as opposed to European perspectives in the training of social professionals are relatively less apparent, though it is worth pausing to consider how we define ‘European’ and ‘international’ perspectives. In the first instance we should note that some of the questionnaire responses mentioned above, included reference to partnerships with Central and East European countries. There has clearly been a considerable growth in collaborative activity with countries beyond the EU since 1989, stimulated by funding from a variety of sources. Some of the programmes have been directly concerned with (re)establishing education and training programmes for the social professions (including for the educators themselves) and with increasing the capacity of nationals to devise their own programmes of research and intervention in relation to the serious social problems being experienced in the wake of transition to a market economy. Some of these changes and initiatives have also been discussed in the journals mentioned above, as examples of East-West collaboration (for example, Bamford et al., 2000) or as case studies of national developments (for example, Pik, 2001).

The question of what constitutes an ‘international’ perspective, or even ‘international social work’ is more ambiguous, though on a geographical level we could simply see it as a perspective or activity which crosses national boundaries possibly within but also beyond Europe, however defined. Varied and imprecise understandings were reflected in responses to a survey carried out by Nagy and Falk (2000). They found some overlap and confusion between teaching aimed at improving cross-cultural competencies in students and that aimed at developing ideas and practice in international social work, and of course the two are related. The authors produced a list of 12 types of responses that can be further reduced to four categories as follows:-

- involvement in international seminars conferences or exchange programmes;
- working with people of a different culture in ones own country or abroad, including engaging in struggles for human rights and social justice;
- learning about comparative structures, policies, practices and cultures;
increasing understanding of the international events and forces which generate social problems and growing interdependence, including reference to the role of multi-nationals and global financial institutions and/or the role of international governmental and non-governmental organisations.

While education for international social work, or the introduction of international perspectives to domestic course, might include any and all of the activities covered by these categories, more fundamentally, I suggest that it is bound to take into account consideration of the processes and effects of globalisation and to be concerned with the relationship between social conditions and needs in both less developed countries and advanced industrial countries (Lyons, 1999c). It thus entails developing some understanding of two key areas - population mobility and resource distribution - which are fundamental to consideration of other ‘global issues’, such as the HIV/AIDS pandemic or disasters.

It was in the context of experience gained through participation in a substantial European network and exchange programme (*European Centre for Community Education*, Seibel, 1995) but also the recognition of a student population who had links with many parts of the world outside Europe, as well as in the particular conditions of social work education in Britain in the mid nineties, that an international social work course was developed at the University of East London (UEL). This was initially (from 1994) offered at third year undergraduate level, as a pathway for students proceeding voluntarily beyond their qualifying Diploma in Social Work to pursue a top-up degree. It comprised four taught units and two other units largely run as a period of negotiated but self-directed learning and project work abroad, in a destination largely of the students choice and not tied to institutional partnership arrangements.

The period abroad was set at three months corresponding to the minimum requirement for ERASMUS and later SOCRATES ‘placements’, but, to an even greater extent than anticipated, many students chose to go to countries beyond Europe, their choice often being related to existing family connections. However, there were some similarities in relation to the value of an orientation or preparation programme, the issues that arose for students while abroad and the need for a programme which included opportunities for debriefing and shared learning on return and assessment which helped students process their experience as well as demonstrating their learning (Lyons & Ramanathan, 1999).

The success of this venture up to the late nineties and continuing involvement with European partners laid the basis for development of a similar course at MA level from 2000. Curriculum development work was funded in part by a SOCRATES grant and it was possible to link up with an existing MA course in Refugee Studies at UEL which drew on other staff’s expertise in European as well as international policies, legislation and response to psycho-social needs of this high profile minority group. The course is already attracting enquiries or students from the other four countries represented in the partnership arrangements (Austria, Germany, Greece, and Switzerland), though ironically, current developments in higher education in each of these countries, makes it more likely that advanced courses at masters level will soon be available to students, in their own language and in their own countries, decreasing the need for students to travel abroad and to gain an MA.

