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Scottish First-line Managers' Views of Newly Qualified Social Workers' Preparedness for Practice; findings from an online Delphi study

Vicki Welch, Jennifer Lerpiniere and Emma Young

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Contact Dr Vicki Welch

vicki.welch@strath.ac.uk

0141 4448505

Improving care experiences

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Introduction

Social work is a broad profession with a number of different practice areas. The work performed by social workers is often highly complex, involving technical elements (knowledge of legal and other processes), relational elements (engaging with clients and their families) and elements requiring professional judgement and skill (such as assessing needs and delivering interventions).

During 2013 a collaborative group was formed by researchers from the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC), Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU) and CELCIS at the University of Strathclyde. This group wished to explore the preparedness for practice of newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) in Scotland and to consider the roles of qualifying training, and employer support during the first years of practice.

A central aim was to provide timely information to contribute to the review of social work education, post - qualifying learning and to the development of a national learning strategy led by SSSC. However, the research outputs may also be of particular interest to higher education providers, employers of social workers and to the wider social work profession in Scotland.

The group took forward two complementary studies; one a mixed methods study conducted by GCU, focused on identifying the perspectives of NQSWs. These were gathered through a survey and follow- up focus groups. The other study, conducted by CELCIS, complemented the first by conducting a three-round online Delphi study exploring the perspectives of first-line managers who held responsibility for supervision of NQSWs. In this report we outline the methods of the online Delphi study and the main findings obtained from it.

Where possible the studies used consistent conceptual frameworks, for example, by asking participants to frame their responses against National Occupational Standards. Our intention was to facilitate a further comparative synthesis to identify areas of concordance and contrast.

We hope to provide additional utility and impact by allowing concurrent consideration of the findings from both studies, therefore our dissemination activities will include joint activities and signposting to or co-hosting of reports. The GCU study also usefully incorporates a review of relevant literatures which was beyond the scope of this study.

Our study used an online Delphi approach, involving iterative contacts with 26 individual managers who had current or recent responsibility for NQSWs. These people formed a virtual panel. They responded to initial questions and to further questions based on our emerging analyses of the data. This produced a rich data set containing information which was analyses qualitatively and quantitatively. We describe the methods used in this study in detail in Appendix 1; and discuss the strengths and limitations of the study. Below we present the study findings and consider the implications for educators, employers and researchers.

Findings

Panel characteristics

In Round 1 a number of characteristics were explored in order to ascertain the sectors in which panel members worked, the extent of their experience and their level of contact with NQSWs.

Members were asked to describe what type of organisation they worked for; all indicated that they worked in statutory sector organisations with most indicating local authority social care departments or combined health and social care teams. None identified working for voluntary or private organisations. Members were also asked to describe the types of clients they worked with and the types of services provided. Twenty five participants gave sufficient information to categorise their work sector and the groups with which they worked; this covered a wide range of social work disciplines. These were re-categorised into broader areas and presented in Table 1 below. Whilst the results suggests that the panel included good representation from managers across all main areas of practice, numbers are too small to claim this sample accurately reflects the structure of wider social work provision.

Table 1 Broad categorisation of panel disciplines

Group	n
Child and family (child protection, family support, looked after children, throughcare/aftercare, disability)	13
Adult (including older adults, mental health, learning disability, physical disability, offenders)	11
Combined child / adult	1

Panel members were asked to indicate how many NQSWs they had ever been responsible for line managing and further to indicate how many they had line managed over the last five years. During their career, 65 percent (n=17) had supervised between one and five NQSWs, 31% (n=8) had supervised between six and ten; only one had supervised more than ten NQSWs. During the last five years, participants had line managed between one and nine NQSWs. One member had a slightly different experience in that they currently delivered training, development and support to NQSWs rather than line managing them per se. This confirms that the panel members were in relevant positions and actively and currently supervising NQSWs.

Views of NQSWs' preparedness for practice 1 (from closed questions)

We begin by exploring responses to two closed questions which were included at the start of Round 1; these questions presented a series of statements relating to aspects of competency and asked panel members to indicate their level of agreement that NQSWs were ready for practice in each area. Responses to these questions provide a valuable touchstone for the qualitative analyses of 'open', free text data collected from all three rounds, just as the textual provide an opportunity to add nuance, detail and understanding to the numeric findings.

National Occupational Standards criteria

In the first of these questions, participants were asked to consider whether they agreed that NQSWs were ready to practice in the 16 activity areas taken from the National Occupational Standards (NOS) for social work. They were asked to indicate their level of agreement on a five-point Likert-type scale. We report levels of agreement for each item in Appendix 2. To consolidate these findings into an overall measure of managers' global impression, we aggregated the percentage agreeing or strongly agreeing to each statement and calculated an overall average (mean) agreement figure; this average figure was 43%. We similarly calculated an overall (mean) figure for disagreement; this was 31%. Taken together these results suggest a relatively modest global level of agreement that NQSWs were ready for practice across these practice areas.

This global approach is useful but masks several differences; for example, it is apparent that different panel members had different opinions and that there were differences between mean agreement with different NOS areas. Analysis of these differences shows some interesting patterns; for example, Table 2 below ranks the 16 areas by the percentage of participants who 'strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that NQSWs were ready to practice. Three areas receive agreement from two thirds or more of panel members; seven areas received agreement from between one third and two thirds; and the remaining six statements received agreement from less than a third of participants. Examining this further, it seems that in general terms, relatively straightforward tasks such as advocating for clients, liaising with other professionals and helping to inform decisions achieved the greatest levels of agreement, whilst managers less often agreed that NQSWs were ready for more complex tasks such as those related to risks, dilemmas and crises.

Table 2 Agreement that NQSWs are ready for practice in National Occupational Standards areas

National Occupational Standards activity area	Percent strongly agreed or agreed
Working with individuals and communities to help them make informed decisions	75
Liaising with other teams, professionals, networks and systems	72
Advocating with and on behalf of individuals and communities	68
Assessing needs and options to recommend a course of action	56
Researching, analysing and using current knowledge of best practice	52
Working with individuals and communities to achieve change	52
Managing and being accountable for own work	48
Supporting the development of networks to meet assessed needs	44
Preparing for and participating in decision-making forums	40
Preparing, producing and evaluating plans	38
Working with groups to promote individual development and independence	32
Assessing and managing risks to individuals and communities	28
Managing complex ethical dilemmas and conflicts	28
Responding to crisis situations	21
Assessing and managing risks to self and colleagues	20
Contributing to the management of resources and services	16
Mean	**43**

This information was re-analysed to compare responses given by managers in children's and adult services. The results are presented in Table 3 (excluding data for the one manager who worked with both service areas). It should be remembered that the aim of this study was not to conduct a quantitative survey and that caution is required in interpreting these data due to the small absolute numbers. Whilst we draw attention to some notable differences (those greater than 20 percentage points are highlighted in Table 3), these should not be considered to be statistically significant, i.e. these apparent patterns might change (or disappear) if a larger sample were drawn.

Managers of NQSWs in children's services appeared more confident in NQSW ability to liaise with networks, advocate and work with clients to achieve change; by contrast, managers of NQSWs in adult services were more confident in their planning skills and their ability to assess risks to workers. We would speculate that these differences may be attributable to the different nature of social work in these subgroup areas, particularly if recruitment processes, early experiences or induction highlight or develop particular skills. For example, it may be that when working with clients with mental health challenges or with offenders NQSWs are encouraged to take particular note of risks to themselves and other workers; equally it may be that when working with vulnerable children, NQSWs are encouraged to pay particular attention to advocating for the child. In this way it is feasible that if candidate selection processes, induction or early training reflect different areas of focus, these would be likely to result in different skill-sets for NQSWs in different fields.

