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COLLABORATIVE DESIGN OF A M.A. IN SOCIAL RESEARCH

A Collaborative Approach to Designing a M.A. in Social Research in Response to the
Changing Higher Education and Social Environment in Ireland

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to share the experience of and the rationale behind the development of a new post-graduate programme in social research for the purpose of generating discussion with other higher education institutions. The context in which the programme is being developed is that where change in the landscape and aims of higher education in Ireland are being driven by aims to streamline resources through merging institutions, increase research output and the research skills of students as well as ensure that higher education meets its economic and social obligations through engagement with society. In addition the social care sector is undergoing significant changes with regard to professionalisation, reduced resources and changes in the basis of the provision of services. In this paper the influences of the aims of higher education as well as the value of consultation and collaboration with our industry partners both in social research and social care on the development of the programme are discussed.

Keywords: Ireland, social research, higher education, post-graduate program, design

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Introduction

This paper discusses the rationale in the context of both higher education and the field of social care work in Ireland of the development on a post graduate programme in social research. It particularly focuses on the role of collaborating with representatives of organisations external to the academic institutions in the design of a programme and how the feedback received impacts on the aims and design of the programme. Decisions to use a blended approach to delivery and a portfolio as part of the assessment process are also discussed.

Higher Education in Ireland

In Ireland today the mission of higher education is stated to be to “rebuild an innovative knowledge-based economy that will provide sustainable employment opportunities and good standards of living for all of our citizens” (*National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*, 2011, p. 9). Pivotal to achieving this mission is developing innovative students who are research literate and capable of engaging with communities outside the higher education institution as well as the issues facing broader society. This is the higher education context in which the new postgraduate programme, M.A. in Social Research, is being developed. This section will outline the strategic aims of higher education in Ireland today and discuss how they have influenced the aims of and institutional context in which the programme is being developed.

Changes in Higher Education Framework

The *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (2011) recommends regional strategic alliances between higher education institutions for reasons of both financial saving the enhancement of innovation through collaboration. Ireland has a large number of higher

education institutions of varying sizes, some of which are considered to be too small to provide quality and efficiency in delivering programmes. Additionally, a number of institutes of technology, including the Dublin Institute of Technology, in Ireland have submitted proposals to change their status to that of a university and been refused. Hence a solution to achieving university status by amalgamating the three institutes of technology in the Dublin region to create a Technological University of Dublin (TUD) was proposed. A formal alliance was established in 2011 between Dublin Institute of Technology, ITT Dublin and Institute of Technology, Blanchardstown (TU4 Dublin, 2016, Welcome). The Technological Universities Bill was published in 2015. The proposed merger has offered the opportunity for this project to be developed under the Re-imagining our Curriculum - Programmes for the Future.

Research

The research strategy for higher education institutions in Ireland includes recommendations that the research base be broad encapsulating a wide range of disciplines. Most relevant to the discussion of the development of the M.A. in Social Research is the recommendation that Irish higher education institutions focus on research in the humanities and social sciences as well as the more traditional focus on science and technology. Research in the humanities and social sciences are seen to be not only “drivers of economic and social innovation” but also contribute the increased “social well-being” for the citizens of the country (*National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030*, 2011, p. 67). The mission of the Technological University for Dublin includes being “an innovative, practice-led, research-informed” institution that engages proactively with and contributes to life-changing opportunities for not only students but also for the communities of Dublin it serves (*TU4Dublin Implementation Plan*, 2014, p. iii). In particular TUD mentions tackling the challenge of social exclusion (*ibid*). In line with this an aim of the M.A. in Social Research is

to facilitate conducting research that will inform others about the needs and experiences of those in Dublin society who are most socially excluded. This will be achieved through engagement in research with agencies and organisations in the community who work with those experiencing social exclusion.

