

Evaluation of a pilot delivery of the Professional Development Award in Practice Learning (SCQF level 9) in the South East of Scotland

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Executive Summary

This report summarises the findings of an evaluation of a pilot, in South-East Scotland, of the Professional Development Award in Practice Learning (Social Services) at Stage 2 (SCQF Level 9) during 2009/10. The award was approved by the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) and the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), delivered by Learning Network South East, Stevenson College and their partners, and part funded by the Learning Network. The evaluation was conducted in 2011 by an independent researcher, and drew, retrospectively, on the experiences of three candidates and their employers, tutor, assessor and line managers, as well as documentary evidence and interviews with programme providers.

The candidates and their employers

- The award's candidates worked in social services settings in the south east of Scotland, and all but one was a qualified social worker. The majority of candidates had prior academic qualifications at SCQF 10 and 11.
- 19 candidates started the programme, and 15 completed it.
- Case study candidates were primarily motivated by a wish to qualify as practice teachers for social work degree students, but also wanted to promote learning more widely in their workplaces and organisations.
- Local authority and voluntary sector employers were also said to be mostly motivated by the need to offer practice learning opportunities, although the wider aspirations of the award, to support the development of social services learning organisations, were also significant to some managers.

Experiences of the programme

- The award was delivered through a combination of face to face programme days, candidate-run action learning sets and private study.
- The award's content, approach and assessment were positively regarded.
- Adjusting to SQA evidence requirements was an initial challenge for programme providers, assessors and some candidates.
- Uncertainties about the sufficiency of the status of the Level 9 award as a preparation for practice teaching were problematic for some candidates, who felt that their achievements might be 'devalued'.
- Case study candidates said they were well supported by programme staff, other candidates and line managers and colleagues in their own agencies.
- Candidates were supported by personal capabilities such as reflexivity, self management skills and the ability to draw on past and present experience.
- The major barriers to learning were cited as competing workload pressures and lack of time; workplaces varied in the amount of workload relief they gave candidates. Some candidates had to overcome individual barriers to learning, such as managing dyslexia, and anxiety about resuming academic study.

Learning from and impact of the programme

- Case study candidates attributed positive changes in their self-awareness, reflexivity, independent thinking, analytical and leadership skills, and confidence, supported by improved knowledge about facilitating learning, evaluation and the context for practice, to their participation in the programme.
- The three case study candidates had offered seven practice learning opportunities since they started the award in 2009.
- Changes in candidate behaviour were evident in their new roles as practice teachers, as well as a developing ability to support colleagues, active evaluation of learning, cascading knowledge to other workers and use of presentation skills to facilitate others' learning.
- Changes in organisations and environments are harder to measure, but there was evidence that achievement of the award is enabling some candidates to take on new roles in their organisation, be proactive in facilitating and evaluating learning, and, in mostly less explicit ways, to improve outcomes for the service users and carers that they work with.
- Two of the case study candidates had management roles which seemed to support their use of learning from the award to promote the development of a learning culture in their workplaces in imaginative and creative ways.

Future challenges

- The findings suggest that Level 9 in south-east Scotland broadly meets the principles, aims and learning outcomes of the SQA award, although it proved difficult to attract a diversity of candidate roles and experience.
- The evidence suggests that the programme is well supported by its teaching and assessment framework. The level 9 award was thought by all participants to provide a good basis for practice teaching social work students.
- The pilot was small scale and its findings may not be representative of all candidates' and employers' experience of the Level 9 award.
- There are continuing doubts about the sustainability of the award, with concerns about the level of future uptake by employers during a time of economic constraint. Locally, the main demand for practice learning appears for qualified practice teachers, and uptake for the Level 9 award was said to be likely to remain low unless its suitability for practice teaching is agreed nationally.

Introduction

The practice learning qualifications in Scotland

There has, over the last ten years, been a steady shift in our understanding of work-based learning, from seeing this as the preserve of a small number of specialist trainers to being “everybody’s business” in the Scottish social services workforce (Scottish Executive, 2004). An important strand of this movement has been the development of a staged framework of Practice Learning Qualifications to support the learning of the social services workforce, and its partners, in Scotland. The new qualifications are intended to support the development of “a competent, confident, flexible and diverse” workforce (SIESWE, 2006: 9), and are aligned closely to current workforce planning strategies in the social care sector (Scottish Executive, 2005), and Codes of Practice for both employees and employers in Scottish Social Services (SSSC, 2009).

The Practice Learning Qualifications comprise a suite of awards developed to support the learning of practice educators with different roles from a wide range of backgrounds. The Practice Learning Qualification (Social Services) [PLQ(SS)] is available for people working in social services who are eligible for registration with the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC). Practice Learning Qualifications [PLQs] are also available to people working in related professions, such as health, and to other individuals, including service users and carers, with significant roles in practice learning. The framework has four stages (Stage 1 to Stage 4), set at levels 7 to 11 of the Scottish Qualification and Credit Framework (SCQF). Since the suite of awards was introduced in Scotland, PLQ programmes have been developed and delivered in all four of the geographical areas previously served by the Scottish Social Services Learning Networks. The majority of programmes have been at Stage 3 (at SCQF level 10), with smaller numbers at Stages 2 and 4 (SCQF 9 and 11), and none to date at Stage 1 (SCQF 7). The SSSC has responsibility for the approval and quality assurance of the practice learning qualifications in Scotland.

This report summarises the findings of an evaluation of a pilot of the PLQ(SS) at Stage 2 (SCQF Level 9), delivered in south east Scotland during 2009/10. The delivery of the award was overseen by a partnership involving the statutory sector (City of Edinburgh, Scottish Borders, Midlothian, East and West Lothian), the voluntary sector (The Multicultural Family Base, Circle), and Stevenson College (South East Scotland Learning Network, 2011a).

The South East Scotland pilot was the first pilot of the Level 9 award in Scotland. More recently, another pilot of the award was run in the North of Scotland. This award has also been evaluated and is reported on separately (Gordon, 2011a). A summary report of the two evaluations, and the learning from their combined findings is also available (Gordon, 2011b). This report sets out the background to the

development and delivery the Level 9 award in South East Scotland, and the aims and methods of the evaluation. It goes on to summarise and discuss the evaluation's findings and highlight local learning from the pilot programme.

