Evaluating Social Work Placements: Key Action Points

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Abstract

Social Work degree courses conduct an annual audit on practice learning opportunities, collecting data from key stakeholders involved in students’ placements, primarily the practice assessor, the placement supervisor and the student. This article presents a summary of the design, scope and key findings of the 2007-2008 audit. Overall, findings suggest concordance of issues between students and their corresponding practice assessors and placement supervisors, leading to a set of five key action points to be taken forward for future cohorts.

Key words: Social Work, Placements, Students

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Introduction and context

In 2007 a consortium of key stakeholders including the General Social Care Council, Skills for Care, the Children’s Workforce Development Council, and the Joint University Council and Social Work Education Committee issued high level guidance on securing and monitoring practice learning opportunities (PLOs)[1] for social work students. This information was put together in the booklet ‘Quality assurance benchmark statement and guidance on the monitoring of practice learning opportunities’. It is the expectation that Social Work degree courses will conduct an annual audit to collect data from key stakeholders involved in a student’s placement, primarily the practice assessor (PA), the placement supervisor (PS) and the student. Data collected is measured against quality assurance benchmark statements around factors that indicate a placement provides a ‘quality’ learning experience. The statements cover:

- The suitability and richness of the learning opportunity in which the student’s appropriate learning and then her [sic] assessment may take place within a resourced, enabling and supportive learning culture;
- An agreed, complied with timetable for the commencement and completion of the practice learning opportunity with sign posted milestones that track progression though to completion;
- The expertise, availability, and performance of personnel who manage the placement, the student’s performance, learning and the assessment;
- A range of suitable and available work opportunities appropriate for the student’s progression, an engagement with which naturally allows national occupational standards (NOS) to be demonstrated;
• A set of workable practical arrangements that lay down mutual obligations and expectations between all participants, including support systems and the management of difficulties (GSCC et al, 2007: 11).

Design and Scope of Evaluation

In line with this process, the University of Wolverhampton Social Work Department collects information from key stakeholders in PLOs on an annual basis. From year to year there has been some tension around the extent to which information supplied by students on their form should be kept confidential. At one end of the continuum, evaluation forms have previously been sent to PAs and the placement agency so that they have an understanding on the quality of the PLO as perceived by the student. At the other end of the continuum, students’ evaluation forms have been anonymous (online returns) and extrapolations made from the data on the quality of practice learning. Placement agencies and PAs tend to favour the former type of feedback. In 2008, the data collection tool was modified to mirror that of the Quality of the Practice Learning Opportunity tool (QAPL)[2].

The overall response rate was less than expected at 27%. Out of 358 distributed questionnaires, 97 were received; 64 from students, 33 from PAs and PSSs[3].

Key findings- Practice Assessor and Placement Supervisor Feedback

In relation to whether PAs and PSs considered the placement request had been presented to them in good time, 85%[4] stated that it had, and 88% stated that they were satisfied with the setting up and confirmation arrangements. In addition, 91% were pleased with the information they had received about the student, 82% were content with the information they had received about the practice learning handbook (although 2 respondents said they had not received a handbook), 85% were satisfied with the information they had received about placement policies and procedures, 88% were pleased with the information received about links with, and the role of, Wolverhampton University, and finally, 91% stated that the student was sufficiently well-prepared to learn and be assessed. The level of support PAs and PSs had received from key individuals during the placement was satisfactory from their line manager (64%), work colleagues (88%), University tutor (70%). 67% were aware of the process by which students would be assessed before the start of the placement. In addition to this, in making a judgement about the student’s competence, 100% took into account the views of service users, 100% views of other colleagues, and 94% views of other professionals. Overall, the degree to which respondents perceived they all worked well together was mixed, with 24% stating the level was average, 12% quite well, 30% very well, whilst 33% failed to respond. Practice Assessors and Placement Supervisors were also asked to explain why they had evaluated particular Quality Assurance benchmarks very positively or quite negatively. Overall, it appears the majority of respondents perceived their placements went very well and were satisfied with both process and outcome. These comments are shown in Table 1.
Practice Assessors and Placement Supervisors made the following recommendations for how to improve future PLOs:

1. The level 3 PA/PS workshop held in May could be held sooner, so that if concerns were raised at this stage, there would be sufficient time in which to resolve them.