In addition to other European students a number of students are from East London or other parts of the UK and others have joined the course from elsewhere (currently Bangladesh, Canada, Kenya, South Africa and Zimbabwe) affording a rich opportunity for ‘intercultural learning’ - a concept more familiar to some European colleagues than a British readership (Aluffi-Pentini & Lorenz, 1996). Conversely, UK mainstream policies in a variety of fields have favoured use of the terms ‘multiculturalism’ and, more recently, ‘valuing (cultural) diversity’ while British education for the social professions has tended to emphasise the development of anti-oppressive principles and practice. The concept of anti-oppressive strategies in social work acknowledges the power differentials between groups in society, including groups differentiated by age, gender, sexuality, or disability, as well as ethnic or racial characteristics, and in turn may be less familiar, or seen as a British peculiarity, in the context of European or international partnerships. I have argued elsewhere for the validity of anti-oppressive concepts and training beyond UK borders (Lyons, 1997) but also suggest that the concept of intercultural learning could usefully receive more attention in the UK.
developments: outcomes and prospects

So what are the prospects for continuing development of work in the area of Europeanisation and internationalisation, particularly in the current period of change in the British system of social work education and regulation of the social care field?

The requirements regarding curriculum content and assessment of new degree level awards from 2003 are still under negotiation at the time of writing. Reconsideration of the form and levels of post-qualifying awards has barely commenced, although these are likely to be tied to a new occupational standards framework currently being devised by the Training Organisation for the Personal Social Services (TOPSS).

On the one hand, in a national context of refusal to join the common European currency zone, and declining numbers of British students choosing to participate in EU funded student mobility programmes (Sanders & Brookman, 2001), as well as preoccupation among social professionals with organisational change and new educational initiatives, the prospects for maintaining or increasing European or international activities do not seem great. Additionally, analysis of different social welfare areas suggests that the UK continues to look across the Atlantic for examples of how to develop policy and services, although European influences can also be discerned in some UK legislation and rhetoric. One such example was evident in the field of child poverty where recent policy changes could be identified as framed by wider policies regarding ‘welfare to work’, an American inspired notion, but also ‘family friendly’ employment policies, showing more continental influence (Lyons, 2000b). Similarly, current efforts to address the staff recruitment and retention problems of Social Service Departments tend to focus on employment of social workers from Australia or South Africa, while experienced social pedagogues from European countries have had difficulty gaining employment as social workers in the London area (personal communications).

However, on the other hand, there are some indications of recent initiatives that might suggest a more optimistic scenario for future Euro- or international developments. Among these is a study, funded by the Department of Health, of Social Pedagogy in a number of European countries (Petrie, 2001), suggesting that the value of work deriving from this form of training could inform new training initiatives and ultimately practice, and hopefully also employment opportunities in the UK. Additionally, the quinquennial review of university research output accords most rewards to those subject submissions that attain an international standard. While this should not necessarily be equated with undertaking comparative research or joint publications across national boundaries, it may be that such ventures do promote innovative and high quality research. Notwithstanding the complexities of such projects their possible relevance to national policy and practice developments has been illustrated by a project in the social professional field (Hetherington et al., 1997), and another EU funded project is directly concerned with knowledge creation through doctoral work, by social professionals in 11 different European countries (Laot, 2001).

It may also be that educational initiatives consolidated during the nineties have produced a new generation of social professionals whose frame of reference is European or even global and who have themselves begun to establish informal networks which cross national boundaries. One such example would be the Alumni Association of the MA Comparative European Social Studies, awarded by the University of North London though taught in Maastricht, with its continuing links through CESSNET (2001). It is also the case that an increasing number of social workers in the UK, and presumably other countries, are experiencing the need for a better understanding of the national and international events that necessitate cross-national activity, as in the case of inter-country adoptions, or repatriation of migrants with special needs. While some of this work might be undertaken by social professionals in specially designated ‘international’ organisations or projects, some of it comes into the daily work of social workers in the child care, mental health or hospital social work fields. Additionally, some social professionals find themselves working in Social Service teams specifically set up to respond to the needs of asylum seekers in which the need for cross-cultural competencies, including working through interpreters, has never been greater (Lyons & Stathopoulos, 2001).

