Social Work Education in England and Spain: a Comparison of Contemporary Developments

by **David Sims** (daveesims@hotmail.com)

Contextualisation

Professionals in the field of Social work have to deal with a multiplicity of new social issues both global and national in origin. The training of social workers clearly needs to prepare those entering the professions for these changes. Different national cultures have responded to these pressures in different ways. The paper that follows uses the examples of social worker education in Spain and England to explore these different responses. Conclusions about the relative priorities in each country's system of professional education are explored.

Abstract: *This paper explores the influences of globalisation on social work education reforms in England and Spain. It will argue that global changes exemplified by European convergence in respect of Higher Education have had a more explicit influence on the Spanish proposals for change than on the current English reforms. It will also argue that whilst both sets of reforms appear to be addressing some of the common professional issues brought to the fore by the new global complexity influencing social work, the English reforms have been driven by more 'domestic' concerns about competence, professional standards and accountability. Evidence supporting these arguments is explored and analysed.*

Introduction

Both England and Spain are seeking to introduce a professional Social Work Degree as the minimum qualification for social work and to extend the overall length of training. In England the reforms are well underway, with the introduction of a three year degree in social work as the minimum professional qualification from September 2003, replacing the current qualification, a two year Diploma in Social Work (General Social Care Council, 2002). In Spain, a long campaign for degree level social work training is reaching its peak, with the preparation in November 2002 of a 'Memoria Justificativa' [Recommended Proposals] by the General Council of Professional Associations for Social Workers [Consejo General de Colegios Oficiales de Diplomados en Trabajo Social y Asistentes Sociales]. This proposal is currently being considered by the Council of Spanish Universities [Consejo de las Universidades] and presents the case for a change from a three year Diploma level qualification to a four year Degree in social work.

The Global context of social work education

A comparison between England and Spain in respect of social work education cannot ignore a range of contextualising factors: the political context (regime and ideology); the policy context (approaches to welfare policy); and the educational context (which institutions, for example, are given responsibility for professional training and how much autonomy they have).

The recent political history of the two countries has been markedly different. The dictatorship in Spain from 1939 until 1975 had the effect of delaying the development of a welfare state and social work itself remained largely influenced by the Catholic Church (Rubi Martinez,

1989). By contrast, in England during the same period the welfare state came fully into being through the welfare reforms following the Second World War (Payne, 1995).

Worldwide there has been a gradual development of welfare states over the second half of the twentieth century, with a growth in the number of schools of Social Work, in line with this pattern. In 1998-9, the World Census of Schools of Social Work (Barretta-Herman, 2000) revealed that approximately 1900 schools of social work existed worldwide. This number had grown tenfold in the second half of the 20th century along with the development of welfare state systems. Of the 230 Schools of Social Work which replied to the relevant question in the census, 46% began offering programmes after 1970.

The census also revealed the predominant affiliation of social work programmes with universities (69.9%). A comparison of Spain and England revealed that all Spanish social work education has taken place in universities since 1981 and all students have undertaken the training at Diploma of Higher Education (DipHE) level. By contrast, social work education in England has been delivered in both colleges and universities at different levels including those of DipHE, Degree and Masters.

Kivinen and Narmi (2003) note the recent policy drive towards multinational Higher Education in Europe and the harmonisation of educational legislation and practices characterised by three elements: marketisation, managerialism and performance. In terms of social work education reform, this paper will argue that convergence policy has had a greater influence in Spain on the *will to reform,* while the elements mentioned above have been much more influential in England.

The case for reform in England: responding to national concerns

From an analysis of the recent history of social work education in England it is apparent that the reforms have been characterised by emphasis on occupational standards, driven by the development of competence and occupationally based education policy (Lymbery, Christopherson and Eadie, 2000). This emphasis has been linked to a poor image of social work (White and Buttle, 2001) which has made it a profession which has been unable to attract recruits, a situation which is not reflected in Spain, where large numbers of social workers are trained and where there is often a problem of insufficiency of vacant posts in social work (Del Pino Segura, 2002). In England, enquiry reports resulting from child care tragedies, have been critical of social work education for failing to develop students' skills in key areas, most particularly in the use of the law, which is now formally examined (CCETSW, 1995).

