Social work education at undergraduate level began at the University of the West Indies, Trinidad and Tobago in 1990. This paper examines the development of the programme which includes the forces that contributed to the establishment of social work education on the St. Augustine campus, the current curriculum, its strengths and weaknesses and challenges that need to be addressed in order to prepare persons to intervene in addressing social problems in the 21st century.

Background to Social Work Education

It is possible to discern two major forces that contributed to the development of social work education at tertiary level in Trinidad and Tobago. One is the presence of a body of trained social workers while the other is the social and economic environment of the 1980s. The combination of these two factors and the responsiveness of the Department of Sociology to social work education gave birth to the present undergraduate degree in social work.

Since the 1970’s there was discussion of the provision of social work education at tertiary level in Trinidad and Tobago. Efforts to provide some measure of training for persons who wished to be helpers in the process of enhancing social functioning, remedying personal dysfunction or promoting social justice were short term. Most students had to go abroad for professional training. The main countries where persons received their training were Jamaica, The United Kingdom, The United States and Canada.

On returning to Trinidad and Tobago, these graduates brought into the existing system an appreciation of the social welfare systems and practices to which they were exposed. Many had only done a two year diploma in social work or a certificate from the Social Welfare Centre in Jamaica. A few who completed a three year degree returned home to play an active role in the development of professional organisations for social workers in Trinidad and Tobago.

The first batch of trained social workers was educated in the United Kingdom. Today most British graduates are senior citizens in

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the society. Many have already retired or may shortly do so. The majority received their training in England between the 1930s and the 1960s. This group usually had a two-year diploma in social work. Those who studied in the United Kingdom in the 1960s and 1970s returned with a specialisation in areas as youth and community work, residential work, child welfare or probation. The early graduates from the thirties to the fifties contributed to the development of social welfare services as public assistance, medical and psychiatric social work, community development, youth work, probation and adoption services.

Having been strongly influenced by the evolving welfare system in Britain at the time, this group reinforced programmes that had been established by the colonial administration of the pre-independence era. Emphasis was therefore placed on dealing with vulnerable groups who would have fallen out of society and needed social support. Having been trained to cater for residual services that are needed by individuals lacking either the financial or family capacity to provide for their basic needs, these professionals provided society with the current image of social workers.

Social workers are seen as people with whom persons who are experiencing a personal crisis can interact for support. The majority of these professionals in Trinidad and Tobago can be found in the medical or legal setting where they function as in a secondary role to other professionals in these areas. For example, in hospitals, social workers provide supportive psycho-social diagnosis of clients for the medical practitioner. In the courts, the probation officer, who is often called the social worker of the court, plays a similar advisory role for the magistrate or judge.

By the 1960's social work education had begun at The University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica. This programme facilitated the training of professional social workers within the Caribbean setting. Persons who were trained in Jamaica returned home with a pro-social development perspective. This understanding of social work practice required that professional social workers be active in the process of social change and development in the Caribbean. Demonstrating an appreciation of the current issues that affected the region, the need to build institutions and to develop professional practice were characteristic of the graduates of Jamaica in the seventies.

Among the activities of this group was the fostering of dynamic social work organisations. Through these associations, advocacy for training in social work actively took place. Many short term training courses sponsored by relevant ministries and community groups for social welfare were initiated by both this group of graduates from Jamaica.

In keeping with current trends where Trinidadians increasingly pursue tertiary studies in The United States, the third category of professionally trained social workers were persons trained in North America, either Canada or The United States. A few social workers within this group had a Masters degree in Social Work (MSW). This level of certification was needed in order to establish private practice in some states of North America. These graduates were also familiar with the accreditation and licensing processes of the North American society for professionals. Representatives of this latter group of graduates, of the eighties and nineties, pioneered social work services in the
profit making private sector within Trinidad and Tobago. Together with psychologists, social workers with postgraduate training have developed employee assistance programmes and private counselling services for families and the workplace.

These three groups of persons provided the foundation for social work practice in Trinidad and Tobago. They emphasised practice skills particularly in case work and group work. Most of them found employment in the medical settings as medical or psychiatric social workers. There was limited research and policy development as part of social work practice. Persons interested in these areas often left traditional areas of practice and moved in to specialist concerns such as child abuse, domestic violence, mental health or substance abuse. Others became consultants in the field of social development, however maintained a social work focus in their activities.

