

# How well does the preparation for practice delivered at the university prepare the student for their first practice learning opportunity in the Social Work Degree?

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**Summary:** This paper sets out to consider the requirement that social work students studying for the Degree in Social Work should be prepared for and assessed as ready and fit to practice before undertaking their first practice learning opportunity. The purpose of the study is to examine the essential elements of good preparation and to evaluate how well the teaching and assessment has prepared students in the South Yorkshire and North East Midland partnership from the perspective of their practice assessors.

This qualitative study involved two key stages. Firstly, a focus group eliciting views from practice assessors on what the purpose and content of preparation for practice should be. Secondly, semi-structured interviews with practice assessors considering how well prepared for practice the first group of Social Work Degree students had been. Interviews were transcribed and data analysed using a 'framework' approach. Three major themes emerged, the communication of information on the preparation between student and practice assessor, the ability of students to relate their previous learning to practice and the understanding students demonstrated of the social work task and role.

All practice assessors were positive about the benefits that preparation at the universities could have for practice but the majority of students did not share information on their preparation with their practice assessor. From this project it has been possible to make recommendations concerning the content of preparation but most importantly the importance of requiring that information on the content and learning in preparation should be shared by students with their practice assessor as the starting point for making direct links into their first practice learning opportunity.

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## Introduction

Since 1992 Sheffield Social Services has been in partnership with Sheffield University, Sheffield Hallam University and local agencies to deliver practice learning opportunities for the Diploma in Social Work course. This partnership was known as SYNEM, the South Yorkshire and North East Midlands partnership. The announcement of the new Social Work Degree was made in 2002 and the introduction of this course as the national training for social work began in September 2003, replacing the Diploma in Social Work.

Sheffield Social Services developed new partnership arrangements with Sheffield University, Sheffield Hallam University and local agencies to deliver practice learning opportunities for the Social Work Degree and the first students began practice in March 2005.

*Requirements for Social Work Training* (Department of Health, 2002) emphasises the role of practice in the Social Work Degree:

practice is central to the new degree, with academic learning supporting practice, rather than the other way round

A number of new requirements are contained in the document, these include, new entry and interview requirements, involvement of service users in all stages of the course, specific teaching requirements and an increase in the number of practice learning days to 200. Additionally, each university must

ensure that all students undergo assessed preparation for direct practice to ensure their safety to undertake practice learning in a service delivery setting. This preparation must include the opportunity to develop a greater understanding of the experience of service users and the opportunity to shadow an experienced social worker. (DOH, 2002)

This research therefore sought to ascertain the adequacy of the preparation, which the first group of students in the Social Work Degree programmes within the SYNEM partnership, received at Sheffield Hallam University and Sheffield University for undertaking their first practice learning opportunity, from the perspective of practice assessors. The role of the practice assessor in this context is to plan the practice learning opportunity, support, practice teach and assess the student throughout the experience.

## **The Literature search and review**

The literature search began with a consideration of terms that might prove useful in finding the most relevant material in this subject area. The phrase 'preparation for practice' used in the question was supplemented by other similar terms, such as, 'readiness to practice', 'fitness to practice' and 'safe to practice'. In addition a consideration of skills, knowledge and values needed to begin the social work task were considered.

The Department of Health and General Social Care Council (GSCC) sites provided documentation relating to the initial stages of setting up the Social Work Degree and rules and guidance pertaining to its implementation. Information regarding the assessment of students as 'ready to practice' in the SYNEM Partnership were made available and how these were interpreted at Sheffield University and Sheffield Hallam University was considered through the explanatory paperwork made available by university staff. The document drawn up jointly by the universities required the student to undertake two days shadowing a qualified social worker and provide a portfolio demonstrating the following:

- Understanding of service user and carer perspectives
- Understanding the importance of a multi-disciplinary approach to social care
- Understanding the importance of preparation for learning on placement and the concept of being an active learner.
- Understanding the value of practice learning in different settings
- Understanding the importance of good communication skills
- Understanding the importance of social work values and anti discriminatory practice
- Understanding of the key roles of a social worker and their own professional development needs from future practice learning experience
- Full attendance at university teaching prior to practice learning

Evidence was provided through prior experience and learning and direct learning from the shadowing experience and university teaching.

Some comparison with other universities was explored and evidence was also found of some initial work being done to review the progress

of the Social Work Degree. Personal contact was made with university staff responsible for the preparation stage of their programmes.