A note on terminology

Practice learning language can be confusing: different terms are used in different parts of the UK, and sometimes within Scotland, to describe similar roles and qualifications. In this report the award's graduates are referred to as 'candidates' or, where appropriate, 'Level 9 holders', and those that they support in the workplace 'learners'; these may include a range of individuals, including social work and other students, and colleagues. 'Practice teacher' is used to refer to the specific role of facilitating the learning and undertaking the assessment of social work students undertaking practice learning opportunities in the workplace. 'Practice educator' is used to refer to a broader role in facilitating the learning of others, including colleagues, SVQ candidates and students from disciplines others than social work e.g. nursery nursing. Although there are different ways of referring to the award, this report will use the term, 'the Level 9 award', as this is the terminology used by candidates, employers, assessors and course providers in the South East. The 'South East of Scotland' in this report refers to the geographical area previously served by the Scottish Social Services Learning Network South East: East Lothian, Edinburgh City, Midlothian, Scottish Borders and West Lothian.

There is a glossary of terms and abbreviations at the end of the report.

The Level 9 award in the South East of Scotland

The Level 9 award is part of a four staged award designed to support the learning and development of others. The more specific aims of the Level 9 award are to equip individuals with the skills, knowledge and understanding required to provide practice learning opportunities for others and to give appropriate support, feedback and assessment, by developing candidates' abilities and competence to:

- Support and guide individual and collective learning using a range of methods
- Support the development of learning cultures within and across organisations
- Provide and facilitate practice learning opportunities
- Give feedback and assess the learning of others at an appropriate level

Elements of two other SQA units, 'Evidence-Based Practice' and 'Leadership for Learning', were also integrated into the course programme (These are more explicitly part of the Level 10 SQA award, but are also covered at Level 9 since they are part of SSSC's original award specifications). The entry requirement for the Level 9 award is a qualification at SCQF Level 8 (or equivalent) or above with a minimum of one year's relevant experience in a social services or other relevant setting (Scottish Qualifications Authority, 2011).

The level 9 award in the South East, like most of the other PLQ awards in Scotland, was delivered as a Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) award: The Professional Development Award in Practice Learning (Social Services). The programme was developed and delivered by Learning Network South East and Stevenson College (an SQA Centre) on a modular basis, each module comprising two SQA units. Delivery was through a mix of face to face learning (workshops and candidate led action learning sets), on the job work based learning and individual study. Each candidate had an allocated assessor (see also Assessment). The Learning Network was able to subsidise the Level 9 award so that candidate fees were lower than the actual running costs.

Aims of the evaluation

The purpose of undertaking two evaluations of the Practice Learning Qualification at Level 9 - in the north and south east of Scotland - was to learn from the experience of delivery of the same set of standards in two different parts of Scotland. Both aimed, to varying extents, to assess both the quality of the learning experience and the impact of undertaking the award on candidates, learners, assessors/ tutors, and the organisations that the candidates worked for. However, the focus of the two evaluations has inevitably been rather different. Evaluating the delivery of the award in the north has been undertaken during the programme's presentation, and so has been able to access the views of candidates as they undertook the award. The south east evaluation was undertaken considerably after the event, which made these process elements harder to evaluate, but provided a good opportunity to ask participants to look back and consider the impact of the award on both the candidates and their organisations over time.

The purpose of this report is to summarise the evaluation findings of the south east element of this project in relation to the following aims:

1. To assess the extent to which the delivery and content of the south east level 9 award met its objective: "To equip individuals with the skills, knowledge and understanding required to provide practice learning opportunities for others and to give appropriate support, feedback and assessment" (SIESWE, 2006).
2. To build on our wider understanding of what assists individuals and organisations to promote the integration of learning into the workplace.

A further report will bring together this evaluation with the parallel evaluation of the north of Scotland level 9 award to meet two further aims:

3. To evaluate the outcomes of the two awards in terms of candidate learning, development of the role of the practice educator, and of the impact of candidates' participation in the Level 9 award on organisational learning and development.

4. To use the findings of the evaluations to stimulate and inform ongoing discussion about the most effective ways to deliver the PLQ qualifications in the current economic climate, including any evidence of the most helpful balance between local and national delivery.

Methodology

Methodological approach

The evaluation methods were broadly based on the methodology used in a previous evaluation of one of the Practice Learning Qualifications: PLQ(SS) at Stage 3 in Tayforth in central Scotland (Gordon and Parker, 2009). The reasons for using a similar methodology were partly practical, drawing on a pre-existing research process that was relatively well 'tried and tested', with research instruments that had already been piloted, and partly to provide potential for comparison between the findings of these two evaluations, as well as a third evaluation in the north of Scotland.

The evaluation had both process and outcome components. There was a limited process element that examined the experience of candidates in retrospect when they undertook the award, to identify both what supported and hindered their progress. The outcome evaluation primarily focused on the impact of the learning of candidates on themselves and others. It drew on Kirkpatrick's framework (1994) for evaluating training programmes looking at four levels of potential learning from the Level 9 award:

- Participants' initial response to the programme of training
- Changes in the candidate's learning e.g. gaining a better understanding of the context for social services practice learning
- Changes in candidate's behaviour e.g. use of knowledge of practice learning to support students or colleagues more effectively
- Impacts on candidates' organisations and learning environments e.g. changes in systems, roles, services and structures

Collecting information about the potential range of different changes – in responses, learning, behaviour, and outcomes – required a variety of complementary evaluation methods that took account of different perspectives, including those of candidates, learners, assessors, and line managers, as well as those who developed, delivered, administered and supported the Level 9 award. These methods are summarised in the next section.

Methods

The methods used were mostly qualitative, involving exploration of the experiences and perceptions of different stakeholders in the Level 9 award. There was a very small quantitative element e.g. collection of data about participant numbers.

Desk Research: This took the form of limited analysis of publicly available documents about the award. Most written information about the award (e.g. candidate evaluations) was no longer readily available because Learning Network South East, which held much of this information, was closed in May 2011.

