

Review of Social Work Education in Scotland Phase 2

Area of Inquiry 8 What should practice learning look like?

April 2016

1. Introduction

The Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) review of social work education has commissioned HEIs to undertake ten areas of enquiry to further inform the review process.

The aims of this enquiry are to:

- Explore existing models for practice learning across Scotland as well as consider the models of other professions.
- Identify key challenges and possible solutions to enhance practice learning.
- Begin to identify alternative models that would best prepare social workers of the future.

The enquiry was undertaken by Deirdre Fitzpatrick, Staff tutor at the Open University in Scotland and Jane MacLenachan, Director of Practice Learning from Stirling University. Due to personal circumstances, the current report reflects only the data gathered by the Open University. John Burns, a research assistant at Stirling University was also engaged to inform the literature review.

The project includes a literature review and a small qualitative research study. It links closely with other areas of enquiry, particularly Area 9, which explores the nature of partnerships between employers and universities and the key area focussing on integrated learning.

2. Review of the Literature

What is Practice Learning?

Practice learning is a contested term as it provides the interface between academy and practice. It can be described as 'direct engagement with patients and service users in community or clinical settings- the very heart and soul of professional education' (Doel & Shardlow 2009 p.4). Furthermore, Shardlow et al (2011) suggest that 'the nature of the interface between universities and social work practice is crucial for the student experience'. The degree to which practice learning only takes place in practice is disputed as learning about practice also takes place in universities particularly in skills based workshops.

'The nature and future of the relationship between 'Field' and 'Classroom' is crucial if learning for practice is to be integrated ...the division between what is learnt in college and what is learnt 'out on practice' is at the heart of all the discussions about how best to relate theory and practice, transfer learning and be ready for practice'. (Clapton & Cree 2004). The purpose of practice learning opportunities for students is to be able to transfer their theoretical understanding of social work into effective practice. Furthermore, they need to be able to demonstrate their ability to synthesise knowledge, skills and values into good practice that meets the Standards in Social Work Education contained within the 'Framework for Social Work Education in Scotland' (SSSC 2003). In order to qualify as a social worker, students need to successfully complete 200 days of assessed practice as well as successfully meet all academic requirements of each course.

What are tensions/Issues in practice learning?

The fundamental dissonance between the academy and the practicum concerns both the discourse around what is social work and what role it should play within society as well as more immediate discussions about how best to prepare student social workers for practice.

'When students were at university, they were taught an aspirational model of social work, which conflicted with a narrow or statutory approach existing on placement. In practice, the expectation tended to be that social workers were focused on this latter statutory model. Students were taught on the social work programme to 'challenge . . . question . . think and critique' (Academic). The reality of practice was very different' (Wilson & Campbell 2016) Practice focussed on more 'process- driven notions of professional behaviour' which included activities such as report writing and going to meetings and students could be encouraged to 'forget about theory' in the real world of practice. (Wilson & Campbell 2016)

Students could be faced with conflicting ideas of social work from the university and the realities of practice which could result in the students' values conflicting with those of the organisations (Wilson & Campbell 2016). This resonates with the age old debate around whether students should be ready 'to hit the ground running' or 'hit the ground thinking'. Research by Glasgow Caledonian University in 2014 explored the degree to which newly qualified social workers

felt prepared for the challenges of practice having just completed their degrees to which the majority agreed that they were well prepared. (Grant, Sheridan & Webb 2014).

Wilson & Campbell (2016) suggest that 'the fundamental dissonance between the academy and the practicum seemed centred on conceptual differences between the two settings. Whereas the university focused on notions of human rights and the relevance of theory to practice, in practice there was a narrow focus on processes and tasks. Competing conceptions of social work or paradigms may be seen ultimately to be the underlying source of the contradictions between the academy and the practicum.' The increasingly strong hold of managerialist approaches to social work has had a fundamental impact on how practitioners view their role as the pressure of large caseloads and onerous administrative demands compete with their commitment to codes of practice, professional values and relationship based social work. The relationship between universities and practice is vital for the development of effective social work education. There are many examples of effective partnerships around recruitment, selection, practice learning arrangements and ongoing research and knowledge exchange activities. Shardlow et al (2011) 'identified pockets of good practice in partnership working, including the engagement of academics in practice settings. For example, The Centre of Expertise for Social Welfare in Central Finland enables academic staff to work closely with students and practitioners in a practice setting (Kuronen, 2009, cited in Shardlow et al., 2011). They also highlight the University of British Columbia (Canada), where practitioners sat on the BSW and MSW curriculum committees, and were involved in the design of curricula. The university also employed practising social workers as sessional staff to design and deliver courses about social work practice. The University of Kentucky used periodic focus groups comprising agency personnel and providers to assess the curriculum. (Shardlow et al 2011)

Clapton & Cree (2004) describe a range of good practice examples including; 'The University of Washington would appear to have embraced ...a 'wrap-around' model in which academic course work literally wraps around practice. The model proposes the transition to community agency-based instruction in which academics and practice agency staff establish 'training units' to provide community-based centres that will not only provide student placements but will also offer courses and training sessions for both students and professionals.'

Whilst these examples show the benefits of effective collaboration between universities and practice, Shardlow et al (2011) suggest a compelling caveat. They discovered 'insufficient evidence to assert that strong employer engagement is an essential, or even a demonstrably desirable, element of qualifying education. He highlights, for example, the potential for unintended consequences that may arise from the tension between an employer's focus on training social workers to meet agency requirements and a university's mission to support the development of critically reflexive practitioners.'

Therefore the tension between the university's 'primary duty to educate' and the 'primary duty of practice to provide care and services to the public' (Doel & Shardlow 2009 p.5) is a constant presence within social work education that requires good communication and strong mutually respectful relationships between both sectors.

