Practice education: Where next?

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Summary: The future of practice education in social work in England is under discussion. An integral part of this relates to those considered qualified and appropriate to assess student social workers and the qualification framework necessary to ensure their supply. A draft Practice Educator Framework for England was published in October 2009. Fifteen partnerships of employers and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) were invited to deliver pilot Practice Educator programmes to test out the draft framework. This paper reports the formative and final evaluations from these pilot sites and lays the foundation for considerations of the future development of practice education in England. The evaluation and the pilot were commissioned by Skills for Care and funded by the Social Work Development Partnership. In total, 321 candidates had been or were in the process of being recruited to these pilot sites; whilst 24 candidates withdrew from or deferred their studies. The findings from the evaluation indicated that the vast majority of pilot sites had accredited their programmes academically, many at Master's degree level. Candidate feedback was predominantly positive; however, about one in eight candidates disagreed that their programme had provided them with sufficient mentoring support. A third of pilot sites have realised they do not have the numbers of stage 2 Practice Educators that qualifying placements may require. Strong partnerships between employers and HEIs and targeted funding will be needed to ensure that future programmes meet workforce development needs.

Key words: practice education; practice teaching; evaluation; social work education.

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Introduction

The future of practice education in social work in England maybe considered fairly secure but its exact focus is in the balance (Social Work Task Force, 2009), as is the wider landscape of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) (Social Work Reform Board, 2010). After approximately 18 months of development work, informal discussions and workshops, the draft Practice Educator Framework for England was published in October 2009 (SfC, 2009). Its aim was to improve the quality of people assessing and supervising social work students by ensuring consistent standards and learning outcomes. Fifteen partnerships of employers and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) were invited to deliver pilot Practice Educator programmes to test out this draft framework. Formative and final evaluations from these pilot sites form the focus of this manuscript and the foundation for considerations of the future development of practice education in England.

Practice Education in England

Terminology associated with practice education in the UK has been fraught with contest and change (Doel, 2010; Parker, 2010). Although agreement seems unlikely 'practice education' and 'practice educator' seem to be the preferred current terms in England. Regardless of these debates, these terms focus appropriately on education; and the teaching and learning of practice.

The Practice Teacher Award introduced as part of CCETSW's post-qualifying awards (CCETSW, 1989) proved, over time, to be popular and valued from a range of posts, not just practice teachers (Parker et al., 2006; Slater, 2007). Lindsay and Tompsett (1998) found that the decision to enter practice teaching was, primarily, an individual one; 75% of their respondents acted as a practice teacher after gaining the award, but only 27% undertook the role on a regular basis. The main reasons given for not continuing were changes in work role, inadequate workload relief and organisational changes.

In a later paper, Lindsay and Walton (2000) reported that strategic planning was at different stages in different agencies and operational

plans for practice learning varied. Only 25% of agencies included practice teaching as a staff development option at appraisal. There was significant variation in the costs of training practice teachers, covering workload relief, paying course fees, expenses and assessment fees. Agencies did, however, report the perceived benefits of increased professionalism within the agency and potential benefits for service users (ibid). Retention strategies for practice teachers included exerting moral pressure, persuasion and financial incentives but there were no real sanctions available when agencies relied on 'singleton' practice teachers (ibid). In each agency there appeared to be a core of practice teachers who continued in the job; retention was further improved where there was agency support, a stable workforce and financial incentives (ibid).

Our own research has indicated that where practice teachers were not individually responsible for practice placements, they were still likely to be contributing to the education process (Parker et al., 2006). Despite the popularity of the Practice Teacher Award it was not included as such in the GSCC post-qualifying (PQ) framework of social work education (GSCC, 2005). However, every PQ award had to have teaching and assessment that developed candidate skills to enable the learning of others (Walker et al., 2008). Whilst recognising the importance of education to professional and individual development, a stand-alone award was needed, and the draft Practice Educator Framework was therefore published (SfC, 2009).

This draft national framework (SfC, 2009) provides a minimum set of standards for practice educators and has been developed to standardise and improve the quality of assessment, teaching and supervision of student social workers on placement. From October 2013 it has been proposed that it will be mandatory for anyone with responsibility for the assessment of a student social worker to have met these standards (Social Work Reform Board, 2010a). This is a very significant development in terms of the quality assurance of practice learning as despite previous attempts it has not been possible to enforce national standards for practice educators and this has led to wide local variations in the requirements for people undertaking the role (Slater, 2007). The draft Practice Educator Framework seeks to address this issue by providing a more flexible pathway for the development of practice educators with clear links to the overarching professional standards for social work being developed by the Social Work Reform Board. The framework

identifies the knowledge and skills required by practice educators and provides guidance on how social workers should be prepared for, supported and assessed as competent to undertake the role. The requirements can be met in a staged manner with social workers who have achieved the standards at stage 1 considered competent to supervise, teach and assess students up to but not including the final placement . Only those who have met the standards at both stages 1 & 2 will be able to make final decisions about a student's fitness to practice as a qualified social worker.