Deprofessionalisation

In England, a preoccupation with skills and standards, has developed in relation to social work education. This reflects the discourse of managerial professionalism, through which governments and policy makers have been seeking to assert more control and regulation of professional behaviour (Sachs, 2001).

The English experience of social work education over the past thirty years has been dominated by the deprofessionalisation debate (Lyons, 1999) and the drive for competence-based vocational education.

Deprofessionalisation results from a bureaucratisation of professional groups resulting in increased rules and sanctions and decreased professional authority and power (Friedson, 1986). Jackson, in his introduction to Lyons' edited collection of articles entitled, *Social Work in Higher Education. Demise or Development'* (1999, p ix) suggests this ongoing debate has

given social work education an 'inward-looking quality' characterised by a struggle to survive as an academic discipline. This apparent introspection is despite the fact that, as Winter and Maisch (1996) contend, the practical case for vocational education has at least one 'global' argument behind it, namely the need of a national economy for a skilled workforce if it is to compete in the global market. Although social work is not an occupation associated with global competition, the changes in social work education in England have been based upon arguments for market accountability. This is evidenced by the proposals for increased employer involvement in workforce planning (J.M.Consulting, 1999).

The Impact of Managerialism

Managerialism in respect of social work education in England has been characterised by a gradual but steady centralising of control over educational content and delivery. Over the last 30 years, since the formation of Social Services Departments in line with the Local Authority Social Services Act of 1970, the training of social workers has gone through a number of significant changes.

The creation of the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW) in 1971 established a designated body responsible for the regulation of training and the promotion of good educational practice. At the inception of CCETSW there were two main qualifications in social work, the Certificate of Qualification in Social Work (CQSW – an academic route) and the Certificate in Social Service (CSS – an employment route). The two qualifications were completely separate, the former offered at degree or Masters level in universities and the latter, offered as an in-service route, generally through colleges of Further Education over a period of two years.

By the early 1980's this inconsistency was regarded as outmoded in the light of changing social circumstances and needs. In 1982 CCETSW concluded there should be a three year award because:

> 'Present training programmes, restricted by their current length, are simply not capable of routinely producing newly qualified social workers with the necessary breadth of knowledge, depth of skill and ability to apply both to effective practice.' (CCETSW, 1987, p 10)

A proposal for a minimum of three years training, cited in its support, European Commission directives on level and length of professional training, but was rejected (Lyons, 1999). However, a newly designed framework for training was published by CCETSW (1989) identifying the core knowledge, values and skills that were required to be part of any future award. It also gave an important role to employers in the management of the new programme, requiring that colleges/universities and employers collaborate in the provision of programmes. CCETSW announced its intention to

> '…concentrate validation and standard setting on the agreed objectives for the outcome performance of students.' (CCETSW, 1987, p 25)

This focus on outcomes reflected a key issue for professional development in the 1980s, namely a growing intervention by the state in defining the nature, purpose and content of professional education (Barnett, 1994). The foundation of the National Council for Vocational Qualifications in 1986 reflected the development of government sponsored efforts to reinforce links between educational curricula and the world of employment (Winter and Maisch, 1996). A key aspect of the NVQ approach was the development of occupational standards in the form of competence statements supported by performance indicators.

The influence of this approach upon social work education in England has been gradual but determined. By 1995, when a combined government department of Education and

Employment was established, symbolising the increasingly close relationship of education and training in the service of the economy (Lyons, 1999), the values, knowledge and skills outcomes of the social work 'curriculum' were converted in to six core competencies and all programmes were required to secure re-approval of their curricula (CCETSW, 1995). The Department of Health has taken this work further in the prescribed curriculum for the new social work degree, by commissioning TOPSS (Training Organisation for the Personal Social Services, 2002) to produce a full set of detailed National Occupational Standards for Social Work.

