

Chapter 1

Challenges and Future Directions for Social Work Education



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Reading the runes is part and parcel of the business of strategic leadership. Anticipating, second-guessing and trying to understand what will happen in the future involve making sense of the present, having an eye on the past and being able to conceptualise a vision of what might be possible. The scale and the pace of change within and beyond the academy suggest that now, perhaps more than ever before, there is a need for this kind of strategic thinking in social work education. In a profession that is known for its big heart, and low confidence (Donovan et al. 2017), the time is ripe for asserting a more strongly articulated positioning, for advancing our agenda and our vision and for reaching out to a broader audience in our efforts to achieve impact.

Such speculation on challenges and future directions for social work education is evident in the literature (see, e.g. Crisp 2019; Connolly et al. 2017; Taylor et al. 2016; Ferguson 2017; Reisch 2013; Reisch and Jani 2012). Across the globe academic commentators are puzzling the way forward – identifying common trends, grappling with contemporary tensions and proffering a range of proposals for navigating alternative futures. The intellectual capacity within the academy suggests this as a critical locale for generating such narratives. It is indeed the responsibility of academics to advance innovative ideas but not in isolation from the wider intellectual community and key stakeholders. There has never been a more pressing time to generate dialogue across national boundaries, institutions and constituencies in the collective endeavour of setting the context for change.

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Social work education exists within a dynamic environment where the demands for evidence-informed practice and a myriad of stakeholder expectations shape the field and the fundamental essence of social work as a discipline. The challenge to progress cutting-edge pedagogy, to spearhead international research and collaboration, to advance social work as a discipline within the academy and to equip students of social work for twenty-first-century practice, is an imperative that has local, national and international dimensions. It represents a challenge to leadership in steering a course through uncertainty and becoming practised in advancing strategic agendas that shape the future of social work education as sustainable, effective and reflecting tomorrow's needs and aspirations.

In this spirit, what became known as the '*Prato moment*', an initiative of the Australian Council of Heads of Schools of Social Work (ACHSSW: 2015–2018) brought together an international group of 'thought leaders' to consider and deliberate on the nature of contemporary challenges in social work education and to advance debates about future directions. In Chap. 11, we explore the feedback provided by this *Prato Group* of international leaders, reporting what they have to say about notions of leadership and what methods there may be for bringing people together to develop and advance strategic leadership agendas. Two convened colloquia in Prato brought academics from East to West in an in-depth dialogue on the key themes of political leadership, research leadership, educating for global social work citizenship, capacity building in the academic workforce and spearheading innovations in teaching and learning. Engaging with national and regional diversity is stimulating and provides opportunities for comparison and benchmarking. Different country contexts alert us to different priorities and concerns within varying socio-political contexts and indeed to intra- as well as intercountry diversity.

International collaboration is a force for strengthening the strategic development of the profession, helping to build a workforce that is better educated and enabling us to draw on a strong research base to complement locally inflected knowledges. The role of the established international bodies has been significant in this respect. International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) has provided the Global Standards document (2005) as a framework to guide schools in developing and reviewing curricula. More latterly, the Global agenda (2014) has set out important priorities and principles as a coherent focus for embedding in national contexts. The issue, however, has been one of scale, engagement and interpretation at local level (see Yuen and Healy Chap. 9 and McNabb, Chap. 8). The relationship with international co-ordinating bodies has been variable and accordingly their impacts.

Despite recognised differences in national and institutional contexts, many of the challenges posed to the delivery of social work education reflect the converging processes of economic globalisation, neo-liberal modernisation, technological advances within an expanding knowledge economy and more latterly convergence around populist political ideologies. These mega-trends have triggered seismic shifts in the policy context of higher education institutions at national level, manifest in the imposition of resource constraints, embracing of new technologies, developing responses to the changing student demographic and to raised student expectations and needs. In addition, as social life has become

more complex (van Ewijk 2018) so too the task of social work. The expectations amongst various stakeholder groups have also grown regarding graduate supply, graduate capabilities and attributes, professional identity, the need for evidence and so on. Different priorities and preoccupations are in evidence across the globe. Some parts of the world, for example, China, are rapidly developing social work programmes for the first time. In the African countries, advancing social development models has been a core priority. In other places, for example the USA and Australia, exponential growth is being experienced within demand-led systems that threaten the quality of delivery and the quality of student experience. Australia, for example, has experienced a huge increase in the international student intake, radically changing the profile of the student body and placing new demands in terms of both relevance and pastoral support.