Whilst this larger debate rages about the nature of social work within the 21st century, the challenge of transferring learning from the classroom to the field is a major concern. Clapton & Cree (2004) explored transfer of learning and more effective models of practice learning in the Learning for Effective and Educational Practice Project. Their literature review noted 'there is an unacceptable gap between theory and practice, a disjuncture between what is taught or learned and what is practised... theory has come to be seen as the preserve of the academic and practice as the domain of the practitioner.(Thompson 2000 p.84 cited in Clapton and Cree 2004). The challenge of integrating theory and practice is explored extensively with limited successful conclusions but clear definitions of the problem. (Clapton & Cree 2004; Doel & Shardlow 2009; Shardlow et al 2011; Wilson & Campbell 2013).

Doel and Shardlow (2009) suggest a more fluid approach where 'the workplace is, then no more site for the application of existing knowledge but rather an opportunity for the individual to forge new knowledge and understandings through the dynamic interchange of existing knowledge with new experience.'(p.7) Clapton & Cree (2004) suggest a model for practice learning which brings the university more physically into the practice placement and they highlight 'the potential for development of the role of the tutor, has identified an opportunity for having the classroom go to the field...Whilst roles would have to be negotiated, the presence of tutor/advisor in the practice agency during the placement period would benefit students in a more meaningful manner than that of placement visits at present; the practice teacher's links with the academic institution would be increased and there would be opportunities for co-leading student groups; the tutor/academic would gain through acquaintance with contemporary practice; and finally, the active presence of a tutor in the practice agency - even for a short period of time in the first instance - would begin the process, for the agency, of becoming a learning organisation' (Clapton & Cree 2004.)

The suggestion that universities could contribute to the development of learning cultures within organisations is explored within this short qualitative study. Fazzi & Rozignoli (2016) explore the benefits of student placements for the organisation and supervisor; 'First, considering the student also as a source of learning is a way to improve the professional's reflective capacity by inducing him/her to observe his/her organisation, job and identity from a different standpoint. Second, considering the student as a source of learning can foster creativity, critical thinking and the devising of innovative solutions to problems in both everyday work routine and supervision. Third, the valuing of trainees as sources of learning maybe a partial but significant antidote to changes in the organisation of social services.'

Finally, a simpler view of practice learning was suggested by a practice colleague at the SSSC employer engagement event in April 2016. 'Practice learning models what social work can become' so encapsulates the aspirations of the profession whilst recognising the challenges of everyday social work practice.

Frameworks for Professional Education in Social Work, Nursing & Teaching

A brief review of the literature concerning social work in the UK, nursing and teaching identified a small and important number of key texts. These include The Framework for Social Work Education in Scotland (Scottish Executive, 2003), Standards for Pre-Registration Nursing Education (NMC, 2010), The Standards for Registration: mandatory requirements for Registration with the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS, 2012), Practice Based Learning for the Social Work, Teaching and Health Professions in Scotland (SMCI Associates, 2008) and Key Aspects of Practice-based Learning in Teaching, Nursing and Social Work in Scotland (QAA, 2011), as well as Social Work specific texts from Wales and Northern Ireland including Standards for Practice Learning in Degree in Social Work (Care Council for Wales, 2005) and The Regional Practice Learning Handbook (Northern Ireland Degree in Social Work Partnership, 2015).

Responsibility for the quality of practice learning is shared between a number of partners including the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), Higher Education Institutions (HEI's), placement/service providers and the relevant professional regulatory bodies; the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC), NHS Education for Scotland (NES) and Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) and the General Teacher Council for Scotland (GTSC) for social work, nursing and teaching respectively.

These professional regulatory bodies provide standards and frameworks for their respective professions and in so doing provide the key context for practice learning. In addition, the QAA provides context through the Scottish higher education standards framework, including the 'UK Quality Code for Higher Education' (<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality>) which gives all higher education providers a shared starting point for setting, describing and assuring the academic standards of their higher education awards and programmes, and the quality of the learning opportunities they provide.

Practice Learning in Nursing?

According to the QAA (2011), the regulatory requirements of the three professional regulatory bodies varies significantly with distinct differences in how practice learning is supervised, mentored and assessed, though the amount of time a learner experiences in a practice based setting is less variable between the three, with approximately half of all learners time spent in practice learning settings. A scoping exercise undertaken by SMCI Associates (2008) identified

the supply and demand of placements as a key issue with HEI's competing for limited resources.

Placement Provision- Nursing placements are the responsibility of the HEI's who, through Service Level Agreements (SLA) with NHS, place students for no less than 2300 hours across their programme. Placement length can vary from 4-5 weeks through to a 15 week placement in the final year of the programme. It should be noted that nursing education programmes are validated for 5 years and a new programme is due to be introduced in 2016. Whilst the SLA assures placement availability to some extent, the arrangements, logistics, support and supervision are facilitated through a combination of HEI staff, Practice Education Facilitator (PEF) and mentors.

Placement Supervision

HEI practice learning staff (in some cases this may be an individual, in others a small team) are responsible for the identification and co-ordination of student to placement setting; the PEF, a role designed by NES to maximise practice learning (NES, 2013), is attached to a practice area (community care or acute care for example) and offers support to mentors. Mentors must themselves be qualified for at least one year and successfully complete a mentorship programme which can form part of continuing professional development. They are registered with the NMC and must provide annual updates on their mentoring activities. Furthermore, their registration as a mentor is reviewed every 3 years. According to the guidance, mentors can be expected to mentor up to three students at any one time though in practice, mentors tend to be responsible for one student at a time. A national approach to how mentors are identified and prepared has been produced by NES (2013). In addition, students must be 'signed off' by a sign off mentor; having successfully completed and NMC-approved mentor preparation programme, 'sign-off' mentors, in addition, need to have 'been supervised on at least three occasions for signing off proficiency at the end of a final placement by an existing sign-off mentor or practice teacher'

Practice learning appears to be well prescribed within nursing; requirements and guidance are set within though not limited to, Standards for Pre-Registration Nursing Education (NMC, 2010), Quality Standards for Practice Placements (NES, 2008) and the accompanying audit tool for Standards (NES, 2010).

