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Social work teaching partnerships: a discussion paper

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ABSTRACT

In 2016 the Government invited English local authority employers of social workers and university providers of social work qualifying programmes to apply jointly for funding to become social work teaching partnerships. This was in response to its concerns about the limited engagement of local authorities with qualifying training programmes. It was also part of the Government's strategy to ensure that students qualified as social workers with what it considered to be the right knowledge and skills and to improve their recruitment, retention and development and overall quality of practice. Following an evaluation of one partnership, this discussion paper addresses the evolution of these arrangements as found in consultations with representatives of 10 social work teaching partnerships (held 2017–18), the four original pilots and the six others that were subsequently funded. Drawing on a synthesis of the partnerships' reported experiences, this paper reports the variations in their approaches and sets out the challenges they faced and addressed, contextualising this in the policy landscape in which they were introduced and operated.

ARTICLE HISTORY

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Background

In 2015 the Department for Education (DfE) and then Department of Health (DH) (now the Department of Health and Social Care—DHSC) invited English local authorities to express an interest in becoming a social work teaching partnership, defined as:

... an accredited collaboration between higher education institutions (HEIs) and employers which deliver high quality training for social work students and qualified practitioners and equip them to practise to specified standards in statutory settings. (DfE and DH, 2016 p2)

A key element of the partnerships was that they were to be employer-led, reflecting the fact that in England local authorities are the main employers of social workers who hold statutory responsibilities in children's services, adults' services and mental health services.

Initially four pilot social work teaching partnerships were funded in 2015–2016, but ahead of the publication of a report on their evaluation (Berry-Lound, Tate, & Greatbatch, 2016) the DfE and DH announced the number of partnerships would be extended and issued an invitation for new partnerships of employer organisations and HEIs to apply for these funds. While both Government Departments were able to take account of the evaluation's contents in shaping the future programme, the timing of the

evaluation's publication meant that those applying for funding to establish new partnerships were not able to benefit from its contents.

The DfE and DH's invitation stated that partnerships were intended to be 'the key delivery vehicle' to address the recommendations made by Professor David Croisdale-Appleby (Croisdale-Appleby, 2014) and Sir Martin Narey (Narey, 2014) in their respective reviews of social work education. Both reports had, in different ways and with different perspectives, emphasised the importance of achieving greater consistency in the requirements for entry onto social work qualifying programmes and greater clarity over the knowledge social workers should be required to have on qualification. Both stressed the need for social work education to become more rigorous, accepting only students with good academic results. This was also an aspiration of the Social Work Task Force (2009) which recommended:

Greater partnership between employers and educators for the improvement of social work education. Assuring the quality of entrants into the social work profession and creating a culture of continuous learning and development on the front line, both depend on a new era of improved partnership between employers and educators. (p 65)

While both the 2014 reports were commissioned at the same time and their recommendations overlapped they appear to be located within very different conceptions of social work. As Higgins (2014) suggests, this is illustrated by differing views on the International Federation of Social Workers' (IFSW) definition of social work, adopted by the IFSW General Meeting in Montréal, Canada:

The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work. (IFSW, International Federation of Social Workers, 2000)

Narey viewed the definition as inadequate because it failed to include an explicit reference to statutory child protection. Croisdale-Appleby did not refer specifically to the definition, but he consulted with international experts and his report contains a favourable reference to IFSW's and the International Association of Schools of Social Work's (IASSW's) approved Global Standards for the Education and Training of the Social Work Profession (IASSW/IFSW 2004). Another difference appears to be Croisdale-Appleby's view of social work education as firmly located with the university contrasting with Narey's more equivocal stance, a view more closely aligned with that which had emerged from the DfE during the preceding year and specifically from the Secretary of State, Michael Gove (Cooper, Schraer, & McNicholl, 2016). There was widespread criticism of this by many social work academics, summed up in a debate at the Joint University Social Work Education Conference where, on the basis of the support it gave to Narey's report, the DfE was accused by one participant of undermining the profession's responsibility for its own development, with another academic fearing that the profession had lost its way and was moving in a different direction from the rest of the world.¹ In summary, while Narey's (2014) report emphasised the 'preparation for task', that of Croisdale-Appleby stressed the preparation and development of a professional (Baginsky & Manthorpe, 2015).