Initially it seemed that literature relevant to the preparation of social work students would be very limited and an exploration of this topic in other related professions was begun through regulatory body websites. But as the search widened it became clear that the concepts of readiness and fitness to practice in social work had started to be explored prior to the introduction of the qualification. Literature was found in recognised professional journals and publications, including those published by the Social Care Institute for Excellence, concentrating mainly on the British experience. This is an issue being developed in associated professions but the scope of this study did not enable further exploration of the comparisons.

## **Why prepare students for practice?**

The Diploma in Social Work had no requirement that students be prepared for social work practice and the importance of such preparation and attempts to provide this varied greatly (Leveridge, 2003). Discussion regarding preparation and assessment for practice was found in literature available to students, practice teachers and tutors but the concentration here was on developing skills rather than any assessment of readiness to practice (Thompson, 2002). All programmes seeking accreditation with the GSCC for Social Work Degree programmes now have to ensure that students are prepared for practice and 'fit for social work practice' (GSCC, 2002). Why was the requirement introduced into the new Social Work Degree?

Leveridge's (2003) work at the University of Teeside predated the new requirements. This work, undertaken in 1998, resulted from the recognition that students beginning the social work programme had on average less experience than previously, fewer relevant qualifications and were younger. Feedback from practice assessors led the course to consider improving preparation for practice. Leveridge states that:

a key element in this approach is the move from 'teaching' to 'learning': that is from merely transferring information (lecturing at students) to modes of encouraging learning which stimulate understanding i.e. discussion and the application of knowledge to problems.

Preparation, therefore, was based on problem solving, incorporating skills, knowledge and values and considerable thought was given to appropriate assessment methods. This work anticipated what is required in the Social Work Degree.

The requirement seems to acknowledge that in social work practice placements students are directly involved with service users in their own right, rather than as an observational activity. Consequently, in order to safeguard service users a level of assessment of appropriate knowledge, skills and values is necessary. Parker (2004) notes that

the responsibility for preparing and assessing you as fit for practice learning adds an important dimension to the education of social workers and emphasises the centrality of practice.

Kearney (2003) states that this preparation stage will

ensure that the student is safe to practice, induct students into the nature and context of social work, laying the foundations for a social work identity and establish an idea of professional practice.

Some aspects of assessing the student's fitness for practice are begun before the course begins. These include the interview process, academic attainment, ability to write in English and health and criminal record checks (DOH 2002). It is further prescribed that students must have the opportunity to shadow a qualified social worker and develop an understanding of service user perspectives, but other aspects of what should constitute preparation and assessment are left to individual social work programmes to decide. Within SYNEM the two universities agreed a joint assessment process, although this involved some differences in academic work and tasks between the two.

Gelman (2004) notes the lack of research that exists into the fears and anxieties of students as they prepare for their first practice learning experience. She suggests that greater knowledge in this area would enable educators to meet gaps which may exist in preparation and her research found that if students had received some teaching prior to practice they were significantly less anxious.

If preparation for practice is to advantage students, service users and practice assessors then the right choices need to be made by universities in terms of both content and assessment methods.

## **Gate keeping the profession**

In exploring the concept of 'preparedness to practice', Furness and Gilligan (2004) explore the definition and measurement of 'good enough' practice and the determination of students' suitability for social work. Again they recognise the recruitment of a younger, less experienced age group into social work courses and state that

academic institutions will need to develop ways of teaching and assessing students practical skills to protect people and to facilitate change and thus, to ensure a student's readiness to practice.

The first stage of assessment of suitability for training takes place at the entry point to the course in the interview and selection procedures. The importance of involving service users, carers and practitioners in this process is stressed at this early gate-keeping stage (Levin, 2004). Lafrance et al (2004) recognise that

the profession of social work has difficulty terminating students for non academic reasons because of an inability to define suitability for the profession and to formulate concrete criteria.

Gibbs and Blakely (2000) argue that less weight is assigned in admissions processes to personal qualities than to academic achievement, although the former was given considerable weight by practice teachers interviewed by Lafrance et al. Koerin and Miller (1998) recognise how difficult it can be to terminate students for non academic reasons but Cowburn et al (2000) stress the importance of not avoiding the issue. As Furness and Gilligan state:

there is general agreement that certain behaviours and characteristics should proscribe individuals from holding a professional qualification in social work and/or working in the field of social care. However there is as yet no definite consensus as to what should constitute the limits or scope of such a list, nor which behaviours and characteristics should result in permanent exclusion from entering the profession.

