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EXPERIENCES OF POST-QUALIFYING STUDY
IN SOCIAL WORK

Abstract

This article is based on a research project to explore the experiences of past and current candidates for post-qualifying awards in social work in England. Also included in the study are the Leads of the post-qualifying consortia in England. The study used questionnaire survey and nominal group techniques to gather data, which was coded and categorised into themes. The main findings relate to the perceived purposes of post-qualifying study, motivations for undertaking post-qualifying study, the factors that sustain and hinder study, the advice that those who have or who are experiencing post-qualifying study would give to those about to start and future plans and hopes in this area.

Post-qualifying study is generally valued, especially in relation to the opportunities it provides for professional development. The support of a mentor who has direct experience of the candidate's programme is highly prized, as are clear and consistent guidance from the programme and meaningful study time and workload relief from employers. There are also frustrations for some candidates who do not feel that their post-qualifying study has stretched them beyond qualifying standards or who experience the teaching as divorced from the realities of daily practice. The appetite for a wider choice of post-qualifying modules suggests that providers of post-qualifying study will need to collaborate within and across regions in order to achieve a critical mass of candidates for more specialist or focused learning. The study suggests a need for further research to understand the impact of post-qualifying study on candidates' social work practice.

The article concludes with two checklists of questions, one for individual candidates and another for agencies and programmes. These questions arise from the findings in the research.

Key words

post-qualifying education; social work; continuing professional development; experiences of study; professional development; nominal groupwork

Introduction

Opportunities for post-qualifying study have been growing steadily in social work in the UK. Two decades ago, continuing professional development was *ad hoc* and personal, a decade ago it became more of an expectation, and now it is growing into a requirement. In these circumstances we need to know more about how post-qualifying study is experienced, and this article presents the findings from a research project to throw more light on this area. In particular, our focus is the *work-based experiences* of post-qualifying candidates: what helps and what hinders success, and why do people undertake this kind of study?

The research was conducted at a pivotal time for post-qualifying education, at a time when a new framework was open to consultation (GSCC 2005a; GSCC 2005b). We hope that the findings from this research into post-qualifying social work education in England will inform the new structures and help us to learn from the experiences of the outgoing framework.

What we know from other studies

Although there is likely to be resonance with post-registration education in other professions (Conneeley, 2005) and other countries (SIESWE, 2006), our primary focus was social work in England. Manual and electronic searches were conducted, and informal sources were used to access unpublished accounts. The database terms were refined to achieve as much sensitivity (capacity to identify as many as possible of the total available relevant articles) and precision (the number that are relevant divided by the number that are identified by the search) as possible (Taylor *et al,* 2003).

Brown and Keen's comment (2004: 77) that 'published research on Post-Qualifying Awards in Social Work is scarce' still stands. By its nature, it is difficult to assess the extent of the grey (informal) literature but, typically, these kinds of study focus on an evaluation of a particular programme or of candidates in a specific agency or a particular constituency (Aldridge, 2006; Channer and Doel [forthcoming]; McCloskey, 2006; Rowland 2003, 2006). Also of interest are personal accounts of post-qualifying experiences, such as Cohen (2000) and Sloman (2005). Although we cannot generalise from these individual accounts they, too, offer us interesting windows on the experience of post-qualifying study.

Cooper and Rixon's (2001) questionnaire survey of post-qualifying candidates in a local authority noted that 'the PQ framework for qualified social workers has struggled to become consistently established within workplace training and practice organisations across the UK'. This need to embed professional education is also reflected in research commissioned by Skills for Care / Practice Learning Taskforce (Doel, 2005). A degree of inconsistency between programmes emerged as a theme in our research, such as the difference between *'the ASW model [which] gives you a block of learning, [when] you give up virtually all your caseload so you can really concentrate'* to most other experiences of study in which it is jostled by the demands of the workload.

In a study based on an analysis of twelve semi-structured interviews and questionnaires from 23 PQSW holders, Mitchell (2001: 433) found that post-qualifying awards 'have a positive impact on practice for both individuals and organisations'. Although the focus of our research is on the *experience* of post-qualifying study and does not extend to the impact on practice, Mitchell's conclusions about the complexity of the factors associated with success and failure reflect our findings.

McCloskey's (2006) evaluation of one particular programme suggested the need for further clarification regarding both course information in general and assignments in particular. Managers' support was highlighted as important, but they often lacked information about the programme and its content. This resonated with our findings.

