

## **Professionalization of Social Work in Malaysia through Legislation: A Literature Discussion on Concepts, Issues and Challenges**

*(Profesionalisasi Kerja Sosial melalui Perundangan: Satu Bicara Ilmiah mengenai Konsep, Isu dan Cabarannya)*

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### **Abstract**

*Social work as a profession may have been well established in many countries; nevertheless internationally its professional status and professionalization process differs from country to country. Social work in Malaysia has come to a new chapter when the government endorsed a proposal to enact a Social Workers Bill as part of its commitment to enhance the quality of social workers and social work practice in the country. One significant aspect of the draft bill is the registration and licensing of social workers. Drawing examples from a few countries that have registration requirement, this paper attempts to highlight some issues and challenges that may arise when the registration and licensing begin after the bill has been enacted. The legislation can provide a legal framework to put in place proper structures for social work education and development. It however requires all stakeholders to work closely to ensure that eventually the vulnerable populations that the profession is serving can also benefit from the professionalization process.*

**Keywords:** *Social work, professionalization, registration, professional regulation.*

### **Abstrak**

*Sungguhpun kerja sosial telah diiktiraf sebagai satu profesion di banyak negara, namun status dan proses profesionalisasinya berbeza antara satu dengan satu negara yang lain. Kerja sosial di Malaysia telah sampai ke satu lembaran baru apabila kerajaan bersetuju dengan cadangan untuk menggubal satu Rang Undang-undang Pekerja Sosial sebagai komitmennya untuk mempertingkatkan kualiti pekerja sosial dan praktis kerja sosial di negara ini. Satu aspek yang signifikan dalam rang undang-undang ini ialah mengenai pendaftaran dan perlesenan pekerja sosial. Dengan merujuk kepada contoh*

*beberapa negara yang mempunyai sistem pendaftaran pekerja sosial, artikel ini coba menonjolkan beberapa isu dan cabaran yang mungkin dihadapi apabila pendaftaran dan perlesenan bermula setelah rang undang-undang ini diluluskan. Undang-undang ini boleh memberi satu kerangka perundangan bagi menyediakan struktur yang penting untuk pendidikan dan pengembangan kerja sosial. Namun ia memerlukan usahasama semua pihak yang berkenaan untuk memastikan proses profesionalisasi ini justeru akan membawa manfaat kepada golongan rentan yang menerima perkhidmatan profesion kerja sosial.*

**Kata kunci:** *Kerja sosial, profesionalisasi, pendaftaran, pengawalan profesional.*

### Introduction

Beginning as a philanthropic and voluntary response to social issues, social work has gradually developed as a profession, beginning in late 19<sup>th</sup> century in the United States, Britain, the Netherlands and Germany, and then in the 20<sup>th</sup> century introduced to other parts of Europe, Africa, Asia, Latin America, Oceania and the Middle East (Weiss-Gal & Welbourne, 2008). Today the International Federation of Social Workers has 116 country members ([www.ifsw.org](http://www.ifsw.org), as at 25 March 2015), while hundreds of schools of social work from over 70 countries are members of the International Association of School of Social Work (IASSW) (Healy, 2008a).

Nevertheless the development of social work as a profession has always been contested and debated beginning with Flexner's famous speech on the matter back in 1915 (Dulmus & Sowers, 2012; Flexner, 1915; Kunneman, 2005;). In the West, particularly in the US and the UK, efforts have been made to demonstrate that social work has progressed as a profession (Dulmus & Sowers, 2012; Greenwood, 1957; Ginsberg, 2005; Hugman, 1991; Popple, 1985; Staub-Bernasconi, 2009), or in a lesser extent, a semi-profession (Etzioni, 1969; Torens, 1972). Despite strong criticisms on the direction (Jordan, 2004; Lymberry, 2001) or the underachieved potential of social work as a profession (Green, 2006), social work has established itself as a profession in different names and forms, for example as caring profession (Hugman, 1991); social welfare profession (Healy, 2009); authority-based profession (Gambrill, 2001); and human rights profession (Healy, 2008b).