The Chief Nursing Officer undertook a review of all aspects of nursing and midwifery education in 2012 and developed a policy called 'Setting the Direction for Nursing and Midwifery Education in Scotland'. It has 6 strategic aims of which one is focussed solely on practice learning;

- 'Aim 4 : to enhance the quality of the practice learning environment for staff and students' (Scottish Government 2014)

The National Strategic Group for Practice Learning (NSGPL) will provide the overarching governance for activity under this aim. They have 3 main functions:

1. To influence, develop and approve strategic guidance for enhancing the practice learning experiences for all learners, and support associated

educational developments devolved from 'Setting the Direction National Delivery Group.

2. Facilitate and ensure governance for, the creation of a strong evidence base to underpin practice learning.
3. Provide a national strategic forum that promotes consistency, co-ordination and sharing of information to inform and guide contemporary nursing and midwifery practice learning experience.

The NSGPL represents strategic level leads of practice learning from service providers and HEIs. The chair of the group is the Assistant Director of Nursing in Scotland. The strategic aim is being addressed through 3 key themes;

1. Expanding the membership of the group to ensure all parts of pre-and post-registration practice learning are represented. It is considered key to ensure that the forum represents all key stakeholders in order to pursue strategic priorities.
2. Developing consistent approaches and enhancing mentorship.
3. Quality Management of the Practice Learning Environment (QMPLE)- developing implementation plans with 5 universities in order to develop national agreements on information governance and thereafter role out across Scotland.

Teaching

As noted, the amount of time spent undertaking practice learning activity between the three professions is approximately 50/50 and in the teaching profession, this sees the student spend approximately 30 weeks of a four year programme undertaking practice learning with almost half of this within the final two years. This sees teachers achieve the Standard for Provisional Registration with the GTCS. In addition, teachers undertake a probationary year of 270 days (or 190 days if part of the Teacher Induction Scheme) which can lead to the achievement of the Standard for Full Registration.

Placement Provision

Placements are co-ordinated centrally by the GTCS through the use of an online 'Student Placement System' (SPS, which replaced Practicum in 2014). Local Authorities and schools can identify how many students they are able to accommodate and HEI's are able to indicate how many students they require placements for. The SPS undertakes a matching process and schools are notified which/how many students will be placed with them and HEI's are notified where their students are placed. Guides for use of the SPS for HEI's, Local Authorities and schools can be found on the GTCS [website](#). The SPS boasts the ability to calculate journey times by both private and public transport; to match students to suitable schools according to University set criteria and has a set of processes and procedures which will ensure that Local Authority Coordinators maintain control and management of their placements.

Placement Supervision

The supervision, support and assessment of student teachers is shared between placement based staff and HEI. Placement based staff can include a Student Regent, Principle Teacher/Curriculum Head and Classroom Teacher and each have various roles, for example and only as an indication, the Regent may provide induction with the Principle Teacher providing oversight of resources and supports available and the Classroom Teacher offering practical advice and support, however, no individual is identified as 'a mentor' and subsequently, in contrast to Nursing, there are no specific training courses or qualifications required for any placement based staff. The HEI staff will include a tutor or teaching fellow who will visit on one or two occasions depending on the length of placement. This may vary from 5-20 weeks depending on the HEI and programme of study. It is the responsibility of this team to support, supervise and assess the student, ensuring this is done holistically and within the [GTCS Standards for Provisional Registration](#).

Social Work and Practice Based Learning in Wales

Where the SSSC provides oversight of Social Work in Scotland, its counterpart, the Care Council for Wales fulfils this role in Wales, and subsequently provides a quality assurance system for Social Work Degree courses and Post Qualifying courses in Social Work through their [Standards for Practice Learning](#) (currently live but under revision). It should be noted that the QAA have a UK-wide role and provide general principles through their Quality Code (noted above), and the CCW Standards incorporates these principles in its Standards.

Similarly to practice learning in Scotland, Social Work students in Wales are required to undertake 50% of their course in a placement setting (approximately 200 days over three placements) and the Standards for Practice Learning sets out 21 Standards to support this; Standards 1-7 relate to HEI's, Standards 8-14 are for Local Authorities and their partners and 15-21 apply to students. Each Standard notes the outcome expected in relation to a specific area of practice and examples of evidence which can be used to demonstrate this as well as activities that could support and demonstrate the achievement of each Standard.

Supervision of Practice learning

Students are assessed by registered Social Workers who either hold or are working towards an accredited qualification in assessment. This qualification is negotiable, for example a qualification from another discipline may be appropriate though the CCW approve specific practice assessment qualifications. Part of attaining this accreditation requires the supervisor to provide direct supervision of SW students so 'working towards' such a qualification is acceptable. During placements, student SW's may be supervised by persons who do not hold a qualification though these individuals will not be responsible for the assessment of student Social Workers.

Funding of Practice learning

All Social Work Degree programmes are organised via Service Level Agreements (SLA's) between HEI's and Local Authorities. This sees the LA assuming responsibility for SW placements though not necessarily providing placement opportunities; one of the three placements a student is required to undertake must be within a LA statutory service while others may be within third sector organisations. The Welsh Government provides funding for SW placements which is paid to LA's via the CCW. The SLA will detail if and how funding should be directed to other (e.g. third sector) placement providers. There are two elements to the funding LA's receive, funding per student (£300) and per day of practice learning opportunity (£20) provided (Care Council for Wales, 2014 – Practice Learning Funding Scheme 2014/15).

Area for consideration

A report (Welsh Institute for Health and Social Care, 2014) into the strengths and areas for development of practice learning identified much of the success of the current system is attributable to the 'goodwill' of LA's and Social Workers. Although LA's retain some responsibility for provision of Practice learning, the SW discipline appears to recognise its role in ensuring future practitioners receive good training, resulting in a system heavily reliant on goodwill which may be unsustainable, and even if it were sustainable it is arguably unfair.

