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# **Rethinking Professional Practice: The Logic of Competition and the Crisis of Identity in Housing Practice**

Tony Manzi and Jo Richardson

## *Abstract*

The relationship between professionalism, education and housing practice has become increasingly strained following the introduction of austerity measures and welfare reforms across a range of countries. Focusing on the development of UK housing practice, this article considers how notions of professionalism are being reshaped within the context of welfare retrenchment and how emerging tensions have both affected the identity of housing professionals and impacted on the delivery of training and education programmes. The article analyses the changing knowledges and skills valued in contemporary housing practice and considers how the sector has responded to the challenges of austerity. The central argument is that a dominant logic of competition has culminated in a crisis of identity for the sector. Although the focus of the article is on UK housing practice, the processes identified have a wider relevance for the analysis of housing and welfare delivery in developed economies.

Key words:

Housing, professionalism, competition, education, retrenchment

## **Introduction**

Following the 2008 global financial crisis (GFC), governments in developed economies have responded by implementing austerity policies, which have prioritised market provision, privatisation strategies and radical reductions in welfare provision. One of the consequences has been that in a wide variety of contexts, notions of public sector professionalism have been reshaped under conditions of neoliberalism and welfare retrenchment (Laffin and Entwistle, 2000). This article considers how such pressures have affected the delivery of housing services, analyses the challenges facing professionals and examines the impact on training and education programmes. In focusing on changes within the UK housing sector, the article examines how the sector has responded to the constraints and opportunities offered by contemporary social and economic policies. The article contends that the processes identified have a much wider applicability for the development of professional identities within contemporary welfare states.

The housing profession in the UK faces a set of critical challenges about the role and identity of housing practice, most notably surrounding the extent to which it should develop a wider commercial or social ethos. In response to these challenges, two dominant discourses have emerged. The first is characterised by the notion that organisations should concentrate on the development of entrepreneurial skills and prioritise market housing. According to this discourse housing organisations should be given wider autonomy to focus on financial competencies, business management and service efficiencies (see for example Walker, 2015) As the Chief Executive of one of the largest UK housing associations stated: ‘We are not able, or indeed being

asked, to provide affordable social rented accommodation for people who should be looking to the market to solve their own problems' (Interview, Neil Hadden, *Inside Housing*, 4/18/15).

In contrast, the second discourse contends that housing organisations should focus on developing social value, based on an ethos of social justice and seeking to provide services for groups in the greatest (financial and social) need. As one commentator argues: 'The best way to understand what any set of institutions, policies and practices does, is to see it from the standpoint of those who have the least power' (Apple, 2006, p.229)

A challenging environment dominated by public sector austerity, wherein housing services have faced the brunt of public expenditure reductions has generated intense debate contemporary practice, training and skills requirements for housing professionals. One consequence of what Davies (2014) has termed a logic of competition has been that in the UK education institutions have struggled to maintain programmes, let alone expand provision. These difficulties have been exacerbated by policies introduced following the 2015 General Election, in which the Conservative majority government has been responsible for further marginalising the social housing sector. We argue that a decline in education provision is indicative of broader erosion in public sector professional identity and status. Whilst there has been a considerable literature on housing, social polarisation and social exclusion (see for example Hills et. al., 2002, Marsh and Mullins, 1998; Somerville, 1998), the implications of these processes for the development of social identities and professional education and training have been rarely considered. The key aims of this article are therefore to examine the changing nature of professionalism in housing; to discuss what implications these changes have for the identity of housing professionals and finally to consider what kinds of knowledge, skills and training are most privileged within the contemporary housing sector.

The analysis is threefold. First, the article examines the changing nature of housing professionalism by briefly examining the 'professional project' within a context of a wider welfare retrenchment and considering the competing pressures facing contemporary housing practice. The second section uses empirical evidence from a study of UK housing professionals to consider the implications for practice, both in terms of the development of social identities and expectations of those working within the sector. The final section considers how knowledge, skills and characteristics are reflected in changes to professional education programmes.

### **Housing and the changing nature of professional practice**

In European terms, housing in the UK has been described as 'anomalous' (Kleinman, 1996, p.34) owing to its historic reliance on a relatively large local authority sector (reaching 30% of the total stock at its height in the 1970s). On one level this relatively large sector offered opportunities for a body of staff to press their claims for recognition, but housing practitioners have had limited success in their ability to achieve professional status. As Laffin and Entwistle (2000) suggest 'the defining feature of the professional project is the search for autonomy (p.208). In contrast, and defined as a 'fragile domain', the professional project in housing has been described as a 'precarious' undertaking (Furbey, Reid and Cole, 2001); one which has been further threatened by managerialism, political antipathy and social change. Subject to

widespread hostility from politicians (of both left and right, albeit for different reasons), increasing scrutiny from managers and hostility from user groups, housing professionalism has struggled to carve out a distinctive role within the welfare state.

