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Damien Courtney  
*Cork Institute of Technology*

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**Social Care and the European Dimension**  
**Damien Courtney, Cork Institute of Technology**

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**Address for Correspondence: Mr D. Courtney, Head of Dept of Social and General Studies, Institute of Technology, Cork, Cork Ireland**

## *Damien Courtney*

### **Abstract**

This paper discusses social care in a European context. It explores issues of terminology in social care. It introduces FESET, a European organisation for those working in social care and related areas and focuses on three programmes on offer - "FESET", "SOCRATES" AND "ECSPRESS". The paper examines current and future developments in social care.

### **Introduction**

Social Care is the generic term currently used in Ireland to describe services provided for children, adolescents, the elderly, for disabled persons and others in residential care, in day care and in the community. The Social Care and Child Care professions are closely associated with the voluntary sector and the statutory health, special education and judicial services. NCEA approved courses in Applied Social Studies in Social Care are available at National Certificate, National Diploma and add-on BA degree levels through full-time, part-time and ACCS study. Social Care courses are provided at the Institutes of Technology in Athlone, Cork, Dublin, Sligo, Tralee, Waterford and at St. Patrick's College, Carlow. Research is undertaken for post-graduate qualifications and for other reasons.

The European dimension of Social Care is important and there have been extensive communication, exchanges and involvement between Irish educational institutions and their counterparts in other European countries. In making comparisons it is difficult to find exact identikit between Social Care

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practice in Ireland and elsewhere in Europe. However, great similarities in philosophy, values and practical ways of therapy, intervention and care exist between Care Workers and such practitioners as Youth and Community Workers, *Educateurs Gradués*, *Educateurs Spécialisés*, *Educator Socio Professional*, *Educatori Professionali*, *Educadores Especializados*, *Socialpedagogische Hulpverlener*, *Sozialpädagogen* and *Gespecialiseerde Opvoeder*. Some practices and associated educational programmes elsewhere overlap and include Social Work in certain countries. The European dimension is also evident in the area of Early Childhood Education.

FESET which has just recently adopted this new title is an European association of training centres for socio-educational care work and was established in 1989 in Strasbourg. Since then its position and influence in European Social Care education and training has been extensive. It currently has 121 affiliated "training centres" from 16 European countries, including 6 from Ireland.

The last of its biennial congresses which was held in 1997 in Lisbon had the theme of 'The Family and Social Change' with particular emphasis on challenges for the training of social care workers. Indeed, 'The Training of Social Care Workers in the Third Millennium will provide the focus for the next congress in 1999 in Antwerp. Using a typical European working model many of its activities are undertaken in commissions or working groups. They include the mutual recognition of qualifications, course methodologies and

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content, publications including that of a multilingual Lexicon, recruitment, fundraising and a congress scientific committee. Efforts to establish an European Social Care data base along with EURASHE - the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education - proved unsuccessful and are now being pursued by a FESET Task Force on Information Exchange.

### **EU Programmes**

The introduction in 1988-9 of the Erasmus Programme provided a focus for educational and training understanding and practice in comparative European Social Care, Social Work, Youth and Community Work. A number of Inter-university Co-operation Programmes (ICPs) in the Social Professions were established which formally linked many Irish institutions from the university and extra-university sectors with comparable European ones and consolidated relationships between the two sectors both within Ireland and elsewhere. One of a number of ICPs for the Social Professions which was co-ordinated by the *Terza Università di Roma*, had 27 partner institutions drawn from 15 countries. Typically, it involved student mobility, staff mobility, intensive programmes/seminars, curriculum development, the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) and joint programmes. In addition, the current Socrates programme also facilitates participation in European modules.

Student mobility to Ireland among care students has been higher than that from it. Ireland is a popular destination due to the widespread use of the English language, the indigenous way of life and the population's high level of

receptivity and hospitality, perceived and I hope real. Unfortunately, the lower level of outward movement has been attributed among other things to poor foreign language skills and high cost factors. Mobility of students and teachers to Ireland from other European countries has brought an European multicultural added dynamic to Irish pedagogical activities. The teacher mobility programme particularly has provided some members of the extra-university sector in Ireland with European educational opportunities, albeit on a much smaller scale, which hitherto were confined to individuals in benefit of sabbatical leave. One spin-off is special teaching assignments abroad agreed individually outside of any EU programme. Short intensive programmes have been very successful and in some instances have focused on particular themes using different European perspectives and experiences.

The Socrates programme continues to facilitate these and the other ICP activities. The establishment within Socrates of bilateral institutional contracts (ICs) and the demise of 'co-ordinating institutions' have resulted in fewer resources available for representatives from the partner institutions, with consequential reductions in academic, pedagogical and other benefits accruing from such encounters. The Leonardo programme provides successful work experience opportunities for students abroad, the Horizon programme has facilitated visits and comparative studies of services and educational opportunities for disabled persons and the Tempus programme has fostered very practical co-operation between individuals and institutions in eastern, central and western European countries.

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#### **“FESET”, “SOCRATES” AND “ECSPRESS”**

FESET decided in response to requests from some former Erasmus ICPs to provide a forum for continued contact between IC partners through the establishment of annual seminars. The first was held in October 1998 in Brussels and set aside an afternoon for meetings between former ICP members and others to consider co-ordination issues and plans for future co-operation. There was also an information paper on European action programmes which included practical advice on how to present applications for successful outcomes. The 1999 seminar will be held in conjunction with the Antwerp Congress.