Koerin and Miller (1998) concluded that courses need to act as gatekeepers, exercising this 'right and obligation' at several points along

the path of students becoming social workers. In the Social Work Degree the assessment of the preparation for practice stage would present the second opportunity, the first being the admissions process.

## **What areas should preparation cover?**

Previous work on 'readiness to practice' has concentrated on the point at which students qualify rather than the beginning stage of practice (Marsh and Triseliotis, 1996). Pithouse and Scourfield (2002) state that there may be a difference between the expectations of students and the expectations of employers, with employers concentrating on practical skills, such as, confidentiality, written and verbal communication skills and problem solving but also recognising the importance of an awareness of own values. Preston-Shoot (2000) questions the notion that: 'students must be ready for, not critical of practice' He feels that there is too much emphasis on practical aspects favoured by employers and not enough on giving students the skills to challenge practice.

There is general agreement that social work training can be broken down into skills, knowledge and values (Thompson, 2002; Thompson, 2002; Parker, 2004; Trevithick, 2004) and that the beginning stage of preparing students for practice is developing an understanding of what social work is. At a basic level this may be an understanding of tasks undertaken by social workers and the observational experience will be significant here, but additionally, an understanding of how the social work task has developed and, most importantly, the service user and carer perspective on social work (Levin 2004). Payne (2001) questions how a social work knowledge base can be defined and recognises that one approach might be considering the knowledge that social workers use but recognising that this would require a store of knowledge because it would not all be in use all of the time. Cournoyer (2000) describes core skills as the foundation skills that are fundamental to effective practice and which can be developed into generalist skills and more advanced and specialist skills. Six core skills are described: observation and recognitional skills, listening skills, analytical skills, communication skills, decision making and assessment skills, and action skills. Core skills need to be established and translated into a coherent introductory programme with an agreed assessment procedure.

Carpenter (2005) stresses the need for students to develop critical thinking skills, problem solving skills and communication skills and there has been considerable development in the use of innovative teaching methods, such as, practice simulation and the use of skills labs to facilitate learning rather than teaching (Levin, 2004; Leveridge, 2003). In the area of communication skills Diggins (2004) found a strong emphasis on 'experiential learning, such as role play, video work and small group work' but a lack of emphasis on written communication skills.

The social work value base is made explicit in the Code of Practice (GSCC, 2003) but Deacon (2000) explains why this is the most difficult area to assess, suggesting that it is possible to learn 'to talk the talk' without developing practice which is 'empowering and in partnership with their service users'.

The Social Work Degree requires the involvement of service users and carers in all stages of the degree, including the preparation of students for practice (DOH 2002). It requires that as part of their preparation students must develop their understanding of the service user perspective (DOH 2002, Levin 2004). Yet Diggins (2004) states that:

service users are not involved in teaching communication skills and it is unclear whether the skills students are learning in the classroom are transferable to the workplace.

There are examples of service user involvement in teaching and assessing, particularly around values and communication skills but clearly this practice is not yet widespread (Practice Learning Task Force, 2003; Doel et al, 2004; Mackay et al, 2005).

It is clear from the research undertaken so far on the Social Work Degree that many different patterns and problems have emerged for the preparation for practice stage of the programme, concerning both content and assessment and much can be learnt from 'what works at this early stage of the training' (Doel et al 2004).



## **The research**

As the Learning and Development Consultant responsible for practice learning in Sheffield Social Services it was my responsibility to arrange practice learning opportunities for students undertaking practice in March 2005 from both Sheffield University and Sheffield Hallam University. The preparation, which the students receive at their university, will directly affect the student; the practice assessor and service users when practice begins. It is, therefore, crucial that students receive preparation which adequately prepares them for this first stage of practice and are assessed as safe to practice before undertaking direct work. The purpose of this research was to:

- Examine the essential elements of good preparation from the perspective of the practice assessor.
- Evaluate how well the teaching and assessment process has prepared the student for practice from the perspective of their practice assessor.

## **Methodology**

This research considers one aspect of the changes implemented in the Social Work Degree. This was a qualitative project designed to investigate what practice assessors feel should be the content of students' preparation for practice and assessment of fitness to practice, and to consider whether practice assessors feel that the preparation given to this first group of students met those requirements and what improvements could be made. This method was chosen because it allows people to explore their experience and understanding and

involves the application of logical, planned and thorough methods of collecting data, and careful, thoughtful and rigorous analysis. (Pope & Mays, 2002)

The research involved two key stages.

### *Focus group*

A focus group was used to elicit the views of practice assessors on what 'preparedness' of students for practice learning is.