Often characterised as the ‘wobbly pillar of welfare’ (Malpass, 2008), due to the dominance of private sector institutions in provision of housing, it was perhaps unsurprising that Larson’s (1997) notion of the professional project and attempts to achieve organisational autonomy (Freidson, 2001) have proved particularly problematic for housing professionals. Often viewed as a ‘common-sense’ occupation, housing practice was unable to draw upon a ‘discrete and easily defensible knowledge domain’ (Furbey, Reid and Cole, 2001, p.37), and the main professional institution (the Chartered Institute of Housing - CIH) failed to achieve consensus about its focus or scope and domain (Furbey, Reid and Cole, 2001, p.38).

Rather than requiring specialist knowledge and skills, housing management tended to be associated with generalist, low level tasks such as the allocation of property, rent collection, arrears and repairs (Laffin, 1986, pp.107-108). In contrast to other high status professional occupations such as architecture, law or medicine, housing management could not claim ideological legitimacy and lacked mystery. Even compared to a roughly similar occupation such as social work (in terms of social status) a professional qualification has tended to be a low priority for housing organisations. Hence, in 2015 only ‘7.7% of all people employed as housing officers, in all sectors, are CIH [Chartered Institute of Housing] members’ (but this figure increased in ‘non-core’ housing roles, such as administrative, youth and community work or care managers). There was also a difference between those working in housing associations and local authorities: ‘18.1% of property, housing and estate managers in Housing Associations are CIH members, compared with 26.6% in local authorities.’<sup>1</sup>

A further complication was that the lack of a distinctive definition of the role of housing managers compounded the difficulty of defining a clear identity for these groups. Thus for Franklin and Clapham (1997) the social construction of the housing manager has varied between interpretations of its personal (caring) role and a more business-like entrepreneurialism. This tension has been a constant and increasing feature in UK housing, creating additional pressure on the self-identity of housing managers. Writers such as Casey and Allen (2004) have thus described housing as a ‘semi’ or ‘incomplete’ profession, characterised by shorter training, less legitimised status, a less specialised body of knowledge and less autonomy from supervision (Etzioni, 1969), in contrast to other established professions in medicine, law or architecture. In this respect and drawing on the work of Goffman (1969), Casey (2008, p.765) has referred to the ‘spoiled identity’ of housing managers who struggle with the demands of managing within a marginalised or ‘invisible’ profession.

### **Welfare professionalism and the logic of competition**

From a wider perspective, a combination of factors has transformed the nature of contemporary welfare professionalism from a ‘golden age of welfare professionalism’

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<sup>1</sup> Information from unpublished CIH research, shared in email communication with authors, 17<sup>th</sup> September 2015.

(Foster and Wilding, 2000, p.143) in the 1950s and 1960s when doctors, teachers and social workers were 'granted a major role in policy making, power to define needs and problems, power in resource allocation, power over people and substantial control over their area of work' (Wilding, 1982).

In relation to changing ideas of professionalism four key features are discussed here. First, increasing commercialisation has blurred the boundaries between public and private sector institutions. This congruence between the sectors has been particularly marked in the case of housing policy with private and voluntary sector agencies becoming increasingly influential in the provision of housing services. Market pressures, based on increasing competition and the acquisition of managerial and entrepreneurial skills (Hanlon, 1998, p.50) have thus exerted a significant impact on housing practice. For example, both Thornhill (2013) and Richardson et al (2014) have identified a 'growing commercial focus' (p. 20) whereby 'commercial' is seen by housing sector respondents as 'business for a purpose'; that purpose being 'social'.

A second important factor has been the rise of managerialism since the 1980s which has been associated with a 'de-professionalisation' through the erosion of autonomy, status and income as employers 'seek detailed control of professional work through means such as performance indicators and the imposition of generic managers' (Laffin and Entwistle, 2000, p.209). Thus Clarke and Newman describe a 'shift from a regime dominated by bureau-professionalism to one dominated by managerialism embedded in processes of both the dispersal and concentration of power' (1997, p.40). Although empirical evidence about the level of de-professionalisation is mixed, 'the old strategies that served the professions well throughout the twentieth century – the defence of an exclusive discipline, the commitment to public service and the domination of the policy process – are increasingly difficult to sustain in an altogether more critical environment' (Laffin and Entwistle, 2000, p.209).

The development of partnership arrangements accounts for a third feature in the decline of welfare professionalism. Contemporary forms of delivery have seen organisational structures dominated by professional bodies (such as planning, highways and housing departments) replaced by multi-agency relationships based on network structures and project management approaches (Stoker, 1999). Housing provision is increasingly dependent on these relationships to provide development, management and administrative services (Reid, 1995). Significantly, these new network structures contain representatives from private, voluntary sector agencies and community groups rather than the traditional public sector dominated professional experts. Described as 'trailing rather than leading change' (Laffin and Entwistle, 2000, p.217) welfare professionals have consequently struggled to assert their identity in the contemporary policy environment.