Case studies: The experiences of three candidates in the context of their practice role and workplace were explored in more detail using a case study approach. Each case study took the form of a face to face interview with the candidate and other key individuals in the workplace that they identified as being involved in, or benefitting from, their practice learning. The candidates were approached by their former assessor to seek their consent, and that of their employer, to take part in a case study. Two case studies were in a local authority setting, and one in a voluntary sector organisation. All three candidates now acted as practice teachers to social work degree programme students, and two had line management responsibilities for other workers (one had been promoted after completing the award). All three candidates worked with children and families, but in different contexts: a children and families social work team, a nursery and in aftercare services for looked after children. The distribution of case study interviews is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Case Study Interviews

Case Study	Candidate	Line Manager	Assessor	Learner	No. of interviews
1	√	√	√	√	4
2	√	√	√		3
3	√	√	√		3
Total	3	3	3*	1	10 interviews

*All three candidates had the same assessor

All interviews were recorded using a digital recorder and fully transcribed. A generic topic guide² was used for all interviews and areas of relevance selected from this for each interview.

² Research instruments can be accessed by contacting the author: jean@jeangordon.co.uk

Interviews with programme providers and employers: Four key individuals involved in the development, delivery and evaluation of the programme were approached and interviewed using the generic topic guide, either face to face (two participants), or by telephone (two participants). One interviewee was also a social work employer.

Ethics

The research was conducted in accordance with the Ethical Guidelines of the Social Research Association (2003). All those who were approached as part of the evaluation, to take part in telephone or face to face interviews, were provided with information about the project, including information about the reasons why the data was being collected, and the uses to which the data would be put. Evaluation participants were asked to provide written consent to their involvement in the evaluation. All data collected through the evaluation was stored and transmitted in compliance with the Data Protection Act 1998.

Analysis

The data from the interviews, desk research, and focus group was systematically analysed to draw out the key information and themes. Most of the analysis was qualitative, involving the coding, sorting and interpretation of the gathered data to generate findings to meet the objectives for the evaluation. Whilst this process aimed to establish comparisons and similarities of experience between different stakeholders, and organisations, the analysis also tried to minimise fragmentation, particularly of case study data, to help gain a better understanding of the contexts of different workplaces by combining and, where relevant, bringing together data from practice learning stakeholders with different roles and perspectives.

Findings 1: The candidates and their workplaces

The Candidates

Eighteen people applied to undertake the award, and 17 started the programme, of whom 15 completed the qualification. All but one candidate was a qualified social worker. Previous qualification levels varied, but most candidates had honours degrees (at SCQF 10), several had masters level qualifications (SCQF 11) and one was undertaking a PhD. Candidates worked with both child and adult service users with a range of needs, and there was a mix of participants from voluntary and statutory services. On completion, five candidates went on to undertake the PDA at Level 10 through a Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) route, and four candidates achieved this award.

Motivation and Interest

All three case study candidates were strongly motivated by their wish to act as a practice teacher to social work students. Obtaining a qualification that prepared them for this role was seen as an opportunity for professional development. This specific interest in practice teaching was set against a broader interest in facilitating the learning of others in their workplace,

"I had always been interested in helping people to learn, and I was always doing some training for the department with groups of people. So I think I had come to the point where I was looking to continue my professional development, and for me [the award] seemed like the obvious way to develop myself, to become more useful to the team, and to also have a different aspect of the job to do."

The candidates all identified a range of ways in which they were already involved in the facilitation of learning before they started the programme. For example, one candidate was in a managerial role which involved promoting the learning of other staff, and one was an SVQ assessor. For all candidates, therefore, undertaking this award was both seen as "*a natural progression*", building on their capabilities and interests, and an opportunity to gain a qualification that had currency in relation to the practice learning of social work students.

Line managers of the three candidates also saw the award as an opportunity for supporting the professional development of their staff. The ability to offer practice learning opportunities to social work students was particularly valued,

"I see it as a good opportunity for staff, for their development, to do practice teaching. I also see how having a student in the organisation is a big positive because I would see it as a good way of keeping us up to date, challenging what we are doing."

Having an additional practice teacher in one team also freed up the manager, also a practice teacher, for other tasks. The "loss" of practice teachers to management positions was also highlighted by other participants, and, more broadly, the challenges of ensuring that there are sufficient numbers of practice teachers to offer placements to students, seemed to be a strong underlying motivation for employers to support their staff to undertake the award. At the same time, two of the managers who took part in the evaluation stressed that they had learnt that the award was also provided other opportunities to supporting their organisation's broader commitment to learning,

"I think that the emphasis on continuous professional development with staff as well as the work with the student has broadened the learning emphasis. So, rather than being purely about student learning, I do think that the Level 9 and 10 awards have offered something more."

This motivation accords well with the broader aspirations of the award in terms of developing workforce learning cultures, and the intentions of the partnership delivering the award to "*sustaining this vision in a holistic way*". At the same time, it was observed by a tutor that the need to train practice teachers was central to employers' interest in supporting their staff to undertake the award,

"They wanted practice teachers because what they wanted was social work students, and they weren't particularly interested in learning organisations: they needed to have social work students coming in the door."

This tension between the broader vision and narrower (but also essential) ambitions of the award in terms of training sufficient numbers of practice teachers, will be explored in more detail later in the report.

Finally, the availability of part-funding for the award was a strong motivating factor for the manager of a candidate in the voluntary sector, and was said by programme providers to have been a key driver for many employers.

Key findings: The candidates

- Retention levels were quite high, with 15 of an original 19 candidates completing the qualification.
- Candidates were primarily motivated to qualify as practice teachers for social work students, but also wanted to promote learning more widely in the workplace.
- Employers were said to be mostly motivated by the need to offer practice learning opportunities to social work students, although the wider aspirations of the award, to support the development of social services learning organisations, were significant to some managers.

Findings 2: Experiences of the award

Eighteen months had elapsed since candidates had completed the award, so that their commentary on the structure and content of the award was not a detailed one, but does highlight some key aspects of interest and learning that still stood out for them.

Programme content and pedagogy

The programme's framework was provided by the three mandatory units of the SQA award:

- Support the learning environment
- Facilitate learning in a social services practice context' for social services sector candidates
- Assess and evaluate learning

The programme was delivered through a series of programme days, based on adult learning principles and comprising three key elements:

- Sharing, valuing and developing previous experience
- Gaining new knowledge
- Practice based exercises and case studies to enable candidates to assimilate and apply previous experience and new knowledge.