2. Earlier setting up and confirmation agreements would be welcomed.

3. Since there were slight difficulties towards the end of placement with line management and other agency individuals showing little understanding of the role of the PLO, it was suggested that work practices could be reviewed before the next PLO in order to ensure students meet the NOS.

4. More knowledge and understanding of multiagency work is required within the degree programme (more understanding of others’ roles, how to manage and mediate conflict, and negotiation).

5. More time is required for students to complete their portfolio at the end of placement, as it was noticed that students are under pressure to deliver very shortly after completion of the placement.

6. The portfolio handbook could be redrafted for better clarity - essential guidance and recommended guidance results in too much to draw together.

Finally, a large number of comments were made by PAs and PSs about the high calibre of students. It is worth highlighting a sample of these comments, in order to help prepare for the next cohort of placement students:

‘I feel that it has been a refreshing experience having a particularly young conscientious student here. Service users have been particularly interested in the work (s)he has been doing and I know they have enjoyed and benefited from the support (s)he has shown them’. ‘The maturity of the student and his/her life experiences alongside his/her work experience has been a tremendous asset to the placement. I have enjoyed supervising this student very much, the young people found him/her approachable and would always seek his/her advice and support. In terms of meeting the practice benchmark, this student always tried to work within guidelines laid down, if (s)he had any difficulties (s)he always asked for advice and support. This student has shown nothing but commitment to his/her placement and has strived to work in a non-oppressive and anti-discriminatory manner. (S)he is focused and determined to reach his/her goal, but also understands that (s)he has to meet the desired standards laid down by the GSCC code of practice’.
Student Feedback

Most students (72%) began their placement on time. Of the remaining 28% students who did not begin their placement on time, reasons for late starting included:

- Communication difficulties – between the University and student, and between the agency and student
- Invalid CRB
- Late pre-placement meeting and requirement for GSCC registration
- Delay in obtaining additional security clearance
- Clarification of health declaration
- Personal circumstances (childcare, illness, etc)
- Staffing issues at placement setting
- No suitable practice learning opportunity.

In relation to whether the student liaised with the provider prior to commencing their placement, 83% stated they did liaise with the provider, whilst 16% did not. However, 88% of students reported there was nothing critical that they needed to know which was not made known to them at the time of commencement.

When asked to rate the information they received about the PLO before commencement, 56% rated it good, 20% fair, 13% excellent, and 11% rated the information inadequate.

Students were asked whether they discussed, completed and then signed a contract upon commencement of the practice learning opportunity. 97% of students had taken part in contractual work, 88% of which were completed within timeframe.

80% of students stated they had a planned induction programme, covering issues around: agency policy and procedures (80%); familiarisation with services and key staff (75%); introduction to local communities and user groups (59%); networking opportunities with allied professionals and other linked service providers (63%); health and safety (81%); and working arrangements (78%).

66% of students stated they had their specifically-agree needs met during their placement, 83% of students stated that, overall, they felt well supported, and 86% stated they had encountered no major concerns. Of the 14% students who did encounter major concerns, the response received was felt to be very good. Overall, the induction programme was rated good to excellent (71%).

A high level of information was provided to students regarding agency policies and how students would be able to raise concerns about key aspects of their work, learning or assessment: complaints (95%); grievances (94%); harassment (91%); bullying (91%); whistle-blowing (95%); disagreements (92%); and dissatisfaction (95%).

Students rated their perceptions of their learning programme in a number of areas, as follows: their learning programme developed their knowledge and skills (48%); their values (52%); areas for development (45%); their learning programme covered agreed units within the key roles (48%), inter-professional or multidisciplinary practice (44%), the GSCC code of practice (47%) and legal interventions (38%); and their learning programme required them to integrate theory with practice (48%).

