First year social care students’ perceptions of social care and its professional status.

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Submitted in partial fulfilment of the Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Applied Social Studies in Social Care
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Declaration

I declare that this project is presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Applied Social Studies in Social Care. It is entirely the work of the author and has not been submitted to any other university or higher education institution, or for any other academic award in this institute. Where work of other people has been used, it has been fully acknowledged and referenced.

Signed: Grace Ajayi
Date: 23/11/2012
Acknowledgements

There are many people whom have contributed in some way to the completion of this dissertation; hence listing them all would take too long. Therefore I would like to give an enormous thank you to all the people who have supported and encouraged me throughout the completion of this project.

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DEDICATION

I dedicated this project to the Almighty God, who saw me throughout this study. I would not have been able to complete this study without you, renewing my strength and increasing your everyday grace upon my life. All praises to you God.
Abstract

The aim of this dissertation was to study first year social care students’ understandings and perceptions of social care and its professional status. Two objectives were considered to derive this aim. First, the author explored first year social care students’ understandings of social care as a profession and secondly, the author examined first year social care students’ perceptions of the professional status of social care. Reviews of the relevant literature relating to social care were examined and a quantitative method in the form of questionnaires was utilised to carry out the investigation among first year social care students in AIT.

One of the findings that emerged from this survey was that the majority of first year social care students acknowledged that their title after graduating would be social care worker/practitioner and the majority correctly identified disability and residential child care to be the sectors which employ the majority of social care graduates. Most of the students reported that they entered social care because they wanted to help people. Most of the students also felt that social care is a well respected profession.

Another significant finding was that the majority of students seemed to have very little specific knowledge of the professional status of social care. Although 55% indicated that there is a professional body none of them mentioned the correct name of the professional body.

The study concluded with a recommendation that there be more information about the professional status of social care profession provided to students entering the course both at the open day and during their first week of the course.
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**Introduction**

The aim of this research study was to study first year social care students’ understandings and perceptions of social care and its professional status. The objectives were to explore first year social care students’ understandings of social care as a profession and to examine first year social care students’ perceptions of the professional status of social care.

The study used widely read national and international literature to compare and contrast statistics with those recorded in this survey. The focus of this information relates to social care as a profession and its professional status. The importance of this research is to highlight the level of understanding of new students starting the course about the profession of social care worker/practitioner and the professional status of social care.

Chapter one contains a review of relevant literature pertaining to social care including definition, history, social care as a profession, the professional status of social care and conclusion. Chapter two concentrates on the methodology used. Chapter three presents the results of the research. Chapter four discusses the findings by comparing and contrasting them to the findings in the literature review. Chapter five outlines the summary, conclusion and recommendations.
Chapter One

Literature Review

1.1 Introduction

“For many people in Irish society, even those entering the field themselves, the meaning of the term ‘social care’ is not self-evident. A common question directed at social care students and professionals alike is, ‘What do you do?’ Misconceptions abound, in many cases practitioners are not accorded the recognition or status they deserve, at least in part as a consequence of a limited understanding of what the term means (Share & Lalor, 2009; p.3).

The overall aim of this research is to study first year social care students’ understandings and perceptions of social care profession and its professional status. This is broken down into two objectives. Firstly, this research explored first year social care students’ understandings of social care profession and secondly, it examines their perceptions of the professional status of social care.

1.2 History of social care

Modern social care derived its title from residential child care. Several influential reports such as Tuairim Report in 1966, the Kennedy Report from Department of Education in 1970, the Task Force Report on Child Services in 1980, Kilkenny Incest Investigation Report by McGuinness in 1993, identified serious deficiencies in the running of the children centres and the need for professionally trained staff (Kennedy and Gallagher, 1997; cited in Share and Lalor, 2009; p.9). Task Force Report, (1980, p.401) stated that “Child care workers… will constitute one of the most important resources of the child care system. We consider that changes are urgently needed to improve training facilities for child care workers, to improve their salary and career prospects and to develop the organisational structures needed to support them in their work” (McElwee, 1998).

Fanning and Rush highlighted that social care services were originally provided on behalf of the state by the religious orders and were largely unregulated until recently (Fanning and Rush, 2006; cited in Share and Lalor 2009; p.12). McElwee & Garfat (2003) stated that, up
until 1992, the most commonly used term in the field of social care and in third-level training colleges was Child Care worker.

