Manuscript Title: Teaching Partnership four years on: lessons learned about relationships between universities and practice partners?

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Teaching Partnership four years on: lessons learned about relationships between universities and practice partners

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Abstract

The North-East Social Work Alliance (NESWA) was formed in 2016 following a successful application for Government funding in the second wave of Teaching Partnerships (TPs). The formation of this TP enabled the development of new and innovative ways of working between higher education institutions (HEIs) and their partner agencies. Four years on this has resulted in a complex network of relationships combining well established existing partnerships with new partnerships and stakeholder arrangements that transcend institutional boundaries. This paper explores the impact NESWA has had on stakeholder relationships between one HEI and its partner agencies. By examining the perspectives of the HEI and its practice partners, it explores structural and operational relationships and critically examines the enhanced model of partnership working that TPs have facilitated. It concludes that overall TPs have promoted enhanced relationships between HEIs and their stakeholders. However, it identifies areas that should be addressed within future governance arrangements by TPs and similar partnership programmes internationally in order to maximise the impact such programmes have on social work education.

Key words: Teaching Partnerships, social work education, higher education

Introduction

Government scrutiny of social work education in England has been sustained over the past 20 years fuelled by concerns regarding the standards of social work qualifying programmes and the suitability of their recruits (Harris et al, 2008; GSCC, 2009; Social Work Task Force, 2009; Social Work Reform Board, 2010; Smith et al, 2018; Croisdale-Appleby, 2014; Narey, 2014; Berry-Lound et al, 2016; Maxwell et al, 2016; Hamilton, 2019). Teaching Partnerships (TPs) were introduced in 2015 to improve social work education and develop a more standardized approach to education and training (Cavener, Phillips and Shenton, 2019).

Universities do not possess all of the resources needed to deliver social work education and need to partner with employers to, for example, secure practice learning opportunities for students (Wilson 2014). The TP model assumes better partnership working will enhance the quality of social work education but the evidence base is limited (Shardlow et al 2011). Wilson's (2016) mixed-methods study of academics' views of partnership working in Northern Ireland and Gordon and Davis' (2016) qualitative study of academics, LA and third sector staff in Scotland are two of only a handful of studies that have investigated this topic.

Vangen and Huxham's (2006) theory of 'collaborative advantage' suggests all partners need to benefit from partnership arrangements but academics in Wilson's (2014) study described complex relationships sometimes characterised by conflict and tension. Gordon and Davis (2016) cite continuity/trusting relationships; shared overarching vision; strategic formalised approaches; mutual benefits; time/financial resources; geographical proximity; and sharing, building on and evaluating good practice as factors that can facilitate effective relationships.

This paper presents a case study of relationships between one HEI and its partners following the establishment of NESWA, one of 23 TPs in England. Reflecting on stakeholder relationships pre- and post-NEWSA it assesses the overall impact the TP has had on strategic

and operational relationships. By examining the perspectives of the HEI and its LA/health trust partners, it critically examines the enhanced model of partnership working that TPs have facilitated.

The paper was written by two academics and four practice partners and is itself an example of positive cultural change facilitated by NESWA. The authors met on four occasions to reflect on the impact NESWA has had on stakeholder relationships. Detailed notes were taken to capture the content of these discussions. The views presented in this paper are those of the authors alone; they may not be representative of the views of their organisations or of partners who did not contribute. Nevertheless, the learning is relevant to the whole partnership and to similar arrangements in the UK and internationally.

The North-East Social Work Alliance (NESWA)

Each TP is different depending on history, context and composition of partners (Interface Associates UK Limited 2020). At its inception NESWA was the largest involving six HEIs, 12 LAs and a National Health Service (NHS) integrated healthcare trust. There were debates around whether two sub-partnerships were needed but a decision was made to go with one so as not to disadvantage partners situated in the middle who wanted to work across the whole region. There are benefits to having such a large partnership, not least in terms of being able to draw upon a wider range of skills, knowledge and experience and potentially impact upon a broader geographical area (Interface Associates UK Limited 2020); as one of the authors of this paper commented it is useful 'to be able to do things once rather than twelve times'. However, navigating the sheer complexity of stakeholder engagement across such a large region has required careful relationship management.

According to Gordon and Davis (2016) financial resources can facilitate successful partnerships. Government funding received in phase two of the TP programme enabled NESWA to develop a number of projects to explore and improve practice within four priority areas – admissions, placements, post qualification training/CPD and opportunities for joint learning between academics and social workers. An application for additional financial aid in 2018 enabled NESWA to continue to progress some of these pilot projects and consider evidence from an independent evaluation, and a third wave of funding in 2019 allowed it to continue for a further three years and create a sustainable framework for ongoing collaboration between LAs/health trusts and HEI's in the region.