Evidence of the influence of this concern with 'standards' on social work education in England was found in the government commissioned report by J.M.Consulting (1999), which reviewed the Diploma in Social Work, and made proposals for extending the length of training. The review identified the complex and critical decisions social workers need to make and the changing and multi-professional environments in which they increasingly work. It concluded that the training offered insufficient breadth of practice experience and insufficient learning about research. In the report the authors identified some of the key issues at the heart of the reforms and these reflect the aspects of managerialism and deprofessionalisation discussed above:

> 'Social Work is an emerging discipline. It does not have all the attributes of the more established professions, but we believe that it can and should have similar aims in terms of excellence of practice; an ethos of service to clients and the public; an evidence/research base for action; and the ability and will to create and operate to a regime of high standards and continual improvement. We are certain that the public expect this.' (J.M.Consulting, 1999, p 4)

Contained in this quotation are issues of competence in practice, accountability to the public, ability to apply research critically to practice and accountability for standards of practice.

The report concluded that degree level training was essential in order to ensure that the social worker was able to integrate theory and practice, especially with reference to research, which was seen as a weakness in the current training. In respect of accountability, the report recommended more strategic involvement by senior managers in practice in the planning and monitoring of education provision and supported proposals for professional registration of social workers. The report echoed concerns about the difficulties in recruiting social workers and the need to extend training opportunities and to reduce the average age of social workers undertaking training, which stood at thirty-two in 1998 (by contrast, in Spain, the average social work student is a school leaver).

The foregoing has sought to evidence the argument that English social work education reforms have been motivated by 'managerial' concerns over competence and standards and have been government led. Following sections consider the proposals for change in Spain and argue that these arise from concerns expressed by academics and have been justified by the need to comply with European directives.

Social work education in Spain: responding to European Convergence

Global changes exemplified by European directives on Higher Education policy have been more explicit in their influence on the Spanish proposals for change than on the current English reforms. Within the European Community there is a policy for convergence in terms of mutual recognition of professional diplomas, certificates and other evidence of qualifications through Council Directive 92/51.EEC (European Training Foundation, 1999). At the same time as the European Community has gradually centralised policies in its member

states, in the field of Higher Education, it has been seeking to promote the mobility of students and educators between countries in Europe (Lunt and Peiro, 2002).

The Sorbonne Declaration in 1998, aimed to promote convergence between the national Higher Education systems of member states, so that mobility would be facilitated (Chacon, 2002). Chacon (2002), notes that in 1999, the Declaration of Bologna recommended that by 2010 academic credit systems should be standardised, the duration of qualifications harmonised, inter-member state mobility of students be promoted and that a framework of common and flexible qualifications be developed.

The Memoria Justificativa (2002) presenting the case for reform in Spain reflects awareness of the European and global context. It begins with a section entitled *International Perspective* [Perspectiva Internacional] and opens the 'context' section which follows, with the subheading, *globalisation* [Globalicazion].

As part of the argument for change an international comparison is made with a range of other countries where training is at already at degree level. In contrast, the J.M.Consulting Report (1999) presenting the case for reform in England does not refer to the European or global context at all. The proposals for improved training evidenced in the Memoria Justificativa are based on the greater social complexity faced by social workers in practice. This complexity is also an aspect of the rationale for the English reforms but in Spain it is explicitly linked to globalisation.

The literature in respect of globalisation reveals some of the challenges relevant to social work education. Castells (2001) observes the increase in inequality and polarisation – the rich get richer and the poor get poorer – and the growing problem of social exclusion, linked to exclusion from the labour market. Fook (2002) highlights the massive displacement of populations and the issue of refugees; new, vulnerable clients, who need social services.