Interestingly, the attention has slowly moved towards the study of social work from an international profession perspectives around and after the turn of the millennium (Gray, 2005; Hare, 2004; Hugman, 1996; Midgley, 2001). Social work professions outside the US and the UK have started to examine the development of social work in their respective countries, for example in Australia (McDonald & Chenoweth, 2009); China (Gao & Yan,

2015; Gray, 2008; Leong, 2007; Li, Han & Huang, 2012; Yip, 2007); Czech Republic (Chytil, 2006); Estonia (Kiik & Sirotkina, 2005); Greece (Koukouli, Papadaki & Philalithis, 2008); Hong Kong (Chui, Tsang & Mok, 2010); Israel (Doron, Rosner & Karpel, 2008; Weiss, Spiro, Sherer & Korin-Langer, 2004); Italy (Facchini & Lorenz, 2013; Fargion, 2008); New Zealand (Beddoe, 2013); Japan (Ito, 2011); Russia (Iarskaia-Smirnova & Romanov, 2002); South Korea (Kim, 2013); South Africa (Gray & Lombard, 2008); Taiwan (Chang & Mo, 2007; Lin & Wang, 2010) and Vietnam (Hugman, Durst, Le, Nguyen & Nguyen, 2009). One may want to ask that the burgeoning of these writings, especially published in English language journals, can possibly be seen as an indicator of the desire of social work in those countries to establish itself as a profession?

At the same time, scholars have started to conduct comparative studies on social work across regions like Europe (Husband, 2007; Kornbeck, 1998; Lorenz, 2008; Radulsecu, 2006) and internationally (Weiss & Welbourne, 2008). Within the European Union, efforts have been imitated to standardize the education standards and recognition of social work qualification through the Bologna process (Lorenz, 2005; Labonté-Roset, 2004; Matthies, 2011). Incidentally, Kornbeck (1998) has even suggested six requirements that social work has to meet in order to become a profession in Europe: (1) 'academisation' - a scientific orientation of social work education, (2) 'commodification' - more paid work than charity, (3) 'institutionalization' - registration and licensure, (4) 'unification' - common core education and code of practice, (5) 'licensiation' - minimum credentials required for licensing, and (6) 'monopolization' - only licensed social workers can perform specified tasks.

### **Problem Statement**

The professional development of social work internationally is, however, different from country to country although Weiss-Gal and Welbourne (2008) found that there are some common features like establishment of professional organizations, formulation of a code of ethics, development of a specific body of knowledge and placement of social work training in tertiary education. Nevertheless, none of the countries in their study has a monopoly over fields of practice, only some has legislation on title protection, lack of control over training and entry into the profession, and also on enforcement of the code of ethics. In another words, using Kornbeck's (1998) criterion, social work is still weak in 'institutionalization', 'licensiation' and 'monopolization'.

In fact, registration of social workers through a regulatory system did not start in the early days of the profession. Taking the United States for example, although the first state to legally regulate the profession was in 1934, most of the registration processes through licensing took place after the 70s and

intensified in the 80s, and it took nearly 60 years for the last state to regulate the profession in 1992 (DeAngelis & Monahan, 2012). In the United Kingdom where social work also has a long history, the registration of all social workers only started in 2003 with the General Social Care Council (GSCC) (McInness & Lawson-Brown, 2007; Pierson, 2011).

Internationally it seems that many countries are gearing towards registration of social worker aiming to raise standards and improving the status of the profession (Beddoe & Duke, 2009), accountability (McInness & Lawson-Brown, 2007), and protecting the public (DeAngelis & Monahan, 2012; van Heugten, 2011). In this regard, social work in Malaysia is of no exception. Although some have written about the development of social work and social work education in Malaysia (for example: Abdullah, 2003; Baba, 2000 & 2011; Ling, 2004 & 2007; Shaffie & Baba, 2013; Sinnasamy, 2006), few has examined the professionalization process from a legislation perspectives.