Social Work and Practice Learning in Northern Ireland

The body responsible for Social Work Degree courses, and subsequently Practice learning, in Northern Ireland is The Northern Ireland Degree in Social Work Partnership (formerly the Regional Body) on behalf of the NI Social Care Council (NISCC). The NIDSWP was established in July 2003 and its membership consists of representatives from all academic and employer organisations involved in the planning and delivery of the Degree in Social Work. The Partnership facilitates the development of regional policies and approaches in relation to selection, practice learning and course content. The NIDSWP publish their Regional Practice Learning Handbook on an annual basis, updating this core text with regular feedback from key stakeholders including HEI's, employers, students and service users. This handbook provides guidance on the overall practice learning experience and provides a central point for collation of key points from various documents that contribute to the planning, delivery and quality assurance of the Degree in Social Work.

Social Work students in NI are required to demonstrate competency in 6 key roles which are spread across twenty standards and have associated activities and indicators. The six key roles are laid out in the Northern Ireland Framework Specification for the Degree in Social Work (DHSSPS, 2014) and detail the key core skills, knowledge and standards that are required from all students to meet the required standard of competence. In the framework specification document, the links with the National Occupational Standards for Social Work (2011) (NOS) and the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Benchmark Statements: – Academic

Standards – Social Work, 2008 are made explicit. The key roles are further broken down into the 20 standards which are required in order to fulfil these key roles. The standards are the general benchmark statements that explain the professional practice components of each key role. Students must demonstrate that they have achieved the key roles (and associated standards) whilst adhering to and demonstrating the values and principles stated within the NISCC Code of Practice for Social Care workers and the Statement of Expectations (DHSSPS, NISCC:2014) from individuals, families, carers, groups and communities who use services or those who care for them.

Practice Learning Provision and Funding

Social Work degree students in NI are required to undertake 2 periods of practice learning and will undertake a total of 225 days of which: 25 days must be spent in preparation for direct work with service users; 185 days must be in direct supervised practice - 85 days at level 2 and 100 days at level 3; and 15 days to be used for individual practice development. Practice learning opportunities are allocated through the Northern Ireland Degree in Social Work Partnership (NIDSWP), and are provided by a range of statutory, voluntary and independent agencies that are Designated Practice Learning Providers (DPLP) by the Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC). Practice learning opportunities are funded through the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS)/Health and Social Care Board for statutory sector providers, and through DHSSPS and NISCC for voluntary sector providers.

Supervision of PL

Only organisations approved by NISCC and given DPLP status can provide practice learning opportunities in NI. Regardless of placement, all practice teachers are qualified Social Workers who have or are working towards the NI Practice Teaching Training Programme- at Masters Level, in the Professional in Practice CPD framework for social workers. The NIDSWP have produced a [toolkit](#) to support Practice Teachers and Social Work students to develop and monitor student learning. Students tend to be supported through practice learning by a team which includes their practice teacher, tutor and onsite facilitator/supervisor. Each of these has specific responsibilities (which can be found in the NIDSWP handbook) and include: practice teacher is responsible for identifying and facilitating the practice learning opportunity, the tutor is responsible for meeting the learning needs of the student and the onsite facilitator provides day to day support to the student. Each of these roles contributes to the preparation and assessment of the student and ensuring they meet the standards required by NISCC to become a practicing Social Worker.

3. Research Study

Methods

The aim of this enquiry, to explore good practice; identify key challenges and their solutions and suggest alternative models, lent itself to qualitative methods. Given the significance of the range of stakeholders involved in practice learning, it was important to gather the different interpretations of each key partner and understand their subjective perspective on practice learning (May 2001).

28 participants took part in semi-structured interviews and/or the completion of a questionnaire:

- A representative from four HEI social work degree programme providers in Scotland
- Staff from 6 local authorities and two third sector agencies that provide practice learning opportunities
- A representative from Scottish Practice Teachers Organisation
- Nine practice educators three of whom were independent practice educators and the others worked for both local authorities and third sector. Seven of the participants completed a questionnaire covering key areas.
- Five students from three different universities, four of whom had experience of two practice learning opportunities and one was undertaking her first.

The HEI and employer participants had responsibility for practice learning within their organisations. The employing agencies were situated in rural and urban locations.

The interviews were mostly conducted by telephone as participants were located across the country. A written record was made of each interview. Four interviews were conducted face to face with local authorities located more locally. The literature review informed the development of a topic guide that addressed the following aspects of practice learning:

- The types of practice learning models currently in use across Scotland
- What is working well within existing practices
- What are the key challenges facing practice learning
- What key recommendations could be made to improve practice learning

Interview records were coded and key themes were identified and further interrogated using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach.

Research ethics

The research proposal was reviewed and agreed by Stirling University's Research Ethics Committee in 17th December 2015. Participants were given written information about the project and provided written consent. They were informed that all records, including the final report of the findings, would be anonymised.

All data relating to the research was stored securely, in a password protected computer folder, to be destroyed within six months of production of the final report. In the findings below universities are only identified by name when it is otherwise self-evident which social work programmes are being referred to (e.g. The Open University's (OU's) sponsorship programme, The Robert Gordon University's (RGU's) distance learning route).

4. FINDINGS

The Central Role of Relationships

All participants highlighted the significance of the relationships that lay the foundations for all practice learning opportunities. All HEIs recognised the importance of developing and maintaining strong relationships with placement providers in order to ensure the availability of practice learning opportunities. Independent Practice Educators recognise that their livelihood is dependent on the relationships they have developed with HEIs and placement providers. Local authority practice learning leads rely on the relationships that they develop with individual practice educators and practice teams to foster placements. Students highlighted that the relationship with their practice educator whilst on placement was central to a successful outcome.

This view was echoed in the literature, 'where social work educational programmes provide practice experience the nature of the interface between universities and social work employers is crucial for the student experience.(Shardlow et al 2011) The research conducted into partnerships for Enquiry Area 9 will further help to inform our understanding of the nature of these partnerships.