Over 30 years neo-liberal politics has had a profound effect on the academy. Fiscal restraint, increasing marketisation and contracting out of services and performance-based outcome measures have all had consequential effects on workloads and work cultures. We have experienced the casualisation of the workforce with very specific gender implications, and in most western societies, there are concerns about sustainability and succession in the social science workforce as the baby boomers retire (Howard and Williams 2017). A range of new pressures and demands face the average academic both in relation to research outputs and in terms of meeting the requirements of the more entrepreneurial university for income generation. Social work academics are empirically documented as being time poor, given the additional demands of the delivery of professional education (Moriarty et al. 2015). The nature of academic work is being transformed (Teater et al. 2016) as are the workplace conditions in which it is conducted. But these are not the only challenges. The directions and imperatives of neo-liberal transformations are experienced as incommensurate with social work values (Ferguson 2017). Contestation over the curriculum reflects the multiple stakeholders with a finger in the pie, including the increasingly articulated voice of service users. There are concerns about the robustness and supply of good research evidence (Sharland 2013; Orme and Powell 2007; and see Kemp Chap. 6), about the sustainability of field education as currently constructed (see Bogo Chap. 7) and the almost perennial concern about the standing of the social work discipline within the academy (Webber et al. 2016).

In the UK, several long-standing and established social work programmes have been closed, for example, the Glasgow School of Social Work, Reading, and King's College, London. Questions have been raised about the appropriateness of the academy *at all* to professional social work training. Indeed, experiments such as fast-track programmes in the UK explicitly pose questions about the relevancy, currency and effectiveness of the university to prepare students for practice. In many country contexts, the discipline is being absorbed into large multidisciplinary schools and within diverse groupings, predominantly clinical in orientation, where the foundational social science knowledge and orientation is largely absent and where they struggle for professional identity and recognition. Concerns around the staffing quotient, the costs of field education and research demands on time poor social work academics raise serious questions about the viability of social work education.

With its field education requirements, social work is seen as an expensive discipline. Many of these developments contribute to making social work appear very marginal within the academy and there is a need to consider strategies to enable push-back and to assert our relevance, place and contributions. We must ask: what are our points of leverage and how well are we utilising them?

This mantra of disruptive trends in higher education is matched within the profession more generally. The pressures apparent from neo-liberal incursions into the everyday work of social work practitioners necessarily reverberate across social work education as agencies find it increasingly difficult to host students on placement and require students to be well prepared for the realities and constraints on contemporary social work practice. It is, nevertheless, not all a tale of woe. Change has brought in its wake considerable opportunities for social work education. The entrepreneurial university values partnerships with community, non-governmental organisations (NGO) and other organisations and emphasises the added value of building strong collaborations. This has long been a strong feature of the delivery of social work education and is now receiving recognition and endorsement. In addition, community/academy partnerships underpin social work research and open up clear opportunities for demonstrating real-world impact. The world is after solutions, and the new paradigm guiding academic research is based on high engagement, collaboration and demonstrating impact. The mandate to collaborate across disciplines is profitable for social work, enabling new and innovative alliances in addressing intractable social problems. In addition, new teaching technologies are ripe for harvesting towards skills training and providing more flexibility for both staff and students who are increasingly wanting to personalise their learning.

The challenge is to grasp what is relevant and progressive in the change agenda and look out for trends and tendencies conducive to the social work mission. New conditions require new strategies. As a collective we have been slow to capitalise on our vantage points, slow to showcase our added value and, to our detriment, we have been slow to reach out to new audiences in communicating our mission. How good are we at articulating our message in new arenas and to other audiences beyond social work for the purpose of engagement for strategic change?