Social care has long been associated with residential child care, but this has experienced a dramatic change with the decline of large institutions (such as children’s home). It has been acknowledged that the types of skills and knowledge that social care practitioners’ exhibit can be constructively applied in other areas, such as in the care of those with disabilities, in working with older people and in responding to the needs of a broad range of people from drug users to victims of domestic violence to asylum seekers (Share & Lalor 2009; p.13)

The Joint Committee on Social Care Professionals in early 2000 enumerated that out of 2904 social care practitioners, 71 were working in community child care, 1214 in children’s residential care and 1,619 in intellectual disability services (Share & McElwee, 2005, p.13). Thus, this survey showed that majority of social care workers now works in the disability sector. So, what is social care?

1.3 Definition of social care

Share and Lalor (2009; p.5) stated that it has been difficult to define social care for various reasons. It has suited governments and some agencies not to have a standard definition; as a consequence, salary and career structure remained vague for some time. For example, the full implementation of Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005, the key legislative basis for defining social care practice has yet to occur. Likewise, there has been a contested notion of social care as a profession and lack of clear professional groupings that can be pointed to as ‘practicing social care’ which makes it difficult to pin down what social care practice might be.

The Joint Committee of Social Care Professionals representing the Department of Health and Children, social care employers and the IMPACT trade union, was set up in 2001 in the wake of a number of Labour Court recommendations that followed a period of industrial unrest in the social care sector. Part of the joint committee’s task was to agree a definition of social care practitioner so that the government and the employers would be better able to decide on what they did, what their status was in comparison with other occupations and ultimately, how much to pay them (Share & McElwee, 2005, p.7)

The joint committee defines social care ‘the professional provision of care, protection, support, welfare and advocacy for vulnerable or dependent clients, individually or in groups.'
This is achieved through the planning and evaluation of individualized and group programmes of care, which are based on needs, identified in consultation with the client and delivered through day-to-day shared life experiences. All interventions are based on established best practice and in-depth knowledge of life-span development’ (Final report of joint committee on social care professionals, 2002; p. 2).

This definition highlights the complexities of social care work and the broad spectrum which it encompasses and emphasises a structured approach to care and highlights the importance of the relationship and partnership that exists in social care (Mahon, 2011).

1.4 Social care as a profession

Social care practitioners work with vulnerable or marginalised individuals in a variety of settings, namely, with children in residential care; people with alcohol or drug dependency; people with a learning or physical disability; older people and immigrants to Ireland (Share and McElwee, 2005). Vulnerable clients are those who experience marginalisation, disadvantage, who have special needs or that are sick. Byrne (2001) described them as being people who have difficulty in, or could not be expected to meet one or all of their own needs be it social, emotional, physical, intellectual or spiritual.

1.5 The professional status of social care

In 2001, Williams and Lalor (p. 73) claimed that ‘the profession (Residential Child Care) is presently at a young stage in its development’. They identified some primary obstacles to the professionalisation of the Social Care Worker, such as pay and status, education and training, registration and multiplicity of jobs titles. Norton (1999) studied the working relationship between social workers and care workers and found that 79% of the 39 care workers and 85% of the 21 social workers questioned felt that social work had a higher status than that of social care work. This study notes that 56% of care workers and 53% of social workers believed that social workers and care workers did not have a good working relationship. Both parties believed this to be somewhat due to the higher status and pay that social workers enjoy over care workers. The social workers also viewed the poor working relationship as due to their lack of understanding of the care worker's role (Norton, 1999; cited in Williams & Lalor, 2001; p. 76).
In 2003, Mr Brian Lenihan T.D., Minister of State, Department of Health and Children at the annual general conference of the Resident Managers Association spoke about the Department’s proposals for the establishment of a system of statutory registration for health and social care professionals, which will include social care professionals. He stated that the proposals are for a system of statutory self-registration for social care professionals and the other twelve health and social care professions. He also stated that the professionalism of social care will enhance the future of the profession. (www.dohc.ie).

In 2005, the Health and Social Care Professionals Act was passed. Its aim is to provide for the establishment of a system of statutory registration which would serve to protect and guide members of the public so that they can be confident that the professional treating them is competent and of good standing.