In 2010, the Malaysian government has approved six measures to enhance the social work profession which include establishing the National Social Work Competency Standards, enacting a Social Workers Bill, establishing a national social work regulatory body, recruitment of qualified social workers, standardization of social work education and development of social work courses at certificate and diploma level (Proposed, 2010). Subsequently a task force which is chaired by the Director General of Welfare has been set up to work on the six measures. The writer has been a member of the task force since its inception in 2010. It is with this backdrop that this paper wishes to discuss the different concepts of regulatory system, follows by a brief description of registration of social work in a few countries, and a brief outline of the proposed regulatory measures for social workers in Malaysia, before deliberating on some issues and challenges on regulating social workers and social work in Malaysia.

### **Understanding the Terminology**

Four terms are commonly used in reference to regulatory system in social work: credentialing, certification, registration and licensure (or licensing) (DeAngelis & Monahan, 2012) and it can be confusing even for social workers (Collins, Coleman & Miller, 2002). Credential is often referred as any document that verifies the qualification of a social worker, and commonly used for voluntary recognition from professional associations (DeAngelis & Monahan, 2012). It does not have any legal jurisdiction but merely served to promote the profession and professional holding them as having obtained knowledge and abilities that meet minimum competency requirement to become licensed. On the other hand, registration is used to describe a system

of voluntary or mandatory registration with a government authority in order to use a prescribed restricted title.

Although it is said that there are no legal distinction between certification and licensure, usually certification has a less rigorous regulatory structure than licensure which operates more comprehensively (DeAngelis & Monahan, 2012). The nature of certification can be voluntary but licensure definitely is mandatory. In legal regulation, the actual distinction is between practice legislation and title protection legislation. A practice act defines and regulates practice, establishes who can call themselves a social worker, and requires anyone engaging in these practice to hold a license which has a time limit (for renewal). Implemented parallel with a title protection act, social workers who have met the legal requirement can use the title “Licensed Social Worker”. However, if the regulation is only a title protection act, then it is not as strict and does not prevent others who do not qualify from practicing, only for these people to abstain from calling themselves by the regulated title, such as “Registered Social Worker” or “Licensed Social Worker”

In short, licensure (through practice act) is the strongest form of occupational control, followed by registration (through title protection act), certification and credentialing. Different countries will have their own way of regulating professionals which include social workers.

### **Registration of Social Workers: Country Examples**

#### *The United States*

Social work regulation in the US started after the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) adopted its first Code of Ethics in 1960 (DeAngelis & Monahan, 2012). Core values and formal ethical guidelines to guide the conduct of practitioners are the basis for profession regulation. The first voluntary professional certification, the Academy of Certified Social Workers (ACSW) was then introduced, targeting social workers with a master’s degree and two years of supervised postgraduate social work experience. At the same time, NASW developed an examination that would be the final requirement of the ACSW. From 1960s until 1980s, many states accepted ACSW certification as verification of qualifications for social work licensure, in lieu of a national licensing examination.

In 1980, NASW developed a model social work licensing law and disseminated it to its chapters for them to advocate for state social work licensure regulation. Twenty more states passed social work licensure during the 1980s and, by 1992, all states have legally regulated social workers. The American Association of State Social Work Boards (AASSWB) was established

in 1978 as a networking for social work regulators to share information about the structure and issues in legal regulation. AASSWB began to offer national examinations in 1983 at three levels: Level A for baccalaureate social workers (BSW) upon graduation, Level B for master's social workers (MSW) upon graduation, and an advanced Level C for master's social workers with two years of supervised experience. By 1991, all states used AASSWB exams (DeAngelis & Monahan, 2012).