Our research aimed to build on these previous studies and to deepen our knowledge of the experience of post-qualifying study. It is unusual in its spread beyond one agency or region, giving us some confidence that the themes arising from the analysis are not just specific to local circumstances. It has alerted us to some of the differences between regions, such as the nature and extent of support that is offered to candidates.

The research process
Following the review of the existing knowledge, the research process fell into two parts, a postal questionnaire survey and a series of focus groups. We devised two questionnaires, one for the Leads of all 17 post-qualifying consortia in England (Appendix 2) and one for post-qualifying candidates across four English regions

(Appendix 3). This second questionnaire had one section for current candidates and one for past candidates, though these were both very similar. The questionnaires were succinct in order to encourage a good response.

Four hundred candidates were selected as part of a random stratified sample; twenty candidates from each of the five years from 2001 were randomly surveyed in each of the four post-qualifying regions participating in the research. This was not necessarily a *representative* sample, in terms of overall numbers, but we judged that focusing on the most recent five years would be more likely to reflect current realities. Other than the year of registration, there were no other sampling techniques used; apart from the difficulties in targeting a sample that matched overall ethnic, gender, age and other factors, we estimated that a random sample of 400 would be sufficiently large to reflect the overall profile and this proved to be the case.

Response to the survey
400 questionnaires were dispatched from four PQ consortia (one hundred from each) and 80 completed questionnaires were received, 40 from current candidates and 40 from past candidates. This response rate of exactly 20% compares to Rowland's (2006) 29% response rate in a more focused geographical area. Completion rates for each question were excellent, which suggests that the questionnaire achieved its aim of being succinct and manageable. Patterns emerged which suggest that we had sufficient data from these 80 candidates to give a fair representation of the bigger picture. One consortium monitored questionnaires returned as not deliverable, and this was 5%, indicating that, overall, approximately 20 of the 400 did not reach their destination.

10 of the 17 PQ Leads returned completed questionnaires. 59% is a good response in most circumstances, though we had hoped for a high return from a group of people with such a direct interest in the focus of this research. The current changes in post-qualifying education may have prevented the response rate from being better.

Focus groups were held in three of the four consortia regions. These were based on the 63% of respondents who stated that they would be willing to take part, with current candidates twice as likely to accept as past candidates. Fourteen people participated in focus groups.

Limitations of the research

We did not consider each subset of award holders separately, since it was not felt that the numbers justified this more detailed analysis by different programme. The numbers responding to the questionnaire and attending the focus groups mean that we must be cautious about generalising from the findings, though they do resonate with those from local surveys such as Aldridge (2006) and Rowland (2006).

Profile of those responding to the questionnaire

The Tables below indicate the profile and post-qualifying record of the respondents. Percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number throughout.

Table 1: Profile of the PQ Leads (n=10)

Age profile	*21-30:* 1 (10%)	*31-40:* 0 (0%)	*41-50:* 1 (10%)	*51+:* 8 (80%)
Gender	F: 5 (50%)	M: 5 (50%)		
Ethnicity	White: 9 (90%)	BME: 1 (10%)		
Disability	No: 9 (90%)	Yes: 1 (10%)		

Table 2: Profile of the Candidates
(n=80 or less; not all candidates completed each category)

Age profile	*21-30:* 5 (7%)	*31-40:* 21 (28%)	*41-50:* 32 (43%)	*51+:* 16 (22%)
Gender	F: 59 (77%)	M: 18 (23%)		
Ethnicity	White: 69 (90%)	BME: 8 (10%)		
Disability	No: 75 (97%)	Yes: 2 (3%)		
Agency	Stat: 67 (87%)	Private: 2 (3%)	Vol: 5 (6%)	Indep: 3 (4%)

Table 3: Post-qualifying record of the Candidates (n=80)

	Total	*Current*	*Passed*	*Withdrawn*
PQSW	35 (44%)	19 (24%)	13 (16%)	3 (4%)
PQ1 Certificate	66 (83%)	26 (33%)	35 (44%)	5 (6%)
Practice Teaching	13 (16%)	5 (6%)	8 (10%)	0 (0%)
Mental Health	10 (13%)	3 (4%)	6 (8%)	1 (1%)
Child Care	9 (11%)	7 (9%)	1 (1%)	1 (1%)
Adults	2 (3%)	0 (0%)	2 (3%)	0 (0%)
Other	4 (5%)	2 (PQ6) (3%)	2 (PQ6/PQ2-5)	0 (0%)
Total		62 (78%)*	67 (84%)*	10 (13%)*

* i.e. 78% of all respondents were currently registered for some form of post-qualifying study, 84% of all respondents had successfully completed one or more of the elements in the Table, and 13% had withdrawn from one or more of the elements.

