

IASSW Committee Discusses Formulation of Global Qualifying Standards for Social Work Education and Training

The Global Minimum Qualifying Standards Committee was set up as a joint initiative of the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) at the joint IASSW/IFSW Conference in Montréal, Canada, in July 2000. A discussion document is available on the IASSW website.

Our consultations indicate that, on the whole, there was a favorable response to the development of a standards setting document that elucidates what social work represents on a global level. The document identifies certain universals and may be used as guidelines to develop national standards with regard to social work education and training. However, given the profession's historically fragmented strands, the contemporary debates around social work's intraprofessional identity, its identity *vis-à-vis* other categories of personnel in the welfare sector, and the enormous diversities across nations and regions, there was some scepticism about the possibility of identifying any such "universal."

The suggestion was that such a document must be sufficiently flexible to be applicable to any context. Such flexibility should allow for interpretations of locally specific social work education and practice, and take into account each country's or region's sociopolitical, cultural, economic, and historical contexts while adhering to international norms and standards.

A minority view was that IFSW and IASSW begin with no document and that a grassroots approach be used in encouraging national bodies to formulate their own norms and standards. These national norms and standards, formulated, for example, via a five-year action plan, could then be processed into a global qualifying standards document.

One does not have to adopt an either/or approach to the development of standards. If we accept the premise that such standards do not represent a finite or static product, but a dynamic process through which we continue building a framework toward which we aspire, then we accept that standards setting would involve a global-regional-national-local dialectical interaction. This must involve cross-national and cross-regional dialogue. In view of the concern expressed by participants that the notion of "minimum qualifying standards" sounds too prescriptive, implying a fixed product, the alternative "global qualifying standards" has been accepted.

Care needs to be taken that in developing global standards we do not further fragment and de-professionalize social work. To circumvent this possibility the committee has made concerted efforts to transcend the kind of reductionist language, used within many national/regional contexts in their development of unit standards, designed to meet criteria for the competencies-based ap-

proach, that fragments social work skills and roles into minute, constituent parts. The committee acknowledges that there might be merits to the competencies-based approach on national or regional levels. However, this is seen to be far too specific to be applied to the global level.

Questions were raised regarding "minimum": by whose or what standards? Is it possible that "minimum standards" could decrease rather than enhance the profession's standards? An alternative argument was that, as "standards" represent an ideal, they could, in effect, come to be "maximum standards" that all schools of social work in all countries and regions are put under pressure to attain.

These concerns provided further ground for omitting the "minimum" from this document. The document does not purport to reflect minimum standards, but standards toward which schools of social work should consistently aspire. Among those who participated during consultations, there was overwhelming concern that context-specific realities and the resources available to individual institutions to meet global standards are taken into consideration. In the development of global standards we should not create unintended consequences by putting some training institutions at a disadvantage. As much as global standards may be used to benchmark

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national norms and standards, as far as possible, national and regional experiences and practices (even where formal standards do not exist) must be incorporated into the formulation of global standards. Where national or regional standards do not exist, IASSW and IFSW should collaborate to facilitate the development of such standards. The circular, interactive, and discursive processes of standard formulation and setting can, in these ways, become and remain continuous and dynamic. The process-product dialectic, in the formulation of standards, is vital. While we have necessary predetermined time frames, we should not, as far as possible, compromise consultation

processes.

The majority of participants believed that, beyond the formulation of a standards document, IASSW and IFSW could play no role; thus, these bodies could not ensure compliance in any way. Monitoring, conforming to global standards, and the possibility of downgrading or upgrading of training institutions were not seen as the tasks of IASSW and IFSW. The roles of the organizations would be facilitative and supportive. Notwithstanding the concerns expressed regarding the need to take into account context-specific realities and the ambiguities surrounding social work education and practice, this document goes on to detail standards with respect to: a

school's core purpose or mission statement, program objectives and outcomes; program curriculum, including field work; professional staff, student social workers; structure, administration, governance, and resources; cultural diversity; and social work values and ethics. As a point of departure, the international definition of social work is accepted, and the core purposes of social work are summarized in the document.

Send your comments to the chairperson, Vishanthie Sewpaul, Sewpaul@nu.ac.za. ■■■

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Online Global Qualifying Standards Document: www.iasw.soton.ac.uk.