The development of an interview schedule was used to guide individual semi-structured interviews with practice assessors to ascertain how well they feel that their student was prepared for their first practice learning experience in the Social Work Degree

A focus group provides qualitative insight into the attitudes and perceptions and opinions of the participants (Krueger, 1994). 5 experienced practice assessors, who would not be working with first practice new Social Work Degree students in the next practice period, were invited to participate in the focus group to be held in March, four attended. The remaining 7 specialist practice assessors were not invited because they would be part of the interview stage. The focus group provided information on the expectations of practice assessors with regard to preparing students for practice which was used to ensure that questions asked of individual practice assessors were relevant and effective.

#### *Semi-structured individual interviews*

Semi-structured individual interviews were used to elicit 'views, opinions, attitudes and experiences' (Arksey, 2004), and an interview schedule was drawn up to aid this process. Interviews took place with practice assessors within Sheffield Social Services in the period April to June 2005, when a group of 17 Social Work Degree students were undertaking their first practice learning opportunity. 12 practice assessors were eligible as a result of providing practice teaching/assessment to this group and all agreed to take part. Some practice assessors were working with more than one Social Work Degree student.

The study was conducted between February and June 2005, the focus group took place in March and individual semi-structured interviews were undertaken in April and May. Questions for the focus group and the interview schedule were taken to a team meeting of experienced practice teacher/assessors for their consideration and the feedback received enabled some useful changes to be made in the wording. Copies were also sent to both clinical and academic supervisors.

Open ended, non-directive questions were used in order to gain an individual perspective from experienced and inexperienced practice assessors in Sheffield Social Services providing practice opportunities for Social Work Degree students beginning practice in March 2005. Data from the focus group and individual interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using the 'framework' approach. This enabled

the researcher to become familiar with the data, identify a thematic framework, index, chart and interpret the data appropriately (Ritchie and Spencer, 1995). One transcript was independently coded to ensure that the researcher did not bias the themes and sub themes emerging. Ethical approval from was given to the project by appropriate bodies. No issues of competence of the practice assessor were considered during the research, as this was dealt with through supervisory processes.

The findings of the project were disseminated to Sheffield Social Services, Sheffield University, Sheffield Hallam University and the SYNEM Partnership Office with the intention of informing the future development of student preparation and assessment for practice within the programme.

## **Data analysis and results**

The themes from the focus group were used to inform the questioning in individual interviews and practice assessors echoed the views of the focus group on what they considered to constitute the components of good preparation when discussing their individual students.

Three major themes emerged from the qualitative analysis of the interview data:

- the provision of information on the content of preparation for practice to the practice assessor by the student
- the ability demonstrated by students to relate their learning to practice, and
- the students understanding of the social work role.

### **Provision of information on preparation for practice to the practice assessor by the student**

The 12 practice assessors interviewed were providing practice learning opportunities for 17 first practice students from Sheffield University and Sheffield Hallam University. From Sheffield University students were studying at MA level, from Sheffield Hallam University students were studying at BA level. Of the 17 students only 1 student, an MA student,

found it relevant to provide a copy of the portfolio he had produced, detailing the work he had undertaken and produced in his 'Readiness to Practice' portfolio. This proved to be an excellent starting point for discussion of the learning opportunities available in the placement and in meeting the student's individual learning needs.

*He sent a copy of the portfolio to me and we used this in our initial discussion ... we have continued to refer to the portfolio and to previous experience in supervision since. Knowing the contents of the portfolio was valuable and an excellent starting point.*

The remaining students did not provide the portfolio to the practice assessor and in most cases made little or no reference to any specific work undertaken in 'readiness for practice' unless the practice assessor directly asked them.

In some cases, practice assessors requested information from the student in the context of preparing for the interview for this study.

*I probably asked them more detail on the broader aspects of preparation for practice ... by way of preparing for this interview.*

The majority of students did not see it as relevant to link information on their preparation for practice to the beginning of their practice or seemed to 'put away' what they had learned in the academic setting in order to concentrate on practice.

In one case the practice assessor was working with two students from the SYNEM programme but also with a student undertaking first practice from another programme. This student was required to bring documentation of their preparation for practice and it was further a requirement that this should be discussed between student and practice assessor at the beginning of the practice learning opportunity. The practice assessor reported that this had been a very positive start to the practice.

*It meant that I had the knowledge of what she had done and she was then able to make the links ... It made both of us make those links.*

When this scenario was put to other practice assessors they felt this would have been extremely beneficial to the beginning stage of practice.