The second phase of social work teaching partnerships

There were 15 successful applications (the four pilots and 11 new partnerships), but final approval of funding was delayed until November 2016. Table 1 contains details of the partnerships. Noteworthy is the variation in the number of partners and in the balance between universities and local authorities. The amount of funding allocated also differed. In contrast to the first phase, the Government did not commission an evaluation.

Study and methods

This discussion paper arises from an evaluation we undertook of one of the new teaching partnerships. The study's protocol was reviewed by King's College London's research ethics committee, but deemed a service evaluation and not requiring its approval. Nonetheless, principles of ethical research were followed. The evaluation report is confidential. It was based on a detailed investigation of the views of representatives of all agencies in that partnership over a nine-month period between June 2017 and February 2018, as well as those of individuals in roles supported by the partnership, students on the social work qualifying courses, and representatives of other universities within the partnership's region but not part of it. We additionally consulted with representatives of 10 other social work teaching partnerships, namely the four original pilots and six funded in Phase 2. Thus, the themes examined in this present paper are based on views of informants representing 11 of the 15 partnerships that existed in 2017–18. Data were collected mainly by face-to-face interviews, although occasionally telephone interviews were substituted for informants' convenience. In all but two partnerships both academic and local authority respondents were involved, with the other two involving either an academic or a representative of a local authority.

Table 1. Teaching partnerships and constituent members in December 2016 (1) = member of original four pilot teaching partnerships.

Teaching partnership	Number of local authorities	Number of private and voluntary independent(PVI) agencies	NHS trusts	Number of universities	Other agencies
<i>Greater Manchester Social Work Academy</i> ^a	10	2	-	2	-
<i>North West Midlands</i> ^a	4	2	1	2	-
<i>South East London</i> ^a	3	-	-	1	-
<i>South Yorkshire</i> ^a	5	-	-	2	-
<i>West Midlands</i>	9	-	-	1	-
<i>Cumbria-Lancaster</i>	1	4	-	1	-
<i>North-East Social Work Alliance</i>	12	-	-	6	1
<i>South Coast centre for Social Work Education</i>	2	-	-	2	-
<i>Yorkshire Urban and Rural</i>	4	3	-	2	-
<i>Leeds and Wakefield</i>	2	-	-	2	-
<i>West London</i>	7	-	-	2	-
<i>North London</i>	3	-	-	2	-
<i>Humber</i>	4	2	-	2	-
<i>Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire</i>	4	2	1	2	1
<i>Suffolk and Norfolk</i>	2	-	-	2	-

^aOne of the original four pilot teaching partnerships.

^bNot full members.

The interviews covered co-ordination and management of partnerships, allocation of funding, relationships across the partner agencies, as well as curriculum, teaching and placement matters. All interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed and analysed using the constant comparative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984) to create a framework for the analysis that also allowed an exploration of the relationships between different parts of the data to arrive at themes and subsequently sub-themes.

This discussion paper examines common themes that emerged from our analysis across the teaching partnerships, as well as the perceived successes, challenges and solutions. While the initiative was confined to English local authorities the matters explored will likely be familiar for those teaching and practising social work in other countries where statutory social work is the main social work role. However, it is important to recognise that the partnerships were all very different in their size, aspirations, management and vision for sustainability, as well as in their assessments of what they had been able to achieve.

Findings

This section outlines the themes identified across the teaching partnerships.

Governance

The partnerships adopted different approaches both to advancing their project plans and managing areas of work. All had an executive or strategic board, usually supplemented by an operational board or a group that oversaw the partnerships' activities. 'Task and finish' groups appeared to be one of the most successful approaches to implementation, with each having its own terms of reference and defined timescales. Unlike other social work teaching partnerships, one large partnership had decided that neither the universities nor local authority partners would receive allocated funding. Instead, money was linked to the development of specific activities. While there was some opposition to the arrangement because some authorities and universities would have preferred to have received funding as happened in other partnerships, it was generally welcomed as having the potential to embed activities that proved to be successful and so provide the possibility of sustainability beyond the life of the partnership. The most criticised model was one where board members took day-to-day responsibility for leading areas of work, but the many competing demands on their time deflected their focus.