Engagement with Wider Society

As pointed out in the *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* (2011) engagement with society by institutions of higher education can take different forms. However it emphasises that “higher education institutions are uniquely placed to lead, develop and apply” approaches to address the challenges facing society, thereby fitting with “current thinking” (p. 74) about the mission of higher education to take more responsibility for the well-being on the community in which it is located. An underpinning theme of TUD is to ensure that the personal and professional development of the student not only benefits him or her and the economy but also is of value to society (*TU4Dublin Implementation Plan*, 2014). The programme was designed in collaboration with representatives from social and research organisations who provided valuable insights for the content of modules such as:

- Ensuring students were aware of cultural differences between the researcher and the participants
- Making the students aware of working with gatekeepers
- The ethics and practicalities of researching vulnerable groups
- Being unobtrusive when collecting data in a participant’s environment
- The importance of developing project management skills

As Jameson, Strudwick, Bond-Taylor and Jones (2012) note, collaboration with practitioners poses the opportunity for creativity in the design of curricula and ensures that the future needs for employability are met. In the development of the M.A. in Social Research collaboration with research and social care organisations is involved at two levels. Firstly, is the feedback from representatives of organisations in the development of the M.A.

programme. Secondly, the student completing the programme will be offered the choice of conducting research in partnership with a not-for-profit organisation in the social care sector and produce a research report which is useful to that organisation in meeting the needs of the clients they work with. The evolution and nature of the social care sector in Ireland is outlined later in this paper.

We are fortunate in developing the M.A. in Social Research that the Dublin Institute of Technology already has a well-developed unit, *Students Learning with Communities*, so that material already developed on principles and guidelines can be adapted. This allows us to engage with colleagues in a different area of the institution and make use of their experience and expertise.

Social Care in Ireland

The idea for the programme was also driven by the social changes in Ireland and, as the team mainly works within social care education, the imminent professionalization of social care work.

While social care work in Ireland originated in residential child care it has expanded beyond this sector with social care workers being employed in a variety of services for different client groups over the last two decades (Hallstedt & Högström, 2005).

Consequently, social care is now impacted on by a variety of legislation and policy frameworks, with the area of social care practice becoming increasingly complex (Hanrahan, 2016).

Over the last twenty years many changes in the sector have come from recommendations of inquiries into mismanagement and bad practice within service provision. Since the 1990s twenty-nine national inquiries and reviews, particularly with regard to the abuse of children, have taken place in Ireland. *An examination of the recommendations from these and inquiries into events with people in care, families and their interaction with State*

services and their impact on policy and research written by Buckley and O’Nolan (2013) states that “recommendations must draw on an evidence base when identifying solutions to policy and practice deficits identified” (p. 5). As pointed out by Sackett, Rosenberg, Gray, Haynes and Richardson (1996) evidence-based practice involves the integration of the expertise derived from experienced practice with external evidence from research.

In addition to the increasing emphasis on evidence-based policy and practice there is a shift in how the area of social care provision is funded and regulated. *The Health Act* (2004) is a legal framework for providing financial support for voluntary service providers and it also outlines a National Governance Framework. *The Public Service Reform Plan* (2014-2016) has at its core a citizen-centred approach that is outcome focused, requiring impact assessment supported by research. The role of community and social care services and how they are being funded are being debated in a radically new context, namely commissioning. Fred Mc Bride, recently appointed Chief Executive Designate of TUSLA (The Child and Family Agency) has confirmed a move towards commissioning by 2017.

Commissioning, in the context of the Child and Family Agency, is the process to ensure that the total resources available to children and families are applied to improving outcomes in the most efficient, effective, equitable, proportionate and sustainable way. (Tusla, 2016, p. 5)

For commissioning to be successful McBride (2016, n.p.) emphasises “the need for good data and analysis and the clear need for outcomes based approach,” which can only be achieved if service providers and workers are equipped with necessary research skills.

As well as changes within the delivery of social care services social care work in Ireland is undergoing a process of professionalisation with the forthcoming introduction of registration of social care workers. While some (e.g., Burns, 2007; Suddaby & Muzio, 2015) have argued that professionalization is a complex process a key feature of it is the generation

of its own evidence base from education and research (Matheson, 2000). Marsh and Fisher, (2008) argue, with regard to the provision of social care services in the United Kingdom, modernization requires the research literacy of the social care workforce to be improved.