The other influence giving rise to social work education in Trinidad and Tobago was the social and economic condition of the eighties. As occurred in the global context, Trinidad and Tobago experienced a major down turn in the economy during the eighties which resulted in the introduction of structural adjustment measures in the economy. During this period there was increased visibility of social dysfunction. One of the most striking characteristics of the era was the increase in poverty levels in the society. Estimates of poverty levels ranged from eighteen percent (18%) to twenty five percent (25%) of the population. This presence of poverty in the society caused other areas of social displacement.

The closure of factories and businesses and the introduction of programmes such as wage controls or Voluntary Termination of Employment (VTEP) in order to reduce state expenditure created new groups of persons who experienced poverty. These were called the “new poor”. Unaccustomed to not being in receipt of regular wages or salaries, these persons needed to develop life skills to manage the new conditions in their lives. There was need for competent professionals to empower them to re-adjust to the new social and economic environment. Addressing areas of social dysfunction of the new poor was one of the needs of the 1980’s.

The vulnerability of youth and children were issues that came to the forefront in this period. To some extent the popularity of topics as child abuse, youth crime, the abandonment of children and child poverty was influenced by the international developments in Europe and North America. The situation of youth and children in Trinidad and Tobago became newspaper headlines in this period thus signalling the need to have personnel to prevent the further deterioration of the situation of vulnerable children in our society. Again there was the need for social workers with expertise in child welfare to assist with this delicate area through preventative, rehabilitative and supportive measures.

Evidently the existence of vulnerable children within the society was an indicator of the further breakdown within family units. Reported cases of domestic violence with the violent murders of women and children contributed to a major panic in the society. The promotion of The Family Services Unit to prevent the further deterioration of the family was one response by social workers to the increased violence within the family. This programme created for the first time an environment where social workers were the
primary professionals within the social service. Thus a need for suitably trained persons was being created. Staff required training in counselling, family intervention and crisis management.

Social work, a professional activity of helping individuals, groups or communities to enhance or restore their capacity for social function and to create societal conditions for the welfare of society, in particular vulnerable groups, was the profession chosen to address these issues. Its training provides professionals with skills for enhancing social functioning through prevention, restoration and remediation. The objectives of the profession include the following:

- Help people improve their problem-solving and coping abilities
- Help people to obtain resources provided as their social rights
- Make organisations more responsive to people
- Influence social and environmental policy
- Facilitate interactions between individuals, organisations and institutions (Hepworth and Larsen 1993).

History of Social Work Education

Advocacy on the part of professionally trained persons and the social issues of the eighties reinforced a need for social work training at tertiary level in Trinidad and Tobago. There were sporadic short courses organised by relevant ministries from time to time, however, until 1986 there was no certified consistent programme of social work education within Trinidad and Tobago. The first social work programme was started by the School of Continuing Studies in 1986. This part-time course catered for persons who were interested in the area and may not have had university matriculation. Students are exposed to relevant training for social work practice and receive a certificate at the end of their training. Through the School of Continuing Studies of the University of the West Indies there are two centres (one in north and one in south Trinidad) for social work training. Recently with the assistance of the Commonwealth Youth Secretariat based in Guyana, the School of Continuing Studies has implemented a Youth and Community Studies programme managed by the Social Welfare Centre in Jamaica.

The pioneering work of the School of Continuing Studies was carried further by the Sociology Department of the University of the West Indies in 1990. At the request of the Trinidad and Tobago Association of Social

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1Prevention involved the timely provision of services to groups of persons before the dysfunction develops.

2Restoration aims at rehabilitating clients whose functioning is impaired e.g., socially, mentally or physically disabled.

3Remediation entails the removal or improvement of existing problems.
Workers and with technical and financial support of the Commonwealth Secretariat, a pilot programme in Social Work education was started on the main campus of St. Augustine. The first effort was a two-year diploma in Social Work. The staff successfully extended this diploma to a three-year degree in 1992.

During the year 1997-98, the curriculum changed so as to allow students greater choice in their selection of subjects. Only social work theory and practice courses remained compulsory for undergraduates doing a degree in social work. All other related subjects became optional. This change related to current changes taking place within the university system, where students were being given the option to do a major and a minor subject in their area of choice. This change allowed students to pursue interests in areas of criminology, human resource management, sociology and psychology. In 1998, a minor in Social Policy and Administration was added to the offerings of the Department and in 2000, a specialisation in social work was implemented.

