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Guest Editors' Editorial

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Guest Editors' Editorial

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Social care education has a long history in Ireland, starting with the child care course in Kilkenny in the 1970s and moving to more broad-based social care degree programmes in the 1980s and 1990s. Social care education now reflects a shared vision complemented by the unique ethos which each educational institution brings to the design of their programmes. Programmes have combined interdisciplinary knowledge in conjunction with practical and personal skills to equip students to engage in social care practice across a diversity of spheres. This has evolved in liaison with the sector and under the remit of the Department of Education, informed by international, as well as national care practice. Educational establishments worked together, leading to the development of the Irish Association of Social Care Educators (IASCE) in 1998, which provided a more formal mechanism for sharing approaches and addressing common challenges. IASCE, in conjunction with social care work representative bodies, came together in 2011 to form Social Care Ireland, which further progressed the development of a professional identity, a shared body of knowledge and a research culture.

Now with CORU, a new actor has taken to the stage in social care education. The role of CORU is to promote high standards of professional conduct, education, training and competence through statutory registration of health and social care professionals; in doing so it fulfils its mandate to protect the public. Social care has reached an important junction, as CORU, social care education, and practice educators in the field align with students to enhance the development, recognition and status of social care practitioners as professionals. There is also a renewed emphasis on the experience of the marginalised and disadvantaged, as the voice of those accessing support services gains greater public space. Concomitant with this, improved quality assurance and a raising of the standards of care, for both service users and staff, are further goals on the horizon. This special edition highlights crucial areas in this new phase of the journey.

The *Standards of Proficiency for Social Care Workers* outline threshold standards for entry to practice. Education institutions have worked with CORU to incorporate these threshold standards into their education programmes since they were published by CORU in 2017. The process is central to establishing the professional identity of the social care practitioner, while also placing the practice component of social care programmes 'centre stage', with added status and recognition. Programmes must now incorporate threshold standards of proficiency *and* uphold academic standards so that a critical perspective can be taken, ensuring that the evolution of the profession is informed by voices from practice and academia, both working more closely over time. The standards reinforce much of the good practice already taking place within social care education whilst also alerting education institutions to key features of the contemporary context; concerns with risk, data protection, service user voice and human rights.

However, as with any strategic initiative this raises political concerns explored by the papers within this special issue (for example, which dimensions of practice are emphasised or not, or

how the standards are conceptualised). The necessity of considering the impact of structural forces as well as bringing a critical perspective to the implications of the standards, highlight the importance of broader, critical, and dynamic perspectives in the education of social care practitioners. Social care education has taken what *might* be construed as a 'giant leap' in consolidating the achievements of past decades of social care education. How the standards are interpreted and achieved in practice will be the result of work by educators, practitioners, social care agencies, students and service users, in navigating the future of social care as a profession.

We hope that the themes addressed in this edition will continue the tradition of fruitful exchange about the direction and development of the profession (e.g. Gallagher & O'Toole, 1999; Williams & Lalor, 2001; O'Connor & Murphy, 2006; McCann James, de Róiste & McHugh, 2009; Lalor & Share, 2013; Howard & Lyons, 2014; Power & Darcy, 2017, among others); in this case, the contribution of the standards of proficiency to this journey. The papers provide a critical analysis of the standards of proficiency as they articulate a particular understanding of care (Majella Mulkeen); the socially constructed nature of texts such as the standards (Susan Flynn); the challenges posed to standards of proficiency and to practice by neoliberalism (John McHugh). Several papers examine the implications of the standards for the teaching of core professional skills such as assessment, intervention and evaluation (Jennifer McGarr & Margaret Fingleton); creative practices in social care (Denise Mac Giolla Rí) and teaching about self-care (Aoife Johnson & Debbie Long).

We are privileged to be guest editors of this special issue and wish to extend our gratitude to the authors of the papers, to IJASS editors, Ashling Jackson (Athlone Institute of Technology) and Colm O'Doherty (Institute of Technology Tralee), for their support, and to all the reviewers of the manuscripts, for their time and substantial feedback to the authors. The challenges of creating a more equal society remain, and through their commitment to supporting people and advocating on their behalf, social care practitioners have a significant role to play. Social care education is therefore of enormous significance and the standards provide a valuable contribution; as a key dimension of regulation, they enhance the status of the profession, and hopefully the quality of services which people who use them, experience.

We hope in this issue you find content that is enlightening, challenging and ultimately helpful in shaping the future of social care education, for students, for current practitioners, and ultimately, for the people we support.

About the Guest Editors

Dr Áine de Róiste is a senior lecturer and chartered psychologist in the Department of Applied Social Studies CIT (soon to be MTU). Áine lectures in psychology, research and practice modules as well as undertaking postgraduate research supervision. She has co-authored text books in social care (*Social Care: An Integrated Perspective*, 2009) and youth work (*Young People in Contemporary Ireland*, 2007) and has published book chapters and research in the fields of social care and developmental psychology.

Dr Majella Mulkeen is a lecturer in the Institute of Technology Sligo where she teaches on the social care programme, with expertise in equality, diversity and social justice. Her research interests are in the fields of gender, equality and markets in social care and more recently in affective inequalities in social care. She has published in these areas in the core social care textbook *Applied Social Studies* (2013), in the journal *Administration* (2016) and in the *Irish Journal of Applied Social Studies* (2012). She completed her doctoral studies on affective

relations in residential social care practice, examining the perspectives of social care practitioners.

Dr Aoife Johnson is a qualified social care worker and full-time lecturer in Cork Institute of Technology. Aoife is involved in research supervision, social care and teaching & learning modules, and is part of the social care placement team. She was the first social care student to achieve her doctorate in CIT, has published a chapter in the Howard and Lyons (2014) 'Social Care: Lessons from Practice' textbook and has presented at several Social Care Ireland Conferences.

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