Kellner (2000, p 305) asserts that the spread of a global culture produces new challenges for education. Culture had been the 'particularising, localising force that distinguished societies and people from each other', and education transmitted the skills and materials that enabled individuals to participate in their culture in a creative way. Globalisation is producing cultures that are more complex and contested, where new identities are being formed. The Spanish argument is that social workers will need to be trained to respond to these changes, which affect social cohesion, and this implies changes in the education of social workers.

In the face of social exclusion and complexity, professional education may be a means of reaching a common understanding and culture. Castells (2001) argues that *shared education* could be a mechanism for creating a

> '…canvas of cultural meaning which is shared through economy and experience.'
> (Castells, 2001, p 123)

The creation of a European Higher Education *area* (Kivinen and Nurmi, 2003) may create a consistent framework for shared education. Social work educators in Spain appear to want to ensure they are part of such a European framework. Policy makers in England make almost no reference to Europe. At a London conference organised by the Department of Health in September 2002 to disseminate information about the new Degree and its background, no mention of either European or global influences was made by the keynote speaker (Mercer, 2002).

The Spanish reforms, unlike those in England, are not driven by government. The campaign for a social work degree [Campana a Favor de La Licenciatura] is led by academics (del Pino Segura, 2002). This reflects the fact that in Spain social work education appears to have a stronger base within Higher Education, being entirely located there. Some academics,

however, are critical of their own dominant influence on social work education. Many courses teach students in large numbers, give a range of electives many of which are not specifically related to social work, and are not always focussed sufficiently on practice (Hernandez Hernández, Merino Ruiz and Rayo Lozano, 1992).

In the School of Social work at the University of Granada[1] for example, students complete three years training but the first two years are spent entirely in the University where a significant proportion of studies are options or free electives which are not taught by social work lecturers, so there is little opportunity for reflection on practice. This approach may reflect a more 'liberal' approach to social work education in Spain, where academics themselves have a more secure employment position (as a result of tenure) and where the managerial principles which have impacted on Higher Education in England have not yet taken such a strong hold.

In Spain the argument for change is also rooted in a comparison with other European countries which are perceived to be 'ahead' in terms of offering training at degree level. Universities are leading the reforms through curricular change and are aware of global influences on the social work role.

Social Work Education in Universities

One of the reasons why academics may have had more influence in Spain over the proposed reforms relates to the relatively early establishment of social work education in universities there. Additionally, policy guidance prescribed the curriculum as early as the 1960s. This contrasts with England where it was only in 2002 that universities were given overall responsibility for delivery of social work training (GSCC, 2002).

In relation to the recent history of social work and social work education in Spain, Hernandez Hernandez *et al*. (1992) describe the period between 1964 and 1983 as characterised by both development and official recognition. At the beginning of this period, Spain was under the dictatorship of General Franco but by the end, was a constitutional democracy. In 1966 the national regulation of social work training began with the first prescribed Plan de Estudios [curriculum] ratified by Royal Decree. Given the political climate, this established the focus of training on work with individuals rather than groups or communities (Hernandez Hernandez *et al.*, 1992). In 1967 the first professional associations were established for social workers and this marked the beginning of a more independent professional recognition. In 1981 a major step was taken in the advancement of social work education, namely its incorporation into Universities.

In 1969 a ministerial directive established social work education at Diploma level, recognising social work as a discipline belonging to the social sciences, and one whose content was required to be fundamentally theoretical. Practical training was then confined to no more than 40% of the total time devoted to studies (Consejo General, 2002).

This directive reflects a long running debate in Spain about whether social work could justifiably be regarded as a science in its own right. Martinez Martinez, Merino Ruiz, and del Castillo, 2000) regard this debate as one of the most controversial questions to emerge amongst social workers over recent years. The authors do not consider social work to be a social science in the true sense of the word, as its aim is not the discovery of new knowledge, but social intervention.