At present, social work can include as many as four parts: BSW upon graduation, MSW upon graduation, independent after two years of supervised general experience, and clinical after two years of specific supervised clinical experience. Most states license social workers in two or more of these categories: BSW (36 states), MSW (43 states), independent but non-clinical (16 states), and clinical (52 states). Five states have associate licensure for people who work in the social service field but do not have a formal social work degree (DeAngelis & Monahan, 2012). The regulatory development for social work in the US is to move from title protection to a practice act along with title protection, increase the categories of licensure, and remove exemptions from licensure so that all social workers must be licensed.

#### *The United Kingdom*

Although social work has a long history in the UK, social workers were employed in different services and has evolved into a modern, complex, bureaucratic profession without the support of a regulatory body and national standardization for a long time (McIness & Lawson-Brown, 2007). It was only after the Seebohm Report 1968 and the subsequent Local Authority Social Service Act 1970 that established social service (child care, care for the elderly and disabled people, and care for those with mental health problem) at the local authority level (Pierson, 2011).

The consolidation of services into one generic department paved the way for the different associations representing social workers into one single national organization – the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) in 1970. The Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW) was then established in 1971 as the statutory authority responsible mainly for promoting education and training in social work, recognizing courses and awarding qualifications throughout the United Kingdom.

It took nearly another 30 years before the Care Standards Act 2000 was enacted to establish the General Social Care Council (GSCC) in 2001 (CCETSW was then abolished) as a mechanism to regulate the workforce (social workers included). The GSCC was given the power to maintain a

register of qualified social workers, social work students and social care staff, and to strike practitioners from that register (Peirson, 2011). Social work was established as a graduate profession with the entry set at 3 years undergraduate social work degree.

However, due to the UK government's decision, GSCC only lasted for a decade when it was closed on 31 July 2012 and the regulation of the social work profession and education was transferred to Health Professions Council (HPC) which subsequently changed its name to the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) (GSCC, 2012).

#### *New Zealand*

Like their UK counterparts, registration of social workers in New Zealand only started after the turn of the millennium. In 2003, the Minister for Social Development introduced the Social Workers Registration Act (2003) (SWRA), through voluntary registration, to improve standards and accountability of social workers in New Zealand (Beddoe & Duke, 2009). The SWRA established the Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB) which has 10 members appointed by the responsible minister. Six members were required to be social workers who would be eligible for registration under the act. The minister eventually appointed nine members who are eligible to register to the first board and one lay person.

The legislation only register social workers but the board was given the power to determine if the applicant should be registered fully, provisionally or temporary. Criteria for these categories were provided under the legislation (Beddoe & Duke, 2009). The registered social workers are also required to have a Competency certificate and have to apply for an annual practicing certificate. Since the registration is non-mandatory, all health social workers are not necessarily registered at this point of time (Beddoe & Duke, 2009). Nevertheless the numbers of registered social workers have increased from 2,485 for year 2009/10 to 4,029 for year 2012/13, and 86% of the registered social workers renewed their annual practicing license for year 2012/13 (SWRB, 2013). Registration is seen to have brought powerful markers of the professionalization that has been missing in the country (Beddoe, 2013).

#### *Singapore*

Singapore introduced an accreditation system for social workers and social service practitioners on 1 April 2009. It was a joint effort by the Ministry of Social and Family Development, National Council of Social Service and Singapore Association of Social Workers. The Accreditation System is

overseen by the Social Work Accreditation and Advisory Board (SWAAB) and administered by the Accreditation Secretariat of the Singapore Association of Social Workers. Practitioners with recognized Social Work qualifications acceptable to the SWAAB can either be accredited as Registered Social Worker (RSW) or Registered Social Workers-Provisional (RSW-P). The accreditation of Registered Social Service Practitioner (RSSP) has ceased since 1 July 2012 and the existing RSSP are encouraged to pursue a social work qualification to be accredited as RSW (Singapore Association of Social Workers, 2014).