Consultation with Stakeholders in Design of the Programme

Consultation with representatives of organisations in the social care sector suggest some of the benefits to the social care sector to be upskilling social care workers and thus improving practice, developing a culture of research within the profession, knowledge sharing between organisations and between social care organisations and educational institutions, helping to ensure the needs of the service users/clients are heard and increasing awareness of the work and needs of the sector.

Upskilling Workers and Improving Practice

Under this theme, stakeholders referred to both the value of research training for social care workers and how this would in turn impact on practice. In addition the value of working with a student from the M.A. programme in conducting research for practice was mentioned. A related subtheme was the contribution of the training provided by the programme to developing a research culture within social care organisations.

Contribution to the valuable training of future workers in the social care sector, skilled contribution of the students to social care organisations with knowledge and understanding of the needs of clients, closer connections between academic and practice knowledge and between educational institutions and the sector.

Moreover, it will drive evidence-based, practitioner-led practice which will be captured from a social care perspective (rather than let's say a social work or related discipline's perspective).

The sector lacks a strong research tradition and components from frontline staff and managers so very appropriate that opportunities for staff to develop competencies in this area. It will promote best practice in different sectors.

A research piece will provide evidence of relevance of the topic researched, while providing recommendations for positive change, improvements and outcomes, all of which will inform best practice and service delivery to the client group.

Developing a Research Culture.

This approach would continue the process of cultivating a research culture in the sector - bedded down, understood to be part and parcel of practice, something graduates understand they will need to participate in or carry out throughout their entire career (rather than just at the under grad level).

Knowledge Sharing

The second theme focuses on how conducting research and publishing it allows not only for greater “transparency of agencies” but also results in sharing of knowledge within the sector.

Sharing of knowledge and practices between different organisations.

Staff can really benefit from this education and it shall promote greater awareness and learning across the sectors. It would feed into current publications and strengthen the profile of professionals in the sector, thus informing best practice approaches for the future.

As the dynamics of children in care and the behaviors they are presenting with, are ever changing, any research into these can only be of benefit to the social care field as a whole. There is limited papers/reports into children in care in today’s climate and the reasons behind this.

Meeting Clients’ Needs

Participants mentioned also how research gives a voice to clients of social care services and through this is a source of feedback for agencies.

Voice to service users.

Inform services around unmet needs, consumer feedback, strategies to adapt to external changes factors, etc.

Increasing Awareness

The fourth theme refers to how research provides a vehicle through which government and other external stakeholders can be made more aware of the realities faced by the social care sector so appropriate funding can be secured.

It [the research project] may also provide the necessary evidence to lobby government departments or philanthropic organisations to source the necessary resources and funding, ensuring continuity of care, and a commitment to positive change for those most vulnerable and unheard within our society.

Managers and external key stakeholders in particular will be more informed of issues especially needs assessment and will be greater informed in the context of decision making with regard to agency priorities and funding needs for future development.

Sector representatives were also asked their views on how either having a staff member participate in the programme or have a student conduct research in their organisation. The benefits to organisations were seen to be filling a gap due to shortfalls in funding and facilitating an organisation in examining its own work to ensure that a quality service is provided.

Filling A Gap

[The programme] would contribute to our already significant presence of volunteers and interns in the organisation. As an NGO our services often rely on volunteers to provide support where there is a gap in funding.

Our funding from the State increasingly requires us to be evidence-based and is moving towards a commissioning model which will necessitate ongoing research to maintain service level agreements by proving we are meeting the needs of the stakeholders. However as a 100% state funded service, we have limited resources

to carry out research and will suffer in a competitive tendering process with other organisations who have greater capacity to do so. This MA programme would provide the basis for a mutually beneficial sectoral relationship - which could be dynamic, ongoing, and cost-effective. If commissioning for services actually comes to fruition - we will need to be driving the research agenda internally (from within social care practitioner/provider circles) or the drift towards the needs of the State will dominate (and that will mean 'value for money' could become the dominant issue in the tendering process - above all else). Students would also provide new thinking and energy - again, not just in terms of what we are giving them, but as mutual partners in a process that enhances the quality of the service we deliver.

Ensuring Quality of Service

Reflection of service provided to individuals, as a result feedback for the whole organisation. Findings being presented to the management team of [organisation].