In furtherance to the Act above, CORU was established in 2007 to regulate and register 12 health and social care bodies, of which social care worker is a part. The aim of CORU is to set and enforce the standards of education, practice, performance, conduct and ethics for each of the professions and to deal with situations where registrants do not meet these standards. CORU is in the process of establishing criteria for the registration of members of the designated professions, codes of professional conduct & ethics and standards of professional performance as a basis for determining fitness to practise in the field of social care (www.coru.ie). The full implementation of the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005, the key legislative basis for defining social care practice, has yet to occur (Share & Lalor, 2009, p.5)

Share and Lalor (2009) acknowledged that all obstacles to professionalization identified by William and Lalor in 2001 have now almost been accomplished. Education and training to degree level and increasingly to postgraduate level is now in operation. Also, salaries and career structures have seen an immense improvement in recent times.

The concern regarding the dramatic growth of social care programme providers since 2002 and the increase in student intake nationwide led to the undertaking of an audit of social care student numbers between January and March 2009. The conclusion shows that the profession employs between 5000-8000 workers in general (this figures were guesstimated by HSE, Trade Union and Health and Social Care Council) and producers 1303 graduates annually (Lalor, 2009).
Last year (2011), the three representative bodies in the field of social care in Ireland, the Irish Association of Social Care Worker (IASCW) (formerly known as Irish Association of Care Workers (IACW), Residential Managers’ Association (RMA), and the Irish Association of Social Care Educators (IASCE), came together under Social Care Ireland with the aim to provide a cohesive and common voice for the social, for consultation and for improving education, training and practice for its members (www.socialcareireland.ie).

1.6 Conclusion

A review of the literature suggested that social care has changed dramatically in the past twenty years. However, to aid it emerge further as a profession, it is necessary to develop appropriate research methods to examine the understanding of current students entry into the profession. Share and Lalor (2009) argued that ‘Social care practice is not just an ordinary job, nor is it something done on a voluntary or amateur basis. This distinguishes it from that vast bulk of (equally valuable) care that is carried out informally in our society by family and community members. The notion of ‘professionalism’ also implies that this is an occupation with some status and one that required access to a specified body of skills and knowledge.

It is important to note that the area of social care is currently awaiting statutory regulation. This will determine the definition, the role of the profession and distinguish them clearly from those grades that are not subject to statutory registration and eradicate the inferiority complex to related established profession such as clinical psychology and social work. (McElwee & Garfat, 2003).

Therefore, the current study is necessary to examine first year social care students’ understandings and perception of social care and its professional status. This is to verify if there have been any improvements since the last review and creates awareness for any further reviews that may be identify.
Chapter Two

Methodology

2.1 Introduction

There are six parts in this section. These are Research method, Participants, Procedure, Ethical considerations, Limitations and Method of analysis.

2.2 Research method

There are two main approaches to collecting data: qualitative and quantitative. The author considered the merits and limitations of both before making a final decision as to which one to use.

The qualitative method emphasises quality, attempting to gather high quality amounts of information rather than relatively large amount of information. It is defined as a ‘research strategy that usually emphasises words rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data’ (Bryman, 2008; p. 21-23). The most common methods of qualitative research are interviews, observation, diaries, and focus groups with predesigned questions.

According to Creswell (2003; p. 153), quantitative research provides a quantitative or numeric description of trends, attitudes or opinions of a population by studying a sample of that population. Information gathered can be collected, counted and calculated. It emphasises quantity and attempts to gather relatively large amounts of information using a structured predesigned questionnaire (Punch, 2005). Bryman (2008; p. 21) described it as ‘a research strategy that emphasises quantification and analysis of data’. This method uses ‘structured and predetermined research questions, conceptual frameworks and designs’ (Share, 2009; p.154).

The author decided to use quantitative method by administering a predesigned questionnaire to the target audience. This method allowed for a significant amount of data to be collected in a brief period of time as the research was restricted by time. It also allowed for efficiency in the analysis of data. The design of the questionnaire was determined by the aims and objectives of the study in order to gain the relevant data needed to justify the research. The
questionnaire contained 22 opened and closed questions. The closed questions gave precise and direct answers, whilst the open questions provided more scope for detailed responses.

There are three sections in the questionnaire. The first section asked information about yourself, the second section asked about why you chose social care as a course and the third section seek your understanding about social care as a profession (See appendix 1 for a copy of this questionnaire).

2.3 Participants
First year social care students were employed as the sample group because they were just starting out in social care and the author was interested in students’ initial understanding and perceptions of social care and its professional status. Thirty questionnaires were distributed but twenty questionnaires which were fully completed were used for the results.

