

Dear Students of Social Work,

Having decided to invest time and resources in a university degree in social work, what might you want to get out of it? If you have not thought about it, it would be good to start reflecting on this question. Of course every university has its mission and an idea of the type of students it wants to produce. However, what is finally achieved is dependent too on the students as the same curriculum does not necessarily translate into equal outcomes since students are inherently different.

The Role of Education in Training the Mind to think deeply and widely



Generally, higher education at the university takes an approach that helps students develop holistic capability in contrast to a training approach that focuses on specific information and skills. As such, the degree in social work aims to help students to acquire knowledge and to become more inquisitive in nature. This takes place both informally and formally through assessed knowledge in order to train social workers to appreciate different contexts and to debate various issues.

For Example: Poverty

In the area of poverty for example, there is a need to understand a country's context in discussing policy issues. In the context of Singapore, it is perhaps fortunate that social work here in a city-state with good housing means that we do not have to grapple with distressed communities with intractable issues of poverty or worse still, persistent intergenerational poverty of a sizeable scale. Any and every country will have people who are poor but persistent intergenerational poverty is a complex and daunting problem that requires sustained effort at multiple levels.

Higher education at the university exposes students to the research being done which shows the difficulties that most countries still struggle with in public policy making and in the strategies to eradicate intergenerational poverty. So what have these countries tried? Many have tried strategies that focus on the places where poor children live while others have tried moving children out of poor neighbourhoods and communities. And what have these countries learned about eradicating intergenerational poverty? Reading widely into research for example should point towards some success in policies that focus on education, stable employment and family relationships.

For example: Working in Multi-Disciplinary Teams

One situation that is fast becoming a norm is that of working in multi-disciplinary teams. Although traditional practice advocates multi-disciplinary work as part of good practice, the more complex environment that systems now have to respond to have precipitated the increased presence of multi-disciplinary teams. Such situations often call for the ability to use critical reflection, an increase in confidence to engage with change, speaking out and challenging effectively the different professionals in the multi-disciplinary team. These attributes link more closely with that of exercising professional judgment rather than relying on 'tick-box' procedures.

Reading widely into research for example should point towards the need for openness and respect for the contributions and roles of various professions in order to deliver good services and outcomes for patients, clients and users of service.

Good students and those who aspire towards a thriving career will want to score and do well at exams and this is good. However, what is equally important is the ability to adopt a different level of thinking about self, situations, and others, the confidence to express values, the ability to see different ways of dealing with issues, the ability to problem solve, and the ability to help others engage positively with change. Bloom et al (1956)¹ identified these attributes as ‘higher level thinking skills’ in which practitioners not only apply knowledge and understanding to practice but also demonstrate the ability to analyse, synthesise, evaluate and reflect critically on situations and problems. These skills should equip students to better deal with future change.

Leadership knowledge and skills



What about leadership knowledge and skills for social work practitioners? Should these be learned in social work education? Most students would appreciate the focus on knowledge and skills that are applicable to potential job roles. However, there is also a sense that perhaps these could be acquired post-education as part of career development training and continuing professional development. Being in a system and in a team lead role in a job could make the knowledge and strategies of engaging with change effectively more relevant post-education. Likewise, supervision skills and how these could be used for performance management could be learned as one assumes team leader roles. That is also the point when the difference between “leading in leadership” in contrast to the “management” role becomes significant.

Role change and job mobility

While social work education inducts students on how to work with clients on transitions in life course and in role change and mobility in jobs, we perhaps do not prepare students sufficiently to handle role change and job mobility for themselves. With the growth and expansion of social services, new and wider variety of job options have opened up. It is therefore relevant to prepare students to think about how their own role change could be addressed in order to make it an uneventful and a positive experience not just for themselves but for the clients they work with and the team that they belong to.

National Social Work Competency Framework



In the hope of strengthening the social work sector, social work education and post education professional development now have a competency reference. The framework is a way of enabling social workers to progress beyond foundational competence to proficiency and expertise. It is important however to understand that competency is necessary and key to good service delivery and outcomes but not sufficient for a profession. After all, the key to quality and efficiency is professionalism. Professionalism is more about exhibiting a courteous, conscientious and generally positively businesslike manner.

A profession is characterised by a job that requires a specific education, as well as training and skills that are guided by a Code of Ethics. People in a profession conform to the technical or ethical standards of that profession. A high level of professionalism is a mark of a mature profession. It is marked by the ability to take charge and to be in control and accountable for what is a professional judgement and opinion. It involves a systems approach at viewing issues that goes beyond the individual cases. It is a professional wisdom that is drawn from among other things and the collective experience of intervening in many individual cases. Social work in Singapore is relatively young in comparison to many of the other professions such as engineers, lawyers or accountants.

Even among the human services, social work is a more recent discipline compared with the doctors, dentists and nurses. Social work is demanding and affects the lives of individuals and families directly. This heavy responsibility should challenge us to attain a high standard of professionalism in the field - to tread where it is most difficult and challenging.

Aspiring social work graduates



As an aspiring social work graduate, one might ask what would make a student hold his or her stand as a social worker ready to work with clients on graduation and with a self-directed professional development plan. There might be some useful reference points from the competency framework. It is also important for the graduate to ensure that he or she has good supervision in practice and to be aware of how the individual's strengths and professional development fit a career structure for social work. It is useful in the initial years of practice to draw consciously on professional standards and competency at different levels of practice. One must also be conscious about values and ethics which is how one would apply social work ethical principles and values to guide professional practice. One has to be conscious about diversity which is about respecting cultural sensitivities and working with diversity in clients and contexts and being anti-discriminatory in service delivery. Furthermore, one must also be able to apply critical reflection and analysis to inform and provide a rationale for professional decision making. By far the most challenging might well be how to apply the skills, knowledge and values to promote independence and safety while balancing rights and risks, protection, control and choice for those whom social workers work with.

Ang Bee Lian

Director of Social Welfare, MSF

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