The typical candidate was female, white, in her forties and working in a statutory agency. The typical PQ consortium Lead was as likely to be male as female, white and a decade older than the typical candidate.

Codings and categories

Responses from the 80 candidates and 10 PQ Leads were analysed and coded for themes. Codes were gathered into related categories, to see which themes emerged from the collective response of these 90 completed questionnaires. Categories are not, of course, watertight, but the codings were developed and used independently by three different researchers to try to ensure their validity and reliability.

NB Figures in the sections below refer to the percentage and number (in brackets) of respondents who made reference to a factor which was coded within that category. For example, when answering the question about the purposes of post-qualifying study, 77 respondents made at least one reference to a factor which was coded as 'Professional development' - this was 89.53%, rounded to 90%, of all those who completed this question (n=86). Many respondents made several references to professional development and these were tallied under the various codes within the professional development category, but there would be only one count within the overall category. In this way we can develop a profile of the prevalence of each of the categories. Categories scoring less than 5% are not included.

The findings

Purposes of post-qualifying study

It is important to understand how social workers view post-qualifying study in its wider context. As far as we are aware previous surveys have not sought to understand the purposes of this study. The principle categories of response were:

- professional development: 90% (77)
- academic development: 27% (23)
- career development: 15% (13)
- outcomes and service development: 15% (13)
- personal development: 6% (5)
- understanding the policy framework: 5% (4)

  n=86/90 (96%)

The most significant aspects of professional development were considered to be enhancing knowledge and skills, updating existing skills and reflective and analytical thinking. Writing in the context of a study into the challenges of post-qualifying child care award teaching, Kroll (2004: 653) has argued that 'thinking space' must be made available, otherwise candidates 'will continue to feel undervalued and ill equipped to deal with the increasing complexity of their work'.

It is interesting that the PQ Leads placed almost as much emphasis on service development and academic development as they did on professional development, perhaps reflecting their wider brief, but professional development was by far the most prominent category amongst the candidates.

The fact that career development was mentioned by only 15% of respondents as one of the purposes of post-qualifying study comes as a surprise and contrasts with Rowland's (2003) regional survey in which 'the top three responses were linked to promotion, salary or a new position'. However, career development becomes more significant when it is linked to motivation, as we see next.

Motivations for undertaking post-qualifying study
Post-qualifying study is demanding, especially in the context of a busy working week. It is important, therefore, to know what motivates people to undertake it.

Interestingly, though 90% of respondents cited professional development as a primary purpose of post-qualifying study, only 66% mentioned it as their primary motivation. Career development becomes more of significant factor as a motivator; indeed, the PQ Leads understood both career development and financial incentive to be greater motivations than professional development.

- professional development: 66% (58)
- career development: 60% (53)
- requirement: 36% (32)
- financial incentive: 28% (25)
- academic development: 19% (17)
- personal development/qualities: 15% (13)

n=88/90 (98%)

Of course, these categories are not watertight and there are connections between them all. However, we might surmise that there are differences between 'push' motivations, such as requirements to pursue post-qualifying education and 'pull' motivations, such as the opportunity for personal development. Career development and financial incentive might be best explained as a combination of push and pull. Rowland's (2006) West Midlands survey saw 'Develop Skills', 'Increase Job Prospects' and 'Validate Existing Skills' as the three main motivations for undertaking an award.

Factors which help to sustain post-qualifying study
All 90 responded to the question which asked about the factors which helped to sustain post-qualifying study. These were the findings:

- support and recognition: 71% (64)
- time: 41% (37)
- personal qualities: 29% (26)
- course content and PQ structure: 17% (15)
- career and future prospects: 12% (11)
- supervision and direction: 8% (7)
- organisational (e.g. workload relief):   7% (6)

                                              n=90/90 (100%)

It is not surprising that support emerges as the most significant factor to sustain post-qualifying study. However, within this overall rubric, there are some interesting contrasts. For example, past candidates were much more likely to indicate that the support of their manager was significant than current candidates (33% as opposed to 13%). PQ Leads placed considerably less emphasis on peer support (team colleagues and other candidates), with just one mention (10%), compared to 32 (44%) references amongst candidates. However, 70% of PQ Leads cited the support of the employer (as opposed to the individual line manager) as a sustaining factor, whilst this was recognised by only 5% of candidates. Overall, it was the support of the mentor that was most cited: 31% of all respondents specifically referred to the support of the mentor as a factor which helped to sustain post-qualifying study. This was reflected very strongly in one of the focus groups (see later).