The majority of the participants were female 15/20 (75%) and 5/20 (25%) were male. 12/20 (60%) of the sample group were aged between 17-25 years of age, 3/20 (15%) were 26-35 years the remaining 5/20 (25%) were thirty-six and above.

2.4 Procedure
After compilation of the questionnaire, a pilot test was carried out among five first year social care students. The pilot study allowed the author to look at the logical flow of the questionnaire and establish the time frame required to complete it. The questionnaire was subsequently re-worded and elements altered to ensure the design was correct and to ensure that the data would be valid.

In order to conduct the study, the permission of a lecturer was sought, which allowed for the distribution of the question during her lecture class. The author spoke to the group and explained the purpose of the research and addressed the issues mentioned in the cover letter. The questionnaires were collected after completion; it took approximately 5 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

2.5 Ethical considerations
Ethical issues in this research included the right of participants to be informed about the purpose of the study, the right to ask questions, the right to confidentiality and also the right
to decline from participating. To deal with these issues, the participants were informed that their data were anonymous and confidential. They were also informed that their participation was voluntary and that they did not have to complete the questionnaire if they did not want to. The purpose of the research was also clearly explained to the participants in the instructions to the questionnaire. The author also gave due respect to participants as to their commitment of time by thanking them.

2.6 Limitations

There are some limitations to this research. Firstly time constraint which means that information had to be gathered promptly in order to facilitate compilation and analysis. The word count restriction and also the sample were small and not representative of all students. As with all questionnaires, the validity of the research depends on the honesty of the participants. 100% honesty and integrity cannot be guaranteed.

2.7 Method of analysis

After receiving the completed questionnaires, the author analysed the responses and used Microsoft excel to transfer the data onto graphs and tables. Graphs and tables were used to display the findings of the research.
Chapter Three

RESULTS

3.1 Introduction

The results section illustrates the findings derived from questionnaires which were distributed to first year social care students within A.I.T. The findings are illustrated in narrative and graphical form and will be presented under the two main objectives of the study.

In order to analyse the results, the author reviewed all the questionnaires received, chose and summarised twenty that were completed fully.

3.2 Objective 1: To explore first year social care students’ understanding of the social care profession.

Under this objective questions 5 to 14 examined first year social care students’ understanding of the social care profession.

Question 5 asked participants to indicate the most important reason for choosing to study social care.

As illustrated in figure 1 below, the most significant reasons identified were ‘to help people’ 6/20 (30%); followed by ‘to gain more knowledge’ 5/20 (25%); and finally ‘to acquire qualification’ 4/20 (20%), while the least reasons were ‘recommended by friends or family’ 2/20 (10%); ‘easy to get job’ 2/20 (10%); and ‘the only option left’ 1/20 (5%).
Question 6 asked the participants if they had any previous working experience in social care.

All twenty students answered the question, 7/20 (35%) answered yes and 13/20 (65%) answered no. The seven participants that answered yes also stated what they worked as. 1/7 worked as a community development officer, healthcare worker and childcare worker respectively, while 2/7 also worked as support worker, community employment scheme respectively.

Question 7 and 8 asked the participants if they attended open day and if they did attend, how satisfied they were with the information received. 11/20 (55%) indicated that they did attend open day, while 9/20 (45%) indicated that they did not attend open day. Out of the 11 that attended, 7/11 (63.6%) indicated that they were very satisfied while 4/11 (36.4%) indicated that they were satisfied with the information they received.

Question 9 asked participants what sector they would prefer to work in after graduating.

As shown in figure 2 below, all respondents answered this question. 6/20 (30%) indicated disability sector as their preferable place to work. 4/20 (20%) said that they would like to work in the residential child care sector, while similar proportion of participants, 3/20 (15%) indicated that they would like to work in the older people and youth work sectors respectively. 1/20 (10%) respondent indicated that s/he wanted to work in addiction sector,
2/20 (20%) indicated said they wanted to work in the homeless sector while 1 respondent indicated s/he wanted to work with HSE

Figure 2  Sector respondents would like to work in after graduating (n=20)

Question 10. Participants were asked what sector employs majority of social care graduates.

As illustrated in figure 3 below, all respondents answered this question, 7/20 (35%) indicated disability, 4/20 (20%) indicated residential child care, 3/20 (15%) indicated older people, while 2/20 (10%) indicated youth work and homeless sectors respectively. 1/20 (5%) indicated addiction and one participant wrote HSE in the option for others.

