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Workforce Shortages, Transnational Mobility and Professional Regulation in Social Work: An Irish Case in Global Perspective

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Abstract

Global migration and labour market pressures have increased transnational mobility in social work, as practitioners move across borders to meet workforce demand. This paper examines how professional regulation interacts with workforce shortages and transnational mobility, using Ireland as a case study. A regulatory dilemma arises from the absence of standardised international reference points for comparing social work education, training, roles, and regulation. Where applicants' qualifications and practice experience do not align with national standards, additional requirements may be imposed, delaying entry into practice. Focusing on applicants from the U.K., U.S., Zimbabwe, and India, identified as principal countries of origin among internationally qualified social workers in Ireland, analysis shows how differences in regulatory structure, education, and role definition shape the assessment of equivalence and extend pathways to registration. The paper determines that this dilemma cannot be resolved by regulators and must be addressed at the level of the profession. It proposes identifying shared core content within existing social work education, using patterns in recognition decisions to inform targeted curriculum development, and creating standardised country profiles describing social work roles to support more consistent interpretation of international experience.

Keywords: Workforce shortages; transnational mobility; professional regulation; qualification recognition; internationally qualified social workers; Ireland; CORU; regulatory dilemma

1. Introduction

Workforce shortages and labour market demand have contributed to increased cross-border movement of social workers, as countries recruit internationally educated practitioners to meet service needs (Hussein 2018; Moriarty et al. 2011). This movement is shaped not only by individual decisions but also by differences in employment opportunities, immigration policies, and economic conditions between countries (Carling and Collins 2018; De Haas 2021). In this context, questions arise regarding how social work is understood, standardised, and regulated across national settings. While international frameworks, such as the Global Definition of Social Work and the Global Standards for Education and Training, provide shared principles (International Federation of Social Workers 2014; International Federation of Social Workers 2020), they do not establish uniform criteria for qualification recognition. As a result, qualifications and professional experience are not directly transferable across countries, with each system defining its own requirements for entry to practice (Pullen-Sansfaçon et al. 2012; Simpson 2009). Professional regulation therefore plays a central role in determining access to practice by setting requirements



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for entry, including recognised qualifications, registration, and standards for competence (Furness 2015; Worsley et al. 2020). While these systems are intended to ensure safe and effective practice, they also control entry to the profession. In contexts where international recruitment is used to address workforce shortages, this creates a tension between maintaining professional standards and enabling timely access to practice.

2. Conceptual Approach

This paper adopts a conceptual policy analysis informed by legislation, regulatory guidance, policy documents, professional standards and published literature rather than an empirical research design. It draws on legislation, regulatory guidance, international professional standards, policy documents, and published literature relating to social work regulation, workforce shortages, and transnational mobility. These sources were critically examined and brought together to explore how different regulatory systems influence qualification recognition and access to professional practice. Ireland is used as a case study to examine these issues in depth, while comparisons with other countries are used to identify similarities and differences in social work education, regulation, professional roles, and qualification recognition. This approach allows the paper to develop a conceptual understanding of the regulatory challenges associated with internationally qualified social workers and to consider their wider policy implications.

3. Professional Regulation in an International Context

Professional regulation of social work varies across national contexts and plays a central role in determining who is permitted to enter the profession (Furness 2015). In regulated countries, individuals are typically required to register with a regulatory body and hold a recognised qualification before they can practice (Furness 2015). These requirements may also include protection of the professional title and the approval of education and training programmes, which establish the criteria that individuals must meet to practice (Furness 2015). Regulators are also responsible for monitoring professional conduct and fitness to practice and may restrict or remove individuals from the register where standards are not met (Furness 2015; Worsley et al. 2020).

Regulatory arrangements differ across countries in terms of how systems are structured, the level at which they operate, and the extent to which they are formally regulated (Worsley et al. 2020). For example, in England, social work is regulated through a national system in which practitioners must be registered with Social Work England and meet defined standards of education, conduct, and competence (Furness 2015; Social Work England 2019). In contrast, in the United States (U.S.), regulation is organised at the state level, resulting in variation in qualification requirements and professional standards across jurisdictions (Worsley et al. 2020). Although it is transitioning to mandatory regulation, currently in Australia, social work is not subject to a statutory national registration system. Instead, the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) sets ethical and practice standards, but it does not have the authority to prevent individuals from practicing or restrict the use of the professional title (McCurdy et al. 2020; Australian Association of Social Workers 2020, 2023). As a result, accountability is distributed across employers, legal systems, and professional bodies rather than a single regulator (McCurdy et al. 2020).

When social workers seek to practice in a new jurisdiction, qualifications are not assessed in isolation. Registration decisions are based on whether applicants meet defined professional capabilities and can demonstrate competence for safe and effective practice within the receiving system (Furness 2015; Worsley et al. 2020). These assessments involve evaluating not only social work education, but also whether professional knowledge,

competencies, and practice can be applied within the local legal and organisational context (Hussein 2018; Papadopoulos 2017). As a result, recognition of a qualification does not in itself guarantee entry to practice, as applicants may be required to demonstrate competence in practice settings or complete additional requirements before registration is granted (Fulton et al. 2016). In contexts where international recruitment is used to address workforce shortages, this becomes particularly significant, as entry into practice is determined through regulatory assessment processes (Worsley et al. 2020), meaning that the availability of internationally educated social workers does not automatically alleviate workforce gaps.