*I would have found that very helpful. I think that I would have had a better view of the student and their capabilities and how they would undertake the task.*

Although students made very limited reference to portfolio preparation and contents, they did in all cases provide their practice assessor with information regarding their previous experience related to social work. They clearly regarded this as much more relevant to the practice experience that they were about to undertake.

*I feel I know her experience in a lot more detail because she has spoken more about her experience so I can pick up on that, relate her interaction, her communication and personal skills.*

As part of their preparation for practice, all students had undertaken two days of shadowing experience with a qualified social worker. Some students made no mention of this experience but many did discuss this aspect of preparation, particularly if the practice assessor in discussion of previous experience had raised the subject. For most students where discussion had taken place the experience had been positive.

*'The student felt that the experience of shadowing and writing about it had enabled her reflective practice. She felt that that in itself was useful for the placement'*

Where preparation for practice had been discussed with students, the student's relationship with the university was reported as significant to how useful students had found the preparation. Other aspects, such as organisation of the teaching, relationship and satisfaction with support from tutors and whether students felt that the preparation had been seriously linked to their readiness and fitness for practice by the university as opposed to going through the motions. These all impinged on how satisfactory they felt their preparation to have been.

*She made a deeper point as well, that her feeling about the way the university were teaching 'readiness to practice' was on a level that this was imposed by the GSCC and it wasn't being taken as seriously as it might have... and that meant that the students in turn weren't giving it the validity and value that they could have done.*

Practice assessors had had their expectations raised by the knowledge

that students would have received specific preparation for practice and been assessed as fit to practice. But they were disappointed by the results.

*The tutor actually asked at the midway review, 'Do you think that the university input has been helpful?' and she said, 'Not at all'.*

As practice assessors received no direct information from the university they were not able to distinguish between the 'readiness to practice' element and other teaching the students had received when discussing the preparation stage.

### **The students' ability to relate academic learning to practice**

Practice assessors reported that many students were unable to demonstrate an ability to relate previous academic learning and integrate this into their practice early in their practice learning opportunity.

*I think it is a real worry to me that ... what's been delivered to them doesn't feel relevant to them when they are on placement*

The one student who had sent his portfolio to his practice assessor before practice began presented quite a different experience.

*We were able to make the links immediately and hit the ground running.*

This contrasted with her other two students.

Practice assessors felt that this lack of engagement with the teaching had a negative effect on the confidence students displayed at the beginning of practice. Many students displayed a high level of anxiety. This often linked to not understanding quite basic information around practice arrangements and practice documentation.

*not being clear about what the assessment is, how things are going to be assessed, what standards and expectations were.*

The one area of learning that many students did mention to their practice assessor was the work they had undertaken on communication skills. Many valued this and were able to directly relate it to practice they started to undertake with service users. This was the area of teaching most commonly referred to by the students.

Practice assessors felt that it was not until students established an ability to relate their learning to their practice that they could begin to develop the ability to reflect on their practice learning.

### **Understanding the social work role**

The focus group held a strong view that fundamental to the preparation of students should be developing their understanding of the social work role and task. When interviewed practice assessors felt that the majority of students had a limited understanding of what social workers do, this applied to both young, inexperienced students and to more mature students who had limited direct experience. If this knowledge base did exist then students related it to their previous experience rather than to their learning on the course so far.

*It has been a steep learning curve to try to understand the social work task,*

Practice assessors in the focus group and in interviews felt that a basic understanding of how theory, methods, legislation and social policy set a framework for social work practice should be established before first practice begins but this has often not been evident in this group of students.

*I think it is essential to understand that social work is directed by government policies, law etc.*

Values and anti oppressive practice were areas on which students had specifically written and been assessed in their portfolio and service user perspectives had also been considered. The extent to which students were able to understand the development of their own value base, understand the value requirements of the social work role and demonstrate these, varied considerably. Some had a well developed understanding of both their own values and of anti oppressive practice.

*The thing that has stood out for me, they both have a very good understanding of anti-oppressive practice.*

Unfortunately this was not the case for all students.

*We are only just starting to relate practice to values and that thinking should have started sooner.*

One practice assessor reported serious concern regarding her student's

value base and she considered ending the practice learning opportunity as a result.