Table 3 Agreement that NQSWs are ready for practice in National Occupational Standards areas by child services and adult services

National Occupational Standards activity area	Percent (%) strongly agreed or agreed	
	Child (n=13)	Adult (n=11)
Working with individuals and communities to help them make informed decisions	69	73
Liaising with other teams, professionals, networks and systems	85	64
Advocating with and on behalf of individuals and communities	77	55
Assessing needs and options to recommend a course of action	54	64
Researching, analysing and using current knowledge of best practice	46	55
Working with individuals and communities to achieve change	62	36
Managing and being accountable for own work	39	55
Supporting the development of networks to meet assessed needs	39	55
Preparing for and participating in decision-making forums	46	36
Preparing, producing and evaluating plans	23	55
Working with groups to promote individual development and independence	23	36
Assessing and managing risks to individuals and communities	31	27
Managing complex ethical dilemmas and conflicts	31	27
Responding to crisis situations	23	18
Assessing and managing risks to self and colleagues	8	36
Contributing to the management of resources	23	9
Means	**42.4**	**43.8**

SSSC criteria

Panel members were also asked to indicate agreement with six further areas exploring NQSW preparedness for practice, again using a five-point Likert-type scale. These statements were areas identified by SSSC as important competencies for graduating social workers entering the first stage of professional employment. The statements are focused on key practice areas and cover many of the same concepts as the National Standards above. As before, we calculated item percent agreement and a global average for percent agreement and disagreement figures. The results are presented in Table 4 below as the percent within each question.

We have highlighted results of particular interest. The average figure for global agreement across these six statements was again relatively low (34%), indeed it was similar (slightly less) than the average level of disagreement with these statements (38%). Additionally, whilst the variation between statements was very high, it is perhaps notable that no panel members 'strongly agreed' with any of these statements and that level of agreement was particularly low in the first two questions.

In addition we draw attention to the relatively high level of disagreement with the first statement, suggesting that managers felt that NQSWs were not ready to deal with complex caseloads. These results accord with the previous findings suggesting that managers do not feel NQSWs are able to deal with the more complex aspects of social work practice.

Whilst these results suggest that many first line managers do not feel that NQSWs are fully ready for practice, this should be considered in the context of what it is reasonable to expect given the complexity of the work and the variability of the role. Looking across professions it is a typical requirement for neophyte professionals to undertake periods of supervised practice or probation prior to achieving full professional status. This issue is also considered in relation to panel members' text responses (e.g. see page 18).

There was one area where agreement was high; NQSW's ability to learn and inquire; again, this finding would seem consistent with results for the NOS criteria which suggested that NQSWs were able to assess needs and options (other than complex needs) and research and analyse current knowledge.

Table 4 Percentage indicating various levels of agreement (based on 25 valid responses)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
NQSWs have the necessary knowledge and skills to manage complex caseloads	0	4	12	72	12
NQSWs have the necessary resilience required for the job	0	8	52	32	8
NQSWs are able to use sound professional judgement	0	32	24	44	0
NQSWs have demonstrated the habits of learning and inquiry	0	68	20	12	0
NQSWs understand outcomes-based approaches and are able to deliver personalised services	0	44	24	32	0
NQSWs are able to take on social work roles in integrated services	0	48	36	16	0
Mean agreement	**34**		**28**	**38**	

Again the data were re-analysed to explore potential differences between managers from adult services and children's services. The results are presented in Appendix 2. These may suggest there are some minor differences, but due to the sample characteristics we would not be confident to suggest that they reflect either substantial or significant differences between groups.

Views of NQSWs' preparedness for practice 2 (open text questions)

During Round 1, participants were asked to describe areas of strength and weakness displayed by the NQSWs they had worked with. In order to promote the current relevance of findings, participants were asked to focus on NQSWs they had known over the last five years. Whilst restricting themselves to recent NQSWs may have reduced the pool of NQSWs that each panel member considered, our aim was to promote concrete and up-to-date thinking about real people, rather than to elicit general opinions, which may have been influenced by wider debates.

In the first round, panel members were asked to comment on the importance and role of induction, supervision, training and development, mentoring and support from colleagues, and to describe best practice related to these. During later rounds we asked a number of questions covering aspects of preparedness or current competence and support for NQSWs. For example, in Round 2 participants were asked to comment on the strengths and weaknesses identified during Round 1, whilst in Round 3 they were asked to comment on several areas of competence and support needs raised by NQSWs in the parallel study carried out by Glasgow Caledonian University. What follows is an inclusive analysis of themes identified across all rounds.

Formal and informal expectations

For the most part, managers did not expect NQSWs to be fully competent in all areas of practice; they rationalised this in relation to the high levels of complexity inherent in the social work task and in relation to the necessarily low levels of experience that NQSWs have:

> *The emphasis needs to be for NQSWs that they are just starting out and are about to embark on a career, they are not leaving education as fully functioning social workers who are expected to know it all. (NQSW manager)*

> *If NQSW have sound basic skills, values etc. the rest is learned over time and with experience. (NQSW manager)*

> *… it is okay to continue learning and developing once qualified [I] have not felt NQSWs in the team have been lacking but just needed time to develop knowledge and experience. (NQSW manager)*

However, despite this informal recognition that further experience was necessary, some panel members noted that as fully-qualified workers, NQSWs should be capable of performing the same job as other staff:

> *Yes they need time to develop, but as an employer I would expect that if I was employing someone as a qualified worker they would be able to do this to a certain level. (NQSW manager)*

> *I think the job, particularly in the local authority is demanding and complex and it is clear that NQSW are not equipped and able to do the same role as a more experienced practitioner yet they are on the same pay scale and expected to do the same job. (NQSW manager)*

The result could be tensions and challenges within busy social work teams who were 'under pressure to deliver'. In addition, as fully qualified workers, NQSWs were formally expected to demonstrate an appropriate level of professional competence by the employer. This was problematic, as when some struggled to do so they could be subject to formal competency processes:

> *The processes within the service once people are qualified mean that it is the performance route we require to go down which is incredibly time consuming and not helpful. A probationary year as in teaching I think should be the way forward. (NQSW manager)*

Thus it seems that there was a discrepancy between the formal expectations of the employing agency and the more realistic expectations of most line managers. This discrepancy seems potentially to result in difficulties for NQSWs, the wider team and employing agencies. If employers are formally expecting full competence and productivity, it may fall to line managers and colleagues to provide additional support whilst NQSWs gain experience. The possible role of probationary periods (raised above) is discussed further on page 18.

NQSW motivation and social work values

Students and NQSWs have previously been shown to be motivated by a set of professional values most commonly associated with compassion, altruism and helping others (Harr & Moore, 2011; Stevens et al., 2012). Some researchers have found that this may particularly be true in relation to applying values to their

work with individuals rather than their ability to apply values at a structural level (Woodward & Mackay, 2012).

In this study, when identifying strengths of NQSWs many managers commented on high levels of motivation and enthusiasm, often underpinned by recent learning and strong social work values:

> *They come with enthusiasm, are more aware of some new ideas in social work like outcomes which some more experienced staff struggle with and are open to learning. (NQSW manager)*

> *They do bring enthusiasm, up- to- date theory and social work values. (NQSW manager)*

This was often reported to have had wider benefits, as the NQSW injected knowledge, values and enthusiasm into the team, bringing new ideas and perspectives:

> *I feel this [knowledge] can be harnessed in the team by developing projects and giving the NQSW involvement in these, this can also be useful to reinvigorate the team and provide a refresher through discussion at team meetings/team development. (NQSW manager)*

Entering the real word of practice

Despite subscribing to a relevant set of ideals, some NQSWs were reported to have had difficulty applying their social work values in some practice situations; for example, some were challenged when clients did not share similar views to their own:

> *Values, [they can] struggle to accept that clients make choices they do not agree with. Use of professional authority [by] enforcing compliance. [NQSWs find] care versus control [to be a] dilemma. Establishing the balance and being clear about the role and responsibilities of criminal justice social work. (NQSW manager)*

Again, despite their clear attachment to social work values and ideals, some NQSWs were considered poorly prepared for the complexity and reality of clients' needs and lives:

> *I find that NQSWs have little understanding of the effects of poverty on the lives of their clients. There is also a poor understanding of inequality or lack of opportunities for the client group. (NQSW manager)*

> *I have found that they can become overwhelmed with the complexities and risks in some of the cases we work with. (NQSW manager)*

Many NQSWs were also reported to find the realities of organisational demands, complex casework and statutory procedures to be challenging:

> *Not always prepared for the realities of working in the field and the demands of the job or the realities of legislation. (NQSW manager)*

> *Lack of knowledge of statutory work, have to learn a lot about policy and procedures and are not prepared for carrying the sort of caseload that they have to. (NQSW manager)*

… it does feel that workers come to statutory services, in particular, with very little real knowledge of what they are getting themselves into. (NQSW manager)

As mentioned previously, many managers did not see these challenges as intrinsic weakness; instead this was seen as an appropriate stage or part of the professional developmental process:

… they are still developing the basic skills and experience and need to get a good grounding in general practice before taking on more complex cases. (NQSW manager)

Dealing with real life scenarios, particularly those involving complex needs and risk are very different from a theory base of learning. NQSW should have the opportunity to develop skills practice, mainly when working with involuntary clients or those clients who are actively & purposefully harmful. (NQSW manager)

Theory and research knowledge

Many participants felt that the understanding of appropriate theory and knowledge from research was a strength of many NQSWs. Several line managers highlighted that theory and knowledge needed a practical skills-set and appropriate underpinning set of values. In this way NQSWs who were strong in 'knowledge and theory', in 'skills' and in 'values' were most likely to be successful practitioners:

Whilst a knowledge of theory can influence and drive practice, values and ethics and an ability to meaningfully engage with clients is of paramount importance. (NQSW manager)

When considering the cognitive aspects of the NQSW role, theory and up-to-date research knowledge were often cast as being subtly different. When talking about 'theory', participants generally appeared to be considering established ideas which underpinned social work practice. When speaking about 'research' managers often seemed to be describing emerging ideas and evidence. Some managers noted that over time, the explicit use of theory reduced; this might suggest that it was either incorporated into practice as tacit knowledge, or that it became secondary to the immediate challenges of the work:

Up-to-date knowledge and theory is something which NQSW's have but sometimes `lose' in the switch to practice. If they are part of a team where this is valued they will tend to hold onto this and to expand their research basis. (NQSW manager)

… I wonder if part of the problem is that, once in practice, theory tends to become secondary for many workers. Up-to-date research is used to inform practice but theory is either embedded in practice or ignored: I'm not sure which. (NQSW manager)

Whilst the explicit use of theory decreased over time, it was also thought to be true that practical experience reinforced understanding of theory and helped to develop appropriate practice informed by theory. A secure understanding of theory was thus helpful inasmuch as it provided a consistent framework against which changing the requirements of work could be coherently organised and understood:

But they should not underestimate the value of theory as this will inform their practice throughout their career, when things change (legislation, procedures, practices, societal expectations etc.) then it is only

by reflecting on earlier theories etc. that practitioners will be able to reflect on the new expectations on them and their clients. This should make them more knowledgeable and ultimately better practitioners. (NQSW manager)

Whilst these managers often felt able to support NQSWs in their learning and application of theory, their perspective on recent research knowledge was subtly different. Here NQSWs were often seen as being at the forefront of emerging knowledge and could be a valuable resource for the wider team. However, to capitalise fully on this resource, there needed to be a suitable culture or ethos within the team, which promoted and valued the use of up-to-date research evidence:

There will be discussion at supervision or perhaps at clinical team meetings about current research but I agree it is not utilised as much as it could be, would be useful to refer to most up-to-date research…. (NQSW manager)

NQSWs could be given a platform to share this [research knowledge] in team meetings. However, I think it is more about creating and maintaining a team culture where all team members, not just NQSWs, should be doing this. (NQSW manager)

Inter-professional work

Inter-professional work was said to be a particular feature of several organisational settings, and one which NQSWs needed to learn about or adapt to. Whilst there were some managers that saw multi-agency work as a particular area of NQSW strength, just as many commented on this as being a weakness or noted that this varied between individuals:

There are probably several strengths including: written work; SW values; resilience; lateral thinking; awareness of multi-agency working and enthusiasm. (NQSW manager)

Lack of knowledge of local services and supports. Lack of knowledge of procedures and protocols. Difficulty weighing up risks and benefits, particularly in multi-agency/adult protection situations. (NQSW manager)

It seems that NQSWs needed to have personal skills and confidence when dealing with other practitioners and professionals, but also that this was facilitated through local knowledge and understanding of relevant systems. Again, this would suggest that inter-professional work is an area where NQSWs may continue to develop with increased experience.

Performing assessments and dealing with risk

Assessment of client's needs, risks and options for intervention was another area where NQSWs were said to demonstrate both strengths and weaknesses. In many cases (but not all) managers felt that NQSWs were capable of performing assessments within certain parameters and if given support to do so:

I do feel assessment skills are developed through experience so the longer they are in the job the better they should get, so I don't have high levels of confidence in their overall assessment decisions initially, although they may have learned some skills on training - however that is the role of the supervisor to work with them on that. (NQSW manager)

NQSW have the ability to assess risk if they are given clear guidance, support [and] training in post. It does take confidence to develop these skills however as it is an essential element of the job it has to be prioritised. (NQSW manager)

Of particular note was the fact that NQSWs were reported to have experienced difficulties performing assessments in more challenging, risky situations or when required to tackle the more complex areas of work:

[Weakness] ability to manage complex caseloads, situations, dilemmas which test value base and high risk situations… (NQSW manager)

Whilst gaining experience was seen as a critical factor in becoming competent in assessment, it was suggested that aspects could / should be more effectively 'taught' during qualifying courses:

[Courses need a] Focus on assessment skills involving both individual deficits, adaptability and outcomes leading to a core skill of making good decisions re outcomes and risk management. (NQSW manager)

Written work, writing reports

Much attention has been paid to social work students' writing skills, both in relation to course material and in relation to practice-based learning (Alter & Adkins, 2001; Leon & Pepe, 2010; Rai & Lillis, 2013). Learning to write reports has been seen as an essential tool through which the novice social worker learns and demonstrates their understanding and mastery of the norms of the profession (Oglensky, 2008). It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that a further area which concerned many (but not all) managers in this study was NQSWs' skills in written work. Various issues were raised:

Poor spelling, punctuation and grammar… report writing skills etc. (NQSW manager)

… unable to write a report, lacking in reasonable writing skills, description, analysis etc. (NQSW manager)

… struggling with report writing… reports are far too long and often confused. (NQSW manager)

Several participants indicated a belief that qualifying courses were failing to develop these skills:

Not sure how NQSW get through a course where report writing and recording are part of the core competencies and arrive so ill-prepared for the job. Some cannot spell, don't know how to write a sentence or use appropriate tenses. (NQSW manager)

Report writing should be the one thing they do well and I do not understand how this is not the case given the emphasis on written work throughout their degree. (NQSW manager)

The fact that NQSWs were not fully prepared for report writing was perhaps the area that most consistently troubled managers. One reason for this may be the fact that, potentially, line managers experienced the deficits that NQSWs displayed in report writing as a personal burden, since they often had to spend time correcting or feeding back to the worker concerned.

Managers also made a link between producing a clearly written report and the process of collecting and analysing relevant information, such that a good report was implicitly seen as evidence of professional proficiency. In addition, managers felt that when negative feedback had to be given to NQSWs about the quality of reports, this unhelpfully tended to erode their confidence. Poorly written reports were also unacceptable for wider reasons, not least because they potentially gave a bad impression to other professionals and to clients:

> *I'm not sure about the writing issues as I feel very strongly that a social worker needs to be able to analyse complex info about families in writing. This needs to make sense and needs to be written well. (NQSW manager)*

> *When this is written poorly it creates more work for line managers, we receive more complaints from service users and other professionals and the impact on a new worker's self-confidence is devastating. (NQSW manager)*

A number of strategies were suggested to improve report writing including 'writing a shadow report', 'peers sharing work and best practice in respect of reports', 'additional time in supervision and much proof reading'. Finally, in respect of report writing, the complexity of making special arrangements for NQSWs with dyslexia was noted by a minority of participants.

Becoming competent (pre-qualifying)

Competency was not seen as absolute, isolated or static; rather it varied from individual to individual and was seen as something which developed over time with appropriate opportunities for practice, learning and support (for a detailed discussion of related issues see Schön, 1987). Becoming competent was not a single event; rather it was seen as an ongoing process.

We consider here the panel members' opinions on a range of processes involved in the development of competency in social work students prior to qualification. This includes, for example, practice placements, teaching and learning in qualifying courses and the potential role of probationary periods. These are discussed below before turning to a range of processes through which NQSWs continue to develop competency after qualification.