This enquiry found that 4 of the local authority practice learning leads suggested that their relationships with most HEIs was centred on their provision of a placement. *'We only hear from them when they want placements otherwise we don't hear from them'* was the comment of one local authority lead but echoed by others. Whilst local authorities recognised the value of offering practice learning opportunities that provide potential future employees with vital statutory experience, they highlighted the need for more mutual benefits from their relationships with HEIs.

Individual relationships are the main vehicle driving practice learning. All HEIs, 3 local authorities and 3 practice educators suggested that 'goodwill' was the glue that was holding the whole system of practice learning together. There were few formalised agreements between stakeholders. Only 1 HEI had formalised their relationships with placement providers by requesting a service level agreement which guaranteed a certain number of students each year and required an

undertaking by the provider to offer the same number of placements. Independent Practice Educators had a variety of written agreements dependent on the placement providers whilst individual practice educators within local authorities or voluntary agencies had no formal agreements. Similarly, 3 local authorities had only 'contracts of commitments' with newly qualified practice educators which asked for them to make an ongoing commitment to take students. Unfortunately, these were rarely successful and were unenforceable as many newly qualified practice educators either, moved into management roles therefore felt unable to offer practice learning opportunities for students or simply didn't take any students after their training.

Whilst positive relationships are crucial to effective delivery of practice learning, they should be complementing an infrastructure of coordinated robust agreements rather than replacing them.

Different Perspectives

Although all stakeholders recognised the significance of relationships it was apparent that there were limited fora to facilitate communication between all parties which resulted in differing perspectives on the challenges currently facing practice learning.

HEIs -Most HEIs highlighted the challenge of securing sufficient statutory placements as a key priority. Only RGU didn't state this priority as they faced less competition for placements in the North East of Scotland and had effective service level agreements in place with their 2 neighbouring local authorities. 2 HEIs questioned the degree to which there was a learning culture present within local authorities as there appeared to be a lack of priority given to practice learning.

Local Authorities-the main priority for each local authority was managing the impact of austerity measures and adjusting to the demands of integration. Each local authority has faced considerable cuts in staffing and reorganisation of services. Learning and Development teams in each local authority have faced cuts in staffing and increased demands for training and development across the workforce to ensure registration requirements are being met. One large urban local authority was left with one member of staff from a previous team of three after voluntary severance agreements were accepted. Each participant from local authorities highlighted that practice learning was only a small (up to 10%) percentage of their workload so developing further practice learning opportunities was limited.

Voluntary Organisations- similarly, voluntary agencies face insecurity as funding regimes require frequent re-tendering for services already being delivered as well as tenders for the development of new services. Although practice placements provide valuable funding via the placement fee for dedicated practice teaching staff and training, there is increased demand on service delivery to work with more service users for improved outcomes. Therefore, there is limited opportunity to further develop practice learning opportunities.

Practice Educators- there were a range of concerns facing practice educators dependent on their location. Independent practice educators faced considerable insecurity as their employment was dependent on student numbers, relationships with HEIs and agencies as well the challenge of balancing the peaks and troughs of workload pressures. Those working within agencies faced the challenge of managing demanding caseloads with practice teaching obligations.

Students- insecurity and anxiety around the allocation of placements was pre-dominant for those students interviewed. Students were aware of the scarcity of placements and were concerned about the apparent lack of matching of their needs with the placements. One student noted that the process of allocation '*seemed focussed on what is available rather than what the student needs*' whilst another talked about '*feeling in the dark*' about her placement until the last minute and suggested that completing the placement profile form was *like 'applying for a job but not knowing what job you are applying for'*. They also raised questions about the quality of some practice learning opportunities as well as concern about the lack of regulation of practice educators.

It is important to create opportunities for communication between all stakeholders to enable a shared understanding of the challenges and pressures facing each so that a more coordinated approach to practice learning can be developed. A broader range of shared endeavours can support enhanced relationships and understandings of each other's perspectives. At the University of British Columbia (Canada), practitioners sat on the BSW and MSW curriculum committees, and were involved in the design of curricula. The university also employed practising social workers as sessional staff to design and deliver courses about social work practice. Similar arrangements existed at Wilfrid Laurier University (Coady, 2009). The University of Kentucky used periodic focus groups comprising agency personnel and providers to assess the curriculum. (Shardlow et al 2011).

Good Practice Models

Although the majority of practice learning models were the traditional single student placements in teams with a practice educator, there were a number of models that used innovative approaches.

Hubs of Practice Learning Opportunities - Across the country there are a number of local voluntary sector organisations offering clusters of placements at any one time. One agency offers 35 placements a year to 6 different HEIs. They employ project workers who have practice teaching as central to their job description. The project workers both manage innovative projects working with Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) children and families and provide practice teaching to individual students as well as weekly student groups. Furthermore, they coordinate and support placements within smaller agencies working with the BME community, thus opening up learning opportunities that would not otherwise be available.

In addition, this agency has also collaborated effectively with a HEI to develop a module entitled 'Meeting Service Users' which forms part of the university's preparation for practice for students. Given concerns that were raised by employers within this enquiry about the effectiveness of preparation for practice modules, this suggests an innovative and collaborative approach. This agency has also extended its collaboration with a HEI to include joint meetings with the HEI practice leads to match placements and students given the numbers of placements offered for each cohort of students.

Alternative model - A further model is in operation in another part of the country where a voluntary sector coordinating organisation uses the practice placement fee to fund full time practice teachers. This then enables them to use their network of contacts with a broad range of smaller voluntary organisations across the region to provide practice learning opportunities that are supported by the employed practice educators. The agency places 6 students at a time which enables them to also run a student group. All the students interviewed for this enquiry highlighted the value of student groups that enable them to develop what one student called a '*community of practice*'.