### **Proposed Social Workers Bill and Registration in Malaysia**

The Task Force or Technical Committee on the enhancement of the practice of social work has started the drafting of the Social Workers Bill since 2010. In the process, many meetings, workshops and road shows across the nation were held to seek feedback from social workers, social welfare officers, and welfare organizations. Among the features of the proposed legislation include:

- (i) Establish a regulatory body in the name of Malaysian Social Work Council that undertakes the tasks of registration, licensing, complaints and discipline, continuing professional education and professional development of social workers in the country. Various committees will be set up for these tasks.
- (ii) The council members will be made up of a number of social workers eligible to be registered, the Director General of Social Welfare, the President of the Malaysian Association of Social Workers, and lay persons representing the public. All council members will be appointed by the Minister responsible for social welfare in the country.
- (iii) The proposed bill will set social work qualification at tertiary education (BSW or equivalent). Practitioner who wants to be recognized and carry the title Social Worker (SW) is required to register with the Council. However, considering that many social work practitioners in the country may not have tertiary social work qualification, they can be registered as Associate Social Worker (ASW) if they have enough practice experience. The Task Force has decided that the legislation to be as inclusive as possible rather than being exclusive.
- (iv) The nature of regulation is mandatory registration but a grandparenting or sunset period has been proposed where the Council can review after the end of a stipulated period. The sunset period is meant for non-qualification practitioners to be registered as ASW and to undergo accredited social work training in order to be either upgraded to SW or maintained as ASW after the sunset period.
- (v) All practicing SW or ASW has to obtain a practice license or certificate which has to be renewed after a few years (the length of the license renewal will be determined by the Council). The criteria for renewal



with Continuing Professional Education (CPE) points which means that all SW and ASW have to accumulate required CPE points by attending accredited CPE training programs from time to time.

- (vi) Since the Malaysian Qualifying Agency (MQA) accredits all programs at the institutions of higher learning, the Council will provide guidelines on tertiary social work education to MQA and prepare a list of recognized social work qualifications that are eligible to register with the Council.

### **Issues and Challenges**

The proposed social workers bill indeed can be a new dawn for the development of social work in Malaysia. At the very least, it provides a legal framework for the profession to decide what best measures to be taken to advance its competencies and status on par with their counterparts internationally. Nevertheless, there are a few challenges that the Council and the profession need to study and then to address them accordingly.

- (i) *Registration of title: professional social worker versus non-qualification social worker*

The actual number of social workers with social work qualifications is undocumented as the membership of the Malaysian Association of Social Workers (MASW) is on voluntary basis. Moreover, two unpublished studies conducted by MASW in 2005 and 2013 revealed extreme low percentages of social work trained practitioners employed in both the public and non-governmental welfare services. The first issue regarding registration for social workers in Malaysia is how to differentiate, in terms of title, between 'professional social workers' (PW) (social workers with social work qualification) and 'functional alternative social workers' (FA) (those without relevant qualifications but are employed to deliver social work service) (Hatta, Ali, Subramaniam & Rauf, 2014). The second issue is related to licensing – will there be any differences, in terms of functions and responsibilities, between PW and FA?

These two issues are actually not new. Social work communities in the US and in the UK have gone through the challenges of hiring of para-professionals as social workers (Austin, 1978) and deprofessionalization where social workers were tasked with more administrative work than direct service (Dominelli, 1996). Government can, through legislation, to regulate who can be registered as professional (Svensson & Åström, 2013) but regulation cannot prevent non-qualified people being hired to deliver welfare and social work services due to the weak legal closure of social work (Harrits, 2014) where the profession lack the ability to have monopoly over its professional work

Another challenge to the entire social work profession in Malaysia is to demonstrate that PW is more competent than FA. The profession should be alarmed by the findings from a study by Hatta, Ali, Subramanian and Rauf (2014) which compares PW and FA social workers. It was revealed that there were no significant differences between PWs and FAs in intervention, evaluation methods, work ethics, and values.

