

Training of Childrens and Families Social Workers Inquiry

Executive Summary

The University and College Union would like the Committee to consider the strategic provision of social work courses to ensure that adequate provision is available in all regions.

Without strategic provision of courses, there will continue to be problems in filling social work vacancies in many regions across the UK.

Introduction

- The University and College Union is the largest trade union and professional association for academics, trainers, lecturers, researchers and academic-related staff working in further and higher education throughout the UK.
- UCU has a number of members who are actively involved in the teaching, training and development of social workers and social care professionals. Our members have hands on experience of the challenges faced by the social care profession and are at the forefront of ensuring that the UK has a well-equipped, well trained and professional social care workforce in the future.
- UCU has concerns about the strategic provision of social work and related courses within the higher education sector, as demonstrated by the closure of the University of Reading School of Health and Social Care earlier in 2009 – the area is now without adequate training provision.

Written Evidence

1. Strategic provision of training for social workers and social care professionals is of great importance to the University and College Union.
2. At the moment there seems to be no overarching strategy in the provision of social care courses, indeed there have been departmental closures in areas where social workers are sorely needed (see case study).
3. The UCU would like to see a strategic plan – which will entail funding considerations both in teaching and research – to ensure the provision of social work and social care courses across the UK. Course provision should be rationally planned to ensure access to courses for all of those who would consider entering the social work profession and to ensure all regions have access to highly trained social workers and care professionals.
4. A number of issues stem from the point of actually having enough people in the social care workforce to provide the much needed service; these issue encompass the basic

necessity of filling vacancies, to the 'Every Child Matters' aims of ensuring continuity of care for children within the care system. UCU believe that there has never been a better time to assess the system and make changes to help the needs of some of the most vulnerable people in society.

5. There must be an assessment of the availability of social care courses to ensure:
 - a) The supply of adequate numbers of social workers a) nationally b) across different regions
 - b) That people who wish to enter into the social care profession can find a course local to them should they need to
 - c) The availability of part-time study
 - d) The availability of courses for professional development
 - e) That course fees and student debt do not erect a barrier to those wishing to enter into social work
6. Progress on those points specified above can only enhance the provision of social services nation-wide and will benefit social services across the spectrum, from ensuring vacancies in understaffed departments are filled, to meeting the 'Every Child Matters' aims such as continuity of care for those in the social service system.
7. There are two main factors that UCU considers vital in addressing the training and education of the social care workforce, and in meeting the assessment criteria already stated:
 - a) University decision-making in regard to course provision e.g. course establishment, course cuts, and departmental closures. A cut at one university could currently leave a region without the supply of social workers if needs to fill vacancies (see Case Study.)
 - b) Funding of higher education social care departments in a) research and b) teaching. Funding decisions and mechanisms, like the Research Assessment Exercise, have major impacts on the decisions universities make. Recent experience has shown that even if a department is offering high quality teaching, if the RAE results are not favourable, then the department may not be saved from closure.
8. As already stated, many issues around social care stem from the basic ability to train social workers. These issues will range from general availability of social workers to ensuring continuity of care for people within the social service system.
9. It is because of the vast importance of ensuing provision is available to train social work professionals that the University and College Union would like the committee to consider the strategic provision of social work courses.

Case Study

10. The University of Reading recently took the decision to close its School of Health and Social Care.

11. The staff within the department and the University in general were opposed to the closure, as was the Reading University Students' Union. The proposed closure was also opposed by a number of local groups including Reading Borough Council and representatives from West Berkshire Council. The British Association of Social Workers stated at the time that the closure could lead to a huge problem in filling social work vacancies in the area. It was widely recognised that the University of Reading School of Health and Social Care provided a service for the wider community and contributed to the continued supply of social work professionals in the wider Berkshire area. The Department was profitable and well established.
12. The decision was taken by the University Council with very little consultation; indeed by the time consultation was sought it seemed that the decision had already been reached.
13. Throughout the campaign to save the School of Health and Social Care, the UCU encountered a number of students and potential students, who felt very let down by the proposals and perplexed as to why such a decision was being taken.
14. Among those who joined the campaign were local single mums. They would not be able to move to another area in order to study as their jobs and family life meant that Reading was the only option for them. Mature students who were considering social work as an option for reskilling were denied the chance to take up such a course and undergraduate students in the department were worried that they would not be able to advance their studies further because of the closure. Local employers – the 6 Berkshire unitary authorities plus Hampshire and Surrey – sponsored employees to undertake qualifying and post-qualifying training at Reading; this will now cease. This is all entirely antithetical to the government's widening participation agenda and has deprived the Reading area of what would have been highly skilled and trained local people who really care about the area.
15. Against the wishes of the local community, the University Council voted to close the department, seemingly going along with the wishes of the Vice-Chancellor. There was no further accountability, no further discussion – the decision was made arbitrarily and many members of the local community are still struggling to understand why.
16. UCU has severe reservations about a system that ignores the wider local need for such vital public servants as social workers in the very week that Lord Laming's report was published.