

REPORT

on

**Survey on Behaviours and Attitudes of
Registered Social Workers towards
Continuing Professional Development**

AND

**Survey on Policies and Practices of
Employing Agencies on
Continuing Professional Development
of Registered Social Workers**

Executive Summary

In October, 2008, the Social Workers Registration Board (the Board) commissioned the Department of Social Work and Social Administration of the University of Hong Kong to conduct two surveys: (1) Survey on Behaviours and Attitudes of Registered Social Workers (RSWs) towards Continuing Professional Development – a benchmark study to collect information on RSWs’ position and attitude in undergoing continuing professional development (CPD) by means of a questionnaire administered by mail or email and telephone interviews, and focus groups; (2) Survey on Policies and Practices of Employing Agencies on Continuing Professional Development – a study to analyze the policies and practices of employing agencies of RSWs (the agencies) in relation to CPD of social workers, by means of a questionnaire administered by mail and a review of the documents on their human resources policies.

The objectives of these two surveys are:

1. To conduct a benchmark study on RSWs’ behaviours and attitudes in respective of their participation in CPD activities, currently and in the past, for an understanding of their acceptability for undergoing CPD; and
2. to collect information on agencies’ existing policies and practices in relations to CPD, and their implementation of those policies and practices for an understanding of agencies’ practical difficulties, and expectations and attitudes towards social workers’ CPD; and, based on the documents provided by agencies, to identify the merits and inadequacies of the various policies and practices.

In respect of the response rate in the survey on RSWs, 1,461 respondents replied through email or mail and the response rate was 10.1% whereas 528 respondents were interviewed on the telephone and the response rate was 61.7%. As for the response rate in the survey on agencies, 115 agencies returned the questionnaire and the response rate was 25.3%. As for the analysis on agency policy, a total of 30 agencies, including 6 small-sized (below 25 employees), 4 medium-sized (25-250 employees) and 20 large-sized agencies (above 250 employees), provided documents on their policies and practices in CPD for the survey.

In the survey on RSWs, the research team found that 90% of the RSWs recognized the need for CPD. As for the mode of implementation of CPD, most of the respondents (72.7%) considered that a “voluntary” mode should be adopted while 21.8% a “mandatory” mode.

As for the survey on agencies, among the 115 agencies responding to the survey, 64.9% considered that a “voluntary” mode should be adopted while 35.1% a “mandatory” mode. Thirteen agencies (11.3%) had set a minimum of CPD hours for their staff to fulfill each year. Moreover, as revealed in the analysis on policies and practices, 4 out of the 30 agencies that provided documents had specified requirements on minimum CPD hours.

In summary, the results of these two surveys showed that the mainstream opinion tended to support a “voluntary” mode of implementation of CPD. The “mandatory” mode was supported by approximately 35% of the agencies and approximately 20% of RSWs responding to the surveys respectively.

With respect to the support that agencies provide for their staff to participate in CPD activities, although 95% of the agencies had high expectations towards their social workers’ undergoing CPD, their practical support for staff in doing so was generally at medium level¹ only. Besides, most of the agencies opined that they should assume medium level² of importance in the roles and responsibility of promoting CPD. The analysis on the agency policies indicated that small and medium agencies were less capable than large agencies in providing supportive measures that required larger amount of resources for their social work employees’ CPD. These measures included providing subsidy for overseas training or accredited courses for professional qualification, arranging internal transfer, or arranging regular off duty shift pattern so as to facilitate staff to attend CPD. The analysis also showed that staffs under different employment terms (full-time, part-time, temporary contract) were offered different levels of subsidies for participating in CPD activities. This showed that social workers of agencies of different scales and under different employment terms were provided with different opportunities to participate in CPD.

In terms of the expectations towards the outcome after undergoing CPD, RSW respondents had less concerns about personal benefits, say promotion or salary increment, but valued more about enhancement of professional standards (for example, raising service quality or improving professional competence). As reported in focus group discussions, such attitude might be attributed to social workers’ putting less weight on tangible benefits and the lack of promotion prospect in the field. It may be difficult to find out the real reason behind but the pursuit of intrinsic professional value is an essential motivating factor for social workers to participate in CPD.

For the survey on social workers, many questions set in the questionnaire were

¹ The level of agency support reflects the extent that agencies had measures to facilitate their social work employees to participate in CPD by, for example, providing leave (pay or no pay) and/or subsidy, arranging flexi-time, formulating relief system, etc.

² The level of importance of agencies’ roles and responsibility in promoting CPD is reflected by the extent that agencies recognized these aspects, namely: offering special arrangements in working hours and allocation of duties, exploring resources to support their social work employees’ CPD, and providing subsidies for CPD activities.

open-ended, which allowed respondents to express their opinions. Quite a number of respondents did so. A noteworthy example was that 1,687 respondents gave explanations on their attitudes towards CPD. Overall speaking, opinions collected from the open-ended questions were mainly related to the following two themes:

1. The mode of implementation of CPD: expressed objection to CPD being taken as a “mandatory requirement” for registration and renewal, or negative sentiments towards “mandatory CPD”, for example, concern about more pressure and burden for social workers.
2. The quality of CPD courses: diverse, practical, and quality courses, able to fit in work schedule, course fee affordable, and as a platform for sharing information on professional development.

CPD is a lifelong and persistent behaviour. With working experience and knowledge enriched over time, RSWs will have higher expectations towards the quality of CPD courses. No matter how CPD will be implemented in future, provision of quality courses is fundamental.

Based on the above results, the research team suggests the parties concerned, including the government, professional organizations, agencies and social workers, to fulfill the following four aspects:

1. to develop quality CPD courses and activities which will address the training needs of social workers with various lengths of practice experience as a foundation and to encourage the pursuit of intrinsic professional value as a starting point for promoting CPD;
2. to ensure that social workers from agencies of different scales and under different employment terms have similar opportunities to undergo CPD;
3. to raise the scale of promotion in order to boost the recognition of professional identity in the field and facilitate agencies and social workers to better understand the concept of “CPD” and “CPD policy”; and
4. to encourage and support agencies to enhance their resource commitment towards CPD of social workers.