So how do the people who have already undertaken European or international social work programmes view and utilise their experience? Over a decade ago an American academic expressed surprise that, despite the congruence
between the skills developed by students on social work courses and those apparently required by major international non-governmental organisations, as indicated in recruitment literature, very few students saw themselves as wanting or likely to take up opportunities for ‘work abroad’ (Rosenthal, 1990). Similarly, while an assumption that experience of an international social work course might better equip students for work abroad or in an international agency, informed the design of the UEL international social work course, a five year retrospective study of the whereabouts and career outcomes of students who had undertaken this degree similarly showed that few had used it in this way.

However, of the 50% of students who replied to the survey, while most were still working in the East London or South East England area, the majority responded that this had been a powerful learning experience for them personally and professionally, the main benefit of which was increased confidence when working cross-culturally. These findings could be compared to a similar study of the outcomes of a British-Danish collaborative course, with a top-up degree awarded by the University of Portsmouth, where it seemed slightly more likely that mobility between European countries in relation to work opportunities was both a motivating factor and an outcome for some of the students (Lyons & Sears, 2000).

What also remains to be seen is the extent to which experience of European or international opportunities as a student might influence future involvement in national associations or international associations, such as IFSW, or its regional groupings, and the extent to which national associations themselves recognise the increasing opportunities and needs for thinking and actions beyond their national frameworks. It is also a challenge for academics, practitioners and researchers to think and act beyond the ‘case study’ paradigm, whether at individual, local community or national level, and to recognise the meta-levels of policy and activity where theorising, communication and intervention are also required.

Concluding comments

I have attempted in this short review to sketch in some of the developments and opportunities associated with introducing European and international perspectives into the education of social professionals in the UK. As with all developments, they need to be seen against a backdrop of national preoccupations in relation to wider social welfare and higher education policies and trends. They are also related to the history of the country, not least as it has been influenced by both emigration and immigration, with a resultant sense of connection to, or distance from, other countries. The ease and speed of travel and communications mean that ‘distance’ now can be appreciated as a social rather than a geographical construct, and historic alliances continue to resonate in international political and personal relationships.

The establishment of regional groupings, with economic, political, and latterly also sometimes social, goals, has been evident worldwide, and has certainly encouraged a process of Europeanisation in the EU context. However, I have argued that the process of globalisation is also a significant force impacting on us all and requiring the development of an understanding of global as well as regional and local processes and events, particularly as they relate to the welfare sector and the work of social professionals. In the case of education for the social professions in the UK there is some evidence of both Europeanisation and internationalisation, though it seems that both are still fairly marginal activities relative to mainstream qualifying training.

However, increased expectations that social professionals will demonstrate cross-cultural competencies in practice, while to some extent being acknowledged through an emphasis in training on anti-oppressive strategies, could also be enhanced through greater exposure to European and international dimensions and comparative research and experience at all levels of training. The challenge to infuse education and practice with perspectives beyond the parochial and national, and to encourage professional concern with European and international social issues and responses, continues.

References


Note:

1. These goals are only now being achieved with the establishment of the General Social Care Council (2001) and imminent changes from a qualifying Diploma in Social Work to a degree course proposed for social work training from September 2003.

We might note here the pragmatic basis for decisions to publish in English; a) to meet the needs of an English speaking readership, but; b) as potentially extending readership to a cross-section of other European Social Professionals who understand English in addition to their mother tongue. Whether such journals are seen as a useful means of sharing ideas and information within and across Europe, and being mutually informative, or another example of cultural imperialism is not known.