

Improvement by degrees: Reflections on developing quality in practice learning for the new degree in social work in Northern Ireland

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Summary: Social work academic institutions and social work agencies in Northern Ireland, in common with counterparts in England, Wales and Scotland, have been working hard to meet the challenges of developing and delivering the academic and practice learning components of the new Degree in Social work. This article highlights a number of developments which have occurred in Northern Ireland. Using findings from recent local research and the authors' own knowledge and insights, some of the broader implications of these developments are discussed and their capacity for learning and transferability is identified.

Keywords: Degree in Social Work; practice learning; practice teaching; quality assurance; social care governance; academic/agency partnership; preparation for practice; group learning; group supervision; models of practice learning.

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Introduction

This article examines the change from the Diploma in Social Work to the Degree in Social Work from a Northern Ireland perspective and argues that the changes are part of a wider agenda in raising the quality of social work practice. The article also asserts that in order to ensure that any improvement in quality is embedded in practice lessons must be learnt from the Diploma. The authors contend that arrangements for developing and delivering on the academic and practice learning components of the degree in social work should incorporate the strengths of former arrangements and emerging best practice. Those lessons are extrapolated from two pieces of research conducted in the Southern Health and Social Services Board area in 2003 and 2004 by one of the authors (Byrne, 2004). The first piece of research was conducted primarily with singleton practice teachers, tutors and students and the second was conducted with *off-site* practice teachers, on-site facilitators and students.

Social work in United Kingdom has gone through a process of dynamic change over the last few years. That change has taken different forms in the nations that make up the United Kingdom despite the original aspiration for a four country alignment. This article concentrates on the Northern Ireland experience but it will make reference to how it compares to the other nations. Change is a concept that social workers and other professionals are very familiar with as it occurs regularly in health and social services. As Caple (1990) states,

Change is not new to people who work in health care organisations. Since 1948, the National Health Service has experienced a number of very different management systems and styles. Every occupational group in the NHS has been reorganised or restructured. (p.5)

Perhaps one of the main reasons why the latest changes in social work have evolved in a different way in Northern Ireland originates from the fact that statutory social work is integrated within the health service whereas in Britain social services are managed within local councils. Social work's integration within the health service in Northern Ireland has resulted in its quality improvements being seen within the context of clinical and social care governance.

The Northern Ireland context

Northern Ireland since the late nineties has been intermittently administered by devolved government which has introduced its own legislation in relation to establishing the new degree and setting up of a social work regulatory authority - the Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC). The following narrative outlines the development of the changes to social work in Northern Ireland.

When Labour came to power in 1997 they set about introducing a programme of modernisation under their concept known as 'New Modern Management'. This modernisation took place in both the NHS and Social Services with the publication of the