The questionnaire did not specifically raise the issue of *who* should be the mentor, but a study by Turner (2000: 231) underlined the benefit of involving line managers as mentors as they can 'refocus on the developmental and supportive aspects of supervision that may have been eroded over recent years in favour of a narrower, more managerial approach ... although the implementation of the PQ framework presents many challenges in relation to the role of the first-line manager, it has the potential to create work-place cultures of a more developmental and professional nature, which ultimately works to the advantage of those who use social work services'.

Time was the other major factor to sustain study, and for most of the respondents this meant having appropriate study time and, just as important *being able to take it.* Here we have links with support, so that supportive managers enabled candidates to use the time they were allocated.

The most important personal qualities were considered to be motivation and commitment. The most significant aspect of course content was its relevance to day-to-day work, and its ability to interest and to be challenging, though there were many, varied factors within this overall category.

Factors which hinder post-qualifying study
We might suppose that the factors that hinder are the converse of those that help. However, when we consider the detail of these responses, there are some interesting contrasts. For example, whilst support is by far the most important category for helping to sustain post-qualifying study (71%), its absence as a factor hindering study is mentioned by only 24%. Organisational issues, which were wholly concerned with backfill and cover for work, were cited by just 7% as helping study, yet 43% of respondents mentioned workload commitments as a factor which hindered study. Perhaps we are seeing reflected in these figures the sense that, by and large, support and recognition are available on a personal basis (e.g. the commitment of a mentor) but not at an organisational level (e.g. the relative lack of workload relief).

- lack of time: 50% (44)
- organisational (workload pressures): 43% (38)
- personal commitments: 26% (23)
- lack of support and awareness: 24% (21)

- personal qualities: 22% (19)
- structural (PQ):   19% (17)
- course content (PQ):   13% (11)
- practical issues: 11% (10)
- assessment issues: 6% (5)

n=88/90 (98%)

Half of all respondents mentioned time as a hindrance. Unfortunately, 'time' is a rather diffuse notion and some people did not specify what they meant by it: 26% just wrote 'lack of time' in their list of factors. For those who were more specific, lack of study days and having to study in one's own time figured large (22% of all responses).

Personal commitments (such as family pressures) were more prevalent amongst current candidates (38%) than past candidates (13%), leading to a hypothesis that fresh memories might sometimes be more accurate or, at least, more vivid. Green Lister's (2003) study of mature women students on a qualifying course resonates with the challenges that many post-qualifying candidates face, with practical issues such as length of journey to study sessions mentioned by 11%.

Lack of awareness of the post-qualifying world is a hindrance for many candidates, especially those working in non-social work settings: *'I'm in a team with health workers and I think "I'm doing all this, but is it recognised by colleagues from other professions"?'* However, one participant in a focus group reflected that *'moving to the culture of a multi-disciplinary team was more supportive - this culture includes study time to read journals'.*

The structure and content of the post-qualifying programme figured more prominently in the factors that hinder, and we will return to this theme when we consider the focus group material. Although the various *structural* factors were somewhat idiosyncratic, those 13% who felt that course *content* was a hindering factor unanimously cited a lack of relevance to day-to-day work as the primary concern. This theme echoed through some of the responses to other questions.

Advice for those considering post-qualifying study

Having reflected on the purpose of post-qualifying study and the factors that sustain and hinder those undertaking it, we asked what advice the Leads and the candidates would give to some-one they were supporting through post-qualifying study.

Again, though there were resonances with themes from previous questions, the emphasis was a little different. In particular, time management emerged as the strongest area for advice, with 37% citing it, usually with reference to the need to organise and plan time and not to leave things until the last minute. As well as time management, would-be candidates were exhorted to make sure they take all their study time (mentioned by 21%) and to be prepared to study in their own time (6%). The most important personal qualities were the ability to focus (9%), especially when the going got tough, and to be assertive (6%), particularly in terms of deciding whether this is the right time to undertake study.

- time management: 37% (30)
- time/timing: 28% (23)
- personal qualities: 21% (17)
- support: 20% (16)
- specific skills: 10% (8)

  there were 17 other pieces of advice which did not easily fall into the above categories

  n=82/90 (91%)

Current candidates were more concerned to stress gaining the support of the supervisor or line manager (19%), compared with past candidates (3%). Writing skills (especially reflective ones) and knowing how to produce a portfolio were amongst the specific skills that respondents advised were important to hone. Perhaps more assistance to consider what 'reflective writing' actually means would be helpful (Rutter and Brown, 2005; Saltiel, 2003). The 'Other' category was especially large in this section, with individual pieces of advice varying from 'consolidate your experience before starting the PQ1' to 'get on top of the direct observation requirements and how these can be achieved'. The significance of direct observation also emerged strongly in one of the focus groups. Although most of the advice was given in a positive light, three people felt it was important to 'jump through the hoops' and 'write what they want to hear'; there was an echo of this in one of the

focus groups. Two of the PQ Leads felt strongly that it was difficult to generalise advice and that each candidate's needs varied considerably.