4. Global Standards, Comparability and Transferability

The International Association of Schools of Social Work [IASSW] and International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW] Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training (2020) provide an overarching international framework for the development of social work education programmes. These standards outline expectations relating to programme design, field education, values, research, and institutional responsibilities. However, they do not prescribe uniform curriculum content and are explicitly designed to accommodate the diversity of socio-political, cultural, and historical contexts in which social work is practiced (International Federation of Social Workers 2020; Ioakimidis and Sookraj 2021). As a result, they do not establish standardised criteria that allow for direct comparison of qualifications across jurisdictions for regulatory purposes. This reflects a broader characteristic of the profession, in which social work education and training are organised within nationally specific systems shaped by local conditions (Gray and Fook 2004). Attempts to standardise the profession have been criticised for overlooking these differences in how social work is defined and enacted in practice (Gray and Webb 2008). At the same time, increased international mobility of practitioners means that such differences become significant when social workers transition between systems (Fulton et al. 2016; Peter et al. 2017). Despite these differences in education and training, there are shared elements in the purpose and identity of the profession. The IFSW defines social work as “a practice-based profession and academic discipline concerned with promoting social change, social development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people, underpinned by principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversity” (International Federation of Social Workers 2014). While this definition identifies common functions, such as working with individuals, families, and communities to address life challenges and promote wellbeing, the ways in which these functions are enacted vary across national contexts depending on legal frameworks, service systems, and socio-economic conditions (Dominelli 2010; Gray and Fook 2004; Sakaguchi and Sewpaul 2011).

Social work does not operate under fully standardised international criteria, in contrast to some other professions that have developed more structured global education frameworks. For example, the World Federation of Occupational Therapists (WFOT) has developed international education standards that specify curriculum content, practice education, and graduate competencies (World Federation of Occupational Therapists 2026). These standards outline how competencies are developed through structured learning, supervised practice placements, and programme evaluation processes. While national regulatory bodies still assess applicants against local standards of proficiency (Occupational Therapists Registration Board 2026), the WFOT framework provides a clearly structured approach to describing educational preparation through defined competencies, curriculum components, and programme standards (World Federation of Occupational Therapists 2026). This comparison highlights that, unlike occupational therapy, social work education is organised more flexibly within national contexts and lacks a shared frame-

work for direct qualification comparison ([International Federation of Social Workers 2020](#); [Papadopoulos 2017](#)).

This distinction becomes particularly significant in practice, where variation across national contexts further complicates the assessment and recognition of qualifications. Variation in social work practice is evident across different national settings' qualifications ([Papadopoulos 2017](#)). "In the U.S., the UK, and the European Economic Area, regulatory arrangements define entry requirements, qualifications, and standards of competence, although these arrangements vary across jurisdictions" ([Davis 2024](#)). In the U.S. specifically, education, practice, and regulation are structured through national professional bodies and state licensing systems ([Regan 2020](#)). In contrast, countries such as India have less uniformly regulated landscapes, where practice spans government, non-governmental, and community sectors ([Yadav 2026](#)), and is shaped by the interaction between formal systems and longstanding cultural support structures ([Roy 2026](#)). Similar dynamics are observed in Zimbabwe, where social work has developed through both colonial and post-independence systems and continues to evolve in response to changing policy priorities ([Muridzo et al. 2022](#)).

These examples illustrate how the scope and enactment of the social work role are shaped by specific national contexts. These differences have implications for regulatory assessment processes, as qualifications are not automatically recognised across contexts and must be evaluated in relation to the requirements of the receiving system. Recognition processes involve assessing whether overseas qualifications and professional experience are comparable to local standards, and may determine that they are comparable, not comparable, or require further study ([Papadopoulos 2017](#)). This indicates that comparability is not assumed in advance but depends on how qualifications and experience align with nationally defined expectations, highlighting the limited development of shared reference points to support consistent assessment across jurisdictions.

5. Professional Regulation in Ireland

Ireland has a persistent shortage of social workers, alongside broader staffing pressures across the health and social care system, with requirements projected to increase substantially due to population growth and ageing ([Keegan et al. 2022](#)). Within social work specifically, recruitment and retention challenges have already affected service delivery, with evidence that services are unable to allocate social workers to all cases, resulting in non-compliance with statutory requirements and difficulties in maintaining consistent service provision ([O'Meara and Kelleher 2022](#)). National planning further indicates that Ireland does not have sufficient health and social care staff to meet projected demand and continues to rely on internationally educated professionals to sustain service delivery ([Department of Health 2025](#)). Taken together, these findings indicate that current staffing gaps are already constraining service capacity and that additional personnel will be required to meet future demand. In this context, internationally educated practitioners form part of the overall supply identified in national planning, and the point at which they can enter practice is therefore relevant to how service capacity is realised in practice ([Department of Health 2025](#)). This section examines how access to practice is structured within the Irish regulatory system.