Universities, qualifying courses and the profession

The critical role attributed to universities for the profession of social work, centred not only on the provision of suitable training but also on the selection of suitable candidates. It was recognised that for the benefit of the profession as a whole, employers and trainers each had roles and needed to coordinate their activities and work together:

> *Employers obviously rely on the universities enrolling the right potential candidates and passing the right NQSWs out at the other end. Then I see it as the employers' responsibility to develop these NQSWs into the type of workers they want. (NQSW manager)*

In terms of practical skills, some participants were critical of qualifying courses, suggesting that were not preparing NQSWs for the current levels of complexity intrinsic in current social work practice:

There are no easy cases anymore, if there ever were, and to feel confident to give some newly qualified workers some of the complex cases is too high a risk. It also has huge implications for the team / colleague and for the person themselves who are being short changed. (NQSW manager)

Consequently there was a feeling that NQSWs needed considerable further training and support, a process which inevitably took time and used valuable resources. It was felt important that as much preparation as possible is completed prior to qualifying:

Preparation and readiness for the job is crucial and it shouldn't be left to professionals in the job to 'pick up the pieces' of workers who perhaps should not [have] qualified in the first place. (NQSW manager)

The role of university tutors and lecturers in preparing students for practice was seen as paramount. Tutors needed to update their own practical skills and it was seen as highly desirable for tutors to find ways to maintain contact with current practice:

My view would be for tutors and those who organise learning to come into area teams and get a true flavour of real practice. Perhaps even manage cases, as well as attend risk management meetings / MAPPA. An experience like [this] may help to develop realistic learning. (NQSW manager)

Ensure that their lecturers have current practice experience. Ensure they [NQSWs] are actually taught social work skills such as assessment skills. (NQSW manager)

Theory and its application to practice

Whilst universities were most often seen as being strong in delivery of theoretical material, this was often seen as being too abstract and it was suggested that theory was not always being effectively framed or contextualised in relation to daily practice:

… I think it is more that the university is not linking theory to practice, I think they are often very out of touch with practice. (NQSW manager)

I believe there needs to be more emphasis in training on the application of theory to practice situations. That is, it is easy to talk a about theories of, say, attachment in abstract but much harder to apply these to a living child or adult. (NQSW manager)

I think there is a tendency to view theory and values as relating to general social care and social equality issues rather than influencing and shaping the specific day-to-day interpersonal skills of assessment and communication in developing and maintaining worker / client relationships. (NQSW manager)

However, there was also an appreciation of the difficulty of teaching theory in this way; some managers felt that the ability to consolidate a full understanding of the relationship between theory and practice was something which some NQSWs needed to continue to develop over time in practice:

I believe sometimes students cannot apply the theory to practice unless they have practiced and then reflect / look retrospectively about what theory they base their work on. It was my experience as a student and an area in which I struggled, however it is fundamental to social work practice and therefore should continue to be a focus within courses. (NQSW manager)

One approach to teaching mentioned by managers was the use of case studies; these were seen as one way in which the applicability of theory could be demonstrated:

> *Perhaps if more university based training more clearly married theory to case studies, students would see the value of theory rather than it being an add-on to practice. (NQSW manager)*

Practice placements

Many previous authors have drawn attention to the important role of student placements suggesting that these are critical in producing a range of professional competencies (Bellinger, 2010; McNay, Clarke, & Lovelock, 2009). The relationship between academic teaching and practice learning is crucial, and these aspects of learning need to be co-ordinated and complementary (Wilson, 2012; Wilson & Kelly, 2010).

Accordingly in this study, practice learning was seen as highly important; in particular, managers drew attention to the relevance and quality of the placement. Above all, from the manager's perspective, placements should be relevant to the chosen field of work. Whilst a range of different learning opportunities and placement types may indeed be beneficial (see for example Jasper, Munro, Black, & McLaughlin, 2013; Scholar, McCaughan, McLaughlin, & Coleman, 2012), in this study, participants believed it was critical for NQSWs to have experience which was directly relevant to their chosen career path:

> *[Students] require sound practice-based learning of social work with an ability to evidence social work practice and knowledge that can be transferred to their area of work... (NQSW manager)*

> *… those that have had children and families team experience cope much better than those from vol[untary] placements. (NQSW manager)*

This was often said to be particularly true for those entering statutory roles, to the extent that without this experience they may find it difficult to gain work in this area:

> *If they have not had a Local Authority placement then they have no real idea of what the work actually is. (NQSW manager)*

> *I would feel that a NQSW coming into a local authority practice team without a placement in a practice team, is too big a jump, and I would be hesitant about employing a NQSW in this situation. (NQSW manager)*

Placements should also be sufficient in terms of number and duration as this allows the student to have an experience somewhat closer to the reality of social work and to undertake a wider range of more complex tasks:

> *From discussion with NQSW they feel two placements are insufficient and perhaps it would be more useful to have a further statutory placement to allow for more exposure to this. (NQSW manager)*

> *I feel the six month placements are good and we do encourage the trainees to have exposure to this, but it is protected and nowhere near real due to demand. It is a real balance trying to give the trainees the exposure they need but not overwhelm them. (NQSW manager)*

The content and quality of placements was fundamental; several panel members stressed the need for placements to be realistic and challenging so that they provided a suitable preparation for practice:

> *I think the work placements could be more challenging and rigorous. (NQSW manager)*

> *Placements should be in busy teams and the Practice Teacher should be given sufficient time to support the student Social Worker to ensure that the role and demands are clear so that they are prepared for the job. (NQSW manager)*

> *I think placements need to be challenging and faster paced. (NQSW manager)*

As well as providing opportunities for learning and development, placements were also valuable for assessment. The real practice setting was an opportunity to identify how the student worked with service users, which it was felt could not be adequately assessed in the classroom:

> *I think there should be a balance between academic and practical expectations during qualifying courses. However I do think that a student's ability to engage with service users and to work in the real world needs to be assessed fully and that placements are of paramount importance in this respect. (NQSW manager)*

The learning and assessment opportunities provided by placements were therefore seen to be critical to the training of students. As a consequence of this, it was acknowledged that employing agencies have a responsibility to overcome the inevitable practical and resource issues and provide sufficient and suitable placement opportunities:

> *The expectations of organisations to provide placements is high, which I agree with. We need to provide very good practice opportunities for students in order to keep the quality of workers high. (NQSW manager)*

> *I would agree, good fieldwork placements are crucial and some of the very limited placements [that] students undertake are in no way preparation for work in practice. That said, if fieldwork are not able or willing to take on students they cannot complain!!! (NQSW manager)*

Despite this, there was some suggestion that employers sometimes failed to provide adequate opportunities and that as a result students were forced into less suitable placements:

> *More recently applicants have not evidenced from their placements that they have attained the knowledge and practice experience that should develop them as social workers, and appear at times to have placements in 'fabricated' social work roles in some settings. (NQSW manager)*

Probationary periods

One approach which was proposed in early rounds received considerable support from other participants in later rounds. This was the concept of introducing a standard probationary period (often a year was mentioned) en route to gaining full professional status. This was seen as offering an opportunity to assimilate further learning and to develop further as a practitioner without the expectation of being

competent in each and every area of work or of being able to carry the same workload as more experienced colleagues:

> *I would be in support of a probationary year for NQSWs. Advantages would be that it would offer them an opportunity to enhance their knowledge, skills and understanding of their role in whatever setting they find themselves in. It would also, I assume, require employers to protect the NQSWs' caseloads so that they do not quickly become overwhelmed. (NQSW manager)*

> *I think this is an excellent idea. NQSWs in Scotland start working at a very high salary level so expectations are in my mind linked. So perhaps we need to look at the 1st year of salary for NQSWs and probationary year. (NQSW manager)*

> *Also, if a probationary year (as suggested below) were introduced this would offer NQSWs an opportunity to exercise their values in practice, encourage them to keep up-to-date re knowledge of theory and hopefully sustain high levels of enthusiasm. (NQSW manager)*

As well as providing learning opportunities and some protected time for NQSWs a formal probationary period for all NQSWs was also seen as being a potentially useful process for employers, enabling them to ensure each NQSW was suited to their particular role:

> *I do believe this is something that could be protective of individual NQSW as well as agencies. The advantages of such an approach can be found within the teaching profession or the Police, both of whom provide probationary periods for Newly qualifieds. I believe there is a recognition in each of these areas that training or practice placements can only provide so much, and it's only in practice over a year that individuals and agencies can get a handle on capabilities and realities of practice. (NQSW manager)*

> *I would support a probationary period so that any learning needs can be met and opportunities for improvement are given. Also if [the] NQSW is not able to carry out the tasks of the post after appropriate [support is] given then it may be that they are not suited to the job at all. (NQSW manager)*