Figure 3.  Sectors that employs majority of social care graduates (n=20)

Questions 11, 12, and 13 asked participants to indicate their levels of agreement with different statements.
Table 1. Students’ different levels of agreement with statements in relation to their understanding about social care profession (n=20)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Don’t know</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social care is a recognised profession in Ireland</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>social care worker/practitioner and care assistant are the same</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social care worker can now register as a professional</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown in table 1 above, all twenty respondents answered question 11, 12, and 13 respectively.

**Question 11** asked participant is social care a recognised profession in Ireland

The majority of participants 13/20 (85%) strongly agreed with this statement, while 6/20 (30%) also agreed. Only 1 participant indicated “don’t know.”

**Question 12** asked participants if social care worker/practitioner and care assistant are the same. 5/20 (25%) responded strongly disagreed, 6/20 (30%) responded disagreed while 4/20 (20%) responded strongly agreed and 3/20 (15%) agreed. 2/20 (10%) responded ‘don’t know’

**Question 13** asked participants if social care worker can now register as a professional

3/20 (15%) responded strongly agreed, 6/30 (30%) responded agreed, 3/20 (15%) responded strongly disagreed while 4/20 (20%) agreed. 4/20 (20%) responded ‘don’t know’

**Question 14** examined participants’ understanding about the role of a social care practitioner.

As shown in figure 4 below, all twenty respondents answered this question, 15/20 (75%) stated that they were very satisfied and satisfied of the level of their understanding, 3/20
(15%) participants responded ‘don’t know’ while 2/20 (10%) participants responded that they were not satisfied.

Figure 4. Students understanding of the role of a social care worker (n=20)

3.3 Objective 2: To examine first year students’ perceptions of the professional status of social care

Under this objective questions 15,16,17,18,19,20, and 21 examined first year social care students’ perceptions of the professional status of social care.

Questions 15 asked an open question regarding what the participants knew about the status of social care as a profession before they started the course.

As illustrated in figure 5 below, 17/20 (85%) answered this question. 5/17 (29.41%) said the social care profession is highly recognised and respected career in Ireland, 4/17 (23.52%) said it allowed for opportunity to help others, 3/17 (17.64%) said it gives access to work with different people, 2/17 (11.76%) said “not much” but they did not stated the little they knew about it, and 3/17 (17.64%) said they knew nothing about the status of the profession.

Figure 5. Participants’ perception of the professional status (n=17)
Question 16 asked participants if they thought they would have a professional qualification after graduating.

16/20 (80%) indicated yes, 2/20 (10%) indicated no, while 2/20 (10%) said they don’t know.

Question 17 asked if participants thought they would have a professional title after graduating.
12/20 (60%) answered yes, while 8/20 (40%) answered no.

Question 18 asked participants that answered yes to question 17 to indicate the professional title.
As illustrated in figure 6 below, all respondents answered this question. 17/20 indicated social care worker/social care practitioner, 2/20 (10%) indicated social worker, while only one participant indicated support worker.

Figure 6 Social care professional titles (n=20)
Question 19 asked participants if there are any professional body for social care practitioners in Ireland.

A shown in figure 7 below, all twenty respondent answered this question, 11/20 (55%) indicated yes, 5/20 (25%) answered no and 4/20 (20%) answered ‘I don’t know’.

Figure 7 Professional body in Ireland (n=20)
**Question 20** Participants that answered yes to question 18 were asked to state the name of the professional body.
Only 6/11 stated professional body, 2/11 said ‘don’t know’. Table 2 below provides the list of professional bodies stated.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social care professional body suggested by respondents (n=6)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social care practitioner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HSE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NASCW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residential</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Question 21** asked participants to list sectors where graduates of social care might be employed. Table 3 below shows the list.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sectors that might employ social care graduates (n=9)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Youth work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residential child care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disability</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As shown in table 3 above, all twenty respondents answered this question. 2/20 (10%) wrote youth work, homeless, mental health service, and nursing home respectively. 3/20 (15%) suggested residential child care, 6/20 (30%) suggested disability, and 1/20 (10%) suggested fostering, child care and alcoholic related services respectively.

### 3.4 Summary of Results

The majority of the participants were female. The most predominant reasons for participants choosing to study social care were to help people and to gain more knowledge also 13/20. (65%) had no previous experience in social care field. Most of the participant (55%) attended open day for information and all of them were very satisfied and satisfied with the information they gathered on the day. Some of the participants are of the opinion that social
care is highly recognised and respected career in Ireland while some thought it easy to get job in the field.