In Rowland's (2003) regional survey, the re-focusing that can come as a result of post-qualifying study reminded many people why they chose their career. The 2003 survey found that an encouraging 96% of the respondents would recommend the awards to others, though this dropped to 82% in the 2006 survey perhaps reflecting some of the uncertainties about the move to the new post-qualifying framework.

What might have prevented a lapse in post-qualifying studies
Past candidates who had withdrawn from post-qualifying study were asked what might have prevented this. Thirteen people completed this question (33% of the subset of past candidates) of whom one responded even though s/he had passed. Numbers are too small to draw any general conclusions about lapse, but the responses clustered around course structure and content (*greater relevance of the course; methods of fulfilling competencies other than written work (such as viva voce or supervision or presentation); more focus on how to do the portfolio; more time to study, etc.),* personal reasons *(more personal commitment needed, etc.)* and practical ones *(not having computer; computer failure).*

In Keville's (2002) study of candidates dropping out, the two main factors were lack of confidence in study skills and, for a small number of social workers, specific and possibly unrecognised, learning needs such as dyslexia. 'Programme organisers were increasingly aware that a significant minority were dropping out of the [PQ1] course. In [one] social services, 37 per cent of candidates were not completing the course and, in group supervision, agency mentors started to make links between this and an unexpected range of learning needs they had noticed with students. While these needs did not prevent workers performing effectively in practice, they affected their ability for written work,' (Keville, 2002). She noted that 'staff must feel safe enough to discuss their individual learning needs, not just in an academic environment or with mentors, but with their line managers too'.

Although none of the respondents in our study made specific mention of learning needs, there were pleas for clearer written guidance and concern about lack of knowledge in relation to finding and synthesizing information. Brown *et al's* (2003) research suggested that many students found these demands daunting. 'Many had limited knowledge of, or limited access to, sources of either print or electronic

information. Many students lacked basic searching and information skills or said they lacked time to undertake literature research.'

Future post-qualifying plans or hopes
The post-qualifying candidates were asked about their future plans and hopes. This is what they planned or hoped for their post-qualifying study:

- continue with further awards: 42% (32)
- no plans: 29% (22)
- achieve current award: 25% (19)
- other CPD: 5% (4)
- not sure: 4% (3)
- wait: 4% (3)
- failed to be selected: 1% (1)

  n=77/80 (96%)

We can feel encouraged that two out of three respondents (67%) want to achieve their current award or continue with further awards. A further 5% indicated their plans to continue with other kinds of continuing professional development. However, 29% have no plans, a further 4% are unsure, and another 4% are awaiting developments. One respondent remarked, "At this moment I am still in recovery!" Another returned to their theme of discontent about the lack of relevance of the course content, remarking that they hoped 'to see the PQ become more practical and less academic'.

Other kinds of opportunity for post-qualifying study
Building on the answers to the question about plans and hopes for post-qualifying study, the questionnaire asked all respondents what other kinds of opportunity they would like to see. 62 (69%) people declared they would like to see other kinds of opportunity for post-qualifying study which were coded into five categories: a*rrangements and modes 28% (19); topics 24% (16); focus 21% (14)*; c*areer and progression 12% (8); level 12% (8).*

There is firm support for blocks of time, such as secondments away from the workplace, in order for candidates to do justice to the PQ study, and to enable them to experience other work settings. There is also an interest in developing flexible modes of delivery, especially distance and e-learning. This may be the only way in

which the very wide-ranging interests in topics for post-qualifying study might be satisfied, since the support for any one particular topic (with the possible exception of counselling) is dispersed. So, though there is widespread interest in following further specialisms, a critical mass of candidates for any one specialism may only be attained over a relatively large geographical area. It suggests an urgent need for universities and agencies to collaborate and harmonise in order to address the wide-ranging interest in and demand for post-qualifying study.

We should also note the interest in post-qualifying study leading into management roles and one suggestion that PQ be made compulsory and linked to a national pay structure, which reflected other concerns about career progression for candidates.