Learning Network West - In the west of Scotland *Learning Network West's* (LNW) role is to support and co-ordinate practice learning. Nine local authorities and five HEIs contribute funding to *Learning Network West*, and representatives of its stakeholders are involved in decision-making through its Board and Steering Group. LNW also provide training and further development for practice educators and link workers. They develop practice learning opportunities with local authorities, voluntary and private organisations and NHS although they have noted a decline in the proportion of statutory placements as the voluntary sector provide 43% of all placements in the West of Scotland.

Challenges & Potential Solutions

All participants readily identified key challenges facing practice learning with some shared themes across stakeholders and a range of possible ways forward.

- ***Availability of range of placements***

All participants recognised the increasingly limited range of available practice learning opportunities. The difficulty in securing sufficient placements was also a common, although not universal, theme in the literature. 'For example, in Sweden provision of placements was described as 'a never-ending challenge', as social workers struggled with 'cutbacks, limited space and facilities, and lack of organizational priority being given to training' (Sandström, 2007: 64 cited in Shardlow et al 2011). The local authorities interviewed all cited these reasons for their reduced provision of practice learning opportunities. They also noted the challenge of maintaining practice educators as many refused to accept any students after they qualified leaving a large untapped resource.

Both HEIs and local authorities interviewed recognised the declining numbers of statutory placements available and the increased use of voluntary sector placements. Whilst local authority practice learning leads expressed their

commitment to providing placements, they struggled to source sufficient placements from overworked practice teams. One HEI shared their statistics for 2014/15. They stated that 25 of their total number of 104 placements were late starting as they struggled to find suitable placements. They also noted the shift in proportion of placements between the statutory and voluntary sector as they now sourced 62% from the voluntary sector. Furthermore, three HEIs stated that they ensured that they fulfilled both formal and informal agreements with voluntary agencies who relied on the placement fee for staff salaries.

The limited range of practice learning opportunities has consequences beyond delayed starts:-

Contrast between practice learning opportunities – SSSC require there to be sufficient contrast between placements to both maximise learning for students and ensure that the qualification remains generic. However, HEIs, practice educators and students referred to the difficulties of ensuring sufficient contrast given the limited availability of a broad range of placements. In particular, it was challenging for HEIs to guarantee a statutory placement for every student given the paucity of statutory placements.

Matching student needs – 4 out of 5 students raised concerns about the degree to which their learning needs were taken into account when allocated to placements. They questioned the value of the detailed profile forms they are asked to complete when one student stated that '*it felt like we were fitted into an available space*'. However, each HEI discussed the lengths to which they attempted to balance the range of needs within the cohort of students and expressed their understanding of the many pressures facing students who mostly worked and some of whom had caring responsibilities. Notwithstanding this, they struggled to meet all the expressed need when there were such limited available options.

Employability of newly qualified social workers- Each local authority interviewed expressed their expectation that job applicants should have some statutory experience. This was clearly understood by 4 out of 5 students interviewed who were all relieved that they had had one statutory placement when currently applying for posts. They expressed concern for some of their cohort who had not had this experience and may face disadvantage in the job market.

1. **Possible Solution**- Increased numbers of blended placements that combine voluntary placements with some statutory work. Both voluntary agencies were already involved in these arrangements with local children and families social work teams. Two local authorities suggested that such arrangements would be easier to support and facilitate as the practice teaching would be provided by the voluntary sector with a link supervisor being allocated from the social work department.
2. Local authorities undertake audit of qualified practice educators to quantify the extent of the underused resource. Liaise with senior managers to explore ways to utilise this valuable resource.

- **Learning Cultures**

The literature review explored the frameworks for practice learning in both nursing and teaching professions which provides the foundations for learning cultures within each. Furthermore, both nursing and teaching education is represented at national levels with strategic fora such as the National Strategic Group for Practice Learning which informs the Scottish Government. Both professions view trainees as integral to the workplace with student placements being the norm rather than the exception.

One local authority acknowledged the impact of '*the cultural atmosphere in teams*' which can enable teams to either actively seek or avoid student placements. It was accepted that busy workloads and staffing cuts have affected all teams across the authority and yet there are some teams that consistently take students. This coincides with 2 HEIs who stressed the importance of developing learning cultures within teams. In addition, the practice lead of one authority stated that '*local authorities have management that don't understand practice learning*'. Both practice educators and students referred to the importance of supportive teams where learning was valued. One student stated that the '*whole team contributes to learning*'.

1. **Possible solution**- develop a national forum for practice learning similar to nursing that enables all stakeholders to communicate and share perspectives and priorities. Ensure that chief social workers from each authority take ownership of practice learning rather than remaining the sole responsibility of learning and development teams. Lishman (2002) highlighted these recommendations which had been part of the LEEP project about the importance of involvement of senior and operational managers in ensuring that practice learning opportunities are available and valued. (cited in Doel & Shardlow 2009) rather than leaving practice learning as the sole preserve of increasingly depleted learning and development departments.
2. Furthermore, HEIs could expand and promote their research and knowledge through targeted knowledge exchange activities with colleagues in practice teams.

- **Quality Assurance Concerns**

A further consequence of the paucity of placements is the potential compromise around the quality of the learning experience. This was identified as a concern by all stakeholders. Local authorities recognised that their depleted learning and development teams were struggling to source placements and had insufficient resources to actively monitor and evaluate the learning opportunities. Similarly voluntary organisations have increased service delivery demands that impact on their ability to comprehensively evaluate placements. However, one voluntary agency had recently established an online evaluation process for students and practice educators to anonymously feedback on learning experiences. HEIs had varying individual systems for evaluating placements and gathered information from tutors, students and practice educators. However, all stakeholders

recognised that there was inconsistent sharing of feedback in order to develop a shared understanding of quality measures.