Candidates also were members of small action learning sets which met after the delivery of each module to extend the learning from the programme days and to enable candidates to learn from each other, and relate their learning to practice. The programme was supported by handbooks, handouts, web-based materials and a access to a library. For one candidate, the face to face element of the programme was vital,

"It really appealed to me...because I know other courses that I have been offered were completely distance learning, with no contact with the University other than electronic contact. I just really didn't want that, it really wouldn't have worked for me. It was the two days with tutor contact and then being set assignments to then go away and work on, then come back, and that was the ideal approach for me."

Overall, candidates' recollections of the programme content and style of delivery were positive. Those elements of the face to face delivery that were experiential, involving, for example, role play, and activities and small group discussions that made very active links between examples of candidate and tutor practice and theory, were particularly valued. One candidate would have liked this emphasis to have been even stronger, and for course materials to have introduced more tools for

learning *"interspersed with the more heavy academic stuff"*. However, all candidates found that the programme offered a sufficiently good balance between knowledge, reflection and practice elements of learning in the programme. Different aspects of the programme stood out for the three candidates, but content that was most often mentioned in interviews as being valuable related to the evaluation of learning, student/ staff supervision and how different people learn. Their assessor described all three candidates as using course materials well, highlighting the way, for example candidates used a key concept in the programme, that facilitating others' learning is *"a 50:50 enterprise"*,

"All candidates have found that really helpful and have often referred back to it: 'I feel like I am doing 100% here and the student isn't...' so that has been key when things have started to look difficult."

All three candidates thought that all their learning on the programme was relevant to their roles as practice teachers and educators. Summing up, one candidate said,

"..it gave you a really good foundation on which to build your skills and your confidence in relation to practice learning. It gave you the tools and the frameworks in which to work with a learner [and] expectations that you will further investigate your practice and reflect on the way that we deliver placements, evaluate placements and evaluate our role."

Candidates were also spoke highly of their participation in the action learning sets, which provided valued opportunities for small group discussion of practice learning as well as mutual support (see also Supports and Barriers). The candidates were all assessing learners, social work students on placement, at the same time as they were studying on the programme, and the action learning sets provided a place where candidates could share their learning, and problem solve,

"We were actually sharing the practical issues of dealing with students. We were supporting each other really. As much learning came from that...you know, we'd say, 'try this..', or another person would be having a problem with a particular learner who was maybe failing a placement, so we'd share ways we support our colleague to work with that learner more effectively."

There were mixed views amongst the three candidates about whether assessing a learner at the same time as undertaking the programme had been helpful. One candidate thought that it was essential to be working with a social work student concurrently, stressing the need to *"practice the learning while it is still fresh"*. Another candidate felt equally strongly that undertaking the programme whilst assessing a student had been an excessive pressure, although this may have been at least partly related, for this candidate, to other factors, such as limited workload relief, and the testing experience of working with a social work degree student who ultimately failed their practice placement (see also Supports and Barriers).

Assessment

The assessment process was described by the programme's partnership as *'holistic..continuous, pragmatic, and emphasises the integration of underpinning knowledge and practice with students and other learners in the workplace setting'* (Learning Network South East, 2011a).

Candidates were required to complete a knowledge based account and a reflective/reflexive account linked to practice for each module of the programme. They received written feedback for each account, and included this evidence as part of their final portfolio, referenced to learning outcomes for the award. The portfolio, constructed with the support of the assessor and a number of face to face portfolio days, was required to be submitted within one year of registration on the programme.

Each candidate had an assessor, who provided individual candidate support and observed and assessed their practice in facilitating and assessing learning on three occasions. The SQA requirements presented challenges for assessors unused to vocational qualifications, although some assessors had prior experience of SQA systems through previous assessment of Level 10 award candidates. One assessor described this pilot delivery as *"a mutual learning process"*, as they worked with candidates to find effective ways to meet assessment requirements through selection of robust evidence, whilst resisting a certain amount of pressure from candidates who were *"just desperate to tick off the evidence requirements"*. With time to reflect on the pilot presentation, an assessor said that s/he was *"sure that if we were able to look at the programme again we would be able to group [the evidence requirements], or produce something that actually assisted people to group them, in some way that would make it much easier."* The partnership with Stevenson College was perceived by providers as essential to the award's delivery and assessment, giving those less accustomed to SQA awards *"complete confidence in terms of what we don't understand"*.

The candidates themselves had mostly positive recollections of the assessment process, and felt very well guided through this by their assessor. A candidate with prior experience of SVQ assessment had found knowledge of SQA requirements helpful, and liked the strong practice base of vocational qualifications,

"It is practice based, it is not academic based...it is not so much about what you know, it is how you deliver yourself and your communication with a learner. You are facilitating them to learn, rather than me teaching them all the time."

Several evaluation participants thought that some candidates had struggled considerably with the SQA approach, one programme provider explaining that, *"they hadn't come through the SVQ system and so the language and structure of the award was quite different from the university programmes they had done for social work...even when they did understand, they didn't like it, they would rather have written a more knowledge based assignment."* At the same time, the programme

had positive experiences of working with SQA, and one provider reflected on how the programme's structure and assessment had appeared "*much clearer, much cleaner once you understood what you were doing.*" Interestingly, none of the candidates interviewed highlighted particular problems with the assessment approach, though this may have been related to the retrospective nature of this evaluation.

Using the award after qualification

All the candidates on the award, and their employers, had an expectation that the Level 9 award would provide them with a qualification that would enable them to act as practice teachers and assess social work students undertaking practice learning opportunities. However, as the programme got underway, the award's status as a preparation for practice teaching began to be questioned by some universities. As one candidate explained, the message that "*level 9 is no longer acceptable, we need people to have the Level 10 [award] to be practice teachers and facilitators*" began to have an impact on how participants viewed the programme. Programme providers, agency managers and assessors who took part in the evaluation described their perception that the question marks around the sufficiency of the Level 9 award for practice teaching were "*undermining*" of candidates undertaking what might become "*a devalued qualification*". Two employers also discussed how, as one line manager commented, "*you think you are buying into one thing, and then you end up having to buy into something else. That feels really unfair, particularly in the current climate.*" The change in understanding of the status of the award had a negative impact on candidates' final evaluations of the programme which were said to be "*hugely coloured by the dismay that candidates themselves, and their managers in quick order, felt that somehow this was a less full qualification than they had understood*". This dismay was not, now, as evident as described in interviews with candidates, although, with a small sample of candidates, this may be related to the selection of evaluation participants. One candidate had also subsequently used the Level 9 qualification to 'RPL into' the Level 10 award.