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[1] As part of the research for this paper a three day visit to the School of Social Work at the University of Granada, in Spain, was undertaken to provide a contemporary insight into the changes occurring there.

The existence of this debate may reflect an ongoing struggle for full academic recognition. It certainly underlines the important role educators have sought to play in the identity formation of social work. Academic questions about social work as a science do not emerge in the recent discussions about the future of social work education in England.

What is clear is that through the educational directives in Spain there has been considerable direction about the content of training, although this has left some flexibility in curriculum content and delivery. In 1990 the core subjects within the social work diploma were once again clarified when the Academic Commission of the Council of Universities [Comision Academica del Consejo de Universidades] prescribed that all courses must contain particular numbers of credits in relation to the subjects of social work, social services and social policy (Consejo General, 2002). However, Mira-Perceval Pastor (1997) suggests that the importance of practice experience has been neglected in the training of social workers, despite this being explicitly required in the directives:

> 'Nadie discute la importancia de las practicas en la formación de los trabajadores sociales'

> [No one is talking about how important practice is in the training of social workers] (Mira-Perceval Pastor, 1997, p 95)

So whilst curricular reform has taken place, this has not been significantly debated with regard to the practical aspects of the training. This suggests professional influence on the debate has not been strong. The *academic* subject matter and the academic standing of the discipline of social work appear to have been under greater scrutiny. The same author notes that another key aspect of development has been missed, namely the failure of Spain to fulfil the recommendations of the 1989 European Commission Report on Social Work Training ['el Informe de la Comision para la formacion en Trabajo Social'], to increase the duration of training to at least four years. She argues for the need for this extended training due to the impact of globalisation on economic and social affairs and the massive changes resulting from this.

There are some similarities between criticisms of social work education in Spain and England. A recent piece of research commissioned by the Consejo General (2000) reveals the extent of dissatisfactions with current training in Spain.

A total of forty-four social work educators, trade unionists, qualified practitioners and students in training, were asked their views on the challenges ahead for social work, given the new professional context resulting from change (including changing social needs, new technology and the European context). The report identified specific criticisms of the current training: it was seen to be too broad and insufficiently focused on practice and on the contemporary challenges facing social workers. One respondent suggested that the practice dimension in University based social work education was completely forgotten, totally disorganised ['totalmente olvidado, totalmente desorganizado'] (Consejo General, 2000, p 186). The report also called for social work training to be generic, criticising the current tendency to over specialise in two particular areas, namely older people and mental health. Specialisation was said to give social workers a *partial view* of social work.

Finally, a major criticism was directed by respondents at a profession which was seen to be out of date and using methods, theories and techniques from a previous era. In particular, social workers were said by respondents, to be unskilled in the use of new technologies, and universities appeared not to be including these sufficiently in social work training, or indeed using new technology in the delivery of curricula. Additionally, other new social challenges, for example, immigration and domestic violence were insufficiently covered by programmes.

The case made for reform in training, reflects some of these criticisms. In the Memoria Justificativa (Consejo General, 2002) the new global reality is explicitly stated as a justification for longer, more in-depth training, which addresses the development of new technology, the requirements of social change and the greater complexity of society. There are echoes of the new requirements for the social work degree in England: social work training is to be longer, generic, include substantial IT learning opportunities and increased practice learning (Department of Health, 2002).

Conclusions: comparing the arguments for reform in the two countries

This paper began by arguing that although there were common factors influencing the social work reforms in both countries, most particularly a new social complexity requiring a more skilled social worker, the reforms in England have been driven by government and linked to managerialist ideas. In Spain, by contrast, there has been a stronger influence of global changes, particularly those emphasising European convergence.