Both in the focus group and individual interviews, practice assessors also linked practical issues to the students understanding of values and the social work task. This was particularly pertinent to one situation where the student's dress continued to be inappropriate, despite being given advice, until

*I had to say 'I'm sorry but you are due to go out and see a client today and I can't let you go out in that outfit. You need to go home and get changed'.*

Practice assessors felt that understanding the professional social work role relates to a range of issues including:

*the expectations of them as far as professional conduct and confidentiality and all those professional issues.*

## **Discussion**

All practice assessors involved in the project in both the focus group and interviews were positive about the introduction of the requirement to prepare students and assess their fitness to practice as a beginning stage of preparing to learn on placement (GSCC, 2002). The inability of the majority of their students to relate their learning during this period to the beginning stage of their practice disappointed the practice assessors interviewed. They failed to meet Kearney's (2003) expectations that this would provide students with an understanding of the context of social work practice and their professional role. Although students valued some aspects of the preparation period, in particular, the shadowing experience and communication skills course, it was their previous experience that they most directly related to the beginning stage of practice learning. This left students who had very limited previous experience struggling and practice assessors needing to start from a very basic starting point with these students. The process to which Leveridge (2003) refers of learning stimulating understanding had not taken place for the majority of students so that a beginning stage of 'discussion and application of knowledge to skills' was not achieved.

All of the students had undergone two stages of assessment for training, at the entry stage and in assessment of their academic work and 'Readiness



to Practice' portfolio. 2 practice assessors explicitly questioned whether their students should have been considered ready for practice after the second assessment stage. In one case this related to the students inexperience and lack of understanding of the social work role. In the other the practice assessor contemplated terminating the practice, questioning the student's expressed values and their appropriateness to meet GSCC requirements (GSCC, 2003). Both practice assessors felt that the lack of scrutiny at their respective universities had left the student and themselves with a considerable amount of extra work to do and the prospect of failure. This may demonstrate difficulties on the part of universities to use this period of preparation as a gate keeping tool as Furness and Gilligan (2004) suggested. Discussion with university staff over readiness to practice requirements revealed that difficulties between the GSCC requirement and university regulations continue to exist, which may make ending training at this stage difficult in some cases.

Evidence provided by practice assessors supported Gelman's (2004) view that a lack of adequate preparation leads to heightened anxiety on the part of students beginning practice. Practice assessors in the focus group and interviews emphasised the need for both practical skills, as Pithouse and Scourfield (2002) suggest, and the importance of students understanding how social work practice has developed, the social work task and the service user and carer perspective, as a basic starting point for beginning practice learning. Their feedback suggests that exploring these elements and the knowledge, skills and values elements effectively before practice learning begins, and ensuring that students are able to link what they are learning academically to practice, are essential to a positive beginning to practice learning. Where a student had recognised the need to explicitly bring the preparation into practice, or been required to do so, it had made a significant difference to their ability to relate their learning at the university to the development of their practice learning.

This study focused on a local context i.e. one social work partnership based in two university settings. It is clear that a wide variety of approaches to the 'assessed preparation for practice' requirement have developed across programmes. The study dealt with the practice assessor perspective and, therefore, only indirectly with the views of students. It would be possible to develop a national perspective on these issues through a questionnaire canvassing the views of practice assessors, students, tutors and service users which would enhance knowledge of what works most effectively in this area.

## **Conclusion**

The group of students referred to in this study were the first to undertake preparation for practice in the Social Work Degree in the SYNEM programme. Although this preparation incorporated many of the elements practice assessors felt were essential to adequate preparation and assessment of their readiness to practice, all of the practice assessors expressed concern over their students' ability to relate what they had learnt at the university to actual practice. The majority of students were inclined to view all but the more practical elements, such as shadowing and communication skills, as academic learning and put these away before moving into practice learning. It is essential that academic learning includes the essential elements to give students a basic level of understanding of the social work task and that students relate this immediately into their practice.

The focus group suggested that an ability to answer in depth the questions posed at interview would provide a good framework for readiness to begin practice, as these would relate to an understanding of the context of social work, what social workers do and the ability to demonstrate a value base consistent with social work practice. Practice assessors understood that there is insufficient time before practice begins for a comprehensive knowledge base to be established but did feel that an understanding of the framework in which social work operates is essential.

## **Recommendations**

Ensure that preparation of social work students at the university includes:

- Developing an understanding of how social work has developed and an understanding the social work task and professional role
- Developing an understanding of the context of social work, including legislation, theory, method and values and the practical application of skills, including communication and assessment
- The perspective of service users and carers
- Clear guidance on what constitutes being unready or unfit to practice
- A requirement that all aspects of preparation are discussed between

student and practice assessor at the beginning stage of practice learning and are used as the basis for establishing the students individual learning needs.

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