Housing practice has witnessed a further (fourth) feature of decline in the status of professionals through the increasing perception of social housing as a residual sector, owing to concentrated deprivation; this has been exacerbated by extensive public expenditure reductions. The wider impact of this residualisation of housing practice has seen a reconfiguration of the state's role in welfare. For Davies (2014) this process is described as 'the pursuit of the disenchantment of politics by economics (p.4) wherein competition and competitiveness are seen as unquestionable social goods. The practical result has been that markets are seen as the key determinant of

public value, resulting in a contingent and conditional welfare state (Glynn, 2009), which serves to entrench rather than reduce structural inequality (Dorling, 2014).

Developing Kemeny, Jacobs and Manzi's (2004) interpretation of social constructionism, those working in housing develop their own, sometimes competing, interpretations of the roles, identities and purposes. For example, housing practitioners have engaged in intense debate about the role of a social housing sector, focussing on the extent to which it should on the one hand be based upon provision of affordable housing and social welfare, or on the other, prioritise the generation of surpluses to be used for a social purpose.

The extension of market-based rationalities to all corners of life under neoliberalism (Davies, 2014, p.168) has generated a logic of competition wherein housing organisations face significant tensions between the discourses of commercialism and social purpose. These tensions are reshaping notions of professional identity, changing motivations towards work and the influencing the behaviour and attitudes of staff. As housing has become a major target for modernisation and restructuring (Malpass and Victory, 2010), debates about the priority to be afforded to social as against commercial considerations have generated fundamental questions about the identity of the housing sector within a context of welfare retrenchment. Concerns about the potential impact of government proposals to reduce organisational autonomy and extend the Right to Buy to housing associations, have exacerbated the pressures facing housing professionals. The next section considers these issues with reference to empirical research conducted in housing organisations and analyses responses from those engaged in the delivery of housing education programmes.

## **Methods**

This research draws upon a study undertaken in 2013/14 (Richardson et al, 2014), which used a variety of methods for examining the views of housing professionals about their roles as practitioners. The methods included: four 'appreciative inquiry' workshops; thirteen focus groups with different housing providers across a wide geographical area; two webinars and 1054 online survey responses (41 of which were from residents who were asked for their views on the future of housing roles). The online survey was publicised by the research team through social media platforms and blogs to encourage high participation from housing professionals across the UK. The Appreciative Inquiry workshops were held in Scotland and England and further focus groups were held in England and Wales inviting professionals working in different categories of organisation, such as: small providers, London based, arms-length providers, housing associations and local authorities. More detail on the stratification of respondents can be found in the published report (Richardson et al, 2014). The study was competitively commissioned by the Chartered Institute of Housing, and included a wide-ranging analysis of the future of frontline housing roles.

Additional research was conducted in 2014 to supplement this study to further investigate the relationship between education, professional training and housing practice. Whilst the initial research was commissioned by the Chartered Institute of Housing, the latter stage of this study incorporated a wider-ranging analysis of the implications for professional education and housing practice. If the methodology for the paper consisted solely of the initial study then there could be a tension between the original aim of the study commissioned by the professional body and our aim in

writing this paper. The original study data, however, served as a platform to outline key themes from which the authors conducted further primary research focused on contemporary tensions. This latter study involved focus group discussion with (four) housing education providers, and supplementary interviews with (nine) education professionals based around the UK. Both authors of this paper are members of a housing education network in the UK, a network which has seen members fall as courses have closed in recent years. Invitations to participate in focus groups and interviews were sent to all known UK housing course leaders who were members of the network.

The discussion which follows includes reflection on survey findings and interview responses from the original (Author et al, 2014) study and the supplementary primary research conducted in 2014 which focused more on respondents' sense-making of competing tensions in professional practice. Respondents were asked to further reflect on the future trajectory of housing professionalism and education.

## Findings

The responses were analysed and coded thematically, in order to analyse how contemporary housing professionals constructed their work identities within a rapidly changing environment. The main themes that emerged from the study involved reshaping professional identities; reconciling commercial and social challenges and developing knowledge for housing education.