The focus on strategic leadership sits at the heart of this book. It is a call to look beyond the challenges of daily operational practice and to engage in dialogue about how we might influence ways of doing things differently. A plethora of leadership and management commentary exists. Much of the focus has been on the impact of neo-liberal methodologies on management and leadership. Perhaps, we have found ourselves somewhat stuck in reactive responses and critique, with notions of survival, resilience and adaptation guiding our decision making. It is timely to look beyond the more usual preoccupations with the impact of neo-liberal policy trends, austerity and resource scarcity. Rather, we need to ask critical questions about change-making, political strategy and the opportunities that present themselves to lead new directions in social work education, to generate alternatives and deploy new tools and strategies under such circumstances of restraint. In other words, we need to move from analysis to action.

Social Work and Leadership

Recent times have witnessed a growing interest in thinking about leadership development in social work, largely focused on the who, the what and the how (Fisher 2009; Hughes and Wearing 2016). The social work literature includes both individual and organisational leadership, and the general focus has been on skill development, leadership competencies and style, the values and attributes of leaders (e.g. Thompson 2015; Sullivan 2016; Holosko 2009) and/or leadership theories (Tafvelin et al. 2014; Lawler 2007). Social workers have had a long leadership history of advocating, reforming, organising and creating transformative change for individuals, communities and families. The formal models for teaching leadership for applications to social work research and practice have, however, relied on rather conservative theories from the business leadership literature (Tafvelin et al. 2011; Elpers and Westhuis 2008; Gellis 2001). Peters (2018) argues that while these models are useful they can lack congruence with social work values and ethics. These theories, he suggests, are influenced by a white male militaristic tradition based on strict hierarchies (Peters 2018; Lawler 2007) which foster a culture of competition and defeat rather than collaboration and empowerment (see also Howard et al. Chap. 10). In addition, the cost-benefit, for-profit business models, can be counterproductive to the human development and human service-centred models which require particular skill sets (Sullivan 2016). Social workers are trained to assess their clients or situations in the context of their social structural environment, rather than focus on their individual failings which requires understanding of systemic disadvantage, inclusivity, voice and choice. Accordingly, more distributive and participatory models have emerged as predominant orientations for social work practice acknowledging the role of leadership at all levels of the organisations and as a democratic enterprise. There is an increased understanding that leadership is not an individual exercise but involves the organic evolution of ideas, drawing on broad spectrum of knowledges and perspectives, synthesising evidence, enabling and facilitating change and development via crafting the context and making transformations in the culture of the relevant environment.

Peters (2018), after reviewing the literature on social work education and practice, concluded that there is agreement amongst scholars that social work education, and the broader profession, lacks leadership training on the individual, organisational and interprofessional practice levels. At the individual level, social workers lack an understanding of the impact of complex organisational influences on the delivery of work and how they can use the power of informal leadership to make changes (Spitzer et al. 2015). In addition, at the organisational level, social workers are competing for limited administrative jobs with individuals from other disciplines (Tolleson Knee and Folsom 2012). Also, at the interprofessional level, social workers are too often limited to secondary professional status especially in the area of health care (Lymberly 2005; Monroe and DeLouch 2004). The lack of gender and race diversity in the leadership positions of an organisation also creates inequalities,

overlooking people's capacity, vision, contributions and differing modalities of leadership (see Thomas and Williams Chap. 4). Many of these issues prevalent in practice leadership apply equally to leadership within the academy. Opportunities to hold specific leadership roles are limited and too often in the status hierarchy social work academics are overlooked and lose out to people from other disciplines.

There has also been a focus in the literature on prominent leaders themselves and elite narratives both historical and contemporary (Aga Askeland and Payne 2017). Archiving the voice and experience of key thinkers is important to the status of the discipline and provides insights into their contributions to strategic change.