Due to the limited availability of persons with both adequate training and interest for full-time teaching of social work at university level, the programme began with expatriate staff from Uganda and Britain. Only one national was hired to research and teach social policy and administration for the Trinidad and Tobago setting. As the programme developed, practice teachers were identified within the community from nationals qualified in social work and related areas.

The programme was modelled on the social work course at Mona, Jamaica. There were four main components to the programme. These were various courses in social work theory, practica, social policy and administration and other essential related courses such as psychology, management, economics, sociology, political science and anthropology. The other related courses were dependent on other units of the university. The course content, for example, for social statistics or psychology would not be determined by the social work programme as took place for social policy, social work theory and practice, but by the department or departmental unit which mounted the course. The students had little choice in which of the related courses that they took. All courses in social work theory, placement and social policy and administration were compulsory. The programme was geared to produce a generic social worker who was capable of responding to the developmental needs of the country, while at the same time having the traditional social work skills of case work intervention and group work skills.

The mission statement of the Social Work Programme at St. Augustine states that the programme will train workers to identify and engage with the root causes of problems, with much emphasis on prevention of problems. The development social worker must acquire skills in research, in institution

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Social work, like the professions of teaching, nursing and medicine requires certain hours of practice under the guidance of trained professionals. Social workers who accept students on placement are called practice teachers.
In addition to the academic demands of the programme for student preparation, there were many administrative demands on staff to create a supportive environment for effective social work training. This included the following:

- identification of practice teachers and placements
- improving human resources for social work training in Trinidad and Tobago
- developing a social policy and administration curriculum

Identification of Practice Teachers and Placements

In order to provide suitable practical experience for students, considerable time and effort has been spent over the last ten years in identifying suitable persons to serve as practice teachers. Once experienced practitioners have been identified, it is important to train them in the pedagogy for social work practice. Regular training sessions are organised to orientate social workers into teaching social work practice. An understanding of the role of cognitive, affective and motor skills in the placement setting is part of the programme.

Practice teachers are key to a programme in social work. With their input, the student is socialised into the profession. The placement experience is crucial to helping the student develop the practice skill to address social issues of the day. Intervention skills are practised under the guidance of the practice teacher. The creation of a team of
suitable workers in the field demanded a major input on the part of the programme.

In addition to identifying practice teachers, the last ten years have also seen emphasis on the identification of suitable work environments for learning social work. Placements were found within the traditional areas, however new areas of practice were identified. Many of these included social services that were designed to respond to the social fallout that was identified in the eighties.

In the selection of placements, it was important to assess the level of placement suitable for students. This required the ability to determine whether the placement was suited to a first, second or third year placement. The consultant played an important role in establishing guidelines in this area.

**Improving Human Resources for Social Work Education**

Improving the human resource base for tertiary training of social workers was important because of the small number of persons who were already trained and qualified to work on the programme. Therefore, at the inception of the programme, emphasis was placed on upgrading the skills of practitioners, such as community development and social welfare officers. Many of these mature students would not have been able to take part in the programme because of family and financial commitments. To address this situation, the programme began in partnership with the state to train civil servants, who were doing social work functions within the various ministries. The government provided scholarships and leave for qualifying civil servants. In this manner the programme directly improved the skill base of departments of the government charged with the responsibility of improving the welfare of the nation’s citizens.

The other task of human resource development undertaken by the programme was to facilitate the increase of national personnel capable of teaching and researching social work at university level. Staff were required to replace the expatriates who had started the programme and to develop the programme to a Master’s level that was required to competently respond to the goals established in the mission statement. This was done through the encouragement of staff to gain advanced training abroad at Ph.D. level and to encourage practice teachers to improve their qualifications at a Master’s level. By 1994, the undergraduate programme at St. Augustine was staffed with suitably qualified nationals. The development of the social work programme at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine played an important role in strengthening human resource capital for social development in Trinidad and Tobago.

**Developing Relevant Social Policy Curriculum**

From the inception of social work education at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, social policy and administration has been an integral part of the social work curriculum and has been included in the specialisation in social work. Nevertheless, while social policy is an integral part of social work training, it is also a discipline in its own right. The London School of Economics pioneered much of the teaching of this discipline under Richard Titmus. With such a tradition it was therefore understandable that social policy would develop some measure
of independence in Trinidad and Tobago as occurred with the Minor in Social Policy. At the Mona campus, social policy and administration has been a major area of study and is available at postgraduate level within the social work programme.