### *Reshaping professional identities*

As a way of understanding how professional identities were constructed, the original study considered the key determinants of changes to working practices. Respondents were therefore asked to rank the key drivers for change in the sector in order of priority; a large majority identified welfare reform measures as the major determinant of change, followed by a lack of housing supply and the increasing gap between income and housing costs. Figure 1 (below) indicates the order of priority given to external factors:

**Figure 1: The top six external drivers changing the frontline housing role**

<b>Influencing Factor</b>	<b>Total rating count (no. of responses)</b>
<b>1. Welfare Reform</b>	677
<b>2. Housing supply</b>	625
<b>3. Increasing gap between earnings and housing costs</b>	558
<b>4. Ageing Population</b>	550
<b>5. Technological advances</b>	406

Although a significant feature of the original study was the low number (361 responses) identifying grant reduction as the most important factor, these results indicated the extent to which professional identities were shaped by external rather than internal processes. There are of course regional implications to these factors, but the impacts of housing affordability, resulting from disparity in income compared to housing costs, were a consistent feature, across the country. This influencing factor also resonated with another ranked factor, 'inequality' and the term 'resilience' was frequently used by respondents to describe the qualities that frontline housing workers (and residents) were thought to need.

Nevertheless, the responses can be classified into those who identified opportunities to reshape housing professionalism set against those who were increasingly pessimistic about the prospects for the sector - broadly corresponding to the distinction Casey (2008) drew between 'proactive' and 'pragmatic' managers. Thus on the one hand were those who have argued that the development of partnership arrangements strengthened the role of housing agencies, which are often placed at the centre of initiatives to (for example) regenerate housing estates. In contrast, other respondents placed little faith that such initiatives could strengthen the profession. For these latter groups, the more housing was seen as a generic service the weaker were already uncertain claims to professional status. In similar ways, the generic nature of housing education could be both a strength and weakness. As one participant in the supplementary study from the Higher Education sector commented:

That's one of the things I really liked...and why I studied housing, because you could do economics, politics, social policy. That's a benefit but it's never had a place as an academic discipline (Focus group).

The above responses supported the sense of housing as a semi-professional (Casey and Allen, 2004) undertaking, lacking either a basis of technical skills or a distinct knowledge basis. An uncertainty about professional identity was encapsulated by one respondent who asked: 'Was there ever such a thing as a housing profession?' (Interview, education provider). Housing was also seen as 'somehow as less than [other disciplines]' (Focus group), demonstrating its existence as a poorly defined and easily marginalised undertaking. In similar fashion one respondent commented: 'people don't understand what [housing] is...it hasn't got a disciplinary base?' (Focus group). This lack of understanding was shared by employers and education providers, resulting in the idea that 'people think you are building houses', rather than undertaking critical enquiry. Another respondent identified what they described as 'a kind of 'de-housing' of the housing profession' (Focus group) meaning a diminution rather than increase in the role and importance of practitioners in new organisational networks. This reshaping of professional identities was apparent in a desire for a number of voluntary housing agencies to create distinct organisational identities

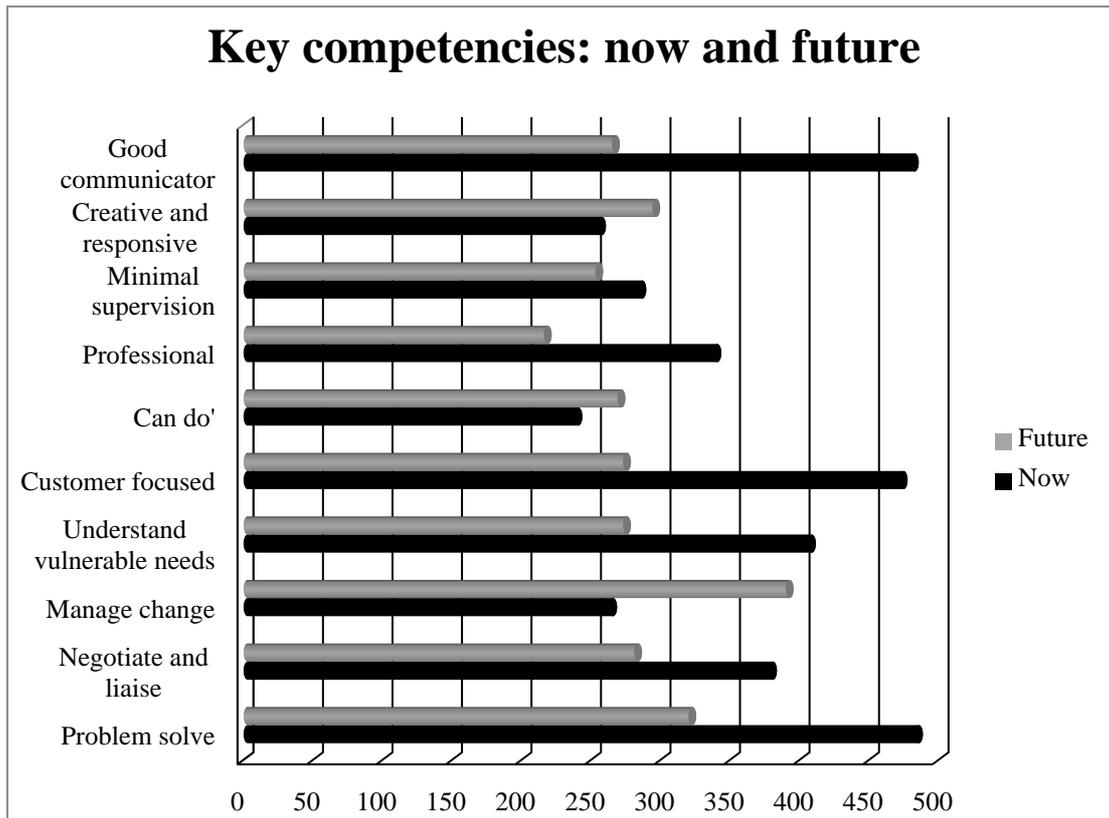
Many organisations like housing associations are now rebranding themselves...there are all these new names coming up with the term housing association is being dropped (Interview, education provider).