Some participants were a little more cautious about the idea of probation, acknowledging that it may create an additional resourcing requirement or being concerned that some NQSWs may be disadvantaged in certain roles if these did not provide suitable support or sufficient opportunities to meet probationary requirements:

> *The disadvantages from a line manager's perspective would be that it could be quite a time-consuming aspect, and that in those teams where there is a high turnover of staff it could potentially take time away from the other, more experienced members of a team. (NQSW manager)*

> *I think it is not all down to the NQSW, their success in their work will depend heavily on the quality of supervision and support they are given, the nature of the team they have joined and how much protection they are given. (NQSW manager)*

Becoming competent (post-qualifying)

In Round 1, panel members were asked to consider the role of different aspects of support given to NQSWs during their first year or so in practice and to highlight effective practice in these areas. Aspects covered included 'Induction', 'Supervision', 'Training and Development', 'Colleagues and Mentors' and 'Organisation'. In Round 2, a number of follow-up questions highlighted themes emerging from the panel's initial responses, including the role of practice learning and the potential for probationary years discussed earlier. In Round 3, participants were asked to comment on a comparison of the perspective of NQSWs to those of managers on areas including 'Theory and values', 'Supervision', 'Research awareness' and 'Skills development'. Data from all three rounds has been combined for analysis; issues emerging in response to the development of competency as a NQSW are discussed here.

Being sensitised / normative processes

Gaining competency continued once NQSWs started work. This critically involved a process of sensitisation as well as amassing further codified (formal) knowledge (see Eraut, 2000). For example, through exposure over time to a series of different cases, and through working alongside experienced colleagues, NQSWs began to develop a store of tacit knowledge which allowed them to calibrate their professional judgement and develop an 'internal benchmark' against which they could make rapid and appropriate decisions (see Eraut, 2007; Schön, 1983, 1987):

> *Thresholds are an area that are best judged though experience. NQSW have no internal benchmark to judge complexity. I recall one case of my own as a NQSW which I found particularly tricky and complex. It took me a while to realise it was the exception rather than the norm. (NQSW manager)*

> *They need to develop skills of thinking and acting on their feet and taking professional responsibility for their actions. (NQSW manager)*

How quickly NQSWs were able to assimilate the norms of practice also depended on a range of individual characteristics and factors related to early training opportunities and to NQSWs' wider experiences:

> *[It] depends on the individual, depends on their life experience and being able to apply some of that learning, depends on their placement and the opportunities there. (NQSW manager)*

Induction

Participants felt that effective induction processes were very important for NQSWs. Effective 'induction' was viewed as being achieved through a range of elements of support (formal and informal) such as supervision, mentoring, shadowing, training and development as well as through generic agency-wide induction procedures.

Some aspects of induction related to the whole organisation, some to the department and some were more specific to the work role. This included early induction focused on generic issues such as health and safety, agency policies, working locations and so on:

> *I feel that an Induction is crucial in the first year. It provides information on the wider remit of the organisation and where the service fits in. It provides the NQSW with information on agency wide roles*

and responsibilities and the ethos of the organisation. It provides the NQSW opportunities to meet other NQSWs in different service areas and cross reference their learning. It ensures the NQSW feels supported in their role both by the service and the wider organisation. (NQSW manager)

Formal agency (authority) induction was clearly thought to be insufficient on its own, but was useful and did provide NQSWs with a sense of belonging and an overview of the agency and associated procedures:

The e-induction programme by the council has limited use. However the personalised induction programme for the first month or so, I feel is very useful. (NQSW manager)

In our council we have a full induction check-list which identifies numerous aspects that need to be covered over the first weeks and months - this can range from where you put your coat, to the use of legislation, recording systems etc. (NQSW manager)

In addition to agency-level induction, most participants described a tailored series of opportunities for introductory experiences to meet individual needs as well as to introduce any unique aspects of the service or role:

Whilst it's good to have all the information to hand regarding guidance, procedures etc., this will not have much of an impact until the worker is picking up practice and can see where the guidance fits in and relates to the job. (NQSW manager)

A mix of formal e.g. introduction to systems, policies and procedures, informational - something to take away with them and consult later and experiential - shadowing someone on the job on day one to get a feel for the social work task. This should be followed up by informal induction sessions/reviews at one week, one month, three and six months to ensure learning is embedded. (NQSW manager)

Formal supervision

The importance of supervision for the motivation and development of new social workers has been reported previously (Chenot, Benton, & Kim, 2009; Davys & Beddoe, 2009). Supervision has several functions and effective supervision can help to promote job satisfaction for social workers (Cole, Panchanadeswaran, & Daining, 2004; Schwartz, 2007). One panel members described supervision as:

A dedicated period of time where the supervisor is able to focus along with the worker. Both bring a clear agenda for discussion. The discussion encompasses case management but also explores wider issues of ethics, values as well as service requirements and expectations. A discussion where appropriate re progression/personal development. (NQSW manager)

Supervision has a special role to play for social work students and NQSWs inasmuch as it can enhance their sense of professional mastery by promoting reflection on real-life practice (Davys & Beddoe, 2009). In addition, the need for effective and reflective supervision may be especially acute during periods of organisational change or times of resource constraint (Bourn & Hafford-Letchfield, 2011). Despite this, recent research raises the concern that supervision is increasingly restricted to functional, managerial or risk management aspects at the expense of wider professional reflection and development (Beddoe, 2010; Noble & Irwin, 2009).

In this study, members of the panel felt that supervision was highly important, especially as the individual transitioned from being a student to being a fully qualified worker:

> *Again, this is central to the process of supporting NQSW move from the role of a student to a qualified member of staff. (NQSW manager)*

> *Supervision is one of the most important roles for NQSWs during their first year and subsequent years. Supervision should not just be viewed as important for the initial learning years, but should be viewed as important throughout their career. (NQSW manager)*

Supervision was said to serve a range of functions to meet the needs of different stakeholders, including the NQSW, their employers and their service users:

> *Supervision has a number of functions and has to be effective for the NQSW, the clients or service users being worked with and also there has to be some recognition that the organisation needs supervision to ensure duties are being met. (NQSW manager)*

> *It should involve three aspects; Managerial, making sure the worker is competent and doing required tasks to a satisfactory standard; Professional development, what they need to do the task and improve outcomes; Personal support, impact of work on self. (NQSW manager)*

It was clear that most participants felt strongly that good supervision involved opportunities to reflect; managers often spoke about providing a 'safe space' for open and honest discussions, especially when tackling more complex case work. The provision of a safe space allowed for honest feedback to be exchanged in an affirming way and promoted reflection on how practice, values and theory could be integrated:

> *Critical to have a reflective space in [a] complex case (which may seem complex to them but isn't really). Critical for them to be able to ask lots of questions-no question is a silly question, private space away from team to be honest about how they are feeling and what support they need. (NQSW manager)*

> *Also provides support in a safe environment, so that positive and not so positive feedback can be exchanged between NQSW and supervisor. (NQSW manager)*

> *It's also an opportunity to explore values and to communicate that new workers are valued by the service. (NQSW manager)*

Whilst many managers highlighted the need to promote a reflective approach, some felt this should occur within a framework which also prioritised tangible decisions and outcomes. They acknowledged that supervision could not be open-ended as time was precious and pressured; as a result, the purposes of reflection were foregrounded and meetings were structured according to a specific agenda:

> *[Supervision should be] Organised; individualised; time specific and with productive outcomes. (NQSW manager)*

This should be two way process, clear agenda, worker should understand the format and be in agreement with this. Focus should be on variety of issues, work, practice, training opportunities [development]. Clear time limit on this, record discussion and actions, signed and copy to both worker and manager. (NQSW manager)

Supervision sessions were also an opportunity to address organisational concerns, for example to clarify roles, promote operational (and other) requirements and monitor the quality and nature of work for the NQSW:

Establishing clarity about role and task and in undertaking assessments of need and risk. Training needs. (NQSW manager)

It is a formal opportunity for the NQSW and supervisor to explore different aspects of their role and how it is impacting on them. (NQSW manager)

Important to monitor progress and to ensure that the NQSW understands what is expected of them. Chance to improve skills and monitor quality of work. (NQSW manager)

Ensuring assessment and decision making skills and knowledge are developed. Making sure the NQSW is moving towards completing post-registration requirements. (NQSW manager)