Professional regulation of social work in Ireland is established under the ([Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005](#)), which provides the statutory basis for regulating designated health and social care professions and for the establishment of a central Council and profession-specific Registration Boards ([Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005](#)). Within this framework, the Health and Social Care Professionals Council, CORU, operates as the statutory regulator responsible for overseeing registration and setting standards for designated professions ([CORU 2023](#)). The CORU Health and Social Care Professionals

Council has oversight of the regulatory system, including setting overarching standards and ensuring consistency across professions (CORU 2023). Regulation is implemented through Registration Boards, including the Social Workers Registration Board, which are responsible for maintaining the register, approving and monitoring education and training programmes, and making decisions on applications for registration (CORU 2023; Social Workers Registration Board 2019). The title “social worker” is legally protected in Ireland, and use of it is restricted to individuals registered under the statutory framework (Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005). Practitioners can only enter the register if they demonstrate that they meet the Social Work Standards of Proficiency, which define the requirements for safe and effective practice (European Parliament and Council of the European Union 2005).

For applicants who obtained their qualifications outside Ireland, this requirement is applied through CORU’s qualification recognition process. Applicants’ education and practice placements, and relevant professional experience where applicable, are assessed against these standards to determine whether they meet the requirements for entry to the register (CORU 2023; Social Workers Registration Board 2019). Where differences are identified, compensation measures may be imposed before registration can be granted (CORU 2023). Compensation measures are regulatory mechanisms used where a qualification is considered broadly comparable but substantial differences remain between an applicant’s education, training, or professional experience and the standards required for practice in Ireland. Their purpose is not to requalify applicants but to address specific identified gaps and demonstrate equivalence with Irish standards (CORU 2023). In a workforce shortage context, these requirements have broader implications. Where recognition is not granted immediately and compensation measures are required, internationally educated practitioners may be unable to enter the register and contribute to services despite forming part of the workforce supply identified in national planning. This means that access to practice is determined not only by qualification, but by how it is interpreted within the regulatory system.

6. Comparative and Legal Framework for Qualification Recognition

The recognition of international social work qualifications in Ireland is structured through both European legislation and national regulatory procedures. All internationally qualified applicants must undergo a recognition process to determine whether their qualifications meet the standards required for practice in Ireland. For applicants from the EU/EEA, recognition operates within the framework of Directive 2005/36/EC; qualifications from outside the EU/EEA are assessed by CORU for registration purposes where they are not covered by the Directive, with all applications determined in accordance with the Directive’s provisions as applied through CORU policy (CORU 2023; Social Workers Registration Board 2019; CORU 2024). Registration is granted only where equivalence to Irish standards is established.

CORU has also introduced a Commonly Aligned Standards (CAS) pathway for applicants from jurisdictions where standards have been identified as aligned with those in Ireland. Alignment has been established between the Irish Standards of Proficiency and those used in the U.K., allowing eligible applicants from England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland to proceed through a streamlined route (CORU 2026a). The CAS pathway removes the requirement for qualification assessment and speeds up the timeline (CORU 2026a). Unlike CAS applicants, those from other jurisdictions continue through the full recognition process, where differences between their education, practice placements, professional experience, and Irish requirements may lead to additional requirements before registration can be granted (CORU 2023, 2024). This distinction is central to the regulatory

dilemma examined in this paper: national standards are maintained through assessment, but the route to registration may differ significantly depending on the perceived alignment between systems. As a result, the pathway to registration is shaped by this perception, rather than by the qualification alone.

7. Addressing Substantial Differences: Compensation Measures

In the Irish context, applicants are offered a choice of compensation measure, typically either an aptitude test or a Period of Adaptation (POA) comprising supervised practice (CORU 2023). An aptitude test is a targeted assessment of the applicant's professional knowledge, limited to the areas where substantial differences have been identified and knowledge of which is essential for practice. The test takes place in Ireland, must be offered within six months, and incurs a fee of €500 (CORU 2026b). As a single high-stakes assessment with an associated cost and no guaranteed outcome, this may present a level of financial and professional risk for internationally qualified applicants, particularly where failure would result in the need to complete a period of adaptation in any case. Where supervised practice is required, it must be undertaken in Ireland under the supervision of a CORU-registered social worker and structured around an approved plan addressing the areas identified in the recognition decision. Responsibility for securing a placement and supervisor rests with the applicant. They must identify and obtain an appropriate practice setting to complete this requirement.

The duration of supervised practice is determined by the Social Work Registration Board and is specified in the recognition decision linked to the extent of the identified gaps (CORU 2026c). CORU guidance indicates that this may involve periods of practice (CORU 2026c); however, it does not specify standardised hour-based requirements for compensation measures. During this period, applicants are expected to complete the required period of supervised practice in line with professional practice expectations and demonstrate that the identified deficits have been addressed (CORU 2026d). CORU guidance does not explicitly address whether POA placements are remunerated, and there does not appear to be a requirement for placement providers to employ or pay applicants during this time (CORU 2026c). Applicants may be required to complete a substantial supervised adaptation period without guaranteed income while also independently securing access to a placement and supervision, creating additional financial and practical barriers to registration. Completion of this requirement is mandatory, as applicants must demonstrate that the identified deficits have been addressed before recognition can be granted (CORU 2023, 2026d).

Under Directive 2005/36/EC, a POA may also be accompanied by further training where necessary to ensure equivalence of professional competence (European Parliament and Council of the European Union 2005). Where deficits relate to standards relating to social work knowledge, this may necessitate engagement with formal education and training in the host country to meet the professional capabilities (CORU 2019). However, there is no evidence to suggest that CORU policy or higher education providers explicitly specify standardised routes for completing such training on a modular basis. As a result, internationally qualified applicants may face additional practical and financial barriers in identifying and accessing appropriate educational provision to address identified gaps, alongside the time and administrative requirements of the recognition process.