Rank and Hutchinson (2000) conducted a study amongst those who held leadership positions within the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) and the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) concluding that education and training in this area was inadequate, both in terms of the demands for leadership in the field and the social work curricula's ability to sufficiently educate students about the concept itself. Many social work researchers point to the lack of leadership and management content in the curriculum in the baccalaureate and masters programmes in social work (Tolleson Knee and Folsom 2012). The lack of continuing education supporting leadership training for social workers in the field has also been noted (Austin et al. 2011), resulting in few administrative leadership positions being held by social workers in agencies that provide social service assistance (Tolleson Knee and Folsom 2012). We would argue that this lack of leadership training has had a negative impact on social work policies and practice. In addition, as high-level seasoned leaders in administration retire, there is a dearth of trained leaders to transition into those positions who can advocate for the values and principles of social work practice (Tolleson Knee and Folsom 2012).

Attempts have been made to be responsive to this void. In the 1980s, NASW developed a curriculum focused on 10 competences needed to run well-functioning, high-quality agencies-organisations (Wimpfheimer 2004). With funds and in partnership with the John A. Hartford Foundation (www.jhartfound.org), CSWE facilitated an initiative to train, mentor and invest in scholars and practitioners in the field of ageing (see the CSWE Gero-Ed Center: <https://www.cswe.org/Centers-Initiatives/Centers/Gero-Ed-Center.aspx>). Similarly in the UK, the introduction of the Professional Capabilities Framework in 2012 (<https://www.basw.co.uk/resources/pcf-professional-capabilities-framework>) identified leadership as a core competency from first level generic training through to post qualifying continuous professional development. Again in the USA, CSWE and NASW teamed up to develop and implement a grant programme, Social Work HEALS: Social Work Health Care Education and Leadership Scholars. Social Work HEALS aims to develop the next generation of health-care social work leaders who will stand ready to lead efforts to address system-level changes, heighten awareness of prevention and wellness, and address the issues of structural racism that are embedded in social institutions. In addition, several schools of social work in the USA have created leadership tracts in Health Social Work (or whole degrees dedicated to leadership in social work organisations (e.g. the DSW programme at the University of Southern California).

What can be said of the leading edge of social work education, of leadership within the academy and leading out beyond the academy for engagement and impact? This is not a question directed only to the social work education bodies such as CSWE, JU-SWEC, NASW or the ACHSSW – important though these are. This speaks to social work education's responsibility for visioning and shaping social work futures through education and training and for modelling alternatives and sustainable futures through leadership enactments. It is also about supporting students to recognise and grasp strategies needed for their role as future leaders.

Future Directions

There is no shortage of proposals suggesting what our future focus should be in social work education. A range of ideas are suggested. For example, neo-radical perspectives (see Ferguson 2017; Ferguson and Lavalette 2005) look to engagement with grassroots collectives and initiatives that generate alternative approaches to social work practice and foreground the social justice values of social work. Others (see, e.g. Gutman et al. 2012; Kjellberg and French 2011) focus on the radical potential of participatory models of service user engagement based on genuine collaboration and co-design in the delivery of social work education. Neo-pragmatic preparedness coupled with critical reflexivity is perhaps one way to describe the orientation of groups of writers who focus on some of the practical challenges in preparing social work graduates as 'fit for practice' (see, e.g. Special Edition *Australian Social Work* 2019). In the USA, NASW has focused their approach on nine Grand Challenges in order to cohere social work energy and effort for 'collective impact' (Coffey 2017; Kania and Kramer 2011). We put our eggs here in the basket of transnational reflexivity – the notion that through cross-national dialogue and deliberation, we can collectively determine key issues, priorities, critical levers and design strategies for action. The aim of strategy is to connect people with purpose: to garner collective energy productively to push the agenda forward and to make things happen. Being strategic requires skill in linking people with purpose but also in connecting with organisational concerns, engaging with the wider community and environment to define purpose, shape impact and ultimately shape future directions. We argue that achieving engagement on multiple levels towards strategic goals that are aligned to the values of social work is the stuff of leadership at all levels. Thus, we are all involved in the leadership change effort, nobody can linger in the wings.

In this book, we have brought together leaders in social work education who share with us their thoughts on different aspects of leadership and tackle many of the issues we raise here.