The benefits of appointing dedicated project managers were recognised in the national evaluation of the four pilot partnerships (Berry-Lound et al., 2016) and the importance of doing so emerged during the second phase. Not only did project managers monitor and review progress, taking the necessary steps to realign activities to the implementation plan, they were also able to address possible conflicts, such as intervening when individuals tried to include initiatives not identified in the submitted bid or where communication between partners and with their wider communities became problematic. These discussions highlighted how few comments were made about the published evaluation report (Berry-Lound et al., 2016). Only three informants

made any reference to it and only two to specific aspects. While the report of the evaluation may have had an influence in the two Government Departments, its importance for the new partnerships was limited, likely because it was published once plans had been submitted and agreed.

Despite the intention that social work teaching partnerships would be employer-led this was considered hard to achieve and, by some, even to define. Most local authority informants reported that while it was appropriate that they had a say in what pre- and post-qualification courses were offered locally, and wished to inform debates on curriculum content, final decisions about content should stay with universities. Some university informants expressed antipathy to the notion of tipping the balance in favour of local authorities, usually based on their fear that if employers' priorities shifted, the consequences for university courses could be damaging. In one partnership spanning two universities, the authorities had adopted one specific framework for practice in children's social care. One of the universities was reported to be anxious to provide substantial input on this approach on its pre-qualification course as most of the students would be employed by these authorities, while the other was only to be willing to cover it as one of many approaches. While there may have been several reasons for this, this latter university attracted students from a wide geographic area who would not necessarily stay in the area after qualification.

Overall, feedback from informants indicated that in partnerships where strong working relationships between the authorities and universities pre-dated the initiative, local authorities had developed proposals that were being implemented, in some cases countering the others' claim that universities' planning cycles were a barrier to progress. This holds out the hope that if these relationships can be strengthened through the partnerships, even barriers that appear to be deep rooted may be surmountable. In general, where sound relationships did not exist, and/or where authorities in the partnership were under improvement notices after Government inspections had judged them to be inadequate, teaching partnerships were not high local authority priorities and universities continued to assume the lead in much of the work.

Admissions

The DfE/DH requirements in relation to admitting students onto qualifying courses were based on applicant partnerships providing evidence related to three eligibility criteria: 1) the involvement of those with lived experience and employer representatives in the design; 2) operation and decisions on admissions; and 3) meeting the Social Work Reform Board's (2010) guidance on student admission using a range of methods to assess candidates.² All the teaching partnerships reported that they had either already met these criteria or reported to be close to doing so.

Informants in both local authorities and universities invariably drew the connection between the numbers admitted on to courses and the availability of placements. In most partnerships, there had not yet been a direct impact on the numbers of students recruited, but there were exceptions. One area had estimated the overall number of students in the 'partnership' and linked it with both the local workforce plan and an assessment of placement capacity. There had been concerns across the local authorities on the high number of students accepted by one non-partnership university that ran

both post-graduate and undergraduate routes. When plans were drawn up to incorporate that university into the partnership its post-graduate route was excluded and thus students on that course were not guaranteed statutory placements. As a condition of joining, that university was also required to halve the number recruited to its undergraduate course. In another partnership, after assessing available practice educators and placements, only the post-graduate programme in the applicant university was included. The university's willingness to reduce its student numbers indicated to the other partners the store it placed on being 'inside' the partnership.

The number of university-based social work training courses in England increased in the first decade of this century but between 2012 and 2015 the number fell (Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), 2016), alongside a fall in overall enrolments (Skills for Care, 2016). In the view of many university informants the teaching partnership initiative was one way of reducing courses even further to reflect and possibly encourage the introduction of alternative training routes such as Step Up to Social Work and Frontline which are increasing their numbers (Cooper et al., 2016) and with which many of the local authorities in teaching partnerships were involved in parallel arrangements (see Domakin & Curry, 2018).

However, the threat to the existence of university-based courses was not just seen as coming from these new training routes. In some regions, all universities offering social work programmes were included in the partnership, but this was not always the case. A few of those who were outside of any partnership were concerned for their future:

Instead of closing courses—and that would have to come from the universities—you raise the requirements beyond what most of their applicants will have, exclude them from the partnership and see if they survive. (University teacher)

Placements and curriculum

Requirements around statutory placements were set out in the original DfE/DH (2016) call and included the requirement that they take place in a local authority setting or settings delivering delegated statutory functions on behalf of the local authority and requiring case records to be updated by the student, under appropriate supervision. In 2016 priority was given to applicants promising two statutory placements relevant to students' preferred areas of practice in contrasting settings. Where the private, voluntary or independent (PVI) sector agencies offered placements that delivered statutory work, proposals were required to show how they were equivalent to statutory placements. While both Government Departments stated that non-statutory experience may be valuable for social work students and would continue to be funded by the Education Support Grant (ESG), the emphasis was firmly on statutory work, revisiting again the view of other placements as 'second best' (McLaughlin, Scholar, McCaughan, & Coleman, 2015).

