

## *Education for social care workers - the views of course participants*

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### **Introduction**

It is widely acknowledged that the experiences of the adult learner returning to education and the experiences of the younger student are very different. For the adult learner, financial situation, motivation, self-confidence, familiarity with the world of employment and unfamiliarity with the world of books, papers and assessments place them in a very different arena to the regular full-time student. Subsequently, the needs of and the approach taken to learning by adults, are likely to be quite different from those of students who have not left mainstream education. An adult education approach encourages learners to draw on their past and current experience in the home, family and in work environments, and to use these experiences to consider critically the information presented to them. Adult learners are often more likely to focus on the relevance of information to their work or home situation.

In the area of education and training in social care, an opportunity to compare the ideas of continuing full-time students with adult learners arose in the context of a study on the need to train formal social care workers who work with older people. In Ireland, the provision of social care education and training takes place both through adult education and through full-time, mainstream forms of delivery. An analysis of responses made by both groups of learners forms the basis of this article.

### ***Education and training in social care***

In Ireland, in recent years, there has been considerable expansion in the scope and provision of educational opportunities in the adult education sector. Several reports and policy documents have been published since the report of the first advisory committee on adult education (Committee on Adult Education, 1973), each recommending further development and expansion of the adult education sector, in particular the development of structures to reduce barriers to participation. There is an acknowledged need for provision of education and training for adults in the areas of health education (Committee on Adult Education, 1984) and in the wider area of health studies. The most recent health policy document in Ireland (Department of Health,

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1994) calls for an examination of the continuing education and training of health professionals in the light of the re-orientation of the health delivery system contained in the Government health strategy. Educational courses in health promotion, health psychology, health care management, health studies and social care have, as a result, become more prominent in recent years. Yet of these courses, it is those that purport to train social care workers that have least educational status, a fact that both reflects and has implications for the professional status of social care work. Courses in social care are predominantly at sub-degree level.

Social care is care that takes place in the home or an institutional setting which is a substitute for home for those who have become too dependent on others to live in the community (Fahey, 1995). It can include medical care, but is chiefly characterised by personal and social services, often provided by family members. Until recently, child care workers have been the only group singled out for formal training, receiving accredited training provision within the Regional Technical College (RTC) system.

Recent years have seen moves toward the recognition of the need to train social care workers who work with older people, prompted by two broad trends in the areas of health policy and demography. In policy, there has been a definite shift toward community-based care. This has evolved against a background of concerns regarding the growing costs of residential care, accompanying cut backs on spending in health, and concern with the quality of care found in institutions (O'Connor *et al*, 1988). There is also a predicted increase in the number of older persons in the community especially in the frail elderly who account for a large share of those in need of social care (Kelleher, 1993; Fahey, 1995).

However, the format of currently available courses is unlikely to be accessible to many social care workers who work with older people. This group of workers is considerably marginalised both within society and the health care system. Both informal and formal social care workers have low educational status (O'Connor *et al*, 1988; O'Donovan *et al*, 1993) and those in the Home Help Service experience low pay and poor working conditions (Lundström and McKeown, 1994). They are predominantly female, of mature years and typically have not been part of the formal educational system for some time. However, it is evident that they are very keen to secure further education and training in their field of work (O'Donovan *et al*, 1997). In a study on carers' educational needs, 90 per cent of formal social care workers expressed an interest in doing an accredited course in social care and 95 per cent expressed a preference for such a course being part-time (O'Donovan *et al*, 1993).

The idea that this group of people would benefit from adult education initiatives underpinned the development of an accredited training programme for social care workers who work with older people in the National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG). Following a consultative process, NUIG's, Departments of Health Promotion and Adult & Continuing Education designed and delivered a part-time training programme, the Certificate/Diploma in Social Care, informed by an adult education model of delivery. The Certificate in Social Care has since been developed in distance education format, thus maximising accessibility.

These two systems of training have evolved in very different ways, and cater for different student groups. Those offered by the RTC are chiefly for young students. Conversely, the NUIG courses are part-time, attract predominantly mature students, who are more likely to be working with adults and to have lengthy work experience in the area.