Overview of the Book

In the following chapters, leaders in social work education, both established and emerging, explore notions of leadership across a range of academic areas of practice. Collectively they represent important efforts to examine, critique and reimagine social work education in response to contemporary challenges. Individually the chapters seek to explore opportunities for innovative leadership across specific academic areas of practice. Darla Coffey and Liz Beddoe begin our discussion with a call for a different kind of leadership strategy in social work education – one that acknowledges and embeds critical scholarship as a key form of activism. In Chap. 2, Darla and Liz explore three connected forces that challenge the delivery of progressive social work education – the emergence of populism across national and international boundaries; the effects of neo-liberalism within the academy; and the waning of public confidence in our profession. While this may seem daunting they argue that these should not define social work, and that there has never been a more important time to stand against these forces both individually and collectively.

Continuing the theme of progressive action, Chap. 3 picks up the question of *disruptive agendas*. Beth Crisp explores Clayton Christenson's concept of *disruptive innovation*, the notion that effective organisations are those that change their practices to keep ahead of competitors. Both with respect to the nature of change across academia and the potential for social work academics to act strategically, Beth suggests a number of potential responses to these disruptive agendas, including *disruptive responses*. In the field of higher education more generally, and in social work education more specifically, Beth suggests that many of the innovations which academic leaders are being required to implement have the potential to undermine the perceived values and needs of their programmes. At the same time, there is clearly a need to advance social work education in ways that are both viable and successful within the academy. Beth explores leadership response opportunities to current and future disruptive agendas – whether they may be positively embraced, adapted or confronted through disruptive responses. Whatever social work's strategic response, Beth suggests that the litmus test needs to be whether it supports the education of effective social workers.

The debates concerning the representation of racial/ethnic minorities in social work education, and particularly with respect to leadership, are confronted in Chap. 4. Here Rebecca Thomas and Charlotte Williams propose a 'redrafting of the culture of organisations' that will support more progressive leadership – *diversity leadership*. Exploring the issues raised by the demand for a more diverse leadership, Rebecca and Charlotte consider the negotiation of leadership roles in these contexts. Their critique of prevailing leadership theories leads them to present an important challenge to the ways in which social work education addresses diversity and inclusiveness. Their insightful analysis of the way in which these often marginalised perspectives can add value and enhance more progressive and transformative organisational cultures leads them to propose the need for social work both to embrace diversity in leadership and to lead diversity within the academy.

There are many opportunities for leadership in social work education, and a number of authors have noted the important role that regulatory frameworks and

standards for practice can play (see, e.g. McNabb Chap. 8). There are, nevertheless, tensions that naturally exist with respect to creating standards that maintain quality practice while at the same time leave scope for creative innovation. Karen Healy addresses these issues in Chap. 5. Karen is a senior academic who has also been past President of Australia's regulatory body, the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW). As such she is well able to explore both the operational tensions created by regulatory frameworks, and their application in practice. Karen, in particular, considers the importance of purposeful partnership between accrediting bodies, academic institutions and the various stakeholders that have a critical interest in social work higher education. She argues that these leadership partnerships and the relationships they engender have the greatest potential to design and implement a quality curriculum needed for our increasingly complex world.

Advancing intellectual leadership in research and teaching is a critical task that is insightfully explored in Chaps. 6 and 7. Focusing on research, Susan Kemp reinforces the importance of active engagement in solution-oriented research in Chap. 6. Challenging us to move from 'research as usual' to research that reflects a commitment to collaborative, equity-oriented intellectual and research leadership, Susan brings her depth of knowledge to address this potential in the context of doctoral research. She argues that the next generation of scholarly leaders need skills in team science, fluency in theory, epistemology and methodological breadth, and the ability to integrate knowledge in ways that can purposefully engage stakeholders in the crucial process of knowledge translation. Susan potently argues that through the creation of this high-level learning environment, future social work scholars will be better able to engage effectively with complex societal challenges in ways that are both effective and impactful.