Despite the uncertainty that evidently pervaded the later stages of the programme, all three candidates interviewed were now very actively engaged in using their award to support social work student practice learning as well as the learning of others. In this respect, for these three candidates, the award appeared to have achieved one of the key outcomes of the award: 'to provide and facilitate learning opportunities'. One candidate said,

" the learning I got out of the course has given me more than enough to be a practice teacher at this point. If the case was that universities or whoever were to say, 'Actually, the requirement is level 10', I would look into that. But at the moment I feel more than equipped to be a practice educator with what I have got."

At the same time, it was reported that not all Level 9 holders (or those who subsequently 'converted' their qualification to Level 10) have gone on to act as practice teachers, and the case study approach used for this evaluation did not help to find out why this was. Questions of currency and status of the Level 9 award will be examined further in the Discussion.

Key findings: Experiences of the award

- Candidates reported positive views of the programme's content, approach and assessment
- The Action Learning Sets were an important source of learning and mutual support
- Adjusting to SQA evidence requirements was a challenge for programme providers, assessors and some candidates, but was mostly successfully achieved with new learning
- Uncertainties about the status of the Level 9 award in relation to practice teaching of social work students were problematic for some candidates, and resulted in concerns that their achievements could be 'devalued' or 'undermined'

Findings 3: Supports and barriers to learning

This section summarises participant views about supports and barriers to learning, some of which have already been highlighted in previous sections.

Supports to learning

Key programme supports have already been highlighted, with all candidates commenting on the support offered by their assessor and tutor. Support from other candidates was also very important, with both the Action Learning Sets and the programme/ portfolio delivery days being key elements in bringing the group together,

"We all got to know each other really well and there was a culture of sharing. You didn't feel you were on your own."

Both the structure and good level of organisation of the programme were also positively commented on.

Candidates also described the practical and emotional support they received from both line managers and colleagues in the workplace very positively. This was partly down to supportive and considerate workplace colleagues, but also seemed to be related to working in practice settings with a broad commitment to learning,

" I think there is a culture [here] that when you can see that someone is really enjoying something and getting a lot out of it, a lot of support comes from the team as whole: they see it as important."

One candidate also commented that having a managerial position had also been a support to learning as it gave greater flexibility to use work time for study,

"I can lean on my colleagues a bit more at times, and there's a lot more come and go. I managed to balance what I did in my own time with work time as well."

Line managers were appreciative of the pressures on candidates studying whilst doing full time work, although one manager said that s/he had been unable to give the candidate any appreciable workload relief for study because of the team's high volume of work (see Barriers to learning). One voluntary sector manager described the impact of having a candidate on the award in the workplace,

"..somebody had to pick up what [the candidate] was doing. I am quite happy to do that, as an organisation we have a huge commitment to training."

The candidates themselves, of course, also brought much to the award that enabled them to juggle study with work and home life. Capabilities highlighted included their motivation to support others' learning, their prior and current experience of

supporting learners and of social work/ social care practice, a reflective approach and self-management/ organisational skills.

Barriers to learning

As might be expected, candidates all, to varying degrees, experienced problems related to the pressures of studying a substantial programme of learning over the course of a year. These pressures were exacerbated for two candidates acting as practice teachers to students experiencing significant problems with practice learning, both of whom they ultimately assessed as having failed their practice learning opportunity. For one candidate juggling these stresses proved particularly challenging,

"I felt under so much pressure from every single direction and really didn't feel like I was managing it very well. I was prioritising the casework, and the student, but then panicking about the college work..so I was struggling with all that was going on."

Whilst both candidates with failing students were very appreciative of support from their assessor, manager and the programme itself, the experience was one that was initially "deskilling" and "anxiety provoking" for both.

Whilst attempts were made by line managers to restrict workload, limited relief was a real challenge for one candidate. The candidate's manager reflected on "*the delicate juggling game*" of managing workload pressures, stressing a commitment to supporting staff with their learning whilst also being required to set this against "*the pressures and demands on the team and how you distribute that evenly*".

Other barriers to learning were more personal and individual. One candidate had dyslexia and struggled with the amount of reading on the programme; in retrospect this participant thought that additional support with learning (e.g. a reader) would have been advantageous. For another candidate, it was the time that had elapsed since s/he undertook academic study that was initially anxiety provoking, although this participant found this initial barrier quite manageable in practice, discovering a particular affinity for reflective writing from early on in the programme.

Issues related to uncertainty about the status and currency of the Level 9 of the award were also reported to have acted as potential barriers to learning, although were not in themselves identified as problematic in this respect by candidates or line managers. However, one candidate did find the start of the programme confusing,

"..it was very fraught with questions and people needing clarity. What was the award? How did that relate your qualifications? Did it qualify for pay awards? I think there did seem to be a lot of awkwardness about it at first."

This confusion was also noted by a programme provider, who found that the candidates initially "*were kind of confused about what the programme was, and what the qualification was going to provide for them*". However, these early teething

problems seemed to be resolved quite quickly through the programme's very explicit focus on working one to one with learners in practice. The candidate also thought that the group's questions had been answered as well as was possible at the time, and, although the start felt a little rushed, the programme had ultimately come over as "*well organised and well thought out*".

Key findings: Supports and barriers to learning

- Candidates felt well supported by the programme and its staff, including assessors and tutor, and by other candidates.
- Agency, line manager and colleague support were very important
- Candidates had existing and developing personal capabilities such as reflexivity, self management and the ability to draw on past and present experience, that supported their learning
- The most major barriers to learning were competing workload pressures and lack of time
- Workplaces varied in the amount of workload relief they gave candidates
- Some candidates had individual barriers to learning, such as problems with managing dyslexia, and anxiety about resuming academic study

Findings 4: Integrating learning in the workplace

A key question for any practice-based learning programme is whether it has had a positive impact on not only the participant, but also on their practice and, in turn their impact on others, including learners, teams, organisations and, in social work practice, ultimately on service users and carers . The evidence for such learning through the Level 9 award is examined below in relation to each of Kirkpatrick's four levels.