## Method

This study sought to elicit the opinions of both student groups on the need to train social care workers who work with older people. We wished to compare the responses of a sample of students. A questionnaire was devised as part of a larger study, commissioned by the National Council for the Elderly (now the National Council for Ageing and Older People), on the training of formal social care workers who work with older people (O'Donovan *et al.*, 1997).

Questionnaires were administered to two subject groups. The first group comprised an opportunistic sample of students currently undertaking the NUIG Certificate in Social Care, a part-time distance education programme. The second group comprised students from the five Regional Technical Colleges offering a Certificate/Diploma in Applied Social Studies in Social Care. In each case, all students undertaking the courses were asked by teaching staff to complete questionnaires and to return these to staff, who in turn returned questionnaires to NUIG. The questionnaire was self-administered and included 18-20 questions, completed anonymously.

The following issues were addressed in the questionnaire:

- the perceived need to train formal social care workers who work with older people;
- whether training formal social care workers who work with older people should be mandatory;
- whether training should be specific to care of old people or generic social care training;
- whether there should be national recognition for training courses for formal social care workers who work with older people.

Categorical analysis was undertaken by means of the chi squared test as appropriate. One way Chi squared analyses were conducted on the breakdown of reasons for each student group. All tests were two tailed.

## Results

Questionnaires were returned for 224 (76 per cent) students from four of the five regional technical colleges (RTCs) that offer the National Certificate/Diploma in Applied Social Studies in Social Care. One College did not return any questionnaires. The breakdown of this student group, (hereinafter called 'young' students), indicated that 50 per cent were first year students, 23 per cent were second year students, and the remaining 27 per cent were in third or fourth year. All of these students were under the age of 31 (see Table 1). Ninety eight students from the NUIG Certificate in Social Care (mature students) returned questionnaires, a response rate of 78 per cent. Only 23 per cent were under 24 years of age (see Table 1). Information on gender was not recorded, although 96 per cent of the student group from which the mature student sample was taken were female.

Ninety seven per cent of young students and 98 per cent of mature students agreed that training is necessary for formal social care workers who work with older people. Each student group was asked also to give reasons for their responses to this question. Three hundred and twenty nine reasons, in total, were given; 85 from the mature student group and 244 from the young student group. Reasons were sorted into six categories and comparisons made between student groups for each category. The categories were: (1) need for specific skills and knowledge; (2) perceived complexity

Table 1: Young and Mature Students, by Age

Young student group		Mature student group	
Age Band	Percentage of students	Age Band	Percentage of students
17-21	180 (80%)	15-24	22 (23%)
22-26	35 (16%)	25-34	16 (16%)
27-31	9 (4%)	35-44	34 (34%)
		45-65	26 (25%)

of work; (3) benefit to carer; (4) benefit to older person; (5) quality of care relationship and (6) other.

The breakdown of reasons per category can be found in Table 2. There was a significant difference between groups in the type of reason given ( $X^2= 36.02$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

Table 2: Number of reasons given by groups for formal social care workers who work with older people needing training

Reason category	Mature students	Young students
Need for specific skills and knowledge	41 (48%)	50 (21%)
Complexity of work	15 (18%)	104 (43%)
Benefit to carer	6 (7%)	3 (1%)
Benefit to older person	5 (6%)	20 (8%)
Quality of care relationship	17 (20%)	62 (26%)
Other	1 (1%)	2 (0.9%)
Total number of reasons	35 (100%)	244 (100%)

Each group of students was asked whether they felt that training for formal social care workers should be mandatory, ie obligatory for all those working in a paid capacity with older persons. Results can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3: Students' perceptions of the need for mandatory training of formal social care workers who work with older people

	Mature Students	Young students
Yes, training should be mandatory	81 (83%)	197 (88%)
No, training should not be mandatory	7 (7%)	11 (5%)
Don't know	3 (1%)	11 (5%)
No response	7 (7%)	
Total	98 (100%)	224 (100%)