Social policy is part of the curriculum in many of the social sciences such as welfare economics, public policy, sociology, anthropology and psychology. Social policy is also determined by the socio-cultural context of the country where the policy is applied. It was therefore important that whereas the course was taught from a social work perspective, it needed to reflect the multidisciplinary nature of much of the subject matter and be culturally relevant to the social environment.

In order to achieve this objective, the courses were designed to meet the needs of non-social work students within the social sciences who pursued training in the area. The curriculum included areas of study such as sustainable development, race and gender policy analysis and core topics as employment and housing. Prior research on the various areas was conducted on local social services in order to ensure the relevance of the course content for the Trinidadian population. This included the use of historical archival resources and visits to local social services.

The experiences of ten years of social work education at The University of the West Indies reflect a sustained effort to provide training for persons to address the social issues of the environment. An average of twenty to thirty persons graduate each year. Since 1993 the programme has produced over two hundred (200) graduates. Many of these persons have found employment within the various ministries of government in positions where they first gained experience through their placement as undergraduates. These graduates have a generic training that covers the areas of social work theory, placements and social policy.

The Curriculum - Strengths, Weaknesses and Challenges

To determine the strengths, weaknesses and challenges of the programme, a questionnaire was administered to past students, present students of the social work programme and staff of the social work programme. The questionnaire covered the main areas of teaching on the Social Work Programme. The following comments reflect the feedback given from respondents.

Social Work Theory

In order to prepare a generic social worker, social work classes cover the following areas: Principles of social work practice, case work, group work, community organisation and human resource management. In addition, there are courses in counselling, residential social work, law for social workers and family and child welfare.

The main strength of these courses is that they emphasise the importance of a sound theoretical base to deal with clients and their

\*See Appendix for a copy of the questionnaire.
presenting problems in a cohesive manner. This includes understanding the client system for assessment and intervention. The courses are essential for practicum activities. The sequencing of the courses is also useful as courses move from systematic case work to group work and then to community organisation. Specialist courses like “Family and Child Welfare” are taught in the third year.

The main weakness of the social work theory courses is that they all lack any Caribbean theory. The texts are all from North America. As a result, the theories are based on American values. The theoretical concepts used have been developed within the context of American culture. Students describe the courses as if there are attempts to plug the Trinidadian client into such a setting in order to explain the appropriate interventions needed for his/her needs. Within the context of a developing society without many of the community resources of countries with well developed social services, the application of some of the concepts of resource identification may seem unrealistic.

In addition, since much of social work education does not have a theory base of its own, there is a heavy reliance on psychology for theoretical insights in social work theory. Students preparing for clinical practice sometimes consider a degree in psychology to be more applicable to their needs in order to work effectively with individuals. Those with an interest in social change and development acknowledge that theories that have been developed for the North American client may not be appropriate to the Caribbean.

Social Policy and Planning Courses

At present the social work programme offers three courses in Social Policy and Planning that are optional for students of social work. There are: “The Development of Social Policy,” “Social Policy Analysis” and “Social Planning.” The Minor in Social Policy was made possible through the inclusion of two government courses: Public Sector Management and Comparative Public Policy.

The strengths of these courses are that the areas in class relate to the needs of social workers. Policy areas such as health, child welfare, sustainable development, Trinidadian history of social welfare, policy analysis and formulation and the preparation of project proposals are some of the areas of these courses that students found particularly useful.

Another area of strength of these courses relates to the methodology of teaching. Students are exposed to Trinidadian responses for addressing social problems and are permitted to initiate independent analysis on understanding the nature of social problems, their impact and the quality of social responses to these problems in the society. In doing so, students have the opportunity to do independent research on areas that directly interest them.

The weaknesses of these courses can be found in the inadequate treatment of other parts of the Caribbean region, the lack of specialist knowledge and the quality of administrative support. Whereas there are
lectures on the Trinidadian situation for topics as housing, community development or human rights, little or no information is given on the other territories of the region. All comparative work revolves around studies from the United States or the United Kingdom. Most of the literature used is from North America or Europe. Only a few articles, with limited distribution have been produced locally that form part of the bibliography of the classes. Specialist knowledge, such as dealing with current policy issues of importance to the Caribbean like AIDS, are not covered in depth within the undergraduate curriculum for social policy.

Students expressed concern that there was little administrative support for social policy and planning courses. Some were not aware that the course was important for social workers until they took one of the classes. In the new system of choice, they felt that it is important to advise students of the relevance of social policy courses to training in social work. They also noted that it was helpful for them to have advance administrative support for doing research in their areas of choice in the community.