Level 1: Response to the programme

The evaluation was not able to gather evidence of candidates' immediate responses to the programme, but instead has had to rely on memories of the experience of undertaking the award. The findings summarised above suggest that the response was mainly positive to the programme itself, but that some candidates' experiences had been less positive because of local contextual problems such as lack of workload relief, or the demands of working with a failing student. Uncertainty about the status of the award and whether it would enable candidates to fulfil their aim of becoming a practice teacher also coloured immediate responses to the programme, although this seemed less pressing now for the three candidates interviewed who were now actively working as practice teachers. The candidate who had elected to go on to undertake the Level 10 award through a RPL route was also positive about this experience although this was said by him and his manager to have involved the candidate in a great deal more work than undertaking the Level 10 award in the first place.

Level 2: Learning

Candidate learning during the programme was very obvious to the programme tutor who described how, as a group, candidates "*were transferring learning very easily and quickly, using the knowledge base to understand learning within their organisation*". All those interviewed during the evaluation were able to identify learning, both during and after the programme. The candidates described a sense of personal achievement at gaining their awards, and this in itself could have quite a profound impact on how the individual felt about his or her role,

"..achieving Level 9, I was able to say, 'Well, I have worked on something that has given me more skills and equipped me better to do this job, and I feel more confident and stronger in my management role. I feel more like a manager.'"

Linked to this sense of achievement, everyone I spoke to referred to a significant growth of candidate confidence arising from undertaking the programme. For example one candidate explained,

"I think it's given me more confidence personally and within the role. It's definitely given me more confidence in relation to actually dealing with and working with learners and supporting learners. "

This perception was verified by this candidate's line manager, assessor and a learner, a social work student. Growth in a range of other capabilities was also reported by interviewees, particularly increased self-awareness, ability to reflect on practice, analytical skills and a more independent and creative approach to their thinking. A candidate said of the programme,

"It gives you awareness of the need to be more thoughtful in your practice and more analytical and more reflective."

These changes were also said to be supported by an expanding knowledge base,

"I've got the learning and I have got the theory to back it up, and I have now got the skills and techniques to be able to present that to people."

This knowledge base included both ways of working with individual learners and increased understanding of context, policy and how to support the development of a learning culture in the workplace.

The candidates were not the only people to learn from the programme. This was a pilot of an award that had not been delivered before, using an assessment framework that was unfamiliar to many candidates and their assessors. The programme managers and providers I spoke to during the evaluation all stressed the degree to which they were learning 'on the job' and fine tuning the programme as it was rolled out. Candidates' managers also discussed ways in which they had learnt about practice learning, with one manager finding the candidates' involvement in the programme particularly stimulating,

"..I think for me, it raised my belief in what training should be, and the impact it should have on staff if you've got it right."

Level 3: Changes in behaviour

Many examples of how this learning translated into changes in practice were discussed during interviews. One self evident change in behaviour arose because candidates were, 18 months on, regularly acting as practice teachers to social work students in their workplaces (see also Level 4). Some candidates were also using their facilitation skills to formally assess other learners, such as nursery nurses on placement or SVQ candidates. With increasing experience of supporting individual learners, candidates described building on their knowledge and skills from the programme. For example, two candidates described how they were able to draw on the very difficult experience of assessing a failing social work student during the award to practice teach in a much more confident and informed way with subsequent students. For one candidate and his/her manager, learning how to assess social

work students was *the* major outcome of the award. This candidate evidently had an important role in the team, supporting new team members, and mentoring less experienced colleagues, but did not think undertaking the programme had in itself influenced the way s/he did this. In contrast, the two other candidates talked in interviews about how their learning on the programme had changed the way that they worked with team members. A candidate in a management role explained how s/he brought,

"... a lot of what I have learned supporting learners into supporting the staff team to be able to actually think more creatively and more out of the box, in relation to practice."

Candidates were also able to 'cascade' their new knowledge and enthusiasm for learning to managers and other team members,

"..there was learning going on for us because s/he did feedback and because s/he was excited about what s/he was doing."

(Candidate line manager)

Two candidates also reported some significant changes related to growth in their understanding about the importance of evaluating learning. Evaluating learning was said by candidates to be one of the more challenging aspects of the Level 9 award, but also one of the most significant in terms of changing this candidate's practice,

"..the evaluation part is what I've used the most... it was quite in depth and it made really think about how little evaluating we do ourselves, and how perhaps, even in supervision in my own team, I didn't offer feedback as well as I could to get the best of my staff."

Although the Level 9 award does not have the same emphasis on leadership as the Level 10 award, all candidates' accounts suggested that the award had supported their ability to act to some extent as proactive facilitators of learning. A candidate who had gone on to complete the Level 10 award through RPL could, with hindsight, see how Level 9 had supported development as a leader of learning,

"A lot of Level 9 [is about] creating a learning culture and creating a learning environment, and I think that is very much about the practice teacher's ability to go out and bring the team into that learning environment and use the team as a resource. I think it is important we acknowledge the leadership in that."

Finally, for two candidates, the award had enabled them to feel more confident about disseminating knowledge, both formally and informally, to bring about learning and change in the workplace. For example, a candidate said,

"..it has allowed me to do more training within [employing agency]. Last year I did a joint training day where we looked at evidence-based practice and professional role and accountability".

Level 4: Changes in organisations and environments

Examples of organisational and environmental change, the highest level in Kirkpatrick's hierarchy, can be the most problematic outcomes of learning to measure. Many evaluations are undertaken during or just after training programmes, often too early for learning to be translated into well substantiated and lasting changes to the workplace, and to outcomes for learners and others. This evaluation had the advantage, in this respect, of taking place some time after the programme's end. On the other hand, the evaluation lacks robust evidence about candidates' starting points and progress during the award, changes in candidates' circumstances (e.g. promotion to manager, RPL to the Level 10 award), as well as the many other influences on practice over the intervening 18 months. These confounding factors make it difficult to make confident assertions about the programme's impact on organisations and environments. Nevertheless, well corroborated evidence did emerge from interviews that the award is having some impact on the development of a learning culture within the candidates' organisations. Examples of these kinds of changes, in terms of impact on organisations, learners and service users are summarised below:

Changes in role: The most evident change in role and concrete outcome of undertaking the award was that between 2009 and 2011, the three Level 9 candidates had assessed seven social work students on placement. Apart from the obvious benefits to students and university social work programmes, the presence of students in the candidates' workplace was described by both candidates and line managers positively, helping to bring new ideas into the workplace and "*keeping thinking fresh*".

