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Teaching Partnership Four Years on: Lessons Learned about Relationships between Universities and Practice Partners?

Ruth Hamilton, Sharon Vincent, Suzie Cooper, Steph Downey, Tracey Horseman and Lynn Stoneley

The North-East Social Work Alliance was formed in 2016 following a successful application for Government funding in the second wave of Teaching Partnerships. The formation of this Teaching Partnership enabled the development of new and innovative ways of working between higher education institutions 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 the North-East Social Work Alliance has had on stakeholder relationships between one university and its partner agencies. By examining the perspectives of the university and its practice partners, it explores structural and operational relationships and critically examines the enhanced model of partnership working that Teaching Partnerships have facilitated. It concludes that overall Teaching Partnerships have promoted enhanced relationships between higher education institutions and their stakeholders. However, it identifies areas that should be addressed within future governance arrangements by Teaching Partnerships and similar partnership programmes internationally in order to maximise the impact such programmes have on social work education.

Keywords: 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

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work qualifying programmes and the suitability of their recruits (Harris, Manthorpe, and Hussein 2008; GSCC 2009; Social Work Task Force 2009; Social Work Reform Board 2010; Smith et al. 2018; Croisdale-Appleby 2014; Narey 2014; Berry-Lound, Tate, and Greatbatch 2016; Maxwell et al. 2016; Hamilton 2019). Teaching Partnerships were introduced in 2015 to improve social work education and develop a more standardised approach to education and training (Cavener, Phillips, and Shenton 2020).

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 Teaching Partnership model assumes better partnership working will enhance the quality of social work education but the evidence base is limited (Shardlow et al. 2012). Wilson's (2016) mixed-methods study of academics' views of partnership working in Northern Ireland and Gordon and Davis (2016) qualitative study of academics, local authorities and third sector staff in Scotland are two of only a handful of studies that have investigated this topic.

Vangen's 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 university and its partners following the establishment of the North-East Social Work Alliance, one of 23 Teaching Partnerships in England. Reflecting on stakeholder relationships pre- and post- North-East Social Work Alliance it assesses the overall impact the Teaching Partnership has had on strategic and operational relationships. By examining the perspectives of the university and its local authority/health trust partners, it critically examines the enhanced model of partnership working that Teaching Partnerships have facilitated.

The paper was written by two academics and four practice partners and is itself an example of positive cultural change facilitated by this Teaching Partnership. The authors met on four occasions to reflect on the impact the North-East Social Work Alliance 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

Each Teaching Partnership is different depending on history, context and composition of partners (Interface Associates UK Ltd. 2020). At its inception the

North-East Social Work Alliance was the largest involving six higher education institutions, 12 local authorities and a National Health Service 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 Ltd. 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 Teaching Partnership programme enabled the North-East Social Work Alliance to develop a number of projects to explore and improve practice within four priority areas - admissions, placements, post qualification training/continuing professional development and opportunities for joint learning between academics and social workers. An application for additional financial aid in 2018 enabled the North-East Social Work Alliance 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 local authorities/health trusts and higher education institutions in the region.

Strategic Relationships

One of the reported benefits of the Teaching Partnership programme is that it formalised collaborative working and acted as a catalyst for cultural change in the way partners work together (Interface Associates UK Ltd. 2020). Gordon and Davis (2016) suggested strategic formalised approaches facilitate effective partnerships and the North-East Social Work Alliance 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 local authorities felt there was real value in having all the higher education institutions together in one room, particularly when Social Work England joined in phase 3.

Geographical proximity facilitated the building of close working relationships in the Gordon and Davis (2016) study. The North-East Social Work Alliance broke down geographical barriers and acted as a catalyst for increased levels of collaboration between organisations in the north and south of the region. Before the North-East Social Work Alliance higher education institutions and local authorities tended to work primarily with their

geographical neighbours. Some local authorities only had relationships with one higher education institution whereas there is now a plethora of new relationships. Higher education institutions 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 higher education institutions 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 higher education institution agenda departs from the North-East Social Work Alliance agenda. Similarly, not all local authorities in the region recruit from higher education institutions within the Teaching Partnership.