Supervision should also include Risk Assessment in all areas of work undertaken. (NQSW manager)

A number of managers highlighted the fact that finding a balance between operational requirements and personal space for reflection was a significant challenge given time and other constraints:

There is a focus on case work in supervision and less focus on theory and reflection… but that is not to say there should not be opportunities for this within post qualifying supervision. Limits of time, the needs of the service user as well as that of the staff and service is also a priority. (NQSW manager)

Considerable time and resources needed to be allocated to supervision to ensure that sufficient priority was given to it. This was difficult in the context of a busy social work department where it could be difficult to predict issues that might arise and take priority:

Supervision should be ring fenced time, but if it needs to be re-scheduled this is responsibility of both [supervisor and supervisee] to ensure this happens. (NQSW manager)

Managers appeared to approach supervision in different ways and with different levels of formality; whilst many mentioned the need to be available and accessible when needed, the majority specified the need for some kind of schedule or structure. This included achieving a suitable frequency for meetings. In the early days this could be very frequent:

Within the first couple of months they will get weekly direct supervision from me (two hours) and then until they finish their PRTL they will get two hours fortnightly - they also gets lots of informal supervision as and when they need it. (NQSW manager)

Several managers had a routine structure for the content of supervision meetings. This was thought to be helpful in ensuring the sessions were used to best effect and that both parties had clear expectations of what supervision involved. In some cases this was formalised by a written agreement:

> *A supervision history should be completed at the first supervision session to identify an NQSW experience of supervisions, this should then provide expectation of supervisor and supervisee and should be a written contract so clarity of roles and responsibilities. (NQSW manager)*

Training and development

As with induction and supervision, learning opportunities were not only seen as highly important but also multi-dimensional, taking different forms and fulfilling different functions. So whilst it was important to have basic and formal training structured around a mandatory programme, space for informal learning and developing a culture or ethos of learning were seen as equally important:

> *Encouraging a learning culture in the agency which takes place on an informal level as well as formal. Encouraging a sense of curiosity about the social work task. Access to current research. (NQSW manager)*

> *I think [training] is important for all social workers. A NQSW begins to assimilate and develop their understanding of being a practitioner in their new role but this can be difficult to make sense of in a busy team with a difficult complex case load. Time out to reflect and learn is therefore especially important. (NQSW manager)*

Whilst much development occurred 'on the job', an appropriate and comprehensive package of learning was seen as requiring a planned approach. Several participants suggested that this planned series of learning opportunities should follow a graded approach:

> *Training should be planned so that over the course of a couple of years all the essential elements of the role are covered. It begins with practical things like how to use systems and follow procedures but should move on to practice issues becoming more complex as time progresses. (NQSW manager)*

The participants often suggested that this incremental approach should gradually introduce new ideas and consolidate these within practice to build on emerging knowledge and skills. In this way training delivered at the right moment could be revelatory, enabling significant steps forward in development of the worker:

> *Training that opens up new possibilities for workers, new ways of working and encourages a sense of possibility as well as offering practical guidance for assessment and intervention. (NQSW manager)*

> *Training opens up practice opportunities and can be most useful when there is an element of practice to relate the training to so it has the best impact. In my experience, NQSWs often feel better equipped and more confident as a result of training. (NQSW manager)*

One manager listed a typical training package; it can be seen how this includes training specific to skills useful in this role, generic areas of learning and combined delivery of formalised training and less formal learning processes:

A NQSW in our team may get in first year - initial CP [child protection] training, vulnerable adult training, some domestic violence training, Solihull, communicating with children input, we can and must do better (with our LAAC children) training, some relevant procedural training e.g. computer system, new risk assessment Frameworks etc., on the job training e.g. group work co-facilitating with experienced facilitator etc., in-team training e.g. how to do a Sect 23 assessment, how to write a contact contract etc. They are also assigned tasks to research and to share the learning at least with me if not the team to help the team's learning. (NQSW manager)

Working alongside peers

Peers were often seen as a valuable source of knowledge, support and encouragement. Support could include overt activities such as shadowing, mentoring and co-working:

Mentor[ing] is an effective way of fostering support/relationships etc. I arranged for new worker to sit across from [an] experienced and positive worker. Effective would be opportunities to observe practice and be able to ask for advice when required. (NQSW manager)

Within our team we encourage and support joint working with colleagues, and if a more complex case has been allocated, an NQSW will more often be linked with the Senior Child Care Worker who will provide a mentoring / coaching role to support the worker in their learning and development. (NQSW manager)

In addition to these explicit strategies, support was also usefully gained via informal peer support and exposure to good role models who displayed appropriate values and working practice:

I also think that unofficial observations happen on a daily basis by line managers and colleagues of NQSWs and as this is less of a false environment than an 'official practice observation' I find that these are more meaningful and can still be reflected upon in supervision. (NQSW manager)

However, whilst colleagues were usually portrayed as an important and a positive source of support, several managers also drew attention to potentially less positive aspects of contact with peers:

Negativity will always be a feature of social work environment given the high levels of stress and workload demands. As a manager this is a consideration when thinking of where a new worker will sit and who they will be around. (NQSW manager)

It was noted that NQSWs are still at a formative stage of professional development; there was therefore a concern that difficult or negative office cultures could be detrimental. These issues needed to be sensitively and carefully managed:

The atmosphere of a team can have a significant bearing on any NQSW. It may influence their future practice or attitudes both positively and negatively. (NQSW manager)

Peer support and mentoring is crucial and will probably have one of the biggest influences in the NQSW career. However, if unregulated bad habits could be picked up. (NQSW manager)

Other line management strategies

In addition to the forms of support outlined above (induction, supervision and training) several line management strategies were mentioned that attempted to provide support, developmental opportunities or encouragement to NQSWs. These included:

- Gradual introduction of greater workload and more complex work;

I think maybe longer placements and a phased entry into work would be best. This might require employers sponsoring students through the training with the guarantee of a job if standards are met. The Fast Track Social Work scheme a few years ago was an example of this. (NQSW manager)

- Matching the work allocated to the NQSW's abilities and interests;

… new workers need time to develop their skills and experience in risk, crises, and complex cases. As a manager, I would not expect NQSWs to be fully competent in complex cases and would allocate work according to experience, knowledge and skills. (NQSW manager)

- Being assigned special projects or asked to input on subjects to team meetings;

Two ways I have identified to protect this are: a) incorporating an objective to read journal articles and share them with the team in annual PRD, b) use of Practice Evaluation. This has recently begun in our area and there is now a rolling programme giving practitioners the opportunity to reflect on their practice. (NQSW manager)

- Opportunities to observe or shadow more experienced workers;

… allow them to shadow pieces of work they have not been involved in and support when carrying out a new or difficult activity and ensuring there is ample support throughout and a reflective discussion afterwards to focus learning. (NQSW manager)

- Receiving feedback, evaluation or observations of their own practice. It was noted that this should be non-hierarchical;

Re observation of practice, I would agree that this is a good approach however, would want to extend it to the whole team including observation of team manager. In this way it would be viewed as an egalitarian approach to reviewing and improving practice throughout the service. (NQSW manager)

- Time management support;

Some NQSWs come with the requisite skills in organising themselves, some need to work hard on these, some don't seem to see the point. The culture in the office should reflect the importance of time management. (NQSW manager)

The challenges of providing support

The provision of support was a particular challenge in busy teams, since it required significant time and resource to do well; this was especially difficult within a context of budgetary constraint. It was helpful

when NQSWs were able to take part of the responsibility for arranging their own training and development opportunities. Whilst this was helpful it was clear that some participants in this study (first line managers) felt that they were unable to fully resolve these resourcing issues and that these difficulties needed to be addressed (as a priority) by senior managers:

> *Teams and managers are busy. I try to give a two-week induction and leave any further induction/learning requirements for the worker to source themselves, so they take some responsibility for their learning. (NQSW manager)*

> *I think anyone moving into a new sector/ department requires time to learn the job and get a feel for client group. However, this is against a backdrop of significant cuts to services; [fewer] workers and bigger caseloads. The above questions should be directed towards senior management and concrete plans/ processes put in place to protect NQSW. (NQSW manager)*

In this findings section we first considered the managers' appraisal of the extent to which NQSWs are prepared for practice before exploring their views on how NQSWs develop their professional abilities, both during training and post-qualifying. We now summarise some of the key learning from the study before considering what implications there may be for educators, employers and researchers.