Strategic relationships

One of the reported benefits of the TP programme is that it formalised collaborative working and acted as a catalyst for cultural change in the way partners work together (Interface Associates UK Limited 2020). Gordon and Davis (2016) suggested strategic formalised approaches facilitate effective partnerships and NESWA undoubtedly facilitated strategic decision-making and acted as a helpful conduit for global discussion around social work education. Partners did not previously meet as a regional collective and LAs felt there was real value in having all the HEIs together in one room, particularly when Social Work England joined in phase 3.

Geographical proximity facilitated the building of close working relationships in Gordon and Davis' (2016) study. NESWA broke down geographical barriers and acted as a catalyst for increased levels of collaboration between organisations in the north and south of the region. Pre-NESWA HEIs and LAs tended to work primarily with their geographical neighbours. Some LAs only had relationships with one HEI whereas there is now a plethora of new

relationships. HEIs similarly forged new partnerships but placements form the bedrock of their relationships so their closest relationships tend to be with organisations that place most of their students. When considering geography it is important to remember that HEIs do not just train social workers for a local workforce. An increasing proportion of social work students come from outside the region and many students move away after qualification. This is a good example of how the HEI agenda departs from the NESWA agenda. Similarly, not all LAs in the region recruit from HEIs within the TP.

Historical ties, continuity and trust have been identified as important factors in facilitating relationships (Gordon and Davis 2016) and social work education in the North-East of England already benefitted from strong regional partnerships and collective understandings. Durable relationships characterised by significant levels of trust had been built around shared professional backgrounds and shared experiences and there were already strong existing partnerships with the sectors that have contributed to NESWA in various ways including Social Work Education North East (SWENE), an alliance between the six regional HEIs; the North East Directors of Children and Adult Services Group; the Vulnerable Children Safeguarding Group (a network of Assistant Directors in Children's Services); the Head of Adult Services Group; and the Principal Social Worker network who were all part of a sector led improvement network. The region also had long established partnerships with people who use services and the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sector. In contrast TPs have been overly focused on statutory relationships (Baginsky, Manthorpe and Hickman 2019). Social work education is not just about the statutory LA workforce. A significant proportion of social work graduates work in the voluntary sector and there may be a need to refresh NESWA's membership moving forwards to include the PVI sector.

Another complexity is that NESWA is not the only strategic decision-making forum in the region. Other partnerships have overlapping aims (for example, the Associations of Directors

of Adult and Children's Services (ADASS and ADCS), the Applied Research Collaboration North-East and Cumbria (ARC NENC) and Skills for Care. This creates a complex picture, as one of the authors of this paper commented 'sometimes there are so many dots you can't make a picture out of it'. It has, therefore, been necessary to clearly define the purpose and boundaries of each partnership. Government funding provided essential financial resources but NESWA has a significantly smaller staff team than the ARC NENC and no funding to strengthen research/practice links through initiatives like embedded researchers, or practitioner doctorates, leading the authors to conclude that social work research is not as well recognised or as influential as health research.

Wilson (2014) warned that overly complex strategic structures can cause inertia and hamper decision-making. A lot of meetings were generated for each of NESWA's workstreams and members started opting out of some of the meetings leading the shared vision to fragment as no-one had an overview of what was happening across the various workstreams. As NESWA has evolved it has addressed this by streamlining its governance structures and re-establishing its overall strategic approach thus avoiding what Vangen and Huxham (2006) termed 'collaborative inertia'.

Operational relationships

Practice learning allocation and provision has been one of the more successful elements of university/employer partnership arrangements (Wilson 2014) perhaps because the mutual benefits are immediately evident in relation to practice learning (Gordon and Davis 2016). A CPD programme for practice educators has been one of the most successful and sustainable outcomes of NESWA generating larger numbers of Practice Educators. All partners were committed to it and shared buy-in across the region contributed to its success.

NESWA also enabled richer conversations around research and the development of innovative research/practice partnerships including a successful secondment from a LA into the HEI (Cavener, Phillips and Shenton 2019). The HEI and its practice partners have started to have conversations about how to develop more effective routes into doctoral study for practitioners and how to support practitioners to undertake and use research (Vincent and Hamilton, 2020) but releasing staff to do things above and beyond their day job is a challenge for LAs.

Gordon and Davis (2016) warn that loss of significant personnel can undermine relationships and changing membership of NESWA has been an ongoing challenge. Some of NESWA's original architects retired or changed jobs soon after inception and it was hard to operationalise their vision due to loss of organisational memory. Questions were also raised in the early days around whether the right participants were attending meetings. Vlaar et al (2006) commented on the variable amounts of time and expertise that stakeholders are able or willing to bring to a partnership. Some NESWA members had HR as opposed to professional social work backgrounds and lack of consistency of attendance made it difficult to build close relationships and maintain a shared understanding of aims and objectives. Some members lacked decision-making power within their organisation, for example, social work subject heads normally represented HEIs but they did not have the power to commit to decisions or actions without wider organisational approval.