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. Furthermore, there were already strong existing partnerships with the sectors that have contributed to the North-East Social Work Alliance in various ways including Social Work Education North East, an alliance between the six regional higher education institutions; 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 sector. In contrast Teaching Partnerships have been overly focussed on statutory relationships (Baginsky, Manthorpe, and Hickman 2019). Social work education is not just about the statutory local authorities's workforce. A significant proportion of social work graduates work in the voluntary sector and there may be a need to refresh the North-East Social Work Alliance's membership moving forwards to include the private, voluntary and independent sector.

Another complexity is that the North-East Social Work Alliance 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, the Applied Research Collaboration North-East and Cumbria 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 this regional Teaching Partnership has a significantly smaller staff team than the Applied Research Collaboration North-East and Cumbria 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 the North-East Social Work Alliance'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 this Teaching Partnership has evolved it has addressed this issue 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 continuing professional development programme for practice educators has been one of the most successful and sustainable outcomes of the North-East Social Work Alliance generating larger numbers of Practice Educators. All partners were committed to it and shared buy-in across the region contributed to its success.

The North-East Social Work Alliance also enabled richer conversations around research and the development of innovative research/practice partnerships including a successful secondment from a local authority into the university (Cavener, Phillips, and Shenton 2020). The university 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 2021) but releasing staff to do things above and beyond their day job is a challenge for local authorities.

Gordon and Davis (2016) warn that loss of significant personnel can undermine relationships and changing membership of the North-East Social Work Alliance has been an ongoing challenge. Some of the original architects of this Teaching Partnership 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, Bosch, and Volberda (2006) commented on the variable amounts of time and expertise that stakeholders are able or willing to bring to a partnership. Some of the North-East Social Work Alliance members had human resources 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 higher education institutions but they did not always have the power to commit to decisions or actions without wider organisational approval.

Gordon and Davis (2016) stress the importance of shared vision in facilitating relationships. The North-East Social Work Alliance partners shared a strategic vision in that they both wanted to produce highly skilled social workers but the Teaching Partnership's priorities have not always sat comfortably with higher education institution's operational drivers. The university's need to demonstrate stakeholder views feeds into programme management as they are regulated against this but the North-East Social Work Alliance changed how they managed their internal programme management. Before the inception of the Teaching Partnership, the university'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 local authority representatives, partners from the private, voluntary and independent 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 higher education institutions in the region had programme management structures but the university was relatively unusual in having a Strategic Partnership Board that its closest partners (those who provided the most placements) attended. As outlined above the North-East Social Work Alliance generated a growing number of meetings and some members understandably prioritised larger Teaching Partnership meetings over individual university meetings and at times the university felt this was to the detriment of operational decision-making. There was an implicit assumption that Teaching Partnership meetings would supersede programme management committees but the two meetings have different functions. Teaching Partnership 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 higher education institutions. Following the inception of the North-East Social Work Alliance 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. The North-East Social Work Alliance placement meetings consider placements as a whole across the North-

East whereas before the Teaching Partnership placement meetings took place between one higher education institution and their key placement partners. Higher education institutions could no longer discuss how they were going to provide placements for their own students as they had in smaller meetings. Some local authorities felt that placement meetings led by individual higher education institutions had been helpful forums 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 Teaching Partnership 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 Teaching Partnership 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 focussed 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 CPD programme for practice educators which can be built upon. Conversely the North-East Social Work Alliance 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. Effective partnership working takes time (Gordon and Davis 2016) thus the North-East Social Work Alliance 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 continuing professional development 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 continuing professional development arrangements. Furthermore, operational pressures and demands, including pressure on budgets have forced local authorities to consider alternative continuing professional development providers. This is problematic for higher education institutions because continuing professional development 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). The North-East Social Work Alliance partners share the same broad aspirations for social work education but the Teaching Partnership model is characterised by tensions because unlike local authorities and health trusts higher education institutions are competitors all providing qualifying social work programmes marketed to students, thus they will never be equal partners. It will be important for the North-East Social Work Alliance to consider these tensions moving forward to ensure stability. In the meantime the university has taken the opportunity to re-evaluate its offer of continuing professional development 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 the North-East Social Work Alliance's future. Understandably the main focus of this Teaching Partnership 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.

Disclosure Statement

The authors report no declarations of interest.

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