There was also evidence that organisations were beginning to draw on the skills and knowledge of candidates in different and developing ways. For example, one line manager explained that s/he was now more likely to ask the candidate to take on additional responsibilities, including policy implementation and presentations to colleagues and other workers. As one candidate reflected,

"From an organisational point of view, it gave the organisation an opportunity to say, 'You've shown that you can deliver learning material, or deliver and impart knowledge and promote learning, so we'd like you to do that'. So I think doing that qualification put me under a bit of pressure from the organisation to actually use the skills I have been trained to use."

Colleagues in one setting were also said to perceive the candidate differently since completing the award, and a manager commented on how this was having a

noticeable impact on their willingness to seek and use her knowledge to inform their practice,

"They think so highly of [the candidate], and automatically go to them as a reference point for lots of issues about practice, or reflecting, child protection, reading materials, and where to source such information."

There was also a knock on effect here for line managers, who were able to delegate roles, such as practice teaching and training delivery, that they previously would have undertaken themselves to candidates. In one instance a candidate's learning on the award was considered by the line manager to have been instrumental in a part secondment to help another team *"with their planning, thinking and reflective practice, how they operate as a team, and what they do with families."*

Changes in organisational culture and practices: There had also been some measurable changes to organisational culture and practices. This was particularly in the areas of evaluation and quality assurance. One candidate, as well as line manager, gave a particularly detailed example of how learning about evaluation, had been translated into the development of a questionnaire for service users,

"The evaluations that we did, there was only just lip service paid to them. We now have an evaluation questionnaire which we give out to service users. It is quite clear in the questionnaire the different areas of the service we want feedback on, how we want that feedback and the type of questioning needed. It elicits a bit more information from the client and that is something that is quite new and we didn't use before."

This development was helping the service to respond to service user views to make improvements, and had been positively commented on in a recent inspection report. Other examples of policy developments cited in interviews included the introduction of a more thorough and consistent approach to the assessment of learners for a non-social work qualification. A candidate also described how learning during the award had helped to substantially improve recording systems and skills in his/her team. The candidate had facilitated a training day and developed new systems for recording, as part of what s/he described as *"a real culture change"*,

"...although there are some people who will continue to resist my new systems I think in general what I have introduced is clearer, easier to use and it is more straightforward for people. I would say that 99% of the staff now buy into it."

Impacts on service users: The methodology used for this evaluation did not make it easy to identify examples of direct impact of candidate learning on service users and carers, and, in any case, cause and effect in this respect would be difficult to establish with any reliability. However, in broad terms, there was evidence of candidates having a heightened awareness of the need to involve service users and carers in meaningful ways in decision making about service delivery, and a proactive

approach to ensuring that colleagues and others also understood the importance of this. This included an increased focus on listening to service user views, described above, and, in one case, expanding a steering group to involve a wider range of stakeholders, including service users. One line manager also gave a very full account of how a candidate had worked closely with a social work student to enable children to move to permanency, drawing on her Level 9 knowledge and practice experience, including confident analysis and use of research and other evidence to make a robust case for a decisive approach to securing a stable home for the children.

Key findings: Integrating learning in the workplace

- Overall, and with hindsight, candidate responses to the programme were broadly positive
- Learning from the programme involved a growth in self-awareness, reflexivity, independent thinking, analytical and leadership skills, and confidence, supported by improved knowledge about facilitating learning, evaluation and the context for practice.
- Changes in candidate behaviour were evident in their new roles as practice teachers, as well as a developing ability to support colleagues, active evaluation of learning, cascading of knowledge to other workers and use of training skills to make presentations to others.
- Changes in organisations and environments are harder to measure, but there was evidence that the award was starting to enable candidates to take on new roles in their organisations, promoting the development of a learning culture in their places of work, and, often less explicitly, having a positive impact on service users and their families.
- The three candidates had made a significant contribution to meeting the demand for practice learning opportunities, offering seven social work student placements since they started the Level 9 programme in 2009.

Discussion

Evaluation against the aims of the Level 9 award

This evaluation provides broadly positive evidence about the extent to which the Level 9 award in the south-east of Scotland has fulfilled its aim of equipping "individuals with the skills, knowledge and understanding required to provide practice learning opportunities for others and to give appropriate support, feedback and assessment" (SIESWE, 2006). This evidence was consistently demonstrated across the three case studies, documentary analysis, and interviews with candidates, tutors, line managers, a learner, programme provider and an assessor. The programme appears to be well supported by its teaching and assessment framework, although, inevitably, given its pilot status, there are areas that require further thought and development in the light of the experience of this first presentation. The three candidates who completed the programme described themselves as well supported to achieve these aims, although it is important to stress that this was a small sample of the 15 candidates that started the award and may not be representative. Candidates encountered a number of challenges related to their working context and the needs of individual learners.

Developing learning cultures and learning organisations

One of the aims of the evaluation is to build on our wider understanding of what helps individuals and organisations to promote integration of learning in the workplace. The findings set out a range of key supports to learning. As in a previous evaluation, of the Level 10 award in Tayforth (Gordon and Parker, 2009), both personal and organisational capabilities for promoting and sustaining learning in the workplace came over strongly in the evaluation. These capabilities tie in well with those set out in Scotland's Continuous Learning Framework [CLF]. The Framework sets out what people in the social services need "to be able to do their job well now and in the future, and describes what employers do to support them" (SSSC, 2008:5). The CLF therefore emphasises both the need for individuals to take personal responsibility for learning, and the role of the organisation in creating an environment that enables them to do so.