Hopes for future developments in post-qualifying study
Recognising the breadth of their experience, the PQ Leads were asked how they would like to see post-qualifying study develop. Their responses fell into four main categories: workforce planning, choice, flexibility and partnerships.

The loudest message concerned workforce planning and the need for a strategic approach to post-qualifying study to embed it in agencies and to make career paths clearer and more flexible. In Rowland's (2003) regional survey, 32% of award holders said they were more likely to remain with their employer after receiving their award, and this has risen to 50% in the 2006 survey. Some of those who said they would not remain explained that this was due to a lack of recognition of the award or a lack of support with continuing professional development.

Other comments included a desire to see more integrated learning with other allied professions, more emphasis on evaluation and research into the impact on practice resulting from post-qualifying study, courses approved and quality-assured on a regional basis, a hope that future developments will absorb the best of existing practice and that universities come to a realisation that employers may have other training priorities. There was also a hope for an ethos of continuing professional development rather than 'training' and a note of the apparent lack of influence the GSCC may have in the future.

Other comments about experience of post-qualifying study
All but two of the candidates had further comments to make about their experiences of post-qualifying study. No particular themes emerged in this section but, taken with

the rest of the questionnaire, some were relatively positive about their experiences, some relatively negative and others rather mixed. One difference worth noting is that current candidates (at 41%) were generally more positive than past candidates (at 32%. Where only 26% of current candidates felt largely negative, 42% of past candidates felt largely negative. Overall, one in three of the candidates responding to this survey felt, on balance, negative about their experience of post-qualifying study - a figure that the new framework for post-qualifying study will no doubt wish to improve.

Some illustrative comments:

On balance positive *(24: 37%)*

'Fortunate to have a tutor who listened to the group'; 'the presentations were invaluable; feel the whole PQ1 route could be in this form'; 'difficult and challenging, but very rewarding'; 'a good mentor was essential'; 'thoroughly enjoyable'; 'I enjoyed the challenge, especially looking at research relating to practice'; 'sense of achievement - it was worth doing'; 'lucky to study at local uni'; good sessions led by practitioners';

On balance negative *(22: 34%)*

'Too theoretical - should be more practice based'; 'strict criteria and lack of creativity not enjoyable'; 'lack of support of in-house training'; 'case studies too long'; 'it is very hard to combine with a busy job and a young family'; 'extremely time consuming and not particularly enjoyable'; 'I didn't get feedback on my work'; 'left me feeling very stressed with an acute sense of failure'; 'feel I have jumped through hoops to show that I can do what I do already';

Mixed *(19: 29%)*

'refreshed my knowledge, but soon forgotten once back at the grindstone'; 'good refresher, but would have been a drain if I'd been in practice for 20 years'; 'I feel I was a guinea pig but some things have improved'; 'found my ASW role in conflict with my belief in empowerment'; 'felt it was a standstill qualification (PQ1) - but a big thank you to my mentor for guidance and support.'

n = 65 (81%)

The focus groups

Three small focus groups, with a total of fourteen participants, each considered three questions: what promotes success, what hinders it and what might improve the

experience of post-qualifying study in social work. A variant of the nominal group technique was used to help the participants in the focus groups to consider and then prioritise their responses to these questions. The nominal group technique has been well-researched and used successfully across a number of different disciplines (Vernon and Borthwick, 2006). It is a useful technique when the group participants are relatively expert in the subject under discussion. The focus groups were small and self-selected, so we should treat the information as providing further detail to the survey, and not necessarily representative.

In terms of what helps promote success in post-qualifying study, in addition to the common themes of protected time and support, there was rather more focus on the courses themselves. The plea for content that was seen as relevant chimes with the survey findings, but these groups placed greater emphasis on the importance of clear, succinct and consistent guidance and this was a surprisingly strong theme across all three focus groups. Payments and career incentives figured relatively little.

In terms of hindrances, the focus groups reflected similar themes to the survey; lack of time and workload issues, as was the lack of support and quality of the mentor, lack of motivation, poor information about the course and other inconsistencies, uninspiring course content and difficulties accessing resources such as library materials. In two groups in particular there was a belief that it was more difficult for people who had not had recent experience of social work education, not just because it was difficult 'to get back on the bike' but because the bike itself had changed fundamentally. There was quite strong criticism of the teaching methods on the courses, that they are relatively prescriptive, pedantic in what they expect and a case of 'jumping through hoops'.