Overall, students rated their learning programme highly (52%). The assessment programme included the following items: direct observation of their practice (100%); direct feedback from service users and carers (88%); direct feedback from other people (89%); regular supervision and constructive, timely feedback (84%); and periodic assessment and review (69%).

In terms of whether students’ areas for development and improvement had been made clear to them throughout the placement, 75% of students stated that they had such feedback provided to them.
Of these, 72% stated they had the support and opportunity to address these areas, and 59% said their assessor made clear to them the reasons for the final overall assessment decision.

Students were then asked how they rated their placement assessment overall. 44% rated it good and 36% excellent. Finally, students were asked to consider the extent to which they were satisfied with their progress towards being a competent social worker and to rate this accordingly. It was found that 45% rated their progress fairly well and 41% very much so.

In addition to providing a number of evaluative statements about their practice learning opportunities against a number of quality assurance benchmarks, students were also asked to highlight and explain why they had evaluated any one’s particular positively or negatively. Positive and negative responses are outlined below, as are students’ recommendations as to how the PLO process may be improved. Summarising students’ comments overall, it appears the majority of students perceived their placements went very well and were satisfied with both process and outcome.

Table 2: Students’ perceptions of their placement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive perceptions</th>
<th>Negative perceptions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive, welcoming, supportive and available PSs.</td>
<td>Little involvement, exclusion by staff/team and lack of work in office environment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Good communication between the student, PA, PS and tutor helped to build a sense of</td>
<td>Induction and conclusion to placement did not happen for a few students.</td>
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<td>satisfaction for students.</td>
<td>No written or verbal feedback provided during placement by PS.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Staff ensure students are made to feel a valued member of the team, and that their</td>
<td>Lack of understanding of student placement, allied with no take-up of University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>views, thoughts and opinions were taken seriously, giving overall job satisfaction.</td>
<td>training.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities to work with service users.</td>
<td>Some students did not gain new learning as they had previously worked with the same</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular supervision sessions.</td>
<td>client group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning new skills.</td>
<td>Insufficient time for PAs and PSs to prepare for receiving students.</td>
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</table>
Students then made the following suggestions for future improvements of practice learning opportunities:

1. It is not advisable to place students in their own workplace, as learning and experience may not be enhanced, and the student may not be perceived as a ‘student’. However, if students must be seconded within their own place of work, attempts should be made to place them within a different team for fresh learning to occur.

2. Many students frequently had to use their own initiative (in building relationships, seeking appropriate work to meet portfolio items or NOS). Some (less experienced?) students therefore might need to be encouraged to seek support in these areas.

3. Recent changes within Wolverhampton City Council means that the social worker role will be divided into 3 distinct roles: assessor, reviewer and care planner. Therefore, considerable exceptions may need to be made to the learning requirements of some students.

4. PAs and PSs should receive more notice prior to students beginning placement. Similarly, students should have more sufficient notice of their placement.

Finally, so many students made positive comments about the high quality of their placements that it is worth bringing to light these perceptions, and it is here that they are illustrated by select quotations:

‘I found this PLO to be completely supportive whilst challenging. I was given ample opportunity to develop my professional competency and skills. I was encouraged to develop my ability to engage with reflective practice and apply theory to practice. Both my practice teacher and supervisor were on-site to answer queries, support, and draw out the best in me. I was encouraged to explore my role, and responsibilities, and myself. This in itself allows social work and personal values to be explored fully. I experienced a safe and comfortable environment in which I felt able to openly discuss problems/issues, either personal or in relation to practice. Consequently, I have been able to move to a place where I would feel confident about starting my social work career in adult services’. ‘I had a very supportive supervisor whose manager made me feel part of the organisation. I benefited from their in-house training programme. I was very much impressed by the positive input and reassurance by staff to the [service users] at the home because sometimes they were very difficult. I thrived from working as part of a team. I also had a great opportunity to apply theory to practice. I also believe there was good rapport between the supervisor, the tutor and myself. Their constructive criticism made me a better student. I did not give myself maximum points because there is still room for me to learn more’.
Conclusions and action points

Five key areas for action were developed from the findings. The evaluation report with action points was submitted to staff in the University’s partner agencies and discussed on the Course Management Committee. Finally, although there is not a formal mechanism for doing so, some feedback was provided to students.