Summary

Key points from findings

The study achieved a suitable sample size, good item response and obtained rich and valuable data. Across the three rounds, consensus was identified in a number of areas, and remaining differences were explained, such that in qualitative terms the study secured notable 'data saturation' (Bryman, 2004). Although the sample was not primarily designed for numerical analysis having a limited number of participants in different subgroups, broad themes did emerge in relation to NQSWs' preparedness and support which were supported by the qualitative data.

Of the 16 National Occupational Standard areas, NQSWs were most considered to be prepared in three areas: working with individuals and communities to help them make informed decisions; liaising with other teams, professionals, networks and systems; and advocating with and on behalf of individuals and communities. There were a number of areas, however, where NQSW preparedness was thought to be relatively limited. These included assessment of risks to individuals and communities and risks to self and colleagues (the latter being particularly low for NQSWs in children and families settings); managing complex scenarios; and working with groups to promote individual development and independence. Competence in preparing, producing and evaluating plans tended to be reported as lower by managers in children and families services than for those in adult settings.

There were also relatively low levels of agreement that NQSWs were completely ready for practice against six SSSC criteria. The lowest level of agreement was for the statement that NQSWs had the knowledge and

skills to manage complex caseloads, but there was more agreement that NQSWs demonstrated good habits of learning and enquiry.

Importantly, the qualitative findings suggested that most managers did not expect that NQSWs would know everything when they first entered the workplace. For the most part, managers saw this as acceptable as further 'on the job' learning was anticipated. But it seems that whilst, informally, many managers regard NQSWs' levels of preparedness as a normal and expected part of professional development, the formal structures and systems presumed that NQSWs *should* be fully competent as soon as fully qualified. This disparity was problematic and sometimes resulted in difficulties for NQSWs, social work teams and employing agencies.

Qualitative responses indicate that there are two particular areas where it would be beneficial for NQSWs to have greater experience and skills prior to qualifying. These were a greater understanding and experience of the realities of social work practice and clients' lives, and report-writing skills. There was a strong sense that NQSWs found it challenging and sometimes daunting to learn about the complexities of the job and of clients' needs, and that for a number, this could be somewhat overwhelming. Practice placements were considered to be a crucial method for developing this understanding; however, participants suggested that practice placement processes needed to be extended. Similarly there was considerable support for the idea of a post-qualifying probationary period prior to attainment of full professional status.

NQSW strengths were reported to include high levels of motivation, appropriate social work values, good habits of learning and enquiry, and up-to-date knowledge of theory and research, although the practical application of knowledge and values could be difficult for some NQSWs. Benefits arising from NQSWs' positive values, enthusiasm and knowledge extended to organisational settings where teams could be re-invigorated and facilitated to access new information. This appeared to be most effective where teams took time to share knowledge, learning and practice issues, for example in team meetings.

Employers had in place a broad spectrum of opportunities for NQSWs to learn, both formally and informally. This included induction, supervision, training, learning from colleagues, mentoring, writing skills sessions, time-management support, observing and shadowing experienced colleagues and case studies to provide students and NQSWs with opportunities for wider learning.

There were significant challenges around providing appropriate support for NQSWs due to workload and time demands. In some cases it was evident that, although supportive strategies were in place, there was not sufficient opportunity for NQSWs to reflect or explore some areas in greater depth.

Implications for educators

It may seem disappointing that less than half of managers believed that NQSWs were prepared for practice to carry out National Occupational Standard activities and that there were relatively low levels of agreement (34% on average) that NQSWs met six practice criteria identified by SSSC. Whilst this may suggest that NQSWs initially require significant levels of support from managers and colleagues, it should be borne in mind that this is not atypical when compared to novices in other professional groups.

This research suggests that it may be useful for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to review emerging learning outcomes required by employers and consider how HEIs can support the attainment of the skills and characteristics most desired by employers. In particular HEIs may like to place greater emphasis on ensuring NQSWs develop good report writing skills, and are supported to develop an understanding of the complexities and realities of practice.

The role and assessment of student placements generated significant discussion in the research. In relation to this HEIs could consider the length and type of placements (e.g. it was recommended that placements should be longer / more frequent and that all students should have experience of at least one statutory placement). This would depend on securing co-operation from appropriate employing bodies and may require consideration of longer programmes of study.

Further observation and assessment of students' direct practice, such as engaging with service users was suggested as an additional component of the placement assessment framework which was mainly viewed as being focused on written reflections of practice and links to theory.

Managers also noted that, as a profession, they rely on HEIs to select suitable candidates for social work practice, but felt that this process was not always as robust or relevant as it could be. HEIs might wish to review selection procedures and the supports that are in place in the rare instances where it becomes evident that a student is not coping well with the demands of the course or placements. HEIs are well-placed to ensure that students who revise their aims or who seem to be less well suited to social work practice are supported to make alternative plans rather than working their way through the course and entering social work employment significantly unprepared.

Finally, the introduction of a formal post-qualifying probationary period received a good level of support; the feasibility of this is something that HEIs may wish to explore with SSSC and employers.

Implications for employers

Findings from this research highlight several areas that employers might give consideration to when employing and supporting NQSWs. Employer practices and processes such as induction, supervision and training may benefit from regular review to tailor learning outcomes to those required by the NQSW and the team. One critical element of supervision that was sometimes reported to be missing was sufficient time for NQSWs to reflect on practice and review their personal development. With regards to induction, the most effective practice was considered to include a programme of formal and informal learning opportunities, and training was reported to be particularly beneficial if it was interactive and explicitly linked to practice.

Early and supported opportunities to learn about the realities of social work practice at an appropriate level would be beneficial as NQSWs may have developed limited understandings of these areas during student placements and qualifying courses. This should include support to deal with the complexities of clients' lives, difficult cases, high caseloads, assessments of risk and statutory work. The need for this exposure also underlines the key role for employing organisations in working with HEIs to provide sufficient and appropriate student placement opportunities. In this context, employers may also wish to discuss with

SSSC, HEIs and professional bodies the value or feasibility of a uniform formal post-qualifying probationary period for social workers.

Characteristics and skills such as high levels of motivation, willingness to learn and mastery of up-to-date theory and knowledge can begin to diminish when NQSWs enter employment. Managers should consider how the working environment can maintain enthusiasm and skills of enquiry. Possible approaches to this can involve protected workloads, mentoring, establishing shared values within teams and using team meetings for discussion of theory and research.

NQSWs' research skills were generally reported to be underutilised and it may be beneficial for teams to consider how this mode of learning can help the team and NQSW in their everyday learning and practice. There is not necessarily a need to use research skills to complete an identifiable piece of 'research'; rather it includes opportunities to use transferrable research skills to facilitate an open approach to new or critical ways of thinking.

Implications for research

This study should be considered alongside the GCU study of NQSWs' views of their own preparedness and support needs. These studies took place at the same time and used similar concepts to facilitate comparison of findings. There are many areas which would be interesting for further research; some of those likely to produce findings of particular impact include examinations of:

- The perspectives of a wider range of informants, including service users and a range of professional colleagues (see Moriarty, Manthorpe, Stevens, & Hussein, 2011).
- The extent to which an early low level of preparedness causes problems in practice settings or is quickly addressed, potentially by examining longitudinal effects of differences in levels of preparedness on entry to the profession.
- Whether the apparent differences in sub-groups (e.g. child and adult services) noted in this study hold true in a larger quantitative study.
- The longer-term impact of any forthcoming changes initiated to qualifying courses, probationary periods, or employer supports for NQSWs.
- The relationship between managers' judgements of NQSW readiness, post-qualifying support and longer- term career trajectory or exit from the profession.

We are grateful for the help we received in conducting this study which has investigated the perspectives of first-line managers of NQSWs in respect of their readiness for practice. This information is complementary to the GCU's parallel study investigating NQSWs' own perspectives. We hope that the information generated will be useful; we realise that as with much research, some questions may be raised which are as yet unanswered. We hope that we are able to continue to contribute to these debates and we would therefore warmly welcome comments or discussion in respect of this study and related topics.