A number of respondents also felt that the professional institution (the Chartered Institute of Housing – CIH) had been largely impotent in reversing the decline of housing: ‘I think the CIH has been caught by history – they were created by the history of social housing [but] they don’t have a real identity any more’ (Interview, education provider). Such responses were indicative of fundamental changes underway within professional practice. Not only was housing seen as marginalised in contemporary discourse, the idea of housing management was also thought to have become a less central feature of contemporary social policy, given the stigma attached to the concept of social renting in contemporary social policy discourses (see for example Watt, 2008). These processes are likely to have profound consequences on self-identities, motivations and attitudes of those working within the sector.

### *Reconciling a commercial and social ethos*

The difficulty in defining in constructing a professional identity for the contemporary practitioner was compounded by the competing demands of social purpose and commercialism which generated particular tensions for housing professionals. In particular, an environment increasingly seen as dominated by private sector interests meant that a traditional focus on public sector organisations and administrative processes was no longer seen as ‘fit for purpose’. Figure 2 (below) demonstrates how respondents to the online survey in the original study viewed the core competencies needed now and in future.

### **Figure 2: Key competencies for frontline housing workers**



The figure above shows the top ten competencies when the responses for ‘now’ and ‘in the future’ are looked at together. The most important competencies for the present related to interpersonal relationships, such as communication, having a customer focus and understanding vulnerable needs. These qualities can be characterised as attributes historically associated with housing practice highlighting the importance of ‘soft skills’ such as empathy and an understanding of social disadvantage. In contrast future requirements were thought to entail primarily organisational rather than interpersonal qualities, for example managing change or negotiating and liaising. Whilst problem solving was identified as a key competency both now and in the future, this competency is likely to be interpreted in very different ways as the sector responded to change.

The above factors were further identified in the survey responses where six competencies outlined were seen by respondents as being more important for the future than the present<sup>2</sup>. They are listed in figure 3 (below) in order of difference in importance. Thus, the largest number of respondents highlighted the ability to manage change (both now and in the future), closely followed by a need to be ‘commercially minded’; whilst only a small number of respondents stated this was important now, the figure increased to 336 who thought it was important in the future, a five-fold increase, classified as representing a need for ‘a commercial head and a social heart’ (Richardson et. al. 2014). In contrast the ‘ability to inspire and gain confidence of others’, saw an increase of just 27 (169 respondents thought this important now and 196 saw this as a future skill).

**Figure 3: Increasing importance of six factors (including commerciality)**

<sup>2</sup> ‘Technical knowledge’ also increased, but only minimally from 167 to 169. Because this is not significant, it is not included in the list.

<b>Competency</b>	<b>Now</b>	<b>Future</b>
Ability to manage change	268	390
Commercially minded	61	336
Able to be creative and respond according to the situation	255	294
'Can Do' improvement focused	238	269
Ability to inspire and gain the confidence of others	169	196
Critically reflective practitioner/ self-awareness	111	119

The significant increase in importance of being 'commercially minded' – of understanding the cost and value across all activities – was supported by interview and focus group responses. Whilst the data from 174 housing officer respondents to the online survey in the original study showed that 'commercially minded' was not listed in the top six competencies either now or in future, like the wider data set there was an over five-fold increase (from 11 now to 64 in future) in importance for the future. Responses included comments such as the following:

Frontline staff need to be more commercially minded, know how to achieve value for money for example. In a changing economy officers must understand the importance of getting homes let and an income coming in to the organisation (English housing association, survey respondent).

The sense that the future of housing practice lay in understanding economy and efficiency in service delivery was echoed by other respondents, for example one respondent commenting that 'I feel the tasks within the role may develop to be more financial than community minded' (Scottish housing association survey respondent).