The familiar themes of extra study time and support from mentors were seen as key to improving the experience, but there were some more singular themes emerging from the focus groups. Two groups put post-qualifying education into a broader context. They thought that the status of social work (and whether it was a rising or falling star) was an important factor in the likely success of future post-qualifying systems. *'If the service itself is near crisis point, PQ is hardly going to be a priority.'* In a workforce that is punch drunk with change, there was a plea to allow the new post-qualifying framework to bed down before any more changes were contemplated.

The need for sound post-qualifying funding for the voluntary sector, so that it could participate fully in these developments, was raised by an individual but quickly attracted support from the rest of one focus group. Another group felt particularly strongly that there was a need for a wide variety of topics in post-qualifying provision, so that the content reflects the breadth of settings for social workers. One group focused more on improving the courses (structure, content, modes of assessment, etc.) They thought current assessment methods needed to be more testing and that they currently relied on too much self-report. They advocated more direct observation. Aldridge's (2006) study indicates an inconsistent approach to practice assessment.

It is interesting that a theme that was relatively muted in the survey became very strongly articulated in all of the focus groups - a call for improved direction and guidance, with better documentation to guide candidates through the process.

In one group the majority had experienced post-qualifying study as a chore rather than a learning experience. However, this same group stressed the importance of a good mentor, and that it was necessary for mentoring to be the primary role of that person. Approachability and accessibility, regular 1:1 sessions, reading and commenting on work and helping focus the work through the use of deadlines were seen as important qualities and functions of the mentoring role. Finally, incentives (not always financial) and clear progression were identified by all three focus groups as important factors in improving the post-qualifying scene.

Conclusion

'I enjoyed it. It was an opportunity to look back at theory, to ask why do I do that and consolidate – it became my baby'
'It felt like jumping through hoops and everything was so pedantic'.

It has been our task to map the experience of post-qualifying study, to gather the findings into coherent themes and to make some judgements about the relative significance of each of these. What can be said with confidence is that the experience of post-qualifying study varies widely and that the factors which explain this variety are complex.

At an individual level there is clear evidence that professional development is highly valued and that participating in these opportunities is more likely to increase confidence, but not for every-one (Mitchell, 2001; Rowland, 2006). It is also evident that motivations vary and we can perhaps infer that it is important for individuals to be aware of what drives them, so that they know how to keep reinforcing their commitment.

Individual candidates live and work in environments that differ in the level of demand they make on the person, and the degree of support they provide. Individuals have different capacities to cope with the demands of work, study and home, and feel the need for support at different intensities. The quality of support is significant, and these findings suggest that of all the sources for support, it is the mentor who is best placed to provide what is needed - knowledge of the programme as some-one who has experienced it.

The agency context is influential, though of more importance to some than to others. Study time and workload relief seem to be the best gifts that an agency can give its staff; however, these need to be *meaningful*. It is one thing to write a policy that states a right to so many days study leave, and another to nurture a culture where it is expected that this time will be taken. If study time and workload relief are meaningful, practitioners perceive this as recognition - of individual achievements and of the importance of post-qualifying study. Recognition by the agency is probably linked to staff morale and we can infer has an impact on recruitment and retention (Parker *et al*, 2006).

> *'The presentations were invaluable; feel the whole PQ1 route could be in this form'*
> *'Too theoretical - should be more practice based'.*

The programmes of study are remarkably varied in the way their content and structure is experienced by the candidates. If a course gives clear guidance with exemplars of successful work, has a practice focus with new and relevant research findings, and is pitched as an obvious progression from qualifying studies rather than a replication of them, we can be confident that virtually all candidates will experience it positively. Programmes need to be able to respond individually to practitioners who have been away from study for a long time, and to candidates who have specific difficulties with study skills. As Sloman (2005) noted in his personal account: 'Having

just finished my social work training I was still in tune with the language used and expected by academic institutions, but for colleagues who might have qualified more than ten years ago this has been an all together more difficult challenge'.

Any conclusions must consider the wider arena, especially the continuing diffuse nature of social work, by which we mean the potential for dissipation as social workers are increasingly working as a minority profession in organisations whose mission is not social work. The stage for social work is increasingly complex and fragmented (Postle *et al,* 2002: 157) and post-qualifying education cannot stand alone 'as a remedy for social work's ills' (Brown and Keen , 2004: 77). This study suggests a need for further research to understand the changes that post-qualifying study makes to candidates' social work practice (if any) and the service users' experience of this.

We would concur with Mitchell's (2001) conclusion that the key to overall success is an active partnership between individual workers, employers and those providing the training and education. Indeed, post-qualifying education offers a huge opportunity for the practice community to build its evidence-base 'from the bottom' (Marsh and Doel, 2005) and unique access to large numbers of practising social workers to gather research data about current practice concerns (Daniel, 2000). Post-qualifying education is most definitely part of the solution.