Continuing the theme of intellectual leadership, in Chap. 7 Marion Bogo advocates for experimental and empirical work to strengthen pedagogy in social work education. Marion explores the tensions and challenges in educating for the social work profession, and in particular providing innovative learning environments that foster skill-based learning. The international crisis in the delivery of field education demands the kind of intellectual leadership that Marion brings to social work research and teaching. She builds on experimental and active learning theory to demonstrate the way in which simulation can effectively provide a rich environment for competency-based learning. Importantly, she notes the importance of senior leadership endorsement of these innovative responses that champions these research-informed developments.

An important aspect of leadership in social work education is to promote and model disciplinary commitment to equity-based practices. This topic of leading equity-based practice is the subject of David McNabb's research, and he uses this to develop a research-based model of practice in Chap. 8. Exploring the place of democratisation, including efforts towards decolonising practices within social work, David reports on his research with leaders of social work programmes in Aotearoa New Zealand. He finds that there are both rewards and challenges in developing a democratising agenda. His framework, drawn from his research, identifies five key enabling elements of a democratising environment that includes creating the mindset for democratising practices; building an authorising environment that provides the

mandate for change; supporting the workforce so democratising practices can flourish; advancing inclusive pedagogies and cultural responsiveness in ways that are values based; and understanding impact and improvement so democratising efforts can be strengthened over time.

As we move towards the end of the book, we look to both the past and the future for inspirational leadership. In Chap. 9, Angelina Yuen-Tsang and Lynne Healy take us on the leadership journey of the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW). Established in 1928, the IASSW has been supporting social work education for over 90 years. During that time, it has advanced a global agenda that has engaged social workers across the globe and has seen and supported the establishment of many schools of social work throughout the world. Angelina and Lynne explore both the challenges and successes in leading one of our longest serving international bodies, paying tribute to pioneering leaders, and to the IASSW for its work in supporting quality social work education and its role in advancing the social work profession across international boundaries.

In our penultimate chapter, we turn to new generation leadership and how we collectively support and nurture tomorrow's leaders. In a chapter full of innovative ideas, Amanda Howard, Sonya Stanford and Anne-Marie Glover offer a new blueprint for new generational leadership theorising. They point to the way in which social work has been poorly served by mainstream leadership scholarship and training, which has been largely adapted from military and business contexts. This misalignment with conventional leadership training, they argue, has rendered emerging leaders bereft of support and an absence of inspirational leadership. They call for a new approach to leadership that better aligns with the relational commitment of the social work profession, and its strong focus on ethical practices. A conceptual framework for social work leadership is called for that is informed by ethical theory and practice insights. Moving forward they suggest that leadership discourses need to change and become much more inclusive through collaborative practices – not an add-on but part of our social work DNA in research, practice and education. This demands fresh approaches that are cognisant of new spaces for leadership, including online communication, new dynamics that challenge mainstream leadership ideas and new learnings that are specifically designed to support the next-generation leaders of social work education.

Bringing our book to a close, Darla Coffey, Marie Connolly and Charlotte Williams return to the question of strategic leadership in social work education. Drawing on feedback from the *Prato Group* of international leaders, in Chap. 11 they explore what leaders had to say about twenty-first-century leadership challenges and the methods and opportunities that present themselves for advancing a new social work leadership. Internationalising the strategic leadership agenda is high on the list of priorities for these leaders who see this as a way to achieve multiple aims, including increasing collective responsiveness to the macropolitical imperatives that have beset social work in recent decades. The call for collective action and the exploration of new spaces for dialogue and collaboration has been raised many times throughout the chapters of this book, and the Prato Group saw international partnerships as being critical to the development of a new leadership culture for social work education.

Conclusion

In many ways, social work education is at a critical juncture in its development. The challenges ahead signal a need to more confidently articulate our discipline's role, shore up our achievements and status and work strategically – and collectively – towards our common aims. While past and current threats inevitably create a reaction within and across academic settings, the future requires us avoid being reactive. Rather, there has never been a more important time to be strategically proactive. As indicated throughout the pages of this book, this will require us to become increasingly fluent in the language of contemporary academia, and through this to align our priorities to a broader political agenda, communicating the role of social work in critical spaces that are both value based and solution focused. In this way, we can ensure that social work education, and its educators, contribute to an international citizenship of social work.

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