Debates over what constituted a statutory placement occurred across most partnerships. It was, perhaps, surprising that there was very little debate on what constituted a good statutory placement, with attention focused very much on securing them. Although there were many discussions about the positive experiences from non-statutory or PVI placements (see Hek, 2012; Scholar, McLaughlin, McLaughlin, & Coleman, 2014), only a minority of those interviewed disagreed with the goal of providing two

statutory placements even though they faced challenges in finding enough and feared losing experienced practice educators (PEs) based in non-statutory settings. Various solutions were being tested, not only to help deal with the shortfall but also to maintain placements they anticipated needing when partnership funding ceased.

As mentioned above many of the authorities involved in teaching partnerships were also involved in one or more of the employer-led social work qualifying training programmes: Step Up to Social Work, Frontline and Think Ahead. These fast track, work-based training routes were reported to be contracting the numbers of available placements and experienced PEs. This had been a widespread concern when they were introduced (Baginsky & Manthorpe, 2014). Universities that employed independent PEs had not seen a reduction in reliance on their support. In some areas rising caseloads meant more PEs, or their managers, were refusing to take students on placement. In one partnership the shortage was reported to have become so acute that local authorities had resorted to threatening to demote social workers if they did not take a student. In other areas, PEs were reported to be threatening to let their PE skills lapse if they could not have a student from a university of their choosing, as opposed to one from a partnership university. Freund and Guez (2018) have recently shown that, in the Israeli context, intentions to leave the task of student supervision among social work supervisors are strongly linked to actual withdrawal from this role.

Informants from universities 'outside' a partnership thought their viability would be at risk if they were unable to offer their students a similar experience to that they would get if they attended a university that was part of a teaching partnership. A frequently feared scenario was one where a fall in applications would occur if statutory placements could not be guaranteed and university managers consequently decided that numbers were too low to sustain the programme. Some university informants reported being less able to offer statutory placements because local authorities prioritised universities in partnerships. They also believed they had 'lost a place at the table' where placements were discussed and decisions made; fearing the consequences should the initiative lead to permanent changes in placement provision and working practices in the local authorities.

Academic delivery

Teaching partnerships were widely viewed by informants as having provided an opportunity to rethink how the two arms of social work education—academic and practice—could be brought closer together in more systematic and effective ways. While there is a long history of involving practising social workers in teaching on social work courses (Williams, Mostyn, & Fyson, 2009), it is often individuals known to academics or those with specific experience (or confidence) to contribute who are approached and several informants wanted a more equitable system.

Some teaching partnerships had used some of the funding for posts designed to bridge the two sectors (employer and university). In one partnership eight practitioners contributed to teaching and research in the university while continuing to work in local authorities. They received introductions in both teaching and research methods from the university and while their contribution was well regarded and enabled the partnership to evidence an increase in practitioner involvement in university teaching, academics believed that those who had conceived the role had failed to recognise, and

subsequently acknowledge, the level of support required for these activities. Another teaching partnership had intended that local authorities would have 15 practitioner consultant posts distributed across their children's and adult services. When the application process attracted 112 applications the project team realised the process had, *de facto*, acted as a skills audit of what practitioners could offer universities, so they changed plans and turned to a spot-purchase approach whereby, if somebody had a skill in a particular area, they were invited to contribute to that aspect of the programme.

As with practitioners contributing to university courses, academics' engagement with practice had been taking place across most partnerships for many years, but it was often *ad hoc* or in response to requests from known contacts. Several partnerships used the opportunity provided by the initiative to establish models that had the potential to be sustainable, and possibly replicable. One partnership was intent on avoiding piecemeal integration in favour of adopting models that were linked to evidence-based or at least evidence-informed practice. The local authorities were asked to identify an area of practice that would benefit from specialist input. Academic staff were then matched to these areas according to their areas of expertise. At the time of the interviews, the partnership had supported a multi-generational group work programme, the provision of reflective group supervision in adult mental health, a one-off piece of psychotherapeutic work, and facilitating a support group for mothers who have had children removed. In another partnership, a model had been adopted whereby research-active lecturers worked directly on case discussions using research on outcomes and evidence to inform assessments and analysis. Anecdotally one team manager reported that she believed that this involvement had led to two children not coming into care. Whether or not there was a link was still being explored, but it was described as 'a process of evolution as well as a bit of a process of revolution—what we've tried to do is make sense of things in a new way' (project director).