On registration, the Task Force has agreed to embrace an inclusive approach that people who wish to be known as registered social workers can apply to register with the Council. The Council will then decide if the applicant to be registered as a Social Worker (SW) or as an Associate Social Worker (ASW) or to be rejected. The criteria taken into consideration would be qualification (degree or non-degree) and experience (length of service and scope of work). This approach is different from the accreditation used in Singapore which differentiates between social workers and social service practitioners. In addition, the Council may want to consider the model of New Zealand where practitioners without tertiary qualifications but with indigenous practice knowledge and skills can be considered for registration through special clause in Section 13 of the Act.

The proposed social workers bill may come with a sunset clause to allow practitioners without proper qualification to register with the Council as ASW. ASW will be then encouraged to take up accredited social work courses during the sunset period to be promoted to SW or remain as ASW after the sunset period. What it means is that after the sunset period, only those with relevant social work qualification can register with the Council as SW or ASW. By then, applicants with a degree in social work (BSW) or above are eligible to register as SW. Applicants with non-graduate diploma or certificate in social work are eligible to register as ASW. The Council has the authority to review by the end of the sunset period if extension is needed.

*(ii) Licensure – area of practice / continuing professional education / supervision*

Compared to registration which is a one-off process, licensure or practicing certificate is much more complicated as it is a continuous process whereby all license holders need to renew the license after a stipulated period if they wish to continue practicing. The main challenge at the initial stage of issuing of licensure is the basis of accessing the applicants' skills, knowledge and value. In another words, how to assess competencies? One document, the National Competency Standards on Social Work Practice, prepared by the DSWM and MASW in 2007, has been endorsed by the government in 2010, and will be the key reference. However it has yet to be transferred or implemented

in current social work education and training. Although the writing of the training modules for social work competency standards has been on-going for the last two years, it will require some time before the modules can be used for the training of trainers (TOT) and training of competency standards to be introduced nationwide.

The next issue is how a license or practicing certificate can be categorized that it only allows a license holder to practice according to his or her capability and competency, especially SW and ASW who do not poses sufficient social work qualification and training? An examination like what the US is practicing may be costly and not feasible in the beginning for many practitioners in Malaysia. The New Zealand and Singapore model of having full and provisional practice license or accreditation may be more practical. For example, SW with full social work qualification can be given full practice license while SW and ASW with limited social work training and experience can be given provisional practice license where they can only practice according to the specification according to their respective agency. If they are moving to another agency or another field of practice, they have to apply a new provisional license.

There will be two requirements for license or certificate renewal: Accumulation of Continuing Professional Education (CPE) points and supervision. When the Social Workers Act is implemented, the Council will accredit training programs offered by qualified education and training providers as CPE for all registered social workers. All SW and ASW will earn points by attending those accredited training programs to gain updated knowledge and skills in the profession and fulfilling one of the requirements for license renewal.

Currently formal social work educations are only available in six public universities – Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS), Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) and the latest being Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UNISZA). Universiti Malaya (UM) has expertise on social administration while Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) has its strength on human development but not full fledged social work education. The Social Institute of Malaysia (ISM) only offers social work training for social welfare officers mainly employed by the Department of Social Welfare (DSWM), while the Malaysian Council of Social Welfare and Development (MAKPEM) caters training for social care workers for welfare organizations registered with DSWM. MASW offers short term professional social work training for welfare organizations with a fee but it does not have any funding to conduct training for free. These limitations can affect the quantity, availability and accessibility of CPE.

Additionally, license renewal requires all license holders to have certain amount of supervision on a regular basis. Unfortunately, professional social work supervision is severely lacking in many social or welfare agencies due to the limited numbers of qualified social workers employed and the command of supervision skills. To train sufficient social work supervisors and to establish a proper supervision structure will be an uneasy task, both in terms of cost and time.

Cohen and Deri (1992) have reported an example in the state of Maine, US on CPE and supervision, which can be a useful reference for Malaysia. When social work licensure became mandatory in Maine in 1984, 1,400 human services workers have become licensed social workers (LSWs) through a four year grandparenting provision. By 1989, the number increased to 2,767 of which slightly more than half have no formal education in social work.