This commercial logic was thought to have profound and far-reaching implications, with housing organisations increasingly seen as large businesses: 'because of their commitments to the banks they need to get their rents in, for their business plans... for securing loans and finance' (Interview in supplementary study, education provider). As a consequence:

The whole nature of housing has become commercially driven now. There is very little boundary between social and private and housing management/property management is all becoming one. It is all about investment risk, bringing money in, raising money from private finance sources (Interview, education provider).

Housing professionals in the original study talked of how 'massive commercial pressures' affected their day-to-day practices. Ensuring effective collection of rental income was viewed as pre-eminent with many organisations spreading the responsibility for this activity through what were referred to as 'rent first' policies.

By commercial, I mean focused on maximising income, minimising costs, cutting out waste, a different attitude and approach to customer care – it's about attention - communication, knowing the customer well. (Chief Executive, English housing association)

The strong priority afforded to rent collection was reinforced by the government's proposal in the 2015 budget statement to limit housing association rent increases. As organisations are increasingly dependent on their rental income, the government's commitment to restrict their autonomy to determine their commercial future has serious ramifications. In addition, the reliance on private finance and need to be seen as social businesses led some to argue that core values were being abandoned as housing organisations repositioned themselves to cope with the demands of an entrepreneurial culture: 'in the process [of change] they have lost the thing that distinguishes themselves from other types of organisations' (Interview, education provider).

Moreover, some criticised the professional institution (the CIH) for being 'too commercial in its focus' (Interview, education provider) and driven by an overriding concern to increase membership. At the same time others expressed scepticism about the utility of what were seen as traditional housing qualifications within an increasingly commercial environment: 'they aim to be relevant to the private sector but in reality they are simply not relevant' (Interview, education provider).

For such respondents the logic of competition was part of a new organizational settlement for the voluntary housing sector that prioritised a managerial rather than professional ethos. At the same time professionals and residents alike increasingly recognised the value of 'efficiency' and more business-like approaches to housing practice (Author, 2013). Resident participants emphasised the importance of commercial knowledge and skills, using terms such as 'tenancy sustainment' and 'business for a purpose'.

These tensions between commercialism and social purpose have been analysed by writers such as Mullins et. al. (2012) who have considered the trend towards increasing hybridity within housing, in particular as applied to an increasingly significant housing association sector. These 'socially hearted, community minded' (Chevin, 2013) values were also noted by leaders in the sector who acknowledged the need to reconcile the social values with the technical competencies needed to function within a competitive business environment. As a practitioner focus group member in the original study commented 'Housing organisations have an interest in keeping communities sustainable ... it will be much worse if we don't do it, if we have families in crisis'.

#### *Developing knowledge for housing education*

Given the dominance of the logic of competition, the role and content of housing education programmes was subject to significant challenge. For academic respondents, changes to the sector imposed a fundamental threat whereby 'we are losing this whole critical analysis end where people can actually sit down and think wider, think outside the box' (Interview). These processes reflected a combination of values as well as changing patterns of demand and supply:

It is partly an ideological issue – about making profit out of property. The main problem is that we have lost our core old-school customers – they can't get funding any more (Interview, education provider).

The dominance of housing associations, which since the late 1980s had become the main providers of social housing, was thought to have created additional difficulties for the development of professional education. As one respondent suggested:

Councils were more committed to education – they were after all part of establishing the profession. In contrast housing associations want to mould people to their way of thinking (Interview, education provider).

An erosion of professional identity and the marginalisation of education provision was thought to have jeopardised a critical pedagogy. Consequently, a tendency to devalue the importance of housing within the curriculum was reflected in the demand for housing as a subject of study:

Young people with social policy backgrounds will move into housing - but housing will be absorbed into other disciplines as well. Housing as such may not be the future (Interview education provider).

Within a sector, which has historically relied on employer support, training and education programmes were seen as threatened by public expenditure reductions. As one respondent suggested 'local authorities used to require staff to be professionally qualified. Now, they no longer do' (Focus group). However, a further explanation was given for a reluctance to sponsor housing education for employees: 'it's not just whether they've got the money for it. It's how they value it compared to alternatives' (Focus group).

As another respondent commented, the logic of competition required housing organisations to reconsider the purpose of staff training and in the process 'losing the value of housing education'. Hence 'employers have a bigger say now, they want things tailored to their particular organisation... They want people trained for their own organisations, for their individual needs'. The implication of this instrumental approach to training was thought to be a loss of 'wider focus, the wider critical analysis and the breadth of learning you get at a university' (Interview, education provider).

As a consequence of these processes employers were perceived to assign a low priority to housing education; hence 'they are valuing different things – not just CIH membership' (Focus group). According to this argument, senior staff were increasingly encouraged to study for generic management qualifications, which were not constrained by the limitations of more narrowly-focused housing programmes. One respondent suggested that organisations were considering alternative qualification routes:

[Employers] are keener on MBAs, but these don't necessarily deliver more – they just provide a different way of thinking... students invest over £20k to get into top jobs, but they are no guarantee of success once they are in the job (Interview, education provider).