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APPENDIX 1:   CHECKLIST FOR THE POST-QUALIFYING JOURNEY
(INDIVIDUAL CANDIDATE)

Here is a series of questions for individual candidates to consider before starting post-qualifying study.

The questions are derived from the analysis of the survey questionnaires and the focus groups in this research. This is not intended to be a quick tick-box, but an opportunity to spend some time with yourself (or some-one whose opinion you value) to consider in some depth the questions that could make the difference between an enjoyable and successful experience, and a burdensome chore that risks a wasted journey. It would be useful to write your responses and to share them with the person who figures in your response to the first question.

Does this post-qualifying study come at the right time for you?
Do you know what alternatives are available to you?

What is going to motivate you to carry on this journey if and when things get tough?
What do you hope success in your post-qualifying study will bring? What (and who) are going to help you enjoy this journey?

How do your colleagues view your post-qualifying study?
Is it important to you that they are supportive?

What will happen to your workload whilst you are studying?
Who do you need to talk to about this? What needs to happen to ensure that you have the time to ensure that your studies will be successful?

How will you make sure you 'have a life' during your studies?
What kind of support do you need from family and friends?

What aspects of your post-qualifying journey do you fear might be disappointing / go wrong?
What will you do about this if it happens?

Practicalities
Like all journeys it is important to make preparations and decide what to take with you.
- **deadlines** *as soon as you have deadlines for course work put them in your diary*
- **study leave booked in your diary** *work backwards from the deadlines to book study leave and, remember, these days must remain highest priority*

- **course handbook** *read through the course handbook carefully and make a note of questions that you want to ask and of whom*
- **library membership** *is library membership automatic or do your need to pursue it yourself?*
- **IT / computer support** *what I.T. support do you need / can you expect? do you need help to learn how to conduct electronic searches?*

Who is your agency contact person?
What will be the arrangements for contact and support?

Do you have regular access to some-one who has done this, or a similar, journey before?
If so, who is this? If not, is this going to be a significant void? If so, can you find some-one? What role will your line manager play? Can you have sight of material that has been successful (e.g. a successful portfolio) - whilst recognising that the new systems will mean that there will be differences?

How will you know that the post-qualifying study has had an impact on your practice?

APPENDIX 2: CHECKLIST FOR THE POST-QUALIFYING CLIMATE (AGENCY and PROGRAMME)

Here is a series of questions for agencies and programmes to consider to support post-qualifying study.
The questions are derived from the analysis of the survey questionnaires and the focus groups in this research. This is not intended to be a quick tick-box, but an opportunity for agencies and post-qualifying programmes to review their systems in the light of these research findings.

What arrangements are there for candidates' workload?
What workload allowances are available? How will the agency and the programme ensure that workload allowances are effective? Are there mechanisms to harmonise these arrangements across agencies?

What arrangements are there for candidates' study time?
What study time is available? How will the agency and the programme ensure that study time is taken? Are there mechanisms to harmonise study time allowances across agencies?

What support is available?

Who provides support for candidates? How is the quality and level of this support monitored and evaluated? How is the support from the agency and support from the programme coordinated? Will there be a mentor available?

What are the incentives for post-qualifying study?
(e.g. career progression, increments, team honoraria, academic credit and further degrees). What kinds of agency expectation are there that post-qualifying study should be pursued? How 'embedded' is post-qualifying study in the agency?

What information does the post-qualifying programme supply to people who might be interested (or obliged) to study?
Are publicity materials and Handbook current? Do they give consistent and clear guidance? Are there exemplars of work available for candidates to view? Are the arrangements for assessment clearly detailed (criteria, deadlines and governance for appeal and re-take)?

What are the main practical issues for candidates and how does the agency and the programme respond to these?
For example, what kind of I.T. support is needed and provided? Is membership of a library/resource centre automatic? Are e-learning materials being explored and developed to complement face-to-face contact?

How is the programme evaluated?
What mechanisms are in place to find out how the programme is being experienced by current candidates, especially in terms of its relevance? How speedily is assessed work returned and is feedback consistent across markers? How is the impact of the programme evaluated over a longer period of time (for example, follow up with past candidates six months and a year after completion)? What happens to these evaluations?

What are the arrangements for the assessment of practice in the new post-qualifying arrangements?
Who will do the assessment of practice? how will that be monitored and evaluated? What training will those undertaking the assessment need?

What will indicate that the programme is having an impact on practice?