For license renewal, the LSWs must receive a minimum of four hours of consultation (supervision) per month from a licensed MSW or a licensed clinical social worker, besides attending CPE. As a result many agencies employing LSWs but have no MSW had to engage consultants from outside the agency to meet the supervision requirement. At the same time, members of the Maine chapter of NASW sourced the funding to organize a 10 hour curriculum seminar that aimed to enhance social work skills, values and theories as CPE for LSWs without formal social work education. It was reported that the response to the program was extremely positive and provided an opportunity for networking and additional training. The authors advocated that the profession itself must provide leadership in these endeavours.

### *(iii) Resources*

One big question is how much the government is willing to invest in the training and the upgrading of social workers in the country? The Council may need funding to start off and the government may expect it to stand on its own financially. Although the aim of social work to gain higher professional recognition is not for professional glorification but is for strengthening the ability of social workers to response to the plight of people who are constantly being excluded or marginalized in society (Lyon in Welbourne, 2009), a higher professional status does not guarantee better income for both the Council and the social workers. Therefore it will be crucial for the Council to have long term plan to sustain the professionalization of social work in Malaysia.

Taking the examples of Maine earlier, improving the overall quality and closing the gap between professional social workers and non-degreed

social workers require a lot of efforts from all stakeholders. In the Malaysian context it will involve the Council, DSW, MASW, social work academia and practitioners on the ground. The registration and training of social workers must not be confined in the Klang Valley only but has to be made available, accessible and affordable as many non-government welfare organizations do not have resources for staff training. In this regard, apart from funding from the government, the stakeholders must also engage and convince the private sector to establish Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs for this purpose.

Furthermore, the Council must have the authority and capacity to enforce the law. It will not be easy especially if social workers do not see the benefits of registering and applying for practicing license or certificate. That is why New Zealand opted for a voluntary registration in the beginning and only works towards mandatory registration after a few years (Beddoe, 2013). In this regards, the Council may have to come out with incentives that can attract registration, then taking a punitive approach against those who do not comply to the legislation.

### **Conclusion**

While the social workers bill is still in working progress and may undergo more changes than what has been deliberated here, we must be mindful that the professionalization of social work does not end with the enactment of a Social Workers Act. It is only the beginning of a long journey to bring the practice and education standards of our social work practitioners at par with international standards. There are many examples that we can learn from other countries that impose social work regulatory system. The works by Beddoe and Duke (2009), Ito (2011) and Van Heugten (2011) have revealed that although registration or certification produced positive results, it does not mark the end of professionalization process for social work a profession. Social work as an emerging profession still faces challenges from its weak legal closure (Harrits, 2014) and the possible clashes of social work values with how government wish to manage its social welfare policies (Ackroyd, Kirkpatrick & Walker, 2007; Dominelli, 1996; Healy, 2009).

This article has attempted to highlight how different countries regulate their social work profession differently. It is important for Malaysia to examine different models and then formulate one that addresses the needs and aspirations of the local practitioners while not diluting the core principles, values and ethics of social work. Renowned social work scholars like Midgley (1981 and 2001) has advised third world countries to find a local model to develop their own social work profession. Citing the South African experience, Sewpaul and Lombard (2004) also advocate for other countries to develop their own national standards and accreditation system, no matter how pains

taking and time consuming, than seeking accreditation from external body whose context might not reflect local realities.

To conclude, Malaysia needs to know its strength and limitation in order to address the challenges in registration and licensing of social workers appropriately. Sufficient monetary and manpower resources are vital for the sustainability of enhancing the profession to the next level. Nevertheless the professionalization and the protection of the title of a registered social worker will only have significance to the marginalized people and vulnerable communities if the profession eventually has the capability and competency to protect, to deliver better quality services, and to bring positive changes to their lives.

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