Workforce planning, continuing professional development (CPD) and progression

Most informants reported that workforce planning was one of the most challenging areas of work, involving both the number of students admitted to qualifying programmes linked to area or regional labour market plans and CPD plans informed by employer requirements. All the partnerships reported problems in associating recruitment programmes with the future requirements of the partner agencies. Just by bringing authorities into a partnership did not eradicate population variations and hence demand for services, nor ensure that graduates remained in the area where they had trained. Several informants linked difficulties in forecasting demand not only to the size of partnerships but also the size of the geographic areas they covered. The authorities in both partnerships that had made most progress in developing workforce plans were geographically close and had worked together previously on several initiatives. One plan contained evidence-based proposals linked to population change. It acknowledged the limitations of the available data but nevertheless used them to produce what they considered to be a workable model. In other partnerships, it was difficult to establish even a minimum baseline for the workforce in children's and adult services because of inadequacies in the data they collected alongside the difficulties they encountered in

sharing information with each other. Most of the partnerships were even finding it difficult to produce accurate evidence on whether or not graduates were employed in social work six or 12 months after qualifying even though they were required to report these data (formerly to the Higher Education Council currently (2019) to the Office for Students).

Establishing CPD plans linked to employer requirements also taxed many partnerships, and there were very few examples of attempts to map existing CPD provision or systematically explore authorities' preferred models of CPD provision or its outcomes. However, one partnership had developed a CPD model that contained modules, including practice education and leadership' management and mentoring, as well as an evidence and research strand. There were also skill-based modules that focused on specific areas including writing court reports and giving evidence:

So what we've tried to do is, rather than come as a university and say, this is what we've got, please buy it, what we said is, this is what we can do if we work together, there are economies of scale in that and also if we co-deliver, there are ways of relieving the cost.
(An academic)

In complete contrast to this spirit of co-production, in another area, the Chair of the local partnership had drafted an outline of a CPD programme which was designed to be applied across all the local authorities in the partnership with training delivered by a university partner. The university had previously offered courses, but these had been terminated because local authorities did not have the resources to fund staff to attend and local authorities were struggling to 'ring-fence' or protect training budgets, but neither the other local authorities nor the university had been actively involved in the proposed development.

Adult services

Despite the initiative having been developed and co-funded by the DfE and DH most partnerships reported a much lower level of engagement from adult services than by children's services. Some informants from the adult sector attributed this both to a lack of awareness and to a widespread perception that the partnership had a children's services focus. Although both Chief Social Workers had written to all Directors of adult and children's services to urge them to support the development of social work teaching partnerships,³ the DfE was widely regarded as the lead Government Department and the nature of the DH's involvement was uncertain. Partnerships that had achieved more balance between the sectors said it had come through open discussions of what each wanted to contribute and gain from the relationship, supported in one case by ensuring separate, as well as joint, agendas and events.

One reason cited for this imbalance was the changing context of adult services during this time, aligned with severe budget cuts affecting all adult social care (as reported by the National Audit Office, 2018). It was also suggested that partnerships' focus on recruitment of social workers may also have led those in adult services to question the relevance of the partnership at a time when they relied on a more diversely qualified workforce, including regulated professionals such as Occupational Therapists and other allied health professionals.

Discussion

The teaching partnership initiative was a two-pronged policy on the education and training of social workers and their subsequent recruitment and retention. It was expressly designed to make qualifying social work training more practice focused. The Department for Education (2018, p. 1) explained that ‘A key strategic aim of the programme is to make sure social work education meets actual employer need’. The partnerships need to be seen within a broader approach, specifically in relation to the government’s vision of social work in England and more specifically in relation to training of those entering children’s services, and more generally its support for employer-led training. The All-Party Parliamentary Group for Social Work (2013) concluded that the recommendations of the Social Work Task Force Social Work Task Force (2009), Social Work Reform Board (2010) and the Munro (2011), including those in relation to training, had not improved practice in children’s services. This was less than three years after the recommendations of all three had been published, years that had seen sharp increases in the number of referrals to children’s services, child protection plans and children being taken into care. This trend has accelerated. The Chair of the SWRB acknowledged that, while much had been achieved, the pace of change had been challenged by the significant reduction in resources (Social Work Reform Board, 2012). However, others have argued that it was not resources alone; for example Higgins, Goodyear, and Whittaker (2015) suggest that a major shift from protectionism to welfare would have been necessary in children’s services for this to have had any chance of success.