Although the Practice Educator Framework specifies learning outcomes and includes guidance on minimum requirements in terms of mentoring and assessment it has been left to local employers, HEIs and other training providers to develop suitable ways in which social workers can demonstrate that they have met the standards and are assessed to be competent practice educators. Following the publication of the draft framework Skills for Care commissioned 15 pilot projects to enable local partnerships to develop and evaluate approaches to practice educator preparation that met their workforce needs.

This paper reports the formative and final assessments from these 15 pilot sites. The Centre for Social Work and Social Policy at Bournemouth University was commissioned by Skills for Care to provide these assessments and identify findings from these pilot projects highlighting programme and candidate perspectives of the different approaches to implementing the draft framework. As such, this is the first known evaluation in this arena. Funding for both the evaluation and pilot projects was provided by the Social Work Development Partnership.

Evaluation methods

The authors were provided with 15 tender documents, 15 interim pilot project reports, 13 final project reports, 14 sets of programme materials and 49 candidate feedback forms for further analysis from January 2010 onwards. To aid analysis between and within pilots sites this information needed to be distilled, abstracted and summarised onto a number of charts (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). This process revealed the need to follow up pilot projects with requests for further information on topics such as employer's needs, partnerships, candidate support and

other programme arrangements (see Appendix 1). Therefore, 15 HEIs and 15 employers were contacted in March and July 2010 to take part in follow-up informal telephone or email conversations. Twelve HEIs and 12 employers chose to take part in the March 2010 follow-up, and 12 HEIs and 11 employers in the July 2010 follow-up. Those employers and HEIs choosing not to respond to our requests for information were followed up with a minimum of two emails and three phone messages to give opportunity for electronic or verbal feedback. Distilled and abstracted summaries of these follow-up conversations were again recorded onto a series of charts to aid analysis between and within pilot sites (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). As a service evaluation that HEIs and employers had already agreed to take part in via their contracts with the Social Work Development Partnership, this study did not require formal ethical approval.

Evaluation findings

Overall programme characteristics

Employers led four of the pilot sites; the remaining 11 were led by HEIs. Original tender documents specified the use of tried and tested, existing partnerships to offer flexible pathways, mostly at Master's degree level, for candidates with diverse qualifications e.g. PQ6 and Enabling Others, to achieve further Practice Educator type qualifications. Yet, the structure of pilot programmes differed across the 15 sites. As previously noted, the draft Practice Educator Framework (SfC, 2009) sought two levels of progression – Stage 1 and Stage 2. Seven pilot sites offered Stage 2 programmes only and a further seven programmes appeared to be focused on Stages 1 and 2. The final programme was offered at Stage 1, with the possibility of future Stage 2 progression.

A total of 321 candidates had been or were in the process of being recruited to 14 Practice Educator pilot sites (Stage 2 = 188 candidates; Stages 1 and 2 = 133 candidates). This equated to a mean (average) of 20 candidates per programme (range 12 – 40 candidates per programme). Twenty-four candidates withdrew (n=20) from or deferred (n=4) their studies, owing to a mix of work related and personal, e.g. illness or family, pressures – equating to a 'drop-out' rate of about 7.5%. As at

July 2010, one programme had yet to start and five pilot sites were part way through the delivery of their programmes.

Thirteen pilot sites spoke of development, strategic, steering or management groups for their projects, where stakeholders met to discuss project progress. At least two of these groups had representation from the independent, voluntary and private sector. Service users and carers had been directly or indirectly involved in the management, design, conduct e.g. face to face sessions or web-based materials, and/or feedback of the majority (n=12) of pilot programmes. Five programme providers recognised the future importance of the involvement of service users and carers in Practice education programmes.

Employers and HEIs from 13 pilot sites variously described their partnerships as strong, good, collaborative, mutually supportive, respectful and full of active engagement. Often these partnerships were based on existing, long-standing relationships, for example, within the wider PQ framework and/or at a sub-regional level. Twelve employers believed their voices have been heard throughout the pilot project process – two employers said it was too early to tell. Partners often recognised the on-going nature of their work together.

Programme entry requirements and APL

For the formative assessment (March 2010) programme entry requirements as specified by pilot sites appeared broadly, though not exactly, in line with the draft Practice Educator Framework guidance. Although eight pilot sites mentioned how they were looking for candidates with Enabling Others, PQ6, PQSW or PQ awards, just four pilot sites specified the exact levels of work experience expected from prospective candidates as outlined in the draft Practice Educator Framework. Further clarification was therefore sought in the final assessment (July 2010). Almost all the 13 final project reports demonstrated that the experience and qualification requirements, as laid out in the draft Practice Educator Framework guidance, for example, for two years work experience, had been adhered to.