The GSCC, the body that validates social work programmes, conducts annual auditing of the programmes, this audit forming part of the Social Work Annual Monitoring Report which goes to the HLSS School Quality Enhancement Committee. A synopsis of these key outcome areas was submitted to the GSCC, who recently advised (informally) that it will pay closer attention to the outcome of evaluations from academic year 2008/2009.

In 2007/2008 the areas for action were:

Action point 1

- That the evaluation should not be a stand alone document; that the Course Management Committee should consider whether it can be incorporated into portfolios, e.g., each student having to indicate in their portfolio that they have completed the evaluation form prior to handing the portfolio in. This would have the benefit of obtaining an almost 100% response rate, in turn enabling a more thorough in-depth PLO evaluation.

Action point 2

- 16% of students indicated they had not visited the PLO prior to commencing their placement and 20% of students did not have an induction. This is not good practice and is contrary to the guidance laid out in the Quality Assurance benchmark statement; specifically there is an expectation that an induction programme is developed for each student. Essentially, strict guidance and a written agreement needs to be progressed with agencies to cover these issues, and improved planning with stringent timeframes included.

Action point 3

- Approximately half of students across the levels are reporting that their placement helped them develop their knowledge, skills and values. A similar number responded positively that their PLOs covered the GSCC Code of Practice, inter-professional practice and legal intervention. This is a matter for urgent consideration as students either do not recognise when these issues are being explored or they have been overlooked in supervision sessions. Students will therefore struggle to recognize how they are working towards becoming competent. It is suggested that these areas are firmly written into Practice Learning Agreements.

Action point 4

- The course still has considerable problems attracting PSs and PAs to briefing sessions. A number of reasons lie behind this but it is recommended that the Course Management Committee examine this further, as PSs and PAs are key to students receiving a positive PLO.
**Action point 5**

- Consider with agencies how the University can assist in supporting them to identify PLOs at an early stage, and keep students up-to-date on how their PLO is being progressed.

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**Discussion**

The University social work team and partner agencies may critique the data as the QAPL tool may be seen to have been designed in such a way that factors determining the quality of a PLO cannot be easily captured, for example, the subjective nature of a quality learning experience. Students tend to be more dismissive of PLOs in the independent sector and may report negatively on their experience. Students, PAs and PSs have varying understandings of subjective areas such as what constitutes values and skills and how to enhance understanding and performance in these areas. The university is dependent on a range of high quality PLOs in agencies – the high level of recruitment means that agencies may resort to providing PLOs that might not ‘step up to the plate’. Students tend to span a range of ages (from 18 to pre-retirement), those who have no social work experience and those who are employment based and have more substantial experience. Approximately 90% of students were female and a significant minority was from BME groups.

Stakeholders in social work PLOs tend to experience high levels of change in organisations with new legislation, policies and procedures and guidance being issued/updated on at least an annual basis in both Adults and Children and Families divisions.

These factors should be born in mind when planning the evaluation of future cohorts’ PLOs, not only for social work students but for other students on professional qualifying courses. Students on nursing and teacher training programmes share common learning experiences; there are some criteria which are common across qualifying training courses. Further identification of these criteria can pave the way for successful inter-professional learning in future placements.

This article provides a description of the evaluation of PLOs for one year at one institution. Insufficient space disallows the linking of this work to other findings about practice learning, thus useful further research would be needed to evaluate the extent to which these findings were similar.

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**References:**