

History and Purpose of the Social Work Assembly for Social Care and Social Work Education and Research

Professor Pat Higham
The Nottingham Trent University
Nuffield Seminar
8 June 2004

1998-1999: *Malcolm Payne and the Co-ordinating Group*

The Assembly began its life as the **Co-ordinating Group of Further and Higher Education Interests in Education and Training for the Personal Social Services**, convened by Professor Malcolm Payne, then at Manchester Metropolitan University. Malcolm perceived a need for a Co-ordinating Group to ensure representation for education and research in the Department of Health Policy Review of Social Work. It was argued that the Department of Health was not certain which organisations claiming some representation for social work education and research should be invited to take part in its Policy Review consultation. At that time there seemed to be no effective processes for bringing different organisations together to provide effective representation for the Review. The education and research constituency lacked an effective voice at a time when major policy reviews were taking place that would change the structure of social work and social care education and research.

The impending demise of the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW) led to the emergence of new national bodies like Topss (the Training Organisation for Social Care) and the General Social Care Council. These new bodies sought representative membership from social care employers, professional bodies, users and carers, education and research for their Boards or Councils. The education and research sector needed to find a way to nominate representatives for these bodies.

With this purpose in mind, Malcolm Payne convened representatives from constituent organisations to form the Co-ordinating Group. The Group focused on education and research interests rather than employer interests. From the start, widening membership to education and research interests beyond formal higher education was seen as important. Early meetings took place at CCETSW's national offices at Derbyshire House, St. Chad's Square in London, and at the offices of CVCP in Tavistock Square.

In October 1998, through a selective process and using agreed criteria, the Co-ordinating Group nominated three Board members for three places on the Topss England Board. One place was reserved for Higher Education, one for Further Education, and one for a professional body in education and training. Candidates for the seats were asked to submit a Curriculum Vitae and a statement addressing the criteria.

The Co-ordinating Group issued a written statement in response to the consultation for the Policy Review of Social Work. It also made

recommendations for membership of the 2000 Social Work Research Assessment Exercise Panel.

2000: *Forming the Assembly*

In January 2000, a 'signpost meeting', attended by constituent organisations, took place in Manchester. The purpose was to set up a governance structure for an Assembly. The signpost meeting agreed that either a single or a more co-ordinated voice for social work education and research was desirable. The meeting rejected amalgamation of separate organisations, but decided to aim for some form of federation.

During 2000, the Co-ordinating Group met with a Topss England Development Officer to advocate a transparent process for achieving academic representation on Topss' working groups. Topss, the training organisation for social care, was in the process of establishing Working Groups to develop national occupational standards for particular social care roles. Topss agreed to supply a list of Working Groups and to consider ways of inviting nominations from the Co-ordinating Group.

In July 2000, the concept of the Assembly was publicised at the Joint Social Work Education Conference.

Attempts were made to establish a national representative body to represent Social Care Lecturers in Further Education, (a proposed Association of Schools of Social Care) but in October the Co-ordinating Group decided that because of the lack of a viable budget and staff time, it would be impractical to create such an organisation.

During 2000 the Co-ordinating Group discussed the separate functions of Topss, the GSCC, and other bodies. Concern was expressed at the apparent lack of 'joined-up' organisations and thinking. The future of professional social work did not seem clear.

By the end of 2000, the Co-ordinating Group and its constituent organisations agreed to launch the Assembly. The proposed members were, as far as can be established:

Association of Care Training and Assessment Networks (ACTAN); Association of University Professors of Social Work (AUPSW); Joint University Council Social Work Education Committee (JUC/SWEC); National Association of Training Officers in the Personal Social Services (NATOPSS); National Organisation for Practice Teaching (NOPT); Social Services Research Group (SSRG); Social Work Research Association (SWRA); the Association of Teachers of Social Work Education (ATSWE); and the UK Standing Conference of DipSW Partnerships (UKSC).

Also mentioned but not included in the Assembly proposals were the Open University (OU); Open Learning Foundation (OLF); Standing Conference of Principals (SCP); Association of Colleges; and Committee of Vice Chancellors

and Principals (CVCP). These bodies had been associated with the concept of the Co-ordinating Group.

A newsletter, to be published three times a year, was proposed.

2001: *Launch of the Assembly*

The last meeting of the CCETSW England Committee took place in May 2001. Also during this period, the Consultation on the Quality Strategy for Social Work/Social Care drew to a close. The Department of Health announced its Project for the Reform of Social Work Education. The emergent Assembly worked closely with SWEC to nominate members of the Project Board and various Project Groups.

During 2001, Topss England set up its Regional Committees. The Assembly contributed some names for nominations to seats on the Regional Committees, and encouraged Further Education representatives to be appointed on the Regional Committees.

The proposed structure of the Assembly was complex. Assembly meetings were to take place three times a year. There would be two annual conferences, one for research and one for education. The Assembly was to be funded through fees from personal memberships and organisational memberships, with personal members receiving discounts on fees for conferences and journals. The Assembly would provide conference, communications, and membership services, and organise seminars and training events. The Assembly wanted to set up an Executive Committee, a Learning and Teaching Standing Committee, and a Research Standing Committee. Separate Committees for England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales were to become constituent parts of the Assembly. Standing committees from constituent organisations were to contribute to the Assembly by holding their committee meetings immediately prior to the Assembly meetings, followed by an Assembly meeting in the afternoon in accordance with an agreed annual programme.