A higher percentage of the participants (30%) preferred to work in disability sector while only 5% would like to work with people with drug addiction. Also, 35% respondent felt disability sector employs majority of social care graduate. Most respondents (85%) identified the professional title as social care worker/social care practitioner. 15/20 (75%) of the respondents were satisfied with their level of understanding about the role of a social care worker while 2/10 (10%) are unsatisfied and 3/20 (15%) were not sure yet whether they are clear with the role of a social care worker.

In regards to participants responses to their perceptions about the professional status, it seems the students had little or no previous understanding about the present status of the profession neither do they know the name of the professional body. The majority of the participants indicated that there is a professional body even though they seemed not to know the name of the professional body, still 55% of the respondent would like to join the professional body after graduating.

Chapter Four
Discussion

4.1 Introduction

The main aim of this research was to investigate first year social care students’ understandings and perceptions of social care and its professional status. The author
examined this aim under two objectives. The first was to explore first year social care students’ understanding of the social care profession. The second objective was to examine first year students’ perceptions of the professional status of social care.

4.2 Objective 1 To explore first year social care students’ understanding of the social care profession.

It was found out that there were more female (75%) than male (25%) among first year social care students in AIT. This corroborated with McElwee, Jackson, McKenna-McElwee and Cameron (2003, cited in Share & McElwee, 2005; p.99) analysis of social care practice courses in Ireland, which demonstrated that women dominated the membership of full-time programmes and stakeholders are only now, in an Irish context, beginning to debate some of the issues, including ‘making care work attracted to men’. Share and McElwee (2005; p.106) concluded that despite the many and varied changes in Irish society over the past fifty years, ‘women still dominate social care profession’.

Therefore, this result may be indispensable in order to give more information to new students, especially male students, during the open day to make them aware of the state of the profession and the evolving necessity to attract more male into the social care field.

This study found that 30% of the respondents chose to study social care because they wanted to help others. Similar studies carried out by Clarke (2007), Donelan (2007) and Mahon (2011) on social care students of AIT also found out that a large percentage of their respondents chose to study social care because they wanted to help other people. This has been one of the most reoccurring factors that have continuously emerged from various surveys carried out within AIT on why student choose to study social care was ‘to help people’.

This is worth of note as much research has identified altruism, empathy and compassion as key personal qualities required to be a social care worker (Bernstein and Nash, 2005; Christian and Townsend, 2004). Clarke (2007) states that ‘wanting to help people’ is known as altruism, an unselfish concern for another person’s welfare, closely linked to helping behaviour. It is therefore evident that the people choosing to study social care already have these personal attributes.
In this study it was found out that 65% of first year social care students in AIT did not have previous experience in the field of social care. This was in contrast to the finding of Wells et al (2000) and McElwee (2003) findings that personal experience influences one's decision to study social care. This was also supported by Cree (2007) who said that childhood experience and family background can motivate a person in choosing a career in a caring profession. The author’s finding may differ due to the economic downturn which has placed embargo on employments since 2008. Also, it may be due to how the participants interpreted the question, because some might have had experience of caring for their family members and not a paid experience in the field of social care. Therefore, this may be some of the reason for the disparity of finding in this research compared with the previous ones.

One significant finding in this study was that when participants were asked to indicate which sector they would prefer to work in after graduating, a larger percentage (30%) indicated disability followed by 20% for residential child care. The participants were further asked to indicate which sector employs the majority of the social care graduates. The finding was that 30% indicated disability and 20% indicated residential child care. This aligned with the findings of the Joint Committee on Social Care Professionals in early 2000 which enumerated that out of 2904 social care practitioners, 71 were working in community child care, 1,214 in children’s residential care and 1,619 in intellectual disability services (Share & McElwee, 2005; p.13).

Also, these findings demonstrate the shift in social care work as illustrated in the literature review where Share and Lalor (2009, p.13) stated that social care has long been associated with residential child care, but this has experienced dramatic changes with the decline of large institutions (such as children’s home). It could be argued that the types of skills and knowledge that social care practitioner’s exhibit can be constructively applied in other areas, such as in the care of those with disabilities, in working with older people and in responding to the needs of a broad range of people from drug users to victims of domestic violence to asylum seekers.