The SWTF had been created under the Labour administration of 2005 – 10, while the task of implementing its recommendations fell to the Coalition Government (2010–2015) which had made an electoral commitment to introduce swift and drastic financial restraint in public expenditure. Considerable resources had been directed to pre- and post-qualification training between 2006 and 2012 but when these came to an end they were replaced by initiatives which were targeted rather than universal, so setting out a very different landscape in which to introduce the Task Force’s recommendations. Financial constraint on the public sector, which is the main employer of social workers, has continued and intensified with inevitable impact on services and the professionals employed in them. But it has also been an unprecedented period of change for a profession where change has become the norm. In addition to the reforms and reports identified above, there has also been continuing uncertainty about funding for university-based courses (see Webber et al., 2014). As noted, new approaches to training social workers have been piloted and rolled out, namely Step Up, Frontline and Think Ahead, while a national assessment and accreditation system for social workers in statutory child and family settings is being piloted (Department for Education, 2017); and a new regulatory body (Social Work England) has been created (commencing 2019). As noted in the introduction to this present paper, these developments outside HEI settings are changing the reliance of the profession’s qualifying training on higher education providers. There are unsurprisingly disputes about the potential effects of these on academic independence, professional identity and retention (as noted by Webber et al., 2014), although more data are now emerging from evaluations. These include a longer-term follow-up study showing positive effects on performance and retention for Step Up to Social Work cohorts after 5 years (Smith, Stepanova, Venn, Carpenter, & Patsios, 2018).

The idea of local authorities and universities coming together to develop and support social work education is not new. Regional partnerships have been running in a number of areas for many years and teaching partnerships are only the latest in a history of similar initiatives, albeit the most ambitious. For example, the Post-Qualification (PQ) framework introduced by Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work and subsequently the General Social Care Council (GSCC) was developed through regional partnerships between universities and employers (Rixon & Ward, 2012). Neither is it original to create initiatives and the means to support them. The two-year Recruitment and Retention Pilots funded in 2009 by the then Department of Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) and supported by the now abolished Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) contained many similarities with social work teaching partnerships (see Government Office for the West Midlands, 2010; Searle & Patent, 2010). Some, such as the North-East Social Work Consortium, reformed as teaching partnerships, others continue without the name or funding, while some have disappeared. The legacy of former arrangements played out across the partnerships in both positive and negative ways. Where local authorities had established links that underpinned current activities and collaborations, the teaching partnership provided the resources, as well as a spark, to take these to a new level. However, in circumstances where past partnerships had flourished but then fallen apart, or where they had stumbled on without real commitment from all agencies, the teaching partnerships appeared to struggle to engage all partners.

The difference between past and current partnerships is that the latter are defined in terms of being employer-led, even if there is an absence of elaboration of what this might mean or of the impact of introducing an imbalance into an initiative focused on collaboration. While the initiative provided or extended a forum for discussion between statutory social work agencies and universities, there was less evidence that plans for the partnerships to be employer-led had translated into reality. As in the early days of the Step Up to Social Work training route where this had also been an aspiration (Baginsky & Mantorpe, 2014), many local authorities would have found it difficult to assume this role. In partnerships based on long-standing relationships, local authorities had developed proposals in collaboration with the universities. These were mostly viewed as successful, but in the instance where the local authorities wanted a curriculum to concentrate on a specific practice framework or where a model of training was developed in isolation from other partners, tensions either came to the fore or progress was halted.