Practice educators raised the question of which stakeholder held overall responsibility for quality assurance; the HEI, agency, practice educator or learning network if they were involved? Given the inconsistency of quality assurance frameworks and the lack of sharing of information, poor quality practice learning opportunities can be used repeatedly. Furthermore, all stakeholders recognised that the quality of practice teaching was extremely variable within agencies as well as that provided by independent practice educators. Practice educators and practice leads in local authorities questioned whether there was a role for the SSSC to enforce codes 1 & 3 of the employer's codes of practice which would ensure adequately competent and well trained practice educators. Students, in particular, were surprised that there was no system of regulation nor quality assurance of practice educators. All participants recognised the crucial importance of the relationship between students and practice educators as a key factor that can lead to successful outcomes.

Independent Practice teachers- Across the sector there is an increased use of independent practice educators (IPEs) as agencies struggle to offer in house practice teaching. Information from the Learning Network West for 2014/15 states that 43% of all practice learning opportunities were supported by Independent Practice Educators. The statistics are consistent for the following HEIs:

Dundee University 55.4%; Edinburgh University 27.9%; RGU 32.3% .

IPEs are providing practice teaching for a large proportion of social work students across Scotland yet there is no regulation of this crucial role and contractual agreements tended to be between IPEs and LNW or individual agencies rather than with universities directly. All stakeholders agreed with the development of a register for approved practice educators with the expectation of ongoing learning and development of their practice teaching role.

Practice educators all discussed feeling isolated in their role although this was exacerbated for IPEs. They also noted the lack of specific training and development events around practice learning and all would welcome more opportunities.

- **Solutions** –Develop a separate register for practice educators similar to nursing's mentor register.
- Peer support network- some are currently in place, established by IPEs. These could be expanded to offer support and further development for all PEs.
- Expand and develop the remit of practice educator briefings at HEIs to include more training and development of PEs. This would meet the needs of experienced practice educators as well as those less experienced.
- Develop a system of quality assurance for practice learning opportunities similar to a current nursing project. Quality Management of the Practice Learning Environment (QMPL) is a database that has been developed by NHS Education for Scotland and colleagues in HEIs and practice. It is

being piloted by NHS Great Glasgow and Clyde and NHS Golden Jubilee Hospital with Glasgow Caledonian University and University of Glasgow in order to share data in order to monitor and evaluate practice learning experiences.

- ***Rural Authorities***

Two rural authorities were interviewed and noted that they were unable to offer many practice learning opportunities due to geographical obstacles presented by large distances for students to travel and the need for students to relocate for their placements. They valued the employer sponsored route to qualification as they were able to effectively 'grow their own' social workers.

- ***Preparation for Practice***

Each local authority raised concerns about the preparedness of students for placements. Firstly, they expressed concern about the youth and inexperience of many social work students declaring them '*green*' and '*a huge extra burden on teams*'. Practice learning leads highlighted the reservations of sector managers who required additional persuasion if the placement was requested for an undergraduate. They raised the additional challenges of introducing less experienced students to the workplace and the expectations of a professional role. However, all the local authorities recognised the different profile of Open University students who were sponsored by employers and already well experienced within social care settings.

Secondly, three local authorities questioned the content of HEIs preparation for practice as they considered there to be a lack of focus on core assessment skills in particular. This was also echoed by 3 students from different HEIs who suggested that an introduction to current assessment frameworks would provide a useful induction for placements. One student suggested that it would be useful to develop a clearer idea of practice whilst at university by increased use of case scenarios and also 'snapshots of what it is to the job' in each area of social work.

One independent practice educator, who works with 5 different HEIs, noted that preparation for placement can vary tremendously between universities and noted the significance of the tutor to enable students to effectively translate their university learning on placement. One student stated that '*very little of teaching at university is translated into what that would mean in practice*'.

HEIs outlined their preparation for practice modules as combining key skills and knowledge invaluable for practice. Three HEIs highlighted the ways in which they involved key placement providers either as guest speakers or as co-facilitators of skills based workshops. They also noted the challenge of involving practice colleagues given the aforementioned workload pressures. They also recognised that they were unable to provide any fee for participation in their preparatory weeks.

These differing perspectives reflect the literature about the tensions between HEIs and practice. Doel & Shardlow (2009) stated that the HEIs 'primary duty is to educate' whilst the primary duty of practice is 'to provide care and services to the public' (p.5) Wilson and Campbell (2013) refer to the gap between universities more aspirational view of social work and a more process driven view adopted by practice.

1. **Solution-** Co-production of preparatory weeks between HEIs and Practice. Involve providers in the design and delivery of preparation for practice.
2. Tutors have an important role in enabling students to translate and interpret their university based knowledge into practice. Some HEIs offer more limited numbers of tutor visits to placements with several offering only one. Increased contact whilst on placement between academy and practice enables students to interpret knowledge in practice. 'The tutorial relationship may be one of the most significant factors in encouraging students to transfer learning' (Cree et al 1998 p.41 cited in Clapton and Cree 2004). Increased contact between tutors and placements will enhance this transfer.

- **Workload Pressures**

The main obstacle to practice learning from local authorities was the pressure of workload. Each local authority had different arrangements for practice teachers which notionally consisted of some workload relief that rarely materialised. It was generally expected that practice teachers may share some of their workload with students although the benefits of this depended on the competence of the student. Furthermore, few local authorities gave financial rewards to practice teachers given the importance of the placement fee to training budgets so there was limited recognition of the additional pressure when undertaking practice teaching. Similarly, learning and development leads struggled to offer any ongoing support and development for their practice educators given the small proportion of their time allocated to practice learning. All practice educators noted that some HEIs had particularly onerous reporting requirements which can impact on which universities they are prepared to take students from.

- **Solution -** All local authorities suggested that HEIs could offer additional support to groups of practice teachers in order to support and develop practice learning
- An increased consistency and streamlining of paperwork across HEIs would enable practice educators to manage the reporting requirements more effectively.

- **Struggling Students**

Practice Educators and employers all referred to the challenges of managing a struggling student or unsuccessful placement. They all referred to the additional workload involved in offering additional support, supervision and observations for students who are struggling to provide sufficient evidence to pass. Furthermore, they highlighted the emotional impact on practice educators as

well as practice teams (Eno & Kerr 2013). Local authority practice leads recognised that it can be challenging to place further students with a practice educator who has recently failed a student.