Gordon and Wilson (2016) stress the importance of shared vision in facilitating relationships. NESWA partners shared a strategic vision in that they both wanted to produce highly skilled social workers but NESWA's priorities have not always sat comfortably with HEI's operational drivers. HEIs need to demonstrate stakeholder views feed into programme management as they are regulated against this but NESWA changed how they managed their internal programme management. Pre-NESWA, the HEI's governance structure for pre-

qualifying and post-qualifying provision included a Strategic Partnership Board, Programme Management Committee, Curriculum Sub-Committee, Practice Learning Sub-Committee and Admissions and Marketing Sub-Committee which were all attended by LA representatives, partners from the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sector, users of services and students and were recognised by the regulatory body at the approval event for the programmes as a strength of provision. All HEIs in the region had programme management structures but the HEI was relatively unusual in having a Strategic Partnership Board that its closest partners (those who provided the most placements) attended. As outlined above NEWSA generated a growing number of meetings and some members understandably prioritised larger NESWA meetings over individual university meetings and at times the HEI felt this was to the detriment of operational decision-making. There was an implicit assumption that TP meetings would supersede programme management committees but the two meetings have different functions. TP meetings aim to establish regional approaches and understandings while programme management committees allow stakeholder views to inform programme and curriculum development and promote accountability to students and compliance with educational and training standards within individual HEIs. Post NESWA programme management became part of a broader discussion and there were no opportunities for detailed discussion about the content of individual programmes or the future of individual strategic developments. The programme management committee structure has now been revitalised at this university and agencies are actively contributing to these structures. Wilson (2014) similarly found that universities in Northern Ireland retained their own internal partnership committees and included other stakeholders in addition to those invited to regional meetings.

The nature of placement meetings also changed. NESWA placement meetings consider placements as a whole across the North-East whereas pre-NESWA placement meetings took

place between one HEI and their key placement partners. HEIs could no longer discuss how they were going to provide placements for their own students as they had in smaller meetings. Some LAs felt individual HEI led placement meetings had been a helpful forum for discussing the 'softer intelligence' around placements. They described them as being characterised by careful negotiation and cultural understanding between partners, for example, a shared understanding that rural authorities needed students with cars was prioritised.

Conclusion

The establishment of a TP in the North-East of England brought about the adoption of a regional approach to social work education that has created new networks and creative initiatives and enabled relationships to flourish across a large geographical area. While there have been many gains in terms of relationships there have, however, also been challenges and losses and, as in any partnership, some partners will have inevitably gained more than others. One of the key learning points is that micro-ground-level engagement needs to be facilitated at an operational level as well as broader macro-engagement at a strategic level. The TP enabled some of the larger structural issues to be tackled across the region but it is important not to lose sight of the value of operational relationships that create dialogue focused at individual programme level.

Gordon and Davis (2016) stressed the need to build on and evaluate good practice and this paper has identified a number of good practice examples such as the CPR programme for practice educators which can be built upon. Conversely NESWA should also learn from things have not worked so well. Some of the projects which were included in the original bid were deemed to be not needed or found to be not practicable once they were discussed as a

collaborative. Effective partnership working takes time (Gordon and Davis 2016) thus NESWA needed time to explore and understand regional needs and establish what it did and did not want as a partnership. One project which was less successful was a regional CPD model. The authors believe this did not work because partners found it difficult to envision 'collaborative advantage' (Vangen and Huxham 2006), preferring instead to hold on to their local CPD arrangements. Furthermore, operational pressures and demands, including pressure on budgets have forced LAs to consider alternative CPD providers. This is problematic for HEIs because CPD is an income generator and an important vehicle for maintaining and building networks and future partnerships. Partners inevitably have different priorities, ideologies and cultures and conflict can emerge if there are asymmetries of power and partnerships adopt proposals that do not address the concerns of one of the partners (Vangen and Huxham 2006). NESWA partners share the same broad aspirations for social work education but the TP model is characterised by tensions because unlike LAs and health trusts HEIs are competitors all providing qualifying social work programmes marketed to students, thus they will never be equal partners. It will be important for NESWA to consider these tensions moving forward to ensure stability. In the meantime the University has taken the opportunity to re-evaluate its offer of CPD regionally and renegotiate this with its partners.

Four years on there is now an opportunity for reflection and the findings from this paper will be used to stimulate a broader discussion about NESWA's future. Understandably NESWA's main focus over the last year and a half has been on how to manage placements during a pandemic and it will be interesting to re-establish key social work education priorities for the region.

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