Employers were generally satisfied with programme entry requirements, in particular with the flexibility HEIs displayed in accepting prospective candidates, for example demonstrating equivalence of 70 day qualifying student placements. However,

admission onto programmes is considered very different from APL, the *Accreditation* or *Assessment* of *Prior* certificated or experiential *Learning*. A distinction between APL and admission procedures was not apparent from original tender documentation. Six pilot sites described their APL arrangements as 'in discussion'. Three of these employers were negotiating with their HEI to give academic credit to their current in-house Managing Practice Learning programmes. Three candidates from one pilot site had had their certificated learning (from another university) accredited. At least a further four pilot sites would have been able to accredit prior certificated or experiential learning, should they have been required to. As part of this demonstration project, one pilot site has created an innovative, flexible 'blank' module for experiential learning called 'Academic recognition for work-based learning'.

Programme credit and delivery

The vast majority of pilot sites had academically accredited their programmes (many at Master's degree level (n=7)) with one significant exception; a programme based on in-house existing training packages. Five pilot sites had also accredited their programmes at levels 6 (Honours – final year undergraduate) or 5 (Intermediate – second year undergraduate). Therefore, much flexibility was apparent, for example for those candidates without an undergraduate degree to earn undergraduate level credit.

About half of the pilot sites had used 15 credit multiples; the remainder, 20 credit multiples. For instance, three of the Stage 2 programmes had certified their programmes at 20 credits; two programmes at 30 credits; and one at 15 credits – using a range of 3-6 'teaching' or 'workshop' days to fulfil these requirements. Stage 1 and 2 programmes certified their combined programmes at 30, 40 or 60 credits, again using a range (6-11 days for a combined programme) of 'teaching' or 'workshop' days. Table 1 gives a flavour of the diversity of programme credit and teaching, workshop or action learning set days across Stage 1 and 2 pilot programmes.

Table 1
Programme credit and required attendance

Stage 1 pilot programmes		Stage 2 pilot programmes	
Level and amount of academic credit	Attendance required	Level and amount of academic credit	Attendance required
15 M level credits	3.5 days	15 M level credits	3 days
15 M or H level credits	6 days	15 M level credits	3 days
20 M level credits	5 days	15 M or H level credits	3.5 days
20 M level credits	6 days	20 M or H level credits	3 days
20 M level credits	6 days	20 M, H or I level credits	5 days
30 M or H level credits	5 days	20 M level credits	6 days
		30 M or H level credits	4 days
		30 M of H level credits	6 days

At least two programmes were delivered by HEI staff at the employer's workplace. One programme started off being offered as a twilight session and subsequently changed to 'day' teaching. At least three employers had been involved with the delivery of their pilot programme; a further three employers would have liked to have been more involved in developing materials for, and the delivery of, their programme. One pilot site had developed a reduced fee 'exam only' route for experienced candidates wishing to complete the assessment but not attend any teaching or workshop days. Two pilot sites used predominantly on-line resources to deliver their programmes.

Programme materials
Fourteen pilot sites provided selections of their programme materials for analysis. These consisted mainly of printed candidate and course handbooks and guides, guidance and information sheets, forms and proformas. This range, although interesting and diverse in its makeup, represented only a partial view of the materials used by pilot sites. Key information was mostly provided to candidates in the form of handbooks, covering information about or concerning the wider institution and more specific details concerning the course itself, for example:

- Facilities and resources
- Welfare and counselling

- Equal opportunities
- Appeals, complaints and mitigation procedures
- Course descriptors, aims and objectives
- Learning outcomes
- Assessment regulations
- Reading lists
- Evaluation and review procedures
- Teaching, learning and assessment strategies/procedures and marking criteria.

Some of the handbooks provided 'added value' with additional or more detailed information for candidates, for instance:

- Detailed list of contacts
- Teaching timetables
- Learning agreements for the programme
- Detailed candidates' responsibilities and entitlements
- Lists of Frequently Asked Questions or concerns / issues
- Practice Educator Framework provided and/or Domain Guidance Statements
- Information Technology / web page / library instructions
- Previous candidates' views
- APL arrangements.

Good practice when providing guidance for written assessment or portfolio work included the following:

- Detailed referencing and plagiarism guidance
- Submission procedures/checklist
- Portfolio – section headed sheets
- Writing guidance.

However, no support materials were received which gave detailed guidance on reflective or theory/practice integrated writing styles.

Candidate perspectives

For the final assessment, 49 candidates from eight pilot programmes provided opinion via an extended evaluation questionnaire (see Appendix 2). These candidates represent 15% of the candidates involved in this demonstration project. Candidates responding to the final evaluation questionnaire had taken a mean (average) of five qualifying students throughout their working lives (range 0-40). Most candidates (n=29 or 59%) took 1 or 2 qualifying students per year though some took many as 3 or 4 (n=4). Just under half the candidates (n=23 or 47%) had agreed to take another qualifying student in the next six months. Further candidate feedback from the final assessment is detailed below using the following sub-headings: *Overall programme effectiveness*; *Candidate support*; *Methods of programme delivery and assessment*; and *Future roles*. Indented italicised paragraphs contain verbatim comments from candidates.