Both employers and practice educators highlighted the importance of good communication with the relevant HEI. It can be particularly challenging when the recommendation is disputed by either student or HEI. Several practice educators discussed the lack of communication about the outcomes to their reports and at times, the overly inquisitorial approach of some HEIs. The role of tutors was vital during these placements although 1 voluntary agency and 3 practice educators suggested that the '*tutor role can be very trim*' and it can feel like they are '*holding a difficult situation*' and at times '*doing the dirty work for them (the HEIs)*'. Another voluntary organisation suggested that the '*problem of the tutor/student role not being of sufficient depth*'.

- **Solution** – Communication and enhanced relationships across a broader spectrum of activities would enable employers and HEIs to work more effectively together, particularly when supporting struggling students.

• **Placement Fee**

Practice educators and employers all highlighted the significance of the placement fees to training budgets and staffing costs. One voluntary organisation referred to the '*challenge is to create significant revenue to fund her own post*' whilst also juggling the priorities of service delivery. IPEs relied on the fees as their sole source of income and juggled the peaks and troughs of increased workloads dependent on placements patterns across HEIs. It was apparent that the placement fee was being used creatively to fund whole practice teaching posts and was currently enabling practice learning opportunities to be available that may not be otherwise.

However, Shardlow et al (2011) noted that most countries explored in their enquiry did not pay placement fees except the UK and some Nordic countries. Furthermore, fees are not paid in nursing nor teaching although the expectations of practice educators in social work is more onerous in terms of their supervision, assessment and reporting functions.

- **Solution** – all participants suggested an increase in the placement fee that has remained static for over 10 years.

5. Conclusions

Practice Learning was clearly highly valued by all stakeholders within Social Work Education across Scotland despite the current challenges. The findings resonated with much of the literature review around both the significance of practice learning and the tensions between practice and academy. However, the

current challenges facing practice learning are great and require creative and bold solutions to ensure that it remains viable at the heart of Social Work Education.

Relationships were clearly the foundations upon which practice learning was built yet there is a dearth of formalised agreements to support this vital part of the social work degree. The 'good will' that is fuelling the existing system needs to be supported by the development of a National Practice Learning Framework that provides forums to facilitate communication between all stakeholders as well as enable the development of shared perspectives and priorities to build practice learning for the future. A National body similar to Nursing's National Strategic Group for Practice Learning would give social work practice learning both the strategic remit required to consider National issues but also a forum to facilitate the development of shared perspectives as it was clear that perspectives were somewhat polarised particularly between HEIs and employers. Such a forum would enable the development of more creative and innovative approaches to practice learning opportunities that may blend statutory and voluntary sector settings and tasks.

Furthermore, more formalised arrangements for placements, similar to the Welsh context, with service level agreements between HEIs and placement providers would encourage and hopefully enable a greater commitment to the provision of placements. The development of effective learning cultures would further enhance this commitment and was recognised by both local authorities and HEIs as a current obstacle to practice learning. HEIs could have a key role to play in assisting the development of such cultures by more proactively engaging in targeted knowledge exchange activities supporting employers to support and develop their practice educators.

The literature and study highlighted the significance of the relationship between academy and practice whilst also recognising the importance of their differing perspectives. It is important that social work education engages with the philosophical questions facing the profession around what social work is and what we educate students to understand about the role rather than solely training a workforce to meet current demands. Wilson & Campbell (2016) summarise this tension by stating that 'When students were at university, they were taught an aspirational model of social work, which conflicted with a narrow or statutory approach existing on placement. In practice, the expectation tended to be that social workers were focused on this latter statutory model. Students were taught on the social work programme to 'challenge . . . question ... think and critique' (Academic). The reality of practice was very different'. However, the suggested National Practice Learning Forum would enable active discourse around these key questions.

Joint collaboration between academy and practice on a number of endeavours would enhance a shared perspective on the requirements of social work education. As well as the suggested knowledge exchange activities, a further vehicle to enhance shared perspectives would be collaborative approaches to the production of preparation for practice modules. There were a couple of examples of existing good practice which could be further developed. A more

dynamic and fluid approach to the involvement of practice in HEIs preparation for placement is important so that modules could be co-produced as well as co-delivered. This more collaborative approach could be extended beyond the initial preparatory weeks to a more partnership approach when students are on placement. The role of tutors could be enhanced to facilitate and enable more fluid transfer of learning from academy to practice. However, this transfer of learning and understanding of theory is more dynamic as suggested by Doel & Shardlow (2009) who suggest it is 'rather an opportunity for the individual (student) to forge new knowledge and understandings through the dynamic interchange of existing knowledge with new experience.'(p.7).

The final suggestion for the development of a more collaborative approach between academy and practice would be to enhance practice educator briefings. These meetings provide an ideal opportunity for universities to engage with practice educators around more than the requirements of their individual programmes. The aforementioned knowledge exchange activities could be included within practice educator briefings to share recent research and literature around practice learning.

One of the key areas of concerns by all stakeholders was the lack of robust and consistent quality assurance mechanisms around both practice teachers and practice learning opportunities. The quality of the practice setting provides the foundation for learning for students and must become a greater focus of the SSSC, HEIs, employers and practice educators. All stakeholders agreed with the formation of a register specifically for practice educators similar to Nursing where all mentors are on a separate register. Furthermore, Nursing have a coherent system for evaluating the quality of practice learning opportunities which could provide some indicators to consider for social work.

This report has offered some insights into existing practices as well as ideas for further consideration. The Review of Social Work Education has provided all stakeholders with an opportunity to honestly reflect on current practices and partnerships and explore ways in which we can more effectively work together and deliver a dynamic and challenging education for student social workers so that they can become critically engaged, reflexive and responsive practitioners.

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