As in the 2009 study, this evaluation highlights the importance of candidates' personal capabilities, including motivation, self-awareness, critical reflection, leadership and ability to question and to analyse. These capabilities were both part of the reason these candidates undertook and persevered with the course, partly in their own time, and areas of growth during the programme. The findings also link well with current work being undertaken by the SSSC³ and its partners to identify leadership capabilities, such as 'motivating and inspiring others', many of which

³ <http://www.sssc.uk.com/ewd/workforce-development/leadership-in-scotlands-social-services.html>

emerged as key aspects of candidate learning on the Level 9 programme. Although this evaluation has gathered a less comprehensive picture of the organisations that supported this learning than the 2009 study, their capabilities, in terms, for example, of support for candidates through the programme, provision of opportunities for new learning and overall, an explicit commitment to creating and sustaining a learning environment through the practice teaching relationship and more generally in the workplace, was evident. These capabilities were important in supporting candidates' learning, and the evaluation provides well evidenced examples of how learning from the award translated into, not only effective support of individual learners, but also change in learning practices and cultures in the workplace.

This evidence suggests that the qualification is having some success in meeting a key ambition of the PLQ framework, to support the development of 'learning organisations' with the "capacity to learn from experience and adapt continuously to changing external conditions" (Gould, 2000, p.585). The importance of building the capacity of the social services workforce to create "a learning culture that commits all individuals and organisations to lifelong learning and development" was also stressed in 'Changing Lives', Scotland's 21st Century Review of Social Work (Scottish Executive, 2006: 12). More locally, evidence from this evaluation provides support for what has, until now, been "*anecdotal evidence that Practice Teachers (educators) are contributing to the development of learning cultures in the South East of Scotland*" (Learning Network South East, 2011b). The evaluation's case study approach also offered an opportunity to consider the context for these changes, and how, for example, candidates in managerial roles appeared to have greater opportunities to put the broader aspirations of the award in terms of creating learning environments into action.

Looking ahead

At the time of the evaluation there still appeared to be considerable uncertainty about the Level 9 award's status as a preparation for practice teaching. All the candidates that undertook the award were motivated by the desire to be practice teachers although this evaluation suggests that the award also had a broader function in promoting a positive culture of learning in the workplace. There was a strong belief expressed in all interviews that the award is one that is well attuned to the role of the practice teacher,

"...the level 9 award gives you a good, solid foundation on which to develop in relation to being a practice learning facilitator or practice teacher." (Level 9 candidate)

However, although these three candidates (two at Level 9, and one, more recently at Level 10) were all very active practice teachers, it was reported that some universities, and sometimes some practice learning co-ordinators in universities would not place students with holders of the Level 9 award. At the same time, all three Level 9 holders had offered more than one student placement, which might

suggest that their practice met university standards in terms of quality and rigour. However, since this evaluation did not include the perspectives of universities about the quality of practice teaching offered by Level 9 holders, it is hard to assess the impact of the award in this respect. It would be of interest to explore the evidence base further, perhaps through exploration of the perceptions of Practice Learning Co-ordinators at different Universities, and/or through anonymised written feedback on the quality of practice teachers' reports that many universities provide to practice teachers.

The context for future delivery is further muddled by uncertainty about the future of the Practice Learning Qualifications in Scotland, and, remembering that the Level 9 award in the South East was part funded by Learning Network South East, questions about whether agencies would at a future date be prepared to fund candidates to undertake an award without the very certain 'carrot' of the Level 9 award being the appropriate level of award for practice teaching.

These questions will be addressed in more depth in a sister report, that looks more broadly at the delivery of the Level 9 award in Scotland, drawing on evidence from this evaluation, and an evaluation of delivery of the same award in the North of Scotland, which attracted a very different group of candidates working in social care and health settings.

Key findings: Looking ahead

- The findings suggest that Level 9 in south-east Scotland broadly meets the principles, aims and learning outcomes of the SQA award, although it proved difficult to attract as diverse a range of candidates as the award's partnership had originally hoped..
- The evidence suggests that the programme is well supported by its teaching and assessment framework.
- The pilot was small scale and its findings may not be representative of all candidates' and employers' experience of the Level 9 award.
- There are doubts about the sustainability of the award, with concerns about future uptake by employers during a time of economic constraint. Locally, the main demand for practice learning appears to be to maintain sufficient numbers of qualified practice teachers in the South-East, and different universities appear to have different views about whether the Level 9 award is sufficient to enable Level 9 holders to offer students practice learning opportunities.

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Glossary

The definitions below apply to the use of these terms in this report. They may have different meanings in other contexts.

Award: A group of Units or Modules, which together make up a recognised award or qualification.

Candidate: The person undertaking the Professional Development Award in Practice Learning at Stage 2 (SCQF 9)

Case Study: Development of detailed knowledge about a single 'case' or of a small number of related 'cases'.

CLF (Continuous Learning Framework): Describes what people need in order to do their job effectively now and in the future in terms of: qualifications and training; knowledge, skills, values and understanding; personal capabilities; organisational capabilities <http://www.sssc.uk.com/clf/home/welcome-to-the-continuous-learning-framework-website.html>

Evaluation: Making judgements about the extent to which outcomes have been achieved.

Learner: An individual who is being supported to learn by the PLQ candidate. In this evaluation this included volunteers, colleagues, SVQ candidates, social work students, and people that candidates had line management responsibility for.

Learning Network: Four regional Learning Networks which were, until June 2011, funded by the Scottish Government to support the learning and development of staff working in Social Services in Scotland

PDA: Professional Development Award accredited by SQA

PLO: Practice Learning Opportunity; social work degree students in Scotland are required to undertake 200 days of assessed practice learning in social services and/or other workplaces.

PLQ: Practice Learning Qualification

PLQ (SS) : Practice Learning Qualification (Social Services)

Practice Educator: "An individual who has the skills, knowledge and understanding to develop and evaluate learning opportunities, and be responsible for formal assessment across a wide range of settings" (SIESWE, 2006).

Practice Teacher: An individual with responsibility for facilitating the learning and assessing the practice of social work degree students undertaking work-based practice learning opportunities

RPL: Recognition of Prior Learning; a process used to evaluate previous learning for the purpose of assigning academic credit.

SCQF: Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework; this describes programmes of learning that lead to qualifications in terms of different levels and credit ratings, so that qualifications can be compared

SQA: Scottish Qualification Authority, the main awarding body for non degree qualifications in Scotland

SSSC: Scottish Social Services Council, which undertakes registration/regulation of the workforce and promotes good practice in the social services in Scotland.

SVQ: Scottish Vocational Qualification, which is assessed in the workplace and awarded by SQA or other awarding body upon satisfactory completion of required Units