

## **Professionalism and professional identity: what are they and how do social work students acquire them?**

Developing professional identity is an objective of social work education, and universities' key role is recognised in documents such as the Social Work Taskforce report (2009). In England, professionalism – 'to identify and behave as a professional social worker' (Social Work Reform Board, 2010:10) – is an element in the proposed Professional Capabilities Framework. In Scotland, the Key Capabilities in Child Care and Protection (Scottish Executive, 2006:28) require social work educators to deliver teaching 'which explores the notion of a professional'.

The nature of social work identity has long been debated in academic and professional journals: there is, however, no single understanding of what professional identity is. Is it related to particular 'traits', for example? Or perhaps it is more to do with what makes social work distinctive? What can we learn from social workers' and students' subjective experiences of coming to identify themselves as professionals?

This paper, based on recently completed doctoral work and ongoing research into the notion of professionalism, shares ideas about the varied meanings, contingent on historical, cultural and workplace associations, of being a social worker. My research findings suggest that in developing their professional identities, social work students draw on a wide range of influences including the curriculum, workplace learning, service users' perspectives and public expectations. The Reform Board's proposals for developments, in both social work education and the workplace, are being implemented under the pressure of competing financial, organisational and ideological demands: how might these also impact on students' developing professional identities? The paper is intended to stimulate discussion about the practical implications, for social work students and educators, of the research on professional identity.