The principal theme at the Brussels seminar was:- 'The Links Between Socio-Educational Practice and Training Practice in Europe'. One working group was concerned with the mission of training centres. The four others dealt with the relationship between socio-educational strategies and the following: violence; exclusion/poverty; mental handicap; and multi-culturality.

The concept of social exclusion provided a unifying theme for the client groups under consideration and confronted new issues in a structural way as well as focusing on individual problems and deficits. It poses challenges for the development of a professional code of practice and for student training. Greater participation in formal education for disadvantaged and marginalised individuals and groups is essential. Changing welfare systems require clients to act differently and care workers to work more with their clients than for

them. There is a need to highlight the increasing violence, abuse and isolation experienced in student placements and workplaces. This imposes therapeutic demands on teachers as well as care workers. The European experience suggests that employment provides the best means to integration and inclusion in multicultural societies even if action plans reflect different priorities in different countries. It also highlights the need for innovative action research which is informed by and linked to care practice on the ground. The European dimension provides a comparative framework for a debate which has just begun. It will continue at the 1999 Antwerp Congress which will have eight workshops linked to social care training. One of them will deal with its European dimension.

Another feature of the Socrates programme is some twenty-five Thematic Networks. In 1995/6 FESET joined with the European Centre for Community Education (ECCE) and the European Association of Schools of Social Work (EASSW) to form ECSPRESS, a consortium for education and training in the social professions which was recognised as a thematic network. Four professional organisations are also associated with this project. They are *La Fédération Internationale des Communautés Educatives (FICE)*; *l'Association Internationale des Educateurs Sociaux (AIEJI)*; the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW); and the International Council for Social Welfare (ICSW). Prior to the establishment of the Thematic Network an Erasmus Evaluation Conference on the Social Professions in 1996 in Koblenz recognised that with the breaking down of traditional barriers convergence was

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occurring in some countries between social work and social care practice. It too highlighted the importance of the European dimension in social work and social care education and training. In 1997 in Bellaria three highly participative and intensive seminars for social educators and practitioners considered: the role of the social professions in fighting social exclusion; the social professions in changing socio-political contexts in Europe; and European dimensions in the curriculum development of the social professions.

The 1998 ECSPRESS Conference on European Dimensions in the Training and Practice of the Social Professions was located specifically in Ostrava in the Czech Republic in order to bring western Europeans into contact with their social professional colleagues in central and eastern Europe at a time of increasing globalisation and when the EU is in the process of enlargement. The importance of market forces and economics are likely to encourage the social professions to form new international alliances and lobbies. Obstacles and challenges to the building of networks include finding time, staying power and resources and overcoming inter-professional rivalries. Comparative European dimensions and internationally recognised awards should be available to all students and teacher participation should be encouraged and facilitated.

Participants were informed of the work of the three ECSPRESS pillars to date which was followed by international, intercultural and inter-professional communication and co-operation through four workshops. The first workshop -

going back to basics - recognised intercultural differences but found that social problems are related and international. Common values as enshrined in the UN Universal Declaration on Human Rights and a code of ethics should constitute an essential element in good training for the social professions. The highest training standards are necessary to empower professional practitioners to intervene effectively in policy matters.

The second workshop - communications in international exchanges - considered that cultural and language issues may contribute to exclusion. Resources are not as readily available to the social professions as in other areas. Greater emphasis on language translation and interpretation would help educators and practitioners to understand diversity and relate better to minorities and refugees.

The third workshop - visions of a Social Europe - considered the 'catching up' of the former communist states. They share new social security and welfare systems and indeed some social problems with western European countries and find that they have more in common with them than with the individualism displayed, in such places as the United States. Whilst problems are best identified by indigenous populations solutions may have international origins.

The fourth and last workshop - cross national standards of qualifications - expressed concern about the lack of knowledge displayed by students and practitioners of policy matters and contemporary issues. The image of the

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social professions in Europe needs to be improved through the establishment of a code of ethics and the provision of better service to clients. An action plan should deal with standards, the curriculum, an inter-disciplinary network, and a European dimension for working in other European countries and should encourage research in order to identify what is best practice.

### **The Future**

The European dimension in Social Care, and in the social professions generally, experienced consolidation during the 1990s through the efforts of enthusiastic individuals in outward looking departments and educational institutions, through better communications as a result of cheaper travel, greater language skills, improved technologies, and most of all through the pursuit of policies leading to such EU programmes as Erasmus and Socrates. The National Council for Educational Awards has been very supportive of these activities.

The momentum should continue to gather pace as we move into the new millennium. This will be achieved through the benefits of the knock-on effects of the extensive networking already in place and the effects of ongoing major developments such as the enlargement of the EU and the realisation of a more meaningful Social Europe. In particular, student mobility, teacher mobility, intensive programmes/seminars, curriculum development, joint programmes, European modules, the ECTS, thematic networks and European associations

such as FESET will all serve to strengthen this essential added component in the education and training of social professionals as in other disciplines.

It is the intention of ECSPRESS during 1998/9 in its final year to establish small teams of 'itinerant educational consultants' to assist new networks and partnerships. The plan is to make available teaching material, guidelines and handbooks reflecting the ECSPRESS experience, to a greater number of interested persons.

I conclude, however, on a cautionary note. EU resources, like others, depend on changing demands and circumstances. The short term nature of some EU programmes, a decline in funding for co-ordination purposes within Socrates and its emphasis on bilateral contracts sends a clear message to the funding authorities in member states and to those charged with responsibility for the distribution of resources within educational institutions. If the European dimension is valued then it needs to be nurtured and sustained in a meaningful way through the allocation of adequate resources for its development and growth in Social Care, in Applied Social Studies and in the Humanities.