It was also notable in the finding of this research that respondents wanting to work with older people were not among the least compared to the findings of Mahon (2011), Clarke (2007) and Donelan (2007), found that majority of their respondents did not wish to work with the elderly. The author of this research might be of the opinion that this result may be due to the recent inspections carried out by Health information and Quality Authority (HIQA) on
nursing homes, which had brought tremendous changes to nursing homes standards. Most nursing homes are now employing social care graduates.

When asked about the difference between social care worker/practitioner and care assistant, 55% disagreed that social care worker and care assistant are the same. The responses to this question might depend on various factors, such as respondents' interpretation of the question in terms of job carried out both, another factor might be individual previous experiences, as different organisations have different titles given to the staff that works with the service users. For example, most residential child care services refer to the staffs that work directly with the children as social care worker regardless of whether they are qualified or not.

The author may argue that what makes a difference between a social care worker/practitioner and care assistant should be qualification. According to Williams (2005) a social care practitioner has ‘academic’ qualities that include: a broad knowledge base in the field; the ability to work both independently and as part of a team; research skills; and a problem-solving approach. This also agrees with Share and McElwee (2005; p. 49) that in Ireland, the term social care practitioner applies to those with appropriate and recognised training who are recruited and employed in a professional capacity with individuals or groups in an agency, community or residential setting.

4.3 Objective 2 To examine first year students’ perceptions of the professional status of social care.

12 out of 17 that answered the question said social care is highly recognised and respected profession in Ireland, allowed for opportunity to help others and allowed access to work with different people. This may be due to improvements that had taken place in the last few years in the professionalization of social care. These improvements include the passing of the Health and Social care Act 2005, the establishment of CORU in 2007 as a statutory registration body for social care practitioner, the coming together of the three representative bodies for social care (the Irish Association of Social Care Worker (IASCW) (formerly known as Irish Association of Care Workers (IACW), Residential Managers’ Association (RMA), and the Irish Association of Social Care Educators (IASCE)). This confirmed to the statement of Mr Brian Lenihan T.D, minister of state, department of Health and Children in 2003 that the professionalism of social care will enhance the future of the profession. (www.dohc.ie).
This was also reflected in the finding where 80% of the students said that they were looking forward to graduate with a professional qualification and 60% are awaiting to graduate with a professional title.

While 55% agreed that there is a professional body for social care in Ireland, none of them mentioned the correct name for the professional body. It worth to note, that two of the respondents mentioned HSE as the professional body. The author discovered from this finding that first year students seemed to have very little specific knowledge of the professional status of social care.

4.4 Evaluation of Method
The quantitative research method enabled the author to target a specific sample group in a short period of time and it enabled the researcher to gain the required information. The use of questionnaires allowed respondents to answer openly and honestly whilst remaining unidentified.

4.5 Future Research
The author suggests that future researchers could compare and contrast the differences in levels of understandings and perceptions of first year and fourth year social care students. This might be necessary in order to compare if there might be a differences in the level of understanding and perceptions of social care and its professional status due to knowledge that might have been acquired over greater years of study.

Chapter Five

Summary and Conclusion
5.1 Summary

The aim of this study was to explore first year social care students’ understanding and perceptions of the social care profession and its professional status. A quantitative method of research was used to obtain the relevant information.

One of the major finding to emerge from the survey was that respondents chose the course because they wanted to help others. This corresponds with all relevant research in the area. Since 2000, the disability sector has been acknowledged as the sector that employs majority of social care graduates. This study also agreed with this, as majority identified disability as the sector that employs majority of social care graduates.

There are some slight changes in some of the findings compared with previous survey carried out in AIT, on similar topics. One of these was a decline in the number of respondents that had previous work experience before starting the course. This study found out that 65% did not have previous work experience in the field prior to entering the course. This was in contract to the findings of Donelan (2007) and Mahon (2011) who found out that the majority of their respondents have had previous experience before starting the course.

One significant finding in this study was that majority of first year students seemed to have very little specific knowledge of the professional status of social care. 55% indicated that there is a professional body but none of them mentioned the correct name of the professional body.

5.2 Conclusion

In conclusion, the overall results of this finding showed that first year student have a good understanding of social care as a profession but they seemed to have less specific knowledge of the professional status of social care.

5.3 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that more information about the professional status of social care profession should be given to new students entering the
course both at the open day and during their first week of the course. This is to give everyone the opportunity to learn about the professional status of the course.

References


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