Overall programme effectiveness

The vast majority of candidates agreed or strongly agreed that their programme had been effective in enabling the development of skills, knowledge and values to teach (92%), supervise (98%) and assess (98%) social work students; and critically evaluate their own development (98%) – see Table 2.

Table 2 – Candidate perceptions of programme effectiveness
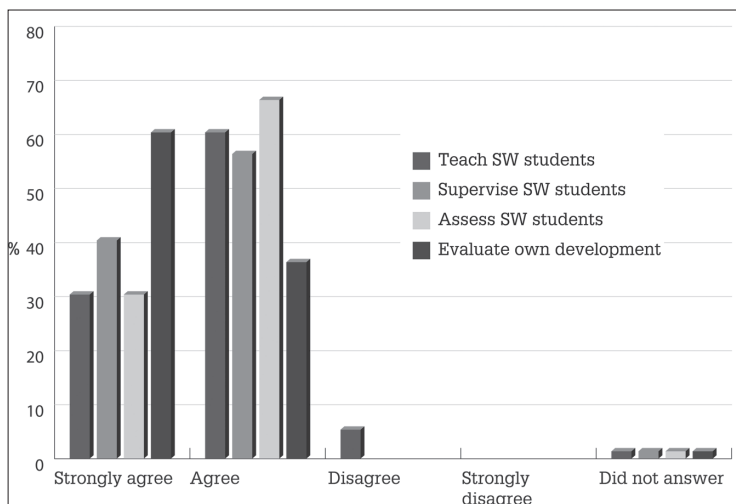
To illustrate:

I cannot say enough how it has developed my skills, helped me to reflect and think on what I would like to improve on. It has been a challenging and stimulating course, and that is shown in how I have valued all the learning achieved. It has made me far more aware of how important it is to think back and give myself time to mull things over and keep good notes.

The three aspects of programme delivery or assessment found most useful by candidates include the opportunity for peer discussion and support of other students in small groups (n=26), the opportunity and space to learn, reflect and update (n=10) and teaching sessions (n=9), for example:

The programme has caused me to assess and listen, to think and reflect. I found it has caused me to think of how I assessed the student. I have looked at my own self assessment and I have become so much more organised; it meant I have been so much more attentive to my students' blocks and learning difficulties.

Other aspects of programme delivery or assessment positively appreciated by candidates include experienced, enthusiastic and supportive tutors (n=8), general resources (n=5) and the opportunity to revisit adult learning theory (n=4). The main aspect candidates had found least useful about programme delivery or assessment was the amount of work required in the time available (n=10), in particular for those returning to study after a long break. Three candidates disagreed that their programme had been effective in enabling the development of skills, knowledge and values to teach social work students.

Candidate support

Most candidates also agreed or strongly agreed that their programme had provided them with sufficient learning resources (92%), learning support (90%) and mentoring support (82%) – see Table 3.

Table 3
Candidate perceptions of programme support
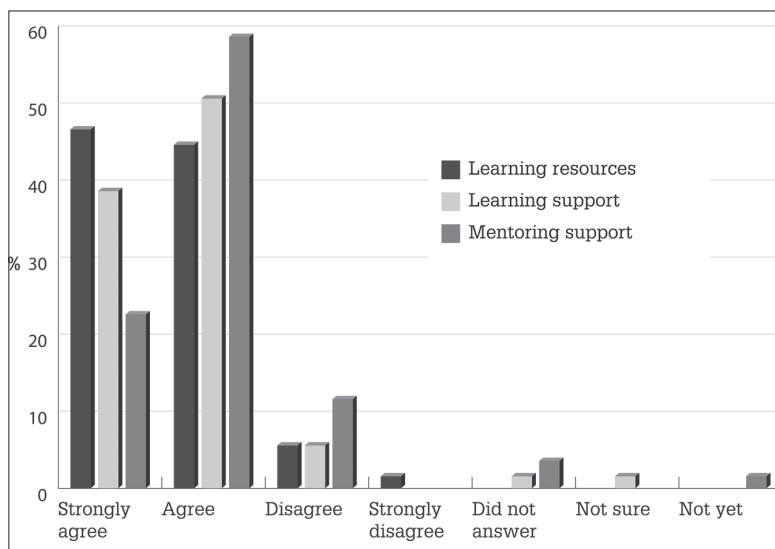
Therefore, six candidates disagreed that their programme had provided them with sufficient mentoring support – issues of clarity, availability and lack of response were apparent, for example:

I was not advised we should have had a mentor and it was not made explicit who the named person would be.

Support was offered; however, I had requested guidance on an observation and did not receive feedback on this.

