

**OPENING STATEMENT TO THE JOINT COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH  
AFFAIRS:**

**Dr Breda McTaggart (10/04/2019)**

**INTRODUCTION**

On behalf of the Institute of Technology Sligo I wish to thank you for the invitation to address this Joint Committee on Children and Youth Affairs to discuss issues pertaining to the recruitment and retention of social workers, with a particular emphasis on whether there are adequate social work course places in third level colleges to meet the recruitment needs of the social work profession in Ireland. I will like to introduce you to my colleague, Ms Brenda Feeney, who is a registered Social Worker and the Course Director of the Masters in Social Work in the Institute of Technology Sligo.

The Institute of Technology Sligo is a higher education provider who develops and delivers programmes of learning to over 6,500 students at undergraduate, masters and doctorate level. It is a leader in online learning, is research active across all areas and has, at its core, a focus on the development of its region and its citizens.

The Department of Social Sciences in IT Sligo is one of the largest Departments in the Institute of Technology Sligo. It caters for the learning needs of over 650 students at undergraduate and postgraduate level. In 2015 the team and I carried out a review of our regions educational and employment needs. From this review we developed and sought validation for a number of awards at undergraduate and postgraduate level, inclusive of a Masters in Social Work. The Masters in Social Work award is the first Social Work award to be delivered in an Institute of Technology. The award has been developed in response to student requests for this award within the Northwest region, a national shortage of social workers, a number of policy documents, which advocate widening access in education and the need to meet an employment and skills shortage.

## **SHORTAGE OF SOCIAL WORKERS**

Waiting lists for social worker expertise exist across all service areas including; children and young people; care of the elderly; and the disability sector. This is even after a sustained recruitment and retention drive across all sectors. The reality exists that this is set to continue as the demand for social workers is not being met by the supply of graduates (215-250) and retention of social workers within specific posts are acknowledged as challenging. Consequently, a large number of vacancies remain unfilled across all sectors.

## **PROVISION OF SOCIAL WORK WITHIN AN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY**

The Institute of Technology Sligo and the Department of Social Sciences is reflective of the non-traditional Higher Education space, where our students are often the first generation to higher education and many are in receipt of grant funding. Students who begin their studies in the Department of Social Sciences work hard throughout programmes and graduate with qualifications that support them to attain better life opportunities and outcomes for themselves, their families and for the communities in which they work and live. However, because of the Institutes lack of provision within specific learning spaces, the Department was concerned that we were contributing to equity of access to in-demand learning opportunities for our student cohort. In 2016, we made the decision to change this by the introduction of a number of awards inclusive of the Masters in Social Work.

## **CURRENT STATUS**

The programme team and I began this development in 2016, in 2018 we sought and secured, under delegated authority, QQI Level 9 validation for a two year full-time Masters Award in Social Work. In September 2018 the programme commenced with a small cohort of ambitious and excited students. They are currently on their first professional learning placement.

As this is a new departure for the Institute of Technology sector, it did raise some questions about whether we should be delivering in this field. The answer to this question is Social Work is a Regulated Profession under the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005, consequently all programmes must be reviewed and assessed by the professional regulator,

CORU. The Masters in Social Work has made an application to CORU and we will be reviewed by our professional regulator in Autumn 2019.

## **CHALLENGES**

There are a small number of challenges when developing and implementing a Social Work award, they are not insurmountable but are worth noting as we try and work collectively to resolve the ongoing issues of social work recruitment and retention. These include:

- a) Educational providers are dependent on the goodwill of services to accept and supervise students for professional placement learning opportunities. It is a significant challenge to secure even a small number of placements and is prohibiting increasing our student numbers.
- b) Students on newly developed Professional Regulated Programmes commence without the assurance that the programme will be successful as part of the validation process. This has a personal and financial risk for potential students and does impact on the numbers applying and the numbers we recruit.
- c) Any changes to the offering of an approved programme e.g. going from full-time to a part-time delivery model requires a new validation process. If one of the offerings is unsuccessful both may be impacted by this. This is because the specific award title i.e. Masters of Social Work and the academic institute is recorded on the Approved Qualifications Bye-Law.
- d) As is normal for all students who wish to return to full-time studies there are costs implications, both in terms of fees and maintenance. Students who were in employment in the previous year may be above the threshold of grant funding for year one, hence the financial burden is increased in year one. Suggestions of Funded Bursaries would be welcomed, provided it does not impact on a student securing grant funding.

## **ISSUES OF RETENTION**

While recruitment is one part of the social work shortage puzzle, retention is the other; this was discussed by the Irish Association of Social Workers to the Joint Committee on the 27<sup>th</sup> March 2019. We would support suggestions put forward by our colleagues and reiterate the importance of quality supervision, streamlining of work practices and manageable caseloads

as key factors in any successful retention strategy. We would add that recruitment and retention strategies need to co-exist as one impacts directly on the other.

## **IN CONCLUSION**

We acknowledge that this is a complex, multifactorial problem and consequently any sustainable resolution will require many different and interrelated strategies. The team and I had, and have, a responsibility to its (potential) students and its region to provide appropriate education and learning opportunities, to the required standard, in an area where employment needs exist, social work is one of these areas. We welcome the opportunity to be part of any resolution strategy.