Applicants who have not practiced social work for more than two years are also subject to CORU's return-to-practice requirements prior to registration. Unlike compensation measures, which address substantial differences in qualifications, training, or professional experience, return-to-practice requirements are intended to ensure that professional competence remains current following a period away from practice. Applicants who have been out of practice for between two and five years must complete a minimum of 210 contact hours,

rising to 420 h where the period exceeds five years. These hours may comprise supervised practice, formal study, or private study and must be completed through a learning plan agreed in advance with a supervisor ([Social Workers Registration Board 2013](#)).

Although compensation measures and return-to-practice requirements are distinct, both are intended to ensure that applicants meet the standards required for safe practice ([CORU 2023](#); [Social Workers Registration Board 2013](#)). An adaptation period addresses substantial differences identified during assessment ([CORU 2026c](#)), whereas return-to-practice requirements demonstrate that competence remains current following a period out of practice ([Social Workers Registration Board 2013](#)). Both may require applicants to secure supervised practice placements and complete additional learning before registration can be granted. For internationally qualified applicants, this can create financial and practical barriers to registration, particularly where placements are unpaid and training costs must be self-funded. In the context of workforce shortages, these requirements may also delay the entry of qualified practitioners into practice.

8. Pathways to CORU Registration and Points of Divergence

The CORU *State of the Register* report provides profession-specific information on the international profile of social workers in Ireland. As of mid-2025, there were 5757 registered social workers, of whom 716 had entered through the international qualification route and 754 were recorded as international registrants. The register included practitioners from 53 countries, with the United Kingdom (U.K.), India, Zimbabwe, and the U.S. identified as the principal countries of origin ([CORU 2025b](#), p. 32). These figures show that a notable proportion of registered social workers in Ireland are internationally qualified and that registrants originate from multiple countries ([CORU 2025b](#)). For applicants who qualified outside Ireland, CORU assesses qualifications against the standards required for safe practice in Ireland ([CORU 2023, 2024](#)). Access to registration involves both recognition and registration requirements: recognition concerns whether the international qualification meets Irish standards, while registration involves additional requirements such as identity, fit and proper declarations, and vetting ([CORU 2023](#)). Once these requirements are satisfied, applicants may progress through different pathways depending on how their qualifications align with Irish regulatory requirements.

Applicants from jurisdictions where standards have been identified as commonly aligned with Irish requirements, including the U.K./Northern Ireland route for social workers, may proceed through the Commonly Aligned Standards pathway, which does not require full qualification assessment and involves fewer documents ([CORU 2026a](#)). Individuals from countries outside the CAS pathway are required to undergo the full recognition process. This involves assessment of the qualification and supporting information against the relevant CORU Social Work Standards of Proficiency, including education, practice placements, professional experience, and other evidence submitted by the applicant ([CORU 2023, 2024](#)). The significance of this full recognition pathway lies not simply in the volume of documentation, but in the greater scope for differences in education, placement structure, regulatory context, and professional role to be identified as relevant to practice in Ireland. Where no substantial differences are identified, recognition may be granted. Where substantial differences remain, compensation measures may be required before recognition, and registration can proceed ([CORU 2023](#); [European Parliament and Council of the European Union 2005](#)).

The way this process is experienced varies depending on how clearly an individual's education, training, placements, and professional roles correspond to Irish expectations, and how effectively this can be demonstrated through documentation. In the Irish system, these expectations are structured through defined programme and practice requirements.

The Social Workers Registration Board specifies six criteria for education and training programmes and requires completion of 1000 h of practice placement, including 350 h in one full-time block (CORU 2019). These requirements provide a clear benchmark for assessment. Where education and experience are closely aligned with this structure, progression may be more straightforward. Where they differ in format, organisation, or regulatory context, additional explanation or requirements, as outlined above, may arise. This does not indicate a lack of competence but reflects the need to demonstrate equivalence within the terms of the Irish regulatory framework. This pattern is consistent with wider research showing that internationally qualified social workers must evidence their preparation against nationally defined expectations, with differences in education, regulation, and scope of practice often requiring adaptation when moving between systems (Pullen-Sansfaçon et al. 2012; Papadopoulos 2017). These differences shape how the recognition process operates in practice and have direct implications for how applicants can progress to registration. The following section examines how these requirements are experienced in practice, particularly in terms of time, cost, and access to employment, before considering how their impact varies across different national contexts.

9. Registration Requirements, Costs, and Barriers for Applicants

The CORU recognition process not only determines whether applicants meet professional standards but also shapes how and when they are able to enter practice (*Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005*; CORU 2023, 2024). This section examines how regulatory requirements are experienced in practice, particularly in relation to documentation, time, cost, the need to remain in Ireland, associated living costs, and access to professional employment. Compared with domestic applicants, internationally qualified applicants may face additional documentation demands. CORU advises international applicants that it may take longer than expected to gather the required information and requires applicants to submit evidence relating to their qualifications, including placements and internships, employment history, and any additional qualifications, training, or courses completed (CORU 2024). The international qualification application process also requires applicants to pay €510 and complete registration-stage requirements including an eVetting invitation form, statutory declaration, proof of professional practice where applicable, and online eVetting (CORU 2024). CORU's 2024 Annual Report states that average registration application processing time was 52 days in 2024, while average processing time for decisions on international qualifications was reduced to 63 days, with a stated aim of reducing international qualification recognition processing times to 50 days in 2025 (CORU 2025a). However, these figures relate to processing once applications are sufficiently advanced or complete, and do not fully capture the time required to gather, certify, translate, and verify documentation, or the additional time required where further information or compensation measures are needed (CORU 2023, 2024).