To highlight that we are indeed providing an individual programme self-determined by the service users.

Highlight areas needing improvement, what could we be doing better?

The research piece will have a practical benefit to the organisation, which may inform future practices, decisions, and funding, all of which are relevant to continue to provide the best possible outcomes for the client/target group. It may highlight available resources that have to date been unrecognised, and create structures, within a climate of community and working together, ensuring inter and intra agency work.

In particular key research topics to inform disabilities services - key areas include new methods / models of service delivery, independent living initiatives, de-bundled funding initiatives, life - skills development and adult education for clients, application of information technology, approaches to employment and the development of social capital, differential diagnosis and the Multi-disciplinary team, and the context of direct social care input to this vulnerable group. Clearly a key area also would be families and client feedback on quality issues also.

The views of these representatives of the social care sector echo the arguments of Marsh and Fisher (2005) about the necessity for research evidence to be embedded in the knowledge base of health and social care professions. They point out that these professions make decisions which have a major impact on the lives of their clients both in the present and over time thus need to be based on the best available evidence. Evidence derived from research may challenge day-to-day assumptions of professionals thereby improving the delivery of services and outcomes for clients. Also the findings from research are best placed to inform the public, enabling them to engage in debates.

Outline of Programme and Rationale

The M.A. in Social Research combines both core and elective modules. This is designed to ensure that the graduate has knowledge of core elements of the theory and practicalities of conducting social research but also has the opportunity to gain more knowledge of specific approaches to research fitting with their background and intentions. Thus the programme aims to attract students who have a diverse range of intentions in relation to research such as those who are interested in working in the field producing research; those who are involved in commissioning research; those who are interested in research to formulate policy and those who are interested in practitioner research to support evidence based practice.

The learning outcomes and programme content are designed to develop a graduate who can:

- Critically evaluate the purposes of social research and research itself
- Discuss past and current debates in social research
- Evaluate the role of ethics in the design, conduct and reporting of social research
- Demonstrate the capability of working with others in the design, conduct and reporting of an ethically sound piece of research

- Competently use a variety of research approaches (both quantitative and qualitative) and methods of collection and analysis
- Productively reflect upon their own skills, knowledge and understanding as an independent social researcher
- Use research skills necessary to proceed to PhD study, work as researchers or conduct research in their current employment

Students will complete and must attain a pass grade in each of the four core modules before completing the independent research element to ensure that they have sufficient knowledge before engaging with agencies and participants. The core modules are:

- Theory and debates in social research
- Qualitative design and analysis
- Survey research and statistical analysis
- Evaluation and policy research

At the moment it is envisaged that five elective modules will be offered, based on the expertise of the current programme team (consisting of staff from the three institutions).

These are:

- Advanced statistics for social research
- Discourse and documents
- Practitioner and action research
- Researching personal worlds
- Tendering, funding and dissemination

Research Project Element

While the original idea was that the research project element would involve the student working with a social services organisation to conduct and write up a research report of relevance to that organisation discussion with members of the advisory committee led to this being broadened, demonstrating the value of early engagement with external bodies in designing an academic programme. Representatives from organisations who conduct social

research pointed out the value of students being placed with such organisations to gain broad experience with the realities of conducting large scale research as well as the existence of a large body of relevant data already collected and in need of analysis. This suggested to the programme team the need to incorporate a more flexible approach to this element of the programme.

Delivery Method and Assessment

A blended learning approach is considered to be effective as it has potential to support and enhance meaningful educational experiences (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). It can also provide a resource-effective methodology (Twigg, 2003) that is attractive to many educational institutions. The approach is recognised to facilitate a less rigid learning system, a broader geographic spread with greater access and it can offer a more flexible and responsive way to learn and work (Harris, Connolly & Feeney, 2009). The blended approach has multi instructional methods combined with multiple delivery methods. Osguthorpe and Graham (2003) identify six reasons why one might choose to design or use a blended learning system:

- Pedagogical richness
- Access to knowledge
- Social interaction
- Personal agency
- Cost effectiveness
- Ease of revision