On the basis that approximately 1 in 5 candidates providing feedback for the formative assessment, and 1 in 8 candidates in the final assessment, disagreed that their programme had provided them with sufficient mentoring support, further clarification on mentoring support was sought from pilot site providers and employers. Pilot sites confirm they were using flexible and creative method, for example peer, group, academic and informal mentoring, to enable candidates, each peculiar to their programme. Nevertheless, seven pilot sites recognised that the support candidates had actually received from their employer-based mentors had been variable.

Methods of programme delivery and assessment

The most valued programme delivery method in use on pilot programmes was the lecture (n=22). Workshops (n=12), seminars (n=11), small group discussions (n=7), reading materials (n=5), tutorials (n=4), on-line materials (n=3), action learning sets (n=3), mentor meetings (n=2) and peer meetings (n=2) were also valued.

The most appropriate methods of programme assessment were considered to be direct observations (n=35), written assignments of various lengths (that is 2-4 thousand words, including reflective accounts, for example of a candidate's learning and development) (n=29) and presentations (n=4). Less common methods of assessment included case studies (n=2), guided discussions (n=1), a mentor report (n=1), accounts of supervision sessions (n=2), and assessed interviews (n=1). The most common form of direct observation was of individual (n=30) or group (n=14) student supervision, or in direct fieldwork with a student (n=14).

> On both occasions I was observed supervising my student. The first direct observation I was unsure what to expect. I had constructive feedback which helped me. I took them on board and the second direct observation was much better. I have gained valuable supervision skills that I am utilising on a weekly basis.

For different reasons, three candidates argued that direct observations were the least appropriate method of assessment, for example:

> Direct observations are difficult to set up to gauge our ability to engage with social work practices ... a direct observation can be staged unless it is impulsive, and can be intrusive and oppressive to all concerned.

Future roles

Candidates saw themselves undertaking roles related to qualifying social work students (n=42) and/or newly qualified social workers (n=39) as displayed in Table 4. Twenty-six candidates saw themselves having more senior roles, for example, supervising senior practitioners, managing practice educators and/or managing training and development sections.

Table 4
Future roles of candidates
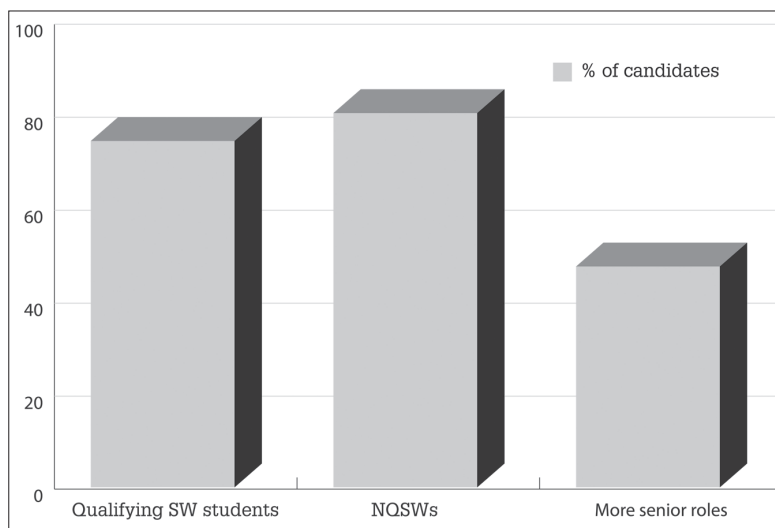
What could have been done differently?

The opportunity for employers and HEIs to think about how things could have been done differently, inadvertently produced a number of related comments on how programmes had acted as a catalyst for a number of (un)planned or actual outcomes:

- *Development*
  Developing pilot Practice Educator programmes to meet employer needs had caused the further development of other related programmes, for example a short introductory course for those with the Enabling Others qualification and a development programme for experienced Practice Educators, using a self-audit process.

- *Candidate audit*
  Related to the above point is the importance of pitching Practice Educator programmes where candidates are at – one of the ways pilot sites had done this was via self-audit processes including diagrammatic flow-charts. They answered a number of 'what if' scenarios such as 'what if I have the Practice Teacher's Award, but I qualified over five year ago?'

- *Tailored programmes*
  Reflection on the process of pilot programmes had caused a focus on what was considered essential. For some, this meant removing anything extraneous, for example taking Domain A out of Master's level delivery because it did not fit; for others, it meant adding a reflective day into the middle of their programme or highlighting the importance of analysis, synthesis and deep reflection in written assignments.

- *Communities of practice*
  The process of this pilot project had raised the popularity and profile of the Practice Educator concept. Pilot sites had begun to think about how they might further encourage Practice Educators to remain active, for example with graduation ceremonies, supervision courses, Stage 3 registration and local conferences to promote Practice Learning. One pilot site spoke about how their pilot programme had embedded practice learning in its rightful regional context.