As outlined above, where supervised practice is required as a compensation measure, it must be completed in Ireland under the supervision of a CORU-registered social worker and cannot be undertaken in another country (CORU 2026c). Applicants are also responsible for securing an appropriate placement and supervisor themselves (CORU 2026c). As a result, the requirement to complete the adaptation period in Ireland constitutes a significant constraint on access to registration, not only because it requires physical presence, but because it places responsibility on applicants to establish access to supervised practice within a system in which they may have no prior knowledge, familiarity, or professional connections. The requirement to complete supervised practice in Ireland, while simultaneously securing accommodation and financial resources, has direct implications. Where supervised practice is required, applicants must complete the specified period be-

fore registration can be granted (CORU 2023). During this time, they are not yet eligible to register and therefore cannot use the protected title of “social worker”, which restricts access to posts designated for registered professionals (CORU 2023; *Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005*). While some pathways to paid employment exist, these are limited and do not reflect standard professional roles. For example, Tusla offers a return-to-practice pathway in which individuals may be employed as an “Interim Children’s Services Worker” while completing required hours, with progression to a professionally qualified social worker position once CORU requirements are met (Tusla 2026a). This role is paid at €38,907, compared to €48,624 for a CORU-registered social worker (Tusla 2026a, 2026b). As a result, applicants may be required to complete regulatory requirements while working at a lower salary level and with restricted access to the full range of professional roles.

The implications of these requirements extend beyond individual financial strain to shape the conditions under which internationally qualified applicants can enter professional practice. As noted, applicants may be required to remain in Ireland for a defined period while completing supervised practice under CORU requirements (Tusla 2026b), but without access to full professional registration or the associated employment opportunities. This creates a structural gap between qualification recognition and labour market entry, during which applicants are expected to meet ongoing living costs while operating outside the standard professional framework.

These regulatory requirements also interact with the broader realities of migration. Internationally qualified social workers may experience a range of personal, financial, and professional uncertainties while navigating qualification recognition processes, relocation, and adaptation to new professional and social environments. Where registration is contingent on completing additional requirements, applicants may face prolonged periods in which their ability to enter professional employment remains uncertain despite holding recognised qualifications and professional experience. Evidence from the United Kingdom suggests that internationally recruited social workers frequently encounter challenges associated with relocation, induction, access to support, and adjustment to new professional and social environments (BASW Diaspora Social Work Special Interest Group 2023). Research has also highlighted the prevalence of workload pressures, occupational stress, burnout, and wellbeing concerns within the social work profession internationally (Ravalier et al. 2022). Qualification recognition processes should therefore be understood not only as regulatory mechanisms but also as lived migration experiences shaped by personal, social, and economic circumstances. These experiences may also be shaped by experiences of discrimination, social exclusion, and challenges associated with integration into the receiving society, which can influence perceptions of belonging and longer-term settlement among internationally qualified social workers (Tinarwo 2017).

This gap is particularly significant in the Irish context, where increases in the cost of living have placed sustained pressure on lower- and middle-income households (Ó Ceallaigh et al. 2025), and where migrants may face additional constraints in accessing stable and affordable housing (Lima 2025). In this context, the requirement to remain in Ireland while completing compensation measures does not operate as a neutral regulatory step, but as a condition that can delay or restrict entry to professional employment. Progression to registration may therefore be shaped not only by an applicant’s ability to meet regulatory requirements, but also by their capacity to absorb the financial and housing-related costs associated with remaining in Ireland during this period.

These conditions illustrate the regulatory dilemma. Measures intended to ensure that practitioners meet defined standards may also delay entry into practice where additional requirements must be completed before registration can be granted (CORU 2023, 2025b). For applicants, this creates a period of financial, professional, and personal uncertainty.

For the Irish system, it means that qualified practitioners may not be available to enter the workforce when they are needed, despite ongoing shortages. However, the extent to which these barriers arise is not uniform. It depends on how closely an applicant's education, training, and professional roles align with Irish expectations. The following sections examine how this variation is reflected across applicants from different national systems, focusing on the U.K., the U.S., Zimbabwe, and India as principal countries of origin within the CORU Social Work Register (CORU 2025b, p. 32). These cases are used to illustrate how different forms of alignment with Irish regulatory and practice frameworks can shape the route to registration.