To draw together the students' work in the different modules as well as their reflection on learning achieved the primary assessment for the programme will take the form of a portfolio. This will not only facilitate the student in developing a store of evidence of their work as researchers but also "their achievements, reflections on learning" (JISC, 2008, p. 6). It thus is potentially a picture of their current abilities and future aspirations for learning and

researching. The e-portfolio enables both tutor and student to have a record of the work and offers timely feedback, facilitating the students to learn effectively. Students build the capacity to critically self-reflect and engage in a diverse and inclusive network so as to engage in discourse around learning (ePortfolio hub, 2016)

Going Forward - Challenges and Questions Raised

Consultation with organisations within the social care sector have identified challenges in relation to the student conducting research with an organisation in relation to ethics, the time suggested for the research piece, the support of some social care organisations required and the challenges involved in bringing all those involved in the research to agree. Some of the questions and issues are:

Ethics

Would the ethical obligations become onerous if the research was to be 'owned' by the organisation rather than the college?

Some of the research ethics policies for organisations are stringent and would need to work in parallel with the internal college structures. Good supervision and governance as will be required.

Time to Conduct Meaningful Research

A three-month placement is quite short, relatively, and providing a placement involves siphoning some work or creating a separate project for the placement, which may cause a drawback in the service as a result where the placement is so short.

Organisational Issues and Resources

Increasingly we find agencies are prioritising the minimum necessary requirements internally with limited funding for continuing professional development for social care professionals being less available.

Time planning will be a critical factor - time to free up specific staff to be released and sponsored to participate. General time planning would be an issue as the lead-in necessary will need to find replacement staff, secure funding, agree topic(s) and cover relevant ethical issues etc. shall all need to be factored. Typically if a student wishes to submit a proposal and the relevant sub group who are authorised to give the go ahead may well be going back to the proposal on a number of occasions to have the details clarified. If they meet once every 6 weeks you can imagine the issues that can arise for academic staff and the specific student(s) concerned - never mind the college research staff and especially the research cohort group who may be involved.

Concern from agencies that the consequent publication when published would affect the public reputation of the agency which could result in over anxious and cautious restrictive focus on topics.

Essentially further consultation with decision makers in the relevant sectors will be critical as unless there is a buy-in at the training and development departmental level the student and college could face a difficult and uphill process. Essentially these groups need to 'commit' to provide funding internally with a forecasted budget to support this wider initiative and if this was secured then the process would likely lead to some very positive outcomes for all concerned. This would then involve negotiation within the various agencies well in advance of course start dates. Will they commit to support?

Involvement of All Parties

The external supervision aspect is important and liaison with the manager of the service providing the placement.

Agreement from families, not all families may consent.

Selection of Participating Organisations

How would placement organisations be selected? Would there be a risk that certain (larger, well established, well known) organisations would dominate - or could smaller less well developed ones, with fewer staff (single service entities for

example) be able to benefit? Again - for example would the big players who have existing relationships with DIT benefit the most, whereas a small DV refuge in a small town outside of Dublin (which actually could really provide a mutually beneficial placement) might lose out as the relationships don't pre-exist? Would agencies be able to put themselves forward and 'tender' for a student?

Meaningful Research

Unless resources and structures are made available, to enact the recommendations the research piece will have no impact on either the organisation or the sector. A commitment to implement the recommendations and a critical review of same need to be factored into the equation, otherwise the research piece may never have the desired outcome of affecting social change.

Conclusion

The TUD merger has offered the opportunity for this project to be developed under the Re-imagining our Curriculum - Programmes for the Future. This paper highlights the importance of connecting and consulting with community and industry partners while developing the curriculum, selecting and engaging with an external advisory board and researching different styles and types of curriculum design

Initially the main impetus of developing the programme with the aim of equipping students and practitioners to develop competencies and skills in social research so as to inform social care policy and practice into the future. While long term, sustainable planning based on research is recognised as the best way to provide quality services within restricted budgets but as service provision is often crisis led the shift or transition has been challenging to date. As reflected in the quotes from social care stakeholders above indicate there are still issues that need to be 'ironed out' to ensure that this M.A. programme can make a 'real' contribution to social care research in Ireland. However the solution maybe broadening the research project element of the programme the programme or adopting the more standard dissertation.

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