Students were asked to give reasons for their response to this question. Two hundred and nineteen reasons were given in total, 42 by the mature students and 177 by the young students. Reasons were sorted into five categories (see Table 4). A significant difference emerged in types of reason given between groups ( $\chi^2 = 36.93$ ,  $df = 3$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

Table 4: Reasons given by groups for training of formal social care workers who work with older people being mandatory

Reason category	Mature students	Young students
Recognition/status/respect for the work	20 (49%)	38 (21%)
Would set standards	9 (21%)	113 (63%)
Influence pay scales	9 (21%)	5 (3%)
Health and safety	4 (9%)	10 (6%)
Other		11 (7%)
Total reasons	42 (100%)	177 (100%)

Finally, students were asked whether training for formal social care workers should be specific to the care of older people or generic social care training, and whether training should have national recognition. Results can be seen in Tables 5 and 6 respectively. While the young students were fairly evenly divided regarding specific vs. generic training, the mature student group were more in favour of generic training. Both groups were equally and highly in favour of national recognition for training formal social care workers.

Table 5: Training of formal social care workers specific to older people of generic social care training

	Mature students	Young students
Training specific to care of older people	33 (34%)	108 (48%)
Generic social care training	48 (49%)	99 (44%)
Don't know	1 (1%)	17 (8%)
No response	16 (15%)	
Total	98 (100%)	224 (100%)

## Discussion

The results of this study indicate an extremely high degree of support by students for training formal social care workers. There was almost unanimous support within both student groups for the need to train workers, very strong support for training which was mandatory and nationally recognised, and mixed responses on whether training should be specific to care of older people or generic in nature. The strong support for

Table 6: National recognition for training of formal social care workers who work with older people

	Mature students	Young students
Yes, training of formal social care workers should be nationally recognised	87 (89%)	197 (88%)
No, national recognition not required	4 (4%)	9 (4%)
Don't know		7 (3%)
No response	7 (7%)	
Total	98 (100%)	224 (100%)

formal training is not surprising given that all respondents are currently undertaking training in social care. However, even allowing for the obvious bias of respondents, the endorsement of the need for training was very high.

The two student groups differed in relation to the reasons given in support of training workers and reasons given for training being mandatory.

#### *Differences between young and mature students*

Almost half of the reasons given by the mature student group for training social care workers related to the need for specific skills and knowledge, while less than a quarter (21 per cent) of the reasons given by the young student group were of this nature. Conversely 43 per cent of reasons given by the young students related to the complexity of the work, while only 18 per cent of reasons given by the mature student group could be so described. These differences can perhaps be linked to the fact that, as adult learners, the mature student group have considerable work experience and are more aware of specific gaps in their knowledge and skill base than younger students. It is reasonable to assume that, having perhaps absorbed the demands of the work, this makes mature students less likely to find the work complex.

There were also differences between the two groups regarding the reasons given for mandatory training. Half of the reasons given by the mature student group related to recognition/status and respect for work, while such reasons only constituted one fifth (21 per cent) of reasons given by the young student group. Concerns about recognition are clearly of greater importance for mature students and may well be linked to their more extensive experience in the work environment, perhaps in particular, experience working with other health professionals. It is evidence too that adult learners may be thinking critically and more aware of the longer term implications of training.

Sixty three per cent of the reasons given by young students related to setting standards in care work with older people, although only 3 per cent gave reasons relating to payment. Interestingly, 21 per cent of mature students' reasons for mandatory training for workers related to the setting of standards and 21 per cent also to the likely influence on pay scales. This is not surprising given reported low rates of pay for many home helps (Lundström and McKeown, 1994). The relative lack of concern about pay scales in young students, and the apparent tendency not to link standards and pay scales, can again be interpreted in the light of limited work experience in the field.

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### *Similarities between young and mature student groups*

It is interesting that support for training is almost equal within both student groups, despite the fact that the courses undertaken by the young student group have, until recently, been focused on the care of children. This finding arguably provides indirect evidence of a positive shift in previously predominately negative attitudes of young students towards older people (eg Power, 1987).