10. U.K. Applicants: Reduced Assessment Within an Aligned Framework

Applicants from the U.K. are in a legally distinct position because CORU has identified U.K. qualifications as falling within the CAS pathway, which means they are not processed through the same full qualification recognition route as internationally qualified applicants (CORU 2026a). This reflects the structure of social work in the U.K., where education programmes are regulated and must meet national standards set by Social Work England (Social Work England 2026a; Lima 2025), and where professional regulation is overseen by designated regulatory bodies across the U.K. (Davis 2024). Social workers in the U.K. are employed across a wide range of practice areas, including child protection, criminal justice, health, mental health, NGO, and community-based services (Social Work England 2026b). While applicants must still meet the Irish Standards of Proficiency, this pathway does not require detailed reassessment of education and training, as these are accepted based on recognised alignment between U.K. and Irish regulatory standards (CORU 2026a). As a result, applicants are not required to demonstrate equivalence through the same level of detailed documentary evidence as those applying through the full recognition route. This reduces the likelihood that differences in education, training, or scope of practice will be identified as substantial, and U.K. applicants are therefore less likely to be required to complete compensation measures before registration can be granted (CORU 2023). Where such differences are identified and U.K. applicants are required to complete compensation measures, they may be better positioned to secure appropriate placements and demonstrate competence, given the similarities between U.K. and Irish education, regulation, and practice contexts. In contrast, applicants from more divergent systems may face greater difficulty in accessing suitable placements and evidencing alignment with the Standards of Proficiency.

11. U.S. Applicants: Divergent Professional Role Structures

Applicants from the U.S. present a more complex case within the CORU recognition process (CORU 2023). Social work in the U.S. is highly professionalised across education, practice, and regulation (Regan 2020). Education is delivered through accredited programmes, and social workers practice across a wide range of settings, including healthcare, social assistance, government, and non-profit organisations (Salsberg et al. 2020). Unlike Ireland and the U.K., however, professional regulation is organised at state level rather than through a single national system, resulting in variation in licensing and practice requirements across States (Davis 2024). A further consideration for Irish recognition is the prominence of clinical social work within the U.S. Clinical social work is defined as a specialised area of practice involving therapeutic and mental health interventions with individuals and families, requiring advanced training and, in some jurisdictions, formal licensure (International Association of Schools of Social Work 2023; Davis 2024). In contrast, social work education in Ireland prepares practitioners to work across a range of practice areas rather than specialising in a distinct clinical pathway (Browne 2012). Within the

Irish context, competence is assessed against the Standards of Proficiency, which require social workers to demonstrate a broad range of skills, including working within legal and organisational frameworks and collaborating with other professionals ([Social Workers Registration Board 2019](#)). As a result, experience that is primarily clinically focused requires careful mapping to the Irish Standards of Proficiency within this framework. While professional experience is considered, applicants must demonstrate how their experience meets the Standards of Proficiency, rather than relying on experience in itself ([CORU 2023](#)). For applicants from the U.S., this may require translating clinically focused roles into terms that align with Irish practice expectations. Where experience is framed primarily in therapeutic or specialist terms, it may be less straightforward to demonstrate how it meets the broader competencies required for practice, including working across services and within organisational and legal frameworks. In this context, the assessment process places greater emphasis on how experience is presented and evidenced than on the extent of experience alone. This may increase the likelihood that additional evidence or compensation measures are required to demonstrate equivalence with the Irish Standards of Proficiency.

12. Zimbabwean Applicants: Structural and Educational Misalignment

Zimbabwe represents a distinct case because, although social work is formally regulated under the Social Workers Act ([Parliament of Zimbabwe 2001](#)), this does not produce direct equivalence with the Irish context ([Bohwasi and Chidyausiku 2021](#)). Implementation of regulation is uneven, with evidence that some practitioners continue to work without registration or practicing certificates, meaning that the boundaries of the profession are not always consistently enforced. In practice, social work is closely linked to developmental and community-based interventions, shaped by limited state capacity and significant NGO involvement ([Kurevakwesu 2017](#); [Nhapi and Pinto 2024](#)). Social work practice in Zimbabwe is shaped by a developmental orientation, combining social welfare provision with broader social and economic development interventions ([Kurevakwesu 2017](#); [Dziro 2013](#)). As a result, practitioners often operate as generalists across individual, community, and structural levels, rather than within clearly defined service roles ([Muridzo et al. 2022](#); [Muzingili et al. 2025](#)). This type of practice may not always align neatly with formalised definitions of social work used in other regulatory contexts. This difference in role structure is reflected in how social workers are educated. In Zimbabwe, training is oriented towards a developmental model, preparing graduates to respond to a wide range of social needs across community, social protection, and development contexts ([Kurevakwesu 2017](#); [Muzingili et al. 2025](#)). By contrast, Irish social work education, while generalist, is structured around defined CORU standards of proficiency and practice placements aligned to specific service contexts, making it easier to demonstrate how experience corresponds to regulatory expectations ([CORU 2019](#); [Browne 2012](#)).

The issue for applicants is therefore not whether they are qualified, but how their education and experience can be translated into the terms required by the Irish regulatory framework ([Papadopoulos 2017](#)). Where experience is framed through broader developmental or programme-based work, it may not map directly onto the defined categories used to assess social work practice in Ireland. This may increase the likelihood that differences are identified during assessment, even where underlying competencies may be present ([Worsley et al. 2020](#); [Papadopoulos 2017](#)). This has direct implications for registration. Where alignment is not clearly demonstrated, compensation measures may be imposed, often requiring supervised practice to be completed in Ireland before registration can be granted ([CORU 2023, 2025a](#)). In practice, this may create a barrier to timely workforce entry. Applicants may be required to remain in Ireland, secure accommodation, and complete supervised practice before entering employment, often under financial pressure associated

with migration. This illustrates the regulatory dilemma in concrete terms: differences in how social work is structured, articulated, and regulated across contexts do not negate competence, but they can extend the pathway to registration, limiting the timely contribution of internationally educated social workers to workforce needs.