The changing institutional environment, wherein private sector agencies were becoming increasingly influential in the delivery of affordable housing objectives

carried a further inevitable set of changes to the content of education programmes. Within such an environment knowledge, skills and competencies for housing practice were likely to undergo fundamental changes. For example:

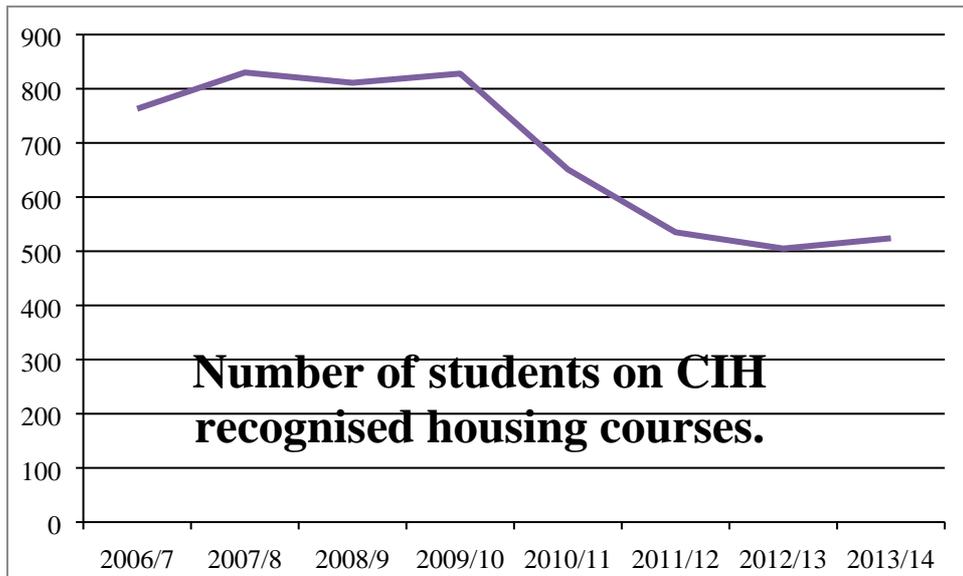
Some universities are now moving towards the private sector...looking at Valuation coming in to housing degrees, looking at private sector skills coming in to what were the more traditional social housing skills. There is this merger between public and private and in future you will find less focused housing qualifications – they will be much more general with a housing stream or housing pathway (Interview education provider).

Within such a context, organisations were thought to prioritise short-term, competency-based programmes rather than developing the longer term, critical skills required in studying for a higher academic qualification. In the words of another respondent:

I think there is a trend in organisations to train rather than educate their staff and at the lower level...it's training at a minimal level for them to be effective in a particular role – not to be creative or to have a broader understanding. It's all about being of the moment (Focus group).

In addition, the generic nature of the housing qualification offered a number of challenges for the professionalism of the sector as one academic commented: 'a lot of the things we generally teach could just as well be taught in a course on social policy; it is not necessarily housing focused' (Interview, education provider). One diagnosis of this difficulty was that 'the real problem is that there has to be an intellectual case for housing education' (Interview, education provider), reflecting a view that housing training and education were neglected at a time when other (notably financial) considerations were predominant. The implication was that the sector would continue to decline, as illustrated in figure 4, indicating the reduction in recruitment on CIH accredited housing courses across the UK.

#### **Figure 4: Student recruitment on CIH accredited housing programmes**



(Based on data supplied by the Chartered Institute of Housing 2014)

Housing education has experienced a sharp reduction in recruitment figures from just over 800 students in 2007 to just over 500 in 2014, reflected across courses and Universities within the UK. Moreover, a number of Higher Education Institutions have closed courses, and in some cases ceased providing housing education altogether. For some respondents the professional institution needed to play a more active role in supporting struggling education institutions and sustaining programmes. Hence

There has been a move by the CIH away from the educational institutions, certainly from the traditional universities, and their obsession now is with doubling their membership. They are trying other routes including [direct provision] themselves - about [working with] professional institutions and bodies which are not universities (Interview, education provider).

One of the fundamental difficulties for Universities had been the combination of tuition fee increases introduced since 2010 and the discontinuation of scholarship schemes and grants offered by government: ‘the problem is that the students don’t get funding’ (Interview, education provider). The low student numbers meant that respondents tended to be demoralised about prospects for the future. This pessimism was aggravated by the sense that from an institutional perspective (despite ostensible priorities) Universities were less interested in vocational programmes.

I think there’s a perception that professional courses are not as important as traditional disciplines - not as research based. If organisations want to compete in a new market they don’t necessarily prioritise professional courses, which people in Universities see as training rather than education (Focus group).