Small proportions of both student groups gave as reasons to support training the benefits of it to the carer and to the older person. Although each student group attached different relative importance to the need for knowledge and the complexity of the work, similar proportions gave reasons relating to the quality of the care relationship (see Table 2). Taken together, these last three categories amount to 90 per cent and 86 per cent of reasons respectively in the young and mature student groups, revealing a shared focus on the vocational and practice benefits of training and a similar tendency to see personal benefits of training as relatively unimportant.

There was little difference between the two groups on generic social care training, with almost half of both groups favouring this over specific training. The similarity in response to national recognition for training of formal social care workers is in keeping with large demand for accreditation of community-based courses reported by Kelly (1994).

The similarity in responses to questions about mandatory training and the vocational focus, may be due to wider contextual factors that impinge on care workers, in particular the need to professionalise care work. These contextual factors may well transcend different age and educational experiences. Social care workers working with older people typically have had limited access to training or educational programmes and there is no state funding for any training they wish to pursue. Most home helps receive local in-service training, although this is unspecified (Lundström and McKeown, 1994) and can vary from one health board region to another. The training that is in existence is predominantly offered at sub-degree level, with less educational status than courses in health promotion, and health psychology, offered at post-graduate level, and those in health studies and social work, offered at degree level.

Resistance to the provision of training to social care workers has been noted in the literature, particularly within the Home Help Service. Formal, comprehensive training is discouraged on the grounds that it might over-professionalise the service, or undermine its voluntary ethos (Lundström and McKeown, 1994; O'Donovan *et al*, 1997). This is most notably voiced by employing organisations (O'Donovan *et al*, 1997). The tension within the Home Help service between voluntarism and professionalism was also noted (Lundström and McKeown, 1994). Such concerns are underpinned by assumptions about the delivery of personal and social care services as a 'natural' extension of the carer's affective relationship with the care recipient (ie a family member or a neighbour), and 'fears' that the education and training of adults who presently provide these services would undermine the delicate nature of such a relationship.

O'Connor (1992: 264) discusses the difficulties child care work faces 'in generating the kinds of beliefs about itself that would underpin its identification as a profession' and also comments on the perceived similarities between child care work and parenting, seen to be a natural extension of a woman's tasks, and indeed an essential part of her role. These difficulties have been noted also in relation to other kinds of care work, ie care of older persons and of adults with learning disabilities, and are not

peculiar to Ireland. Graham (1983: 30) notes that it is through caring that women gain admittance 'into both the private world of home and the public world of the labour market'. In the home women care in an informal capacity as wives, as mothers and as daughters, while it is 'through formal caring - as nurses, teachers, secretaries, cleaners and social workers - that women enter and occupy their place in society' (*ibid*: 30). In this way, care that is undertaken in a formal paid capacity can be construed easily as a natural expression of a woman's nature, as fundamentally dissimilar to other types of work, and as somehow being tainted by being packaged, organised and paid in the same way as the work of a clerk or a mechanic. The link between the marginal status of care work and the gendered nature of care has also been discussed by Hodgins and Kelleher (1998).

Rejection of the idea that care work cannot and should not be 'professionalised' can be seen tentatively to form a common ground between the two student groups. It also indicates that, while it may be useful to distinguish between the different methods of learning or delivery for young students and adult learners, it is important to acknowledge common ground, particularly in relation to groups that share experiences of discrimination or marginalisation.

### Conclusions

In summary, the results of this study indicate that within both a young student group and mature student group, there is a strong support for the idea that formal social care workers who work with older people be trained, that this training should be mandatory, and nationally recognised. Approximately half of each group feel that training should be generic social care training. Differences between the two groups emerged largely in relation to reasons given for the need to train formal social care workers and the reasons for such training being mandatory and such differences can be interpreted in the light of the lengthier work and life experience of the adult learner/mature students. The high degree of support and agreement between the groups challenges previously voiced reservations about training and indicates that due attention should be given to contextual factors in which students undertake their learning, in which gender and resistance to recognising the value of one's work can override distinctions in age and educational experience.

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