13. Indian Applicants: Absence of Regulatory and Structural Alignment

India represents the most structurally divergent case. Although social work is well established in both education and practice, there is no statutory framework linking education, registration, and professional practice through a unified system (Yadav 2026; Kaseke 2001). As a result, there is no consistent mechanism ensuring how social workers are trained, recognised, or defined across contexts. This lack of structure is reflected in both practice and education. Social workers in India operate across a wide range of roles, including poverty alleviation, community development, welfare delivery, and the implementation of government and NGO programmes (Yadav 2026; Dev and Sangeeta 2025). These roles are often organised around programmes and community initiatives rather than consistently standardised professional functions. As a result, work described as social work may not correspond directly to how the profession is defined and structured in Ireland, where roles are linked to regulated services and defined competencies (Social Workers Registration Board 2019). Indian applicants therefore differ not because of individual capability, but because they are entering the recognition process from a system that lacks a unified regulatory and educational structure (Yadav 2026; National Association of Professional Social Workers in India 2016). In the absence of a consistent framework linking education, professional roles, and registration, there is no shared reference point through which equivalence can be established (Yadav 2026). As a result, qualifications and experience must be assessed on an individual basis, increasing the likelihood that differences are identified and that additional requirements are imposed before registration can be granted (Worsley et al. 2020; Papadopoulos 2017). This has direct implications for registration. Where alignment is not clearly demonstrated, compensation measures are more likely to be required before registration can be granted (CORU 2023; European Parliament and Council of the European Union 2005). As with applicants from Zimbabwe, these measures must often be completed in Ireland and may involve securing supervised practice and access to appropriate placements before entry to employment is permitted (CORU 2024). In the context of migration, this creates additional challenges. Migrants to Ireland face barriers in securing accommodation, navigating complex administrative systems, and managing financial pressures associated with the cost of living (Lima 2025). These structural constraints can affect the ability to access placements and complete compensation measures in a timely manner.

Differences in how social work is defined, structured, and regulated do not indicate a lack of competence, but they limit the ability to demonstrate equivalence within the Irish framework. For applicants, this can result in extended pathways to registration before they are able to enter employment. In the case of India, the regulatory dilemma becomes acute. The absence of a unified regulatory and educational structure means that comparability is more difficult to establish at a system level, increasing the likelihood that differences are identified and that additional requirements are imposed. For the Irish system, this means that internationally educated social workers who could contribute to the workforce may not be available in a timely manner where this level of uncertainty exists, reinforcing the gap between labour demand and the availability of qualified practitioners.

14. Discussion

This paper identifies a regulatory dilemma in Ireland arising from the interaction between workforce shortages, transnational mobility, and professional regulation. In the absence of clearly comparable criteria for social work education, regulators such as CORU must assess international qualifications against nationally defined standards on a case-by-case basis (Worsley et al. 2020; Papadopoulos 2017). This is a necessary regulatory function, as CORU's statutory responsibility is to ensure that all registrants meet the standards required for safe and effective practice in Ireland (CORU 2023). The issue identified in this paper is therefore not a failure of regulation, but a consequence of the limited availability of internationally shared reference points through which qualifications, professional experience, and competencies can be more readily compared across jurisdictions. In this context, differences are more likely to be identified, even where underlying competencies may be present, resulting in compensation measures that introduce additional time, cost, and structural barriers. In the context of workforce shortages, this creates a contradiction: internationally educated social workers form part of the available labour supply yet delays in recognition may prevent timely entry into practice. The dilemma therefore lies not in the actions of the regulator itself, but in how the absence of shared professional reference points extends the pathway to registration.

The discussion of workforce shortages and qualification recognition must also acknowledge the ethical implications of international recruitment. Countries such as Ireland benefit from the skills and expertise of internationally qualified social workers, many of whom were educated and trained in systems that have already invested significant public resources in their professional development. Previous research has highlighted concerns regarding the migration of social workers from lower-income countries to higher-income destinations, particularly where this contributes to workforce shortages and reduced service capacity in sending countries (Engelbrecht 2006). At the same time, international recruitment has become an increasingly important strategy through which countries experiencing workforce shortages seek to sustain social work services (Hanna and Lyons 2016). This creates an ethical tension between the legitimate aspirations of individual practitioners to pursue employment opportunities abroad and the potential consequences for countries that experience the loss of trained professionals. The purpose of the present analysis is not to advocate for increased international recruitment, but rather to examine how qualification recognition systems shape access to professional practice for those who have already chosen to migrate. Improving the transparency, consistency, and fairness of recognition processes should therefore be understood as distinct from encouraging the active recruitment of professionals from countries experiencing workforce shortages (Engelbrecht 2006; Hanna and Lyons 2016).