From a consideration of social work education in the two countries, the paper has shown that there are points in common about the justification for reform even though it may be motivated by different actors. Issues of the relevance of education to practice are apparent in both countries, for example. The proposals to increase the practice element of social work training in England, to further promote the role of employers in the training, and to develop detailed National Occupational Standards, are however, acting to wrest decision making and control about the content and delivery of the training away, from educators and academics, into the hands of service managers and employers. This is managerialism in action.

In Spain arguments are also put forward for re-emphasising practice, although the absence of a clear framework of occupational standards underpinning the proposals suggests that managerialism has had less impact than in England.

Considering the evidence discussed above, it appears that the difference in the rationale for the reforms relates, in part, to the differential power held by academics in universities and is not just about the influence of convergence. It is evident that academics have more control over the future of social work education in Spain.

The current existence of a debate about social work as a science underlines the strong academic influence on professional training. This appears to reflect a cultural difference within Higher Education in Europe and is reflected in a recent piece of research. In a comparison between influences on social work education in England and Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Greece, Lymbery *et al.* (2000, p 269) identify what they refer to as the 'unique pressures that have been experienced in British social work'. These include factors such as the political climate which led to managerialist approaches, the poor status of social work, and the concept of *competence* in education and training. In the other countries considered there was seen to be much less regulation of social work education, with no equivalent of CCETSW and much less involvement of employers. Universities were much more in control of their curricula:

> 'In none of the countries within the network other than Britain, was the process of, or the criteria for, assessment dictated by any outside body'. (Lymbery *et al.*, 2000, p 270)

This aspect of university control over social work education reflects the situation in Spain, where it is the universities which will decide the future shape and content of education and training in social work. Although the comparison of social work education in the two countries

has revealed similar dissatisfaction expressed in terms of the inadequacy of current training, the English reforms may go further to address these.

The need for professional training to match the needs of vulnerable people and the delivery of appropriate services, presents a strong case for a competency based approach, where what professionals learn is influenced by employers of social workers. When curricula are dominated by academics' concerns they can remain distanced from the realities of practical social work, as has been suggested above by the research in Spain carried out by the Consejo General (2000). However, if competencies are achieved at the expense of the student having a broader, more critical aspect to their education, then they may not emerge sufficiently skilled, intellectually, to manage the kind of complex decision making and dilemmas which confront them in the *globalised* context of practice.

The preoccupation with skills and standards in England, whilst domestic in nature, is itself part of a global debate about professional competence and power, both in Higher Education and social work training. In Spain, academics appear to be controlling the debate. The evidence suggests that there is a higher level of awareness of European convergence than in England. In England, whilst social work educators and practitioners have for many years campaigned for longer training, this has now been imposed with strict rules about what the curriculum must contain in terms of theory and practice. This supports the argument that the reform of social work education in England has been more greatly influenced by a domestic, inward looking managerial culture, than by global or European considerations. In contrast, because control of social work education in Spain remains within the Higher Education sector and is seen as an educational matter, there is a more outward looking aspect, in arguing for reform in the light of European policy on convergence.

Deem (2000, p 7) identifies a concept referred to as 'internationalisation', defined as 'the sharing of ideas, knowledge and ways of doing things in similar ways across different countries'. This concept may help to explain the difference in the approach to reform in the two countries. Whereas social work education in both countries has inevitably been affected by globalisation and the need to respond to a more complex reality for social work, it seems that educators in Spain may be more ready (or simply more able) to accept and even promote the concept of internationalisation.

The Spanish reform proposals appear then to address international and global issues more explicitly. However, in Spain the willingness to embrace convergence may also be because academics see that this can serve as a pretext for reform. In England, academic control of social work education has been eroded by managerialism and this, combined with official and political ambivalence towards Europe, has allowed for ideas of convergence to have much less influence.

Ironically, current differences in the domestic Higher Education systems in the two countries in terms of respective duration of Diploma and Degree level courses, could impact negatively on European 'convergence' ideas in respect of social work training. In England the training is likely to be three years long, whereas in Spain, it is almost certainly to be four.

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