Practicum (Placements)

Beginning the first semester of the first year, with observation field visits to different agencies that offer social services, the students are exposed to varying placement experiences where they have the opportunity to practice the theoretical concepts that they have learnt in social work theory. Placements are two days a week and occur in all three years of study. Placements include all the government ministries that have social work functions. These would include the Ministry of Youth, The Ministry of Social and Community Development, The Ministry of Education, The Ministry of Culture and Gender Affairs and The Ministry of Health. Placements can be in secondary settings for social work such as a hospital, a prison or a school. Primary social work settings for placement can occur at the National Family Services Unit. Non-governmental organisations and residential centres as children's homes, shelters for battered women provide invaluable practice experience for students. Some of these services developed in response to the social conditions of the eighties.

The practical experience that is obtained in the field contributes to the uniqueness of social work training. The hands on experience of attempting to put into practice theories learnt in the classroom permits students to appreciate the reality with which they have to work on leaving university. In practice, the challenge of empowering clients to practice values of self-determination becomes difficult in a context with limited supports, such as social housing, inadequate public assistance and health services.

Administrative concerns loom high for the student population with the placement experience. In a context where it is not yet possible to find placements with qualified social workers for all students, use is made of persons with training in allied fields such as guidance and counselling, probation officers, community development officers and sociologists with specialised training in gender and development. Communicating social work needs within these contexts can be difficult. There is therefore need for ongoing training of field-work teachers so that a social work professional identity can be transferred to the student.
Challenges for the Further Development of Social Work

The main challenge of the programme is to enable students to be able to respond to the needs of clients and actively contribute to the development needs of the Caribbean. To do this requires developing culturally relevant and effective methodology and theory for intervention at the levels of the individual, the group and the community. Research on Caribbean case studies is essential for developing such theory. It will also be important to disseminate the results of these findings for use on the curricula of the three campuses.

Responding to the developmental needs of the region also requires in depth analysis of relevant policy areas that impinge on much of the social worker’s activity. Such activity can be best done within a context that facilitates a concentration on research activity as may exist in a postgraduate or research centre. Emphasis at the present in the St. Augustine programme is on undergraduate teaching and the development of the human resource capacities of the social work community.

Some efforts at generating discussion papers and sharing some initial research has already occurred in the programme through the hosting of three major conferences and publication of their proceedings within the ten year life of the programme. These were:

1. New Directions in Social Policy (held to launch the social work programme in 1989)

2. Third Caribbean Social Work Educators Conference (hosted by Trinidad staff in 1997)

3. Social Services in Trinidad and Tobago (held to launch the Minor in Social Policy in 1998)

There remains, nevertheless, the challenge of providing a more relevant knowledge base particularly concerning children, families, behaviour change and poverty reduction. These areas remain in the twenty-first century major subjects to be addressed by social work education.

The challenge of redefining core knowledge and functions of social workers brings out discussion on fundamental issues such as: What is the essential knowledge that a professional should have in order to practise social work in Trinidad and Tobago? Effective practice requires that one is able to effectively reduce the occurrence of evidence of social dysfunction within the society. Trained social workers should have the skills to intervene and promote well-being among vulnerable groups of the society.

The questions are also asked, “Who is to be recognised in the society as a trained social worker? Are persons with the certificate in social work of the School of Continuing Studies social workers? Are persons with a two-year diploma from Jamaica or England social workers or para-professionals? Are social workers only persons with a Masters in Social Work, a degree not as yet available in Trinidad and Tobago?” These questions bring to the fore issues of accreditation and
licensing of practitioners. These topics are now part of the current debate for the development of social work in the context of Trinidad and Tobago.

The twenty-first century will require that social work training in Trinidad and Tobago provide comparable training to that of the international community where many practitioners received their training. That is the countries of Jamaica, The United States, The United Kingdom and Canada. It will however have to competently cater for the areas of social dysfunction that occupy the minds of the public and relate to poverty, vulnerable children, youth and family breakdown.
References


APPENDIX

QUESTIONNAIRE DISTRIBUTED TO
STAFF AND STUDENTS AT ST. AUGUSTINE

REVIEW OF SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION IN THE
CARIBBEAN - TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

1. Please give your views on social work education in general.

2. Itemise the strengths, weaknesses and challenges of social policy and planning courses.

3. Itemise the strengths, weaknesses and challenges of social work theory courses.

4. Itemise the strengths, weaknesses and challenges of practicum.

5. Any other comments that you wish to make.