This issue is not unique to Ireland. Although international frameworks provide shared principles, they do not establish uniform criteria for qualification comparison (International Federation of Social Workers 2020; Ioakimidis and Sookraj 2021). As a result, regulators globally rely on case-by-case interpretation (Worsley et al. 2020; Papadopoulos 2017). This cannot be resolved by a regulator, whose primary function is to ensure safe and effective practice (Furness 2015; CORU 2023). Responsibility therefore lies with the profession. The challenge examined in this paper concerns the absence of shared reference points for comparing qualifications, education, and professional experience across jurisdictions. Building on this, the IFSW and the IASSW should take a more active role in defining core components of social work education, aligning more closely with approaches adopted in professions such as occupational therapy (World Federation of Occupational Therapists 2026). While neither organisation possesses formal regulatory authority, both have established international legitimacy through the

development of international frameworks, including the *Global Definition of Social Work* and the *Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training* (International Federation of Social Workers 2020; Ioakimidis and Sookraj 2021). Their role would therefore be facilitative rather than enforcement-based, providing a forum through which educators, professional bodies, and regulators can collaborate to develop shared reference points and improve comparability across systems.

Establishing shared core content, alongside context-specific national education, would provide clearer reference points for assessment without requiring full standardisation. Internationally agreed core content could define the theories, knowledge, methods, and skills common to social work practice globally, with national education systems building on this foundation through context-specific content. A clearer distinction between shared professional foundations and context-specific requirements would not only support more consistent qualification assessment but would also make it easier for internationally qualified social workers to identify the jurisdiction-specific knowledge and competencies required for practice in a new country. Where differences are identified through qualification recognition processes, applicants could more readily determine whether these relate to core professional competencies or to local requirements such as legislation, policy frameworks, service structures, and practice expectations. This would provide internationally qualified social workers with clearer and more transparent pathways to undertaking targeted education that addresses specific regulatory requirements, facilitating more timely progression towards registration while maintaining standards for safe and effective practice.

While challenges to standardisation are well recognised, particularly in relation to cultural and systemic diversity (Gray and Webb 2008; Dominelli 2010), these do not and should not preclude the identification of shared professional foundations. Examples might include ethical decision-making, human rights principles, assessment skills, relationship-based practice, communication skills, safeguarding responsibilities, critical reflection, and understanding of structural inequalities. While these may be expressed differently across national contexts, they represent areas of substantial commonality within social work education internationally. Regulatory insight could further support this approach. Patterns in recognition decisions could inform curriculum development, allowing commonly identified gaps to be addressed within existing programmes rather than through ad hoc or separate provision. This would provide internationally educated applicants with clearer, more accessible routes to meeting requirements without altering the core structure of domestic education. Designing modules that address multiple areas of learning within a single unit could also reduce the cumulative time and cost burden associated with additional training. Clearer definition of core and context-specific components would also support more consistent regulatory assessment, enabling compensation measures to be linked to defined areas of learning and reducing reliance on implicit reasoning (Worsley et al. 2020; Papadopoulos 2017).

A further issue concerns how social work roles are interpreted across national contexts. While assessors in Ireland must evaluate experience against the Irish Standards of Proficiency, this process is constrained by limited shared understanding of how social work is organised in other countries. Differences in role definition, service delivery, and professional boundaries mean that experience gained in one context may not be easily understood in another (Worsley et al. 2020; Papadopoulos 2017). Reliance on applicant documentation alone is also limited, as applicants typically describe their experience in terms of their own system and may not identify or articulate competencies in ways that align with Irish regulatory expectations. To address this, professional bodies in the country of qualification (for example, the Zimbabwean social work regulator or professional association) could take a more proactive role in supporting the recognition process. Where there

is an established pattern of migration to a specific destination, such as Ireland, these bodies could analyse how social work roles within their own system correspond to the expectations of the receiving country. This would involve examining how practice experience, such as community-based or developmental work in Zimbabwe, relates to the competencies required under the Irish framework, including identifying core social work skills that are transferable across contexts as well as areas that require clarification rather than being treated as deficits.

Transferability would not imply that practice is culturally identical. Rather, competencies would require contextual interpretation. For example, community-development skills developed in collectivist settings may be transferable to Irish practice while still requiring adaptation to different legal frameworks, organisational structures, and cultural expectations. At an international level, the IFSW could facilitate this process through the development of a structured, standardised template to guide national professional bodies in documenting social work roles within their jurisdictions. This template could include key elements such as typical practice settings, role functions, and how core competencies are demonstrated in context. These profiles could then be compiled into a shared international resource accessible to regulators, providing a clearer basis for interpreting international experience. While Ireland is used as the reference point in this paper, such an approach would have broader relevance and could support regulators internationally in making more consistent and informed assessments of qualifications and experience. In doing so, it would enable greater recognition of transferable competencies across different systems, particularly where roles that appear distinct in form reflect common underlying social work functions.

Taken together, these measures do not remove the regulatory dilemma, because the underlying tension remains between workforce need and regulatory protection. In the Irish context, internationally educated social workers form part of the available labour supply, yet the requirement to demonstrate equivalence against nationally defined standards means that entry into practice may be delayed. Where differences are identified, additional requirements such as compensation measures extend the pathway to registration, limiting the timely contribution of qualified practitioners to the workforce. What these measures offer, however, is a more structured way of managing this tension. By clarifying core competencies, aligning education with regulatory insight, and improving understanding of international practice contexts, the profession can reduce the extent to which recognition decisions depend on interpretation alone. This supports more transparent and consistent decision-making, while maintaining standards for safe and effective practice. In doing so, it does not resolve the tension between maintaining standards and enabling timely workforce entry, but it enables that tension to be managed more effectively within the constraints of the regulatory system.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

IFSW	International Federation of Social Workers
IASSW	International Association of Schools of Social Work
AASW	Australian Association of Social workers

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