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Appendix 1: Methods

The online Delphi approach

The Delphi study approach is predominantly a qualitative approach. Data are generated through a series of rounds of contact with a panel of participants who have a particular sphere of expertise. Traditionally this is achieved via repeated one-to-one interviews; the researcher 'shuttles' between different members of the panel and the panel members never meet. The researcher aims to interview each panel member once in each 'round' of the study. During the second and subsequent rounds, anonymised summaries of earlier responses are shared so that participants are able to confirm, refute or refine the emerging findings. Our online Delphi approach follows a similar process, except that data collection takes place over the internet rather than via personal interview.

A Delphi method was chosen for a number of reasons; in particular it has been shown to be a rapid and effective way to generate detailed data and to secure buy-in from participants. The online mode of communication has a number of advantages for participants such as enabling them to participate at a time and place that best suits them. There are also advantages for the researchers, including minimising time and resource requirements (e.g. for travel and transcription) and the avoidance of certain potential sources of bias (e.g. from social influences or transcription). Data are in effect, 'analysis-ready'. Recent studies suggest that online Delphi studies can be highly successful and learning from these earlier studies has been incorporated into the design of this study (Lerpiniere et al., 2013; Welch, 2012).

Sample

The Delphi panel for this study were first-line managers of NQSWs. It was believed that this group would be able to provide informed and current observations of NQSWs' preparedness for practice, areas of strength and limitations. In addition, it was felt that this group would be well-placed to comment on systems within the workplace for providing effective support for NQSWs during their first year or two in practice.

There exists no straightforward list of employers of social workers which could have been used as a sampling frame for this study. Instead, a convenience sample was identified using SSSC's contacts across a range of different statutory social work settings. An initial group of 42 potential participants was identified and names and contact details passed to the research team. Potential participants were contacted to provide information about the study's aims and methods, the voluntary nature of participation, data handling processes, and the extent of confidentiality.

Potential participants were invited to become members of a 'virtual panel' and to respond at their convenience to three online rounds of stimulus material and associated questions. Twenty- seven participants agreed to take part; of these, 26 went on to complete questions in the first 'round'.

The Delphi rounds

The first round was the most extensive and consisted of a mixture of open and closed questions incorporating contextual questions, evaluations of preparedness against various national standards,

identification of NQSWs' strengths and weaknesses and identification of what support is provided during the first year of practice. Twenty-six panel members took part in Round 1.

The second round of the study presented some of our early analyses of responses to the first round and asked participants to consider and comment on these via a number of open questions. Sixteen panel members added further responses at Round 2.

The third and final round repeated this process and additionally presented some key findings from the GCU study of NQSWs' views, asking the panel members to reflect on how these were similar to or different from their own perspective. Eighteen panel members took part in Round 3.

The three rounds were presented to panel members over a period of around eight weeks during the first months of 2014.

Data format and analysis

The process collected data in the format of participants' typewritten responses. For Round 1, open text, numeric and pre-categorised 'tick-box' data were gathered; Rounds 2 and 3 consisted entirely of open text questions. All textual responses were transferred into QSR NVivo in order to facilitate analysis. Analysis consisted of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with two researchers reviewing material to identify initial trends before more detailed coding of the material took place. Numeric and pre-categorised data were analysed in SPSS. Due to the relatively small numbers in this study, and the fact that it is based on a convenience sample, the main focus of numeric analyses was on producing descriptive statistics. Where inferential analyses are conducted (as with a small number of between-group analyses) caution should be applied when interpreting the results.

Item-response was generally good, with most questions in each round being answered by all participating panel members. Open text responses were generally given in fully-developed sentences; sometimes these responses were extensive with some exceeding 250 words in length. Most textual responses fell between 50 and 200 words [for comparative purposes, note this particular paragraph contains 95 words]. Occasionally short answers were given to a question, usually cross-referring to a more lengthy response given to an earlier question. Thus we are confident that the written data provides a highly detailed and rich source of information.

In this report, verbatim quotes have been used to give a clear sense of the richness and nuance of participants' contributions. Selected quotes typically represent several similar comments. Where used, identifiers have been removed to prevent identification of individuals or organisations, and all participant quotes are attributed to the generic 'NQSW manager' meaning any member of the Delphi virtual panel. The study received approval from the School of Social Work and Social Policy Ethics Committee, University of Strathclyde.

Copies of the stimulus material and questions posed in each round are available on enquiry to the authors.

Strengths and limitations of the methods

These methods have a number of strengths but also some important limitations. The study adopted a pragmatic mixed-methods approach; this was helpful since it allowed us to explore the detailed perspectives of panel members whilst also investigating how these perspectives are distributed among members of the panel. The study provided access to the insights of relevant managers who have 'expert' knowledge of NQSWs' first years in practice. These people were experienced practitioners in their field, currently positioned as first-line managers, thus they were well-placed to comment both on the demands of the job and on their experience of NQSWs' preparedness for it.

Whilst we have conducted a mixed methods study with both qualitative and quantitative analyses, this study was primarily designed as a qualitative piece of work. This is reflected in our approach to sampling; whilst ideal for a qualitative study, the sample size and make-up places restrictions on how numeric findings should be interpreted. In particular, they should not be seen as being representative of all first-line social work managers since we cannot guarantee this panel reflects the profession as a whole. The study was not designed to have the structure or the 'statistical power' required to confirm associate or causal links, and although conducted over three rounds, it is cross-sectional rather than longitudinal as it is based on panel members' opinions at one point in time; i.e. our Delphi approach is not longitudinal. Numeric patterns and trends described in the findings are therefore associations only and should not be taken as implying causal links. However, since the sample size and make up was ideal for qualitative analyses and provided sufficient rich textual data with high levels of explanatory insight, we are able to use this to complement the numeric analyses, providing insights into how apparent differences are likely to arise. For example, we note some apparent differences between groups (e.g. adult and child social work) and use the qualitative data to explore potential reasons for these.

Further research would be required to confirm these apparent differences or identify whether they are primarily due to how qualifying courses have prepared NQSWs for practice in different areas, or due to other subsequent influences, including the recruitment of different types of candidate to different work roles or due to differences in induction and early in-role development.

A further strength of the study is that it is aligned with the current study of NQSWs' perspectives being conducted by GCU. This presents a number of advantages. For example, the researchers had access to a supportive peer group from the three collaborating organisations. In addition, it has been possible in a small way to present emerging findings from the GCU study to managers to allow panel members to respond directly to NQSWs' perspectives.

Appendix 2: Additional tables

1 Full results: NOS areas

National Occupational Standards activity area	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	n=
Working with individuals and communities to help them make informed decisions	0	75	13	13	0	24
Liaising with other teams, professionals, networks and systems	0	48	28	20	4	25
Advocating with and on behalf of individuals and communities	4	64	20	12	0	25
Assessing needs and options to recommend a course of action	0	56	20	20	4	25
Researching, analysing and using current knowledge of best practice	0	52	28	20	0	25
Working with individuals and communities to achieve change	8	44	28	20	0	25
Managing and being accountable for own work	0	48	28	20	4	25
Supporting the development of networks to meet assessed needs	0	44	28	28	0	25
Preparing for and participating in decision- making forums	0	40	28	28	4	25
Preparing, producing and evaluating plans	0	38	29	29	4	24
Working with groups to promote individual development and independence	0	32	36	32	0	25
Assessing and managing risks to individuals and communities	4	24	32	36	4	25
Managing complex ethical dilemmas and conflicts	0	28	28	44	0	25
Responding to crisis situations	0	21	21	50	8	24
Assessing and managing risks to self and colleagues	0	20	44	36	0	25
Contributing to the management of resources	0	16	32	48	4	25
Mean	43*		28*	31*		

NB: Percentages do not add up to 100 due to rounding.*apparent difference due to rounding.

2 Detailed results for agreement that NQSWs were prepared in SSSC practice areas (row %)

		Agree	Neither agree or disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
NQSWs have the necessary knowledge and skills to manage complex caseloads	Child	0	15	77	8
	Adult	9	9	64	18
NQSWs have the necessary resilience required for the job	Child	0	62	23	15
	Adult	18	36	46	0
NQSWs are able to use sound professional judgement	Child	0	39	23	39
	Adult	0	27	18	55
NQSWs have demonstrated the habits of learning and inquiry	Child	69	15	15	0
	Adult	65	27	9	0
NQSWs understand outcomes-based approaches and are able to deliver personalised services	Child	46	31	23	0
	Adult	46	18	36	0
NQSWs are able to take on social work roles in integrated services	Child	46	46	8	0
	Adult	55	27	18	0

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