Thorley (2014) observes, despite increased emphasis on strengthening relationships between universities and employers, there appears to be a limit to what 'sporadic local partnerships' are able to achieve without a systematic approach to workforce planning, bringing recruitment to social work courses in line with the demand for social workers and the provision of placements. Previous attempts have often failed. One of the recommendations of the Social Work Task Force (2009) was for the development of a system for forecasting levels of supply and demand for social workers. The former Centre for Workforce Intelligence (CfWI) was commissioned to develop a tool, but it was not widely adopted (CfWI, 2012). Thus, it may have been an unrealistic expectation for teaching partnerships to achieve a local workforce plan or to find solutions which others had not. Most of the partnerships in this study appeared to be initially concentrating on the need to address recruitment challenges and ascertain the availability of placement, rather than the

more daunting task of identifying the number of social workers needed to meet future demand. Several informants, usually in universities considered to be more prestigious, were concerned about the quality of courses offered by other institutions and the number of students they admitted. While there was no desire to see courses closed, they did want to see them improve. As Cleary (2018) has identified, the marketisation of universities is the ‘elephant in the room’ with some universities admitting high numbers of students without the necessary resources. In at least two partnerships this tension was beginning to be addressed, but the sustainability of the solution (mid-2018) remains uncertain.

Social Work Teaching Partnerships were forced to accept, or at least privilege, the equation of social work with statutory activity. This reflects the alignment of the initiative with Narey’s view of social work education as preparation for statutory child protection. The dominant university view was that non-statutory placements were not only valuable for students but necessary to meet demand. Nevertheless, they agreed to arrange statutory placements because to do otherwise would have brought into question their commitment to the teaching partnership initiative.

While academics in partnerships reflected on the challenges they faced in meeting required goals there were very few criticisms of the concept of teaching partnerships from those who were part of them. This was not necessarily the case for those on the outside for whom they were generally viewed as divisive. Some went further and discussed what they considered to be a hidden and, in their view, the pernicious agenda of the initiative, namely to manage numbers entering the social work profession and reduce the number of qualifying courses.

In the absence of DfE and DH arranging opportunities to meet, the partnerships organised their own conferences and meetings, as well as some partnership specific evaluations. Most, but not all, participated in these events and viewed them as a useful forum for sharing information and ideas, especially when officials from both departments were present. Gray (1989) recognises that collaborations are ‘ongoing and evolving processes’ (p15), reliant on a model of shared power which can be difficult to achieve. It was evident that partnerships were at different points on this continuum when the data that have informed this paper were collected. For some, it remained a peripheral activity competing with many other demands, whereas others were establishing structures and embedding them locally and regionally. While the pilot teaching partnerships have been evaluated (Berry-Lound et al., 2016), a national evaluation of the extended initiative was not commissioned. The limitations attached to confining an evaluation to pilots (Pawson & Tilley, 1997; Spicker, 2013) or to just the first phase of an initiative (Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004) have been evidenced. In the case of the teaching partnerships, the absence of a contemporaneous evaluation between 2016 and 2018 prevented an assessment of the impact of the variations that were evident across the partnerships. However, the 22 partnerships funded in 2018 (12 from Phase 1; followed by 2 and 10 new ones) have been asked by the Government Departments ‘to evidence that work and its outcomes through the production of case study reports, the best of which can be shared more widely to support improvements across the sector’ (Department for Education and Department for Health, 2017, p. 4). A limited evaluation was, furthermore, commissioned by the Department for Education in late 2018 to examine the initiative, mainly retrospectively, which will hopefully also be able to capture the partnerships’ legacy. The test of their success will be if the structures

established outlive the initiative and if it can be shown that they lead to better outcomes for those receiving services from social workers. Research may also be needed after central government funding ceases to determine the partnerships' legacy. As Ghate (2016) points out:

... even when considerable investment is made to introduce innovations within service systems, sustaining the potential over the longer term continues to challenge policy and practice communities across the globe. (p812)

Notes

1. See <https://www.willispalmer.com/news/archive/five-key-questions-jswec-debate-social-works-future/>.
2. All candidates for BA and MA courses should complete a written test, regardless of their previous qualifications; have performed well in individual interviews and group exercises; thresholds for entry should meet certain standards, such as a minimum of 240 UCAS points or equivalents for applicants for undergraduate courses; candidates should have achieved GCSE grade C or above in English and Maths or certified equivalents, be competent in written and spoken English and be able to demonstrate basic IT skills and employers, service users, and carers should be involved in the selection process.
3. <https://lynromeo.blog.gov.uk/2016/04/14/teaching-partnerships-are-forging-the-future-of-social-work> (accessed 25 March 2019).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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