This comment pointed to a contradiction in education provision as the funding regime under the Research Excellence Framework (REF) now focuses strongly on ‘impact’. The housing sector provides rich potential for demonstrating the broader significance of applied, practical research activity and giving a low value to professionally based programmes is likely to undermine performance in research output and carries funding implications (particularly in the post 1992 sector, where the majority of housing programmes were situated). Thus ‘in new institutions there is an under-

resourcing which makes it very, very difficult to do any proper research so there is increasing emphasis on quick and dirty enterprise activity which is not prestigious. It maintains the relationship but it's no good for the REF' (Focus group).

Within an environment where 'the internal politics of universities is all about protecting their own teaching and their courses' (Focus group) programmes with small numbers of students and generating low-income were clearly under threat. A number of respondents suggested that the decline in housing education carried serious implications for housing scholarship: 'a lot of people are doing research but they are not in housing – they are mainly in social geography (Interview, education provider). The consequence was that housing research was 'more likely to be undertaken by consultants, specialists and think tanks' (Interview).

Whilst some respondents saw the housing curriculum as generic and capable of integration within wider social policy programmes, others argued that there was a specific need for a housing focus within a study of social history that would help in instilling core values, such as equity and social justice. However, concerns were expressed that if the CIH professional qualification becomes smaller and tighter in focus then this social historical, values-based approach to understanding the world and the housing professional's place in it would be lost. The pressures of maintaining professional housing education programmes within an environment widely seen as (both internally and externally) hostile meant that responses from education providers tended to be generally pessimistic about their future prospects. The considerable number of education institutions that had decided to close their programmes led to a deep-rooted fear that there was no real future for housing education. Clearly these developments have important consequences for the development of professional programmes and suggested a difficult future for housing education.

## **Conclusions**

As Judt (2015) has argued, 'The discounting of the public sector has become the default condition of policy discourse in much of the developed world' (p.315) and nowhere has this logic of competition been more noticeable than in professional housing practice. Whilst the practice of housing management has taken a specific form within UK social housing, processes of welfare professionalism and de-professionalism are evident in all major developed economies as they struggle with the demands of austerity, welfare conditionality and retrenchment. In this light, although UK housing education has been unusual in offering undergraduate and postgraduate housing qualifications, the skills, knowledge and competencies required by professional managers share similar trajectories, with commercial skills, financial acumen and applied economics becoming valorised as traditional approaches to social policy and social science become marginalised. It is clear that the housing professional project has changed in fundamental ways (as it has in other areas of the public sector and across the welfare state as a whole). Whilst housing has always been one of the weakest examples of professionalisation within the welfare state, it can be seen as reflective of wider processes affecting contemporary welfare provision and professional identity.

The evidence considered in this article points to a number of specific challenges for the development of housing professionalism. Firstly, the level of uncertainty about further change and the dominance of external factors has significantly weakened

professional autonomy within a sector which has historically struggled to develop a strong professional ethos. It has been particularly difficult for housing professionals to carve out a distinctive sense of identity at a time when the social contribution of housing practice is consistently undermined.

The social values traditionally held by housing practitioners, such as a commitment to social justice, equity and tackling disadvantage create specific conflicts with the relentless logic of competition. Housing professionals struggle to reconcile these demands, and the dominance of the commercial head over a social heart has become increasingly evident.

As seen in the above discussion these factors carry important implications for the development of housing education programmes as new knowledges, skills and competencies are valorised. Private practice is likely to assume an important role with the professional qualification likely to become transformed. Whilst there have been a number of important studies of housing professionalism there have been very few analyses that consider the implications for the education of practitioners, given the importance of reflective critical thinking.

The evidence in this study points to the emergence of a crisis of identity for housing professionalism within an increasingly commercialised housing sector. These pressures have been exacerbated by severe expenditure reductions that have disproportionately affected housing organisations, and which have meant that the sector has tended to prioritise short-term training requirements rather than longer term professional education. Although housing has occupied a distinctive position as the wobbly pillar of the welfare state it is by no means unique and the crisis of housing education and professional practice is indicative of broader crises affecting modern welfare states in general. At heart these issues reflect wider political transformations towards the commodification of social welfare and the historical weakness of housing practice is indicative of a weakness at the heart of welfare under conditions of neoliberalism. The ‘social heart’ which has formed the core identity of the housing sector is thus increasingly difficult to locate.

Notwithstanding these critical concerns, there remains hope that the social value of the housing sector, can be reflected in managerial, professional and education programmes. The sector may face a temporary crisis of identity, but the relentless logic of competition is contingent and limited. The processes identified in this article are difficult (but not insurmountable) for housing professionals. Given the increasing attention devoted in public policy to the ‘housing question’, organisations, education institutions and the professional body will surely reflect on an appropriate balance between social values and commercial demands – to ensure that the competing tensions can be more effectively managed in the housing sector of the future.

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