However, employers have recognised the transitional nature of current arrangements. Put another way, five pilot sites have realised they do not have the required numbers of Stage 2 Practice Educators that student placements require. This realisation has occurred at the same time as tremendous budgetary pressure on services.

Finally, six HEIs highlighted how they would have increased levels of academic support, in particular to allow for the step up to M level – in the form of increased mentoring, action learning sets, a reflective day in the middle of programmes or longer preparatory sessions.

Discussion

Limitations

This evaluation has been limited to some extent by time constraints and by its methodology which, whilst fit for purpose, would have been enhanced by an extended longitudinal evaluation of outcomes and

systematic collection of data in greater depth from all stakeholders, candidates in particular. As at July 2010 five Practice Education demonstration projects had yet to complete the delivery of their programmes and one programme had yet to start. Therefore, this evaluation is based on partially completed demonstration projects. Nonetheless, the data gained is robust in reflecting the perceptions of the programmes, candidates and employers to date and provides a solid foundation for considering the future development of the Practice Educator in England.

Programme characteristics

Pilot programme structures that is at Stage 1 and/or Stage 2 and entry requirements are congruent with guidance contained in the draft Practice Educator Framework (SfC 2009). It is notable that virtually all pilot sites have academically accredited their programmes (many at Master's degree level) with one significant exception – a programme based on existing in-house training packages. Five programmes offer candidates the flexibility to earn academic credit at a different level. Such difference may be confusing, but is not new. Previous research (Doel et al., 2008) shows that PQ programmes of study are remarkably varied in their content and structure. However, these differences in programme structures are perhaps indicative of a need to review programme expectations, purposes and characteristics and consider whether there is a need to be more systematised and standardised in approach. The ramifications of this would need to be explored: for instance, whether academic standardisation would restrict local variation that accounted for local needs, or made the choice of provision neutral rather than creative. Therefore, further consideration should be given to the specification of minimum levels of academic credit and at what level. CPD and the PQ education framework feature as central elements of the musings of the Social Work Task Force (2009) and the Social Work Reform Board (2010). HEIs, in their established partnerships, with local and regional employers are particularly well placed to deliver high quality programmes. This expertise may not be sufficiently recognised under a fluid and varied approach to CPD, which includes non-accredited and unassessed in-house training.

Most employers have contributed to the completion of direct

observations, again in line with the draft Practice Educator Framework, but some have not. Three employers would have liked to have been more involved in developing materials for, and the delivery of, their programme. The involvement of and support from employers in practice education has already been highlighted by earlier research as important (Lindsay & Walton, 2000; Doel et al 2008). It will be vital for the future success of the implementation of the Practice Educator Professional Standards for Social Work that employers are fully involved in the development, delivery and assessment of future Practice Educator programmes. Mitchell's (2001) early work on PQSW partnership came to the conclusion that the key to overall success is an active partnership between individual workers, employers and those providing the training and education. Brown et al (2010) also later show how this three-way shared responsibility for workforce development is a positive way to enable education and training providers, employers and practitioners, directed by national requirements for social care education, to facilitate the design of relevant and meaningful CPD provision.

At least two programmes have been delivered by HEI (or employer) staff at the candidates' workplaces. It is expected that future Practice Educator programmes will embrace this partnership model further, owing to its likely cost-effectiveness. Partnerships have been emphasised within the Social Work Task Force (2009) final report and beyond in Reform Board discussions to debate possible partnership models. It would be timely to develop coherence with these recommendations as the focus on practice learning, and/or placements is directly structured by, and in turn structures, the practice educator standards needed to ensure effective field education. The development of this type of partnership will need to be represented within the deliberations of the Social Work Reform Board.

Key information has been mostly provided to candidates in the form of handbooks – again, it is notable that no support materials were received that gave detailed guidance on reflective or theory/practice integrated writing styles. This is not unusual but perhaps disappointing. Research by Doel et al. (2008) on the experiences of post-qualifying study in social work notes that reflective writing skills are important, and suggests that more assistance to consider what 'reflective writing' actually means would be helpful for students. Further work appears necessary in this area. Pilot sites have further supported their candidates in a variety of, often group-based, ways, for example in action learning

sets. Yet, none of these mechanisms appear to include workload relief or study leave for candidates. Similarly, the study by Doel et al. concluded that study time and workload relief seem to be the best gifts that an agency can give its staff; however, these need to be meaningful, which meant for most of the respondents, having appropriate study time and, just being able to take it. Again, it would seem appropriate to work toward coherence with the recommendations contained in the Social Work Task Force Final Report (2009) for study leave.

A total of three candidates from one pilot site had their certificated learning, from another university, accredited towards their award; though many APL arrangements are described as 'in discussion'. Further clarity around APL, as distinct from admission procedures, is required within any future standards for Practice Educators. Alignment with university requirements is important and these should be clear, rigorous and flexible, as noted in Brown et al. (2010 pages 71-84).

