'Gateway': An innovative pedagogical approach to prepare social care workers for social work training

Abstract

This article presents a case study of an innovative course requested, funded and designed by the West London Social Work Teaching Partnership (WLSWTP). Due to difficulties in recruiting social workers across these local authorities, the graduate certificate in social care recognised and developed the skills of the current local social care workforce, many of whom were already undertaking roles previously undertaken only by social workers. Many social care workers were unable to access social work qualification routes because they were not in a position to study independently or did not have the required qualifications for bursaried programmes at universities or through fast-track providers.

The delivery of a graduate certificate in social care, over one academic year, one day a week, offered the opportunity for social care workers across adult's and children's services to provide evidence of their ability to study at degree level. Those students completing at a 2:1 level met the academic entry requirements for the MSc course at one of the partner universities and one fast track route.

The case study outlines the course development, curriculum design and preliminary findings from an ongoing evaluation.

GATEWAY TO SOCIAL WORK: AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH

Keywords

teaching, partnership, workforce, graduate, certificate, recruitment

Introduction

This article presents an innovative development from the West London Social Work Teaching Partnership (WLSWTP): the 'Gateway to Social Work' programme (henceforth 'Gateway'). This was designed to enable existing social care practitioners from WLSWTP (consisting of 8 London Boroughs and 2 Universities) to obtain a Graduate Certificate in Social Care to overcome barriers in accessing social work training and to address recruitment issues across WLSWTP. This article presents early findings from an ongoing evaluation of the programme.

Before the 'Gateway' was commissioned in 2016, existing local social work programmes required full-time attendance. This provided barriers for prospective students, already employed in the sector (loss of salary and other employment benefits). Additionally, regulatory and university admissions requirements for academic as well as vocational experience requirements for post-graduate and fast-track providers excluded experienced workers without a degree. For example, Hanley (2019, p.1) identifies concerns that fast-track programmes recruit a less diverse student group and the emphasis on 'academic credentials' rather than experience restricts access to the financial benefits of these programmes. The WLSWTP instead focussed on the existing social care workforce that reflected the diversity of local populations. The 'Gateway' offered an alternative work-based route to gain a recognised academic qualification and access social work qualifying programmes. Successful applicants undertook a rigorous selection process through interview, a

groupwork exercise and written analysis of an academic article to assess their potential to undertake this pathway to social work.

The 'Gateway' programme

The 'Gateway' was delivered during the 2017/18 academic year, one day a week. It offered the opportunity for social care workers to provide evidence of their ability to study at degree level. Those students completing at 2:1 level would meet the regulatory and admissions requirements for the MSc Social Work course at a partner university. One fast-track programme also recognised the qualification. There were twenty-seven students enrolled on the programme across the partnership representing a diverse and experienced cohort. Although they had varying prior experiences of education, all were supported to achieve their English and Maths functional skills as an entry requirement. threshold for entry to the programme.

Curriculum design

Drawing on adult learning pedagogical principles (Knowles, 1980), the programme was designed to build on the extensive work experience the students brought to the course. Academic learning was designed to help students achieve manageable, stepped learning tasks with in-built study skills support and tutorials and drew on a 'constructive alignment' model to align learning, teaching, assessment and learning outcomes (Biggs and Tang, 2011, p108). The programme comprised four consecutive 15-credit modules. Modules introduced students to study skills and the theoretical context for ethical professional practice in social work that recognized the lived experience of people who access services.

Key findings from initial evaluation

Using a realistic evaluation model (Pawson and Tilley, 2010), this longitudinal study aims to capture the views of the cohort of twenty-seven students on the course. Recognising the limitations of an internal evaluation the course team wanted to identify the student's learning at different points post-completion and identify components that enhanced or hindered accessing social work qualifying courses, and whether students pursued a social work pathway. Over a three year period the evaluation consists of face-to-face focus groups (January and September 2019), three online surveys (Summer 2019, Autumn 2020 and September 2021 and online semi-structured interviews with six students on two occasions (July 2020 and September 2021).

Of the twenty-seven students who attended the course, 63% (n=17) responded to the initial questionnaire in mid-2019. The students all remained working in social care and were from diverse backgrounds: aged between 31-57 years; 65% were women and 35% were men; 71% were from Black, Asian and Ethnic minority groups and 29% from White UK backgrounds; no one disclosed a disability; 41% had caring responsibilities; 76% had worked in social care for between 6 and 21 years; 53% had previously studied at degree-level or beyond and the remaining respondents had qualifications from GCSE's to diploma level. Of the seventeen respondents 71% had applied to a social work course (degree apprenticeships, Step up to social work and university Masters programmes). By late 2020, a further questionnaire to all twenty-seven participants had a response rate of 37% (n= 10) with 50% of the sample

recruited onto a full time Masters or a 'Step up to social work' programme and 30% of the sample recruited onto an Apprenticeship programme. Local agreements for funding and support were implemented.

Conclusion:

Our evaluation is ongoing, but early findings demonstrate that the 'Gateway' enabled the WLSWTP social care workforce to access social work training. When the programme commenced it was a unique work-based route for experienced social care practitioners to access training whilst maintaining employment. Subsequently, the apprenticeship degree has added another work-based route into social work with a flexible approach to entry criteria with a view to providing 'a more inclusive and representative workforce' (Higgs, 2020, p4) - also a key concern for the WLSWTP. Stone and Worsley (2020, p5) found the recruitment to their apprenticeship programme was 'a springboard for mature and experienced people' rather than the dominant view that they cater for younger people. Interestingly, they found that a 'pre-apprentice programme' would strengthen academic readiness and the development of study support strategies. The 'Gateway' programme is a template for how this might be achieved.

References

Biggs, J. & Tang, C. (2011). *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*. 4th ed. McGraw-Hill.

Hanley, J. (2019). The best and the brightest: Widening participation and social justice in contemporary social work education. *European Journal of Social Work*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2019.1653829

Higgs, A. (2021). The England degree apprenticeship: A lens to consider the national and international context of social work education. *Social Work Education*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2021.1873935

Knowles, M. (1980). *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: from Pedagogy to Andragogy*. The Adult Education Company.

Pawson, R. and Tilley, N. (2010). *Realistic Evaluation*. Sage.

Stone, C. and Worsley, A. (2021). 'It's my time now': The experiences of social work degree apprentices. *Social Work Education*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2021.1873936