The Assembly proposals were circulated to constituent organisations and gained support. Subsequently, the Assembly was launched at the Joint Social Work Education Conference on 9 July 2001. At that point, the Co-ordinating Group's functions were passed to the Assembly.

2002: *Search for a Chair for the Assembly*

Malcolm Payne stated that he did not wish to become Chair of the Assembly, and he withdrew, having successfully achieved the founding of the Assembly. The search for a new Chair began. During this period, the Joint University Council Social Work Education Committee under the leadership of Professor Joan Orme supported and led the developmental work for the Assembly. The plan was to complete formation of the Assembly by the end of 2002. As time

passed, the search proved problematic. Potentially the role would require a great deal of time, and the Assembly had no immediate funding source.

Over the next months, Assembly meetings addressed the issue of the Chair. The discussion centred on perceptions that the Assembly's proposed structure was too complex. The relationship of the constituent member organisations to the Assembly was not clear.

Efforts continued during 1992 to develop the representational capacity of social care lecturers in further education. Andrea Rowe, Topss England's Chief Executive, offered some developmental funding for outreach work to further education colleges, to secure representation from further education on Topss England Board.

In October 2002 the Assembly agreed that a new approach was needed for the Assembly. Dr. Ray Jones, Director of Adult and Community Services, Wiltshire County Council, was asked to become Chair of the Assembly.

2003: *Rethinking the Governance and Purpose of the Assembly*

In January 2003 the Assembly re-grouped under the leadership of Dr. Ray Jones. A Steering Group of representatives of constituent organisations met together at the University of Birmingham. The complex structure was abandoned. A new purpose was agreed.

'The Assembly was to

- (a) cover both social work and social care, recognising that social care is now the over-riding disciplinary area, but with social work as the lead discipline and profession within social care.
- (b) have as its focus social care and social work education and research, to give the Assembly a lead role in promoting and protecting the values, knowledge and skills base of social care and social work.

This focus was seen as particularly important at a time when social care and social work are being managed and delivered within settings which are not immediately identifiable as being lead social care/social work agencies and organisations, such as the integrated services being developed with Health, the integrated services being developed with Education, and the new configurations of multi-disciplinary teams being developed within the voluntary sector (e.g. family centres) and within the statutory sector (e.g. youth offending teams and drug action teams). It was particularly timely, therefore, to develop and promote a lead umbrella and networking organisation for social care and social work at this time. This ought to be recognised by, for example, the Department of Health as an important means of championing social care and social work whilst not opposing the new configurations for service delivery and management which are being developed.

- (c) The Assembly should cover all of the UK administrations (i.e. England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland) and also have links with international learning and development.
- (d) The Assembly should be a 'virtual organisation', acting as a network co-ordinating, for example, views and perspectives from member organisations. As such, it should not have a very extensive organisational infrastructure. There might need to be some secretariat capacity (for administration) and some development capacity (to get the Assembly organised and up and running). This might be funded by seeking a grant from a relevant grant awarding body (or indeed possibly from the Department of Health). This would be less complicated than seeking a subscription membership arrangement.
- (e) The work programme of the Assembly ought to be relatively modest, as, in effect, its role is to bring together constituent organisations to create a coherent and common voice for social care and social work education and research. This might be achieved by having Assembly meetings two or three times a year, and with any statements/proposals prepared by the Assembly being drafted by members of constituent organisations working together as relevant. In this way the Assembly does not set itself up as an over-arching body beyond the other organisations but as a network for those organisations.
- (f) The focus of the Assembly on promoting the values, knowledge base and skills of social care and social work through social care and social work education and research would keep the Assembly centred on social care and social work education research rather than, for example, on having employer and service provider organisations within the Assembly's network.'

(Ray Jones, 21 January 2003)

In the latter part of 2003, the Assembly nominated Professor Ian Butler to replace Pat Higham as the Higher Education member of the Topss England Board effective from the Topss Annual General Meeting in the autumn of 2004.

2004 The Nuffield Seminar: Does Social Work and Social Care Education and Research need an Assembly?

In 2004, Ray Jones succeeded in obtaining funding from the Nuffield Foundation for a Seminar/Forum to debate the future of the Assembly. The Steering Group began to plan the Forum/Seminar to take place in London on 8 June, when representatives/members from each of the potential constituent organisations of the Assembly would meet to determine the future for the Assembly and its potential role and remit.

The Assembly argues that it provides an opportunity to develop a collective voice for social care and social work at a time when the organisational

structures for social care and social work are changing. During this period, the new Social Work degree began in England, and the other countries began preparations for the new degree. The General Social Care Council in England announced a review of Post Qualifying Social Work education and training. The Department of Health funded Learning Resource Centres in England, and the Practice Learning Task Force was given a continuation of its activities for a further two years. In March 2004, social work was recognised as a profession with a protected title, with a requirement for Registration and continuing professional development for Re-registration. The Green Paper *Every Child Matters* designated the Department of Education and Skills as the lead department for services to children and young people. The integration of health and social care gathered pace.

Publicity for the Forum stated:

The Assembly for Social Care and Social Work Education and Research is an embryonic “virtual organisation” which would act as an umbrella network. It would seek to speak collectively for social care and social work education and research to champion, promote and protect the value, knowledge and skills base of social care and social work.

The Assembly would:

1. Protect, promote and develop the values, knowledge and skills of social care and social work
2. Contribute to effective practice and policy that delivers positive outcomes for service users
3. Network across UK social care and social work education and research representative organisations, and
4. Foster and maintain interaction between the Assembly and Government bodies and key agencies involved in the changing delivery of social care and social work services.