Candidate perspectives

This demonstration project has been successful in funding Practice Educator programmes, based on the draft Practice Educator Framework, that have recruited 321 candidates. Twenty-four candidates have subsequently withdrawn or deferred – a comparatively respectable drop-out rate of 7.5% (GSCC, 2009). Similar to Lindsay and Walton's (2000) findings, feedback from 15% (49 out of 321 candidates) is generally positive. Nevertheless, about 1 in 8 candidates disagreed that their programme had provided them with sufficient mentoring support. Seven pilot sites recognised that the support candidates had actually received from the employer-based mentors had been variable. Mentoring support is already seen in the wider PQ arena as the most significant factor to sustain post-qualifying study (Doel et al., 2008). This support is vital, regardless of whether it comes from HEIs or employers (Lindsay and Walton, 2000). Mentoring and coaching, when done well, will foster creativity and innovation and will help build the skills needed by professionals to deal with complexity and uncertainty (Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2008). Candidates need to have access to mentoring that enables them to discuss openly uncertainties and difficulties without this impacting on their assessment. Further clarity is needed in any subsequent Practice Educator standards and

between programme partnerships on the separate but related roles of mentors and practice assessors. Candidates also need to be allowed time for reflection, consolidation and/or critique within any taught element of programmes. Again, this has been seen in the study by Doel et al. (2008) where time is seen to be the next major factor to sustain study after mentoring.

Most candidates saw themselves undertaking roles related to both qualifying social work students (n=42) and/or newly qualified social workers (n=39). Many candidates had more senior roles, for example, supervising senior practitioners, managing practice educators and/or managing training and development sections. It is likely, therefore, that more than 27% of these individuals (Lindsay and Tompsett, 1998) will continue as Practice Educators at different levels. These roles are part of the widened continuum that practice education encapsulates as reported within the Social Work Task Force report (2009).

Where next for practice education in England?

Future roles may still include a new career grade, as suggested by the Task Force, that concretises the commitment to continuing education of the workforce as well as its replacement in terms of new graduates. How far this is realised may be debateable at a time of retrenchment in public expenditure and recession but the principles which imply a deep commitment to professional development and education for better practice remain. What is probably more likely, however, is the adoption of a professional capabilities framework, the product of discussions within the sub-groups of the Social Work Reform Board (2010). Two of the nine capabilities are identified as they relate to 'knowledge' (PC5) which is applied and passed on perhaps through 'professional leadership' (PC9), which explicitly refers to taking responsibility for the professional learning of others. This would include field or practice education.

An emphasis on partnership, however that contested term may be understood (see, for instance, Whittington, 2003), needs to create the conditions in which HEIs and employer agencies can work together to construct, deliver and further develop programmes that contribute to continuing improvement in practice. The partnerships will, no doubt,

focus on placement issues – a third of pilot sites have realised they do not have the required numbers of stage 2 Practice Educators that student placements require. Placements require high quality teaching and the practice educator award provides a potential conduit for that. Further funding may not only be required to develop Stage 2 Practice Educators but also Stage 3 senior Practice Educators as detailed in the Social Work Task Force final report (2009).

Currently, however, the debate is set within a context of fiscal constraint and increased pressure on higher education and social services. Any developments will need to satisfy the demands of economic efficiency as well as pedagogic effectiveness. Our positive evaluation indicates the potential effectiveness of the draft practice educator framework in contributing to the new workforce, developing the existing workforce and, what has not been achieved previously with the Practice Teacher's Award, ensuring a degree of consistency in standards across England. Nationally agreed Practice Educator standards, applied across the country, with strong partnerships between employers and HEIs will ensure that future programmes meet workforce development needs. Practice Educators play a vital role in training the practitioners of the future be they qualifying, newly qualified or post-qualifying social workers and are therefore of fundamental importance to the continued learning and development of all practitioners and the effective delivery of high quality services.

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Appendix 1

a) *'Fill in the blank' chart questions for programme providers – formative assessment*

Programme cost – please could you specify the cost of your programme?

Stage 1 cost:

Stage 2 cost:

Combined cost (if different from Stage 1 plus Stage 2):

Programme structure – please could you reiterate the structure of your programme, including stages, academic credits (if any) and their level?

APL - Please could you outline your programme's APL arrangements? In particular, what are the links to PQ/Enabling Others?.

Partnership – To what extent do you think that your partner's (employer) needs have been met?

How would you describe the strength of your partnership?

The future – What would you do differently if you had to start another PE programme tomorrow?

Is there anything else you would like to contribute to this formative assessment?

b) *'Fill in the blank' chart questions for programme providers – final assessment*

Programme design – Please explain your overall rationale for the choices you have made concerning the design of your programme?

Service user/carer involvement – How have you involved service users and carers in developing your proπgramme?

Mentoring – To what extent have your candidates received sufficient mentoring support?

Practice Educator Framework (PEF) – What are your thoughts on the possible standardisation of the PEF e.g. in terms of specifying minimum levels of academic credit?

Partnership – Four months on, how would you now describe the main features of your partnership arrangements?

The future – Four months on, what would you do differently if you had to start another Practice Educator programme tomorrow?

Is there anything else you would like to contribute to the assessment process?

c) *'Fill in the blank' chart questions for employers – formative assessment*

Programme entry requirements – Do you have a view on the suitability of your programme's entry requirements for Stage 1 and/or Stage 2?

APL arrangements – To what extent are you satisfied with arrangements for the accreditation of prior learning (APL) within the pilot programme?

Programme cost – To what extent are you satisfied with the cost of the programme? Have you been able to negotiate programme costs with your provider, or not? Do you envisage that your organisation would continue to purchase this programme at its current cost?

Programme delivery and assessment – How are you contributing to the delivery and assessment of the pilot programme? How are you supporting any direct observations?

Candidate support – How are you supporting candidates through the pilot programme?

Practice assessment – What sort of models of practice assessment will you be undertaking?

Employer's needs, voice and partnership – To what extent do you think that your needs have been met? To what extent do you think that your voice has been heard? How would you describe the strength of your partnership?

The future – What would you do differently if you had to start another PE programme tomorrow? Is there anything else you would like to contribute to this formative assessment?

d) *'Fill in the blank' chart questions for employers – final assessment*

Direct observations – Please describe how the direct observation of practice educators has worked within the programme?

Mentoring – To what extent have your candidates received sufficient mentoring support to candidates?

Practice Educator Framework (PEF) – What are your thoughts on the possible standardisation of the PEF e.g. in terms of specifying minimum levels of academic credit?

Partnership – Four months on, how would you now describe the main features of your partnership arrangements?

Value for money – Do you perceive your programme to be good value for money?

The future – Do you envisage that your organisation will continue to purchase this programme? Four months on, what would you do differently if you had to start another Practice Educator programme tomorrow? Is there anything else you would like to contribute to the assessment process?

Appendix 2. Candidate Evaluation Questionnaire: Final Assessment

Evaluation Questionnaire
Practice Educator Framework Programme

Please indicate your response to the following statements below by placing a tick in the appropriate box and/or making comments as required. If you are part way through the programme then please rate your experience so far.

	Please type 'Yes' in the appropriate box	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
	The programme is/was effective in enabling me to develop skills, knowledge and values to :				
Q.1	**… 'teach' social work students**				
Q.2	**… supervise social work students**				
Q.3	**… assess social work students**				
Q.4	**... critically evaluate my own development**				

Please add any additional comments to clarify or illustrate your answer if you wish below:

	Please type 'Yes' in the appropriate box	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Q.5	**The programme provides/provided me with sufficient learning resources, e.g. workbooks, on line materials etc**				
Q.6	**The programme provides/provided me with sufficient learning support**				
Q.7	**I was provided with sufficient mentoring support**				

Please add any additional comments to clarify or illustrate your answer if you wish below:

Q. 8 Please list which of the delivery methods in use/used on your programme
        (e.g. lectures, seminars, workshops) are/were -
a) most valuable:

b) least valuable:

Q. 9 Please list which of the assessment methods in use/used on your programme
        (e.g. direct observations; written assignments; presentations) are/were -
a) most appropriate:

b) least appropriate:

Q. 10 Concerning the direct observation of your practice as an educator,
        please delete as appropriate:

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as observed while supervising a student	Yes/No
I was observed in group supervision with students	Yes/No
I was observed engaging in direct fieldwork with a student	Yes/No
Other: I was observed (please complete)……………………	Yes/No
Please add any additional comments to clarify or illustrate your answer/s:	

Q.11 Three things I enjoy/ed or find/found most useful about the programme's delivery or assessment are/were:…………………………………………………………………………………..

………

Q.12 Three things I did not enjoy/ed or find/found least useful about the programme's delivery or assessment are/were:……………………………………………………………………………….

………

………

Q.13 The training/education/assessment roles I see myself undertaking in the future are

Please delete as appropriate:

- **contributing to assessment and mentoring of NQSWs   Yes/No**
- **qualifying students   Yes/No**
- **more senior roles   Yes/No**
- **other (please specify)…**

………

Q.14 In total, how many qualifying students have you taken as a practice educator?.........

Q.15 Approximately how often have you taken these qualifying students e.g. 1 per year?

………………………………………………………………………………………………………..

Q.16 Have you formally agreed to take another qualifying student in the next 6 months?

Yes   No (please delete as appropriate)

Q.17 Have you completed your Practice Educator Programme?

Yes   No (please delete as appropriate)

If no, please state how much of the programme you have completed.

………………………………………………………………………………………………………..

If you would be prepared to take part in a follow-up evaluation, please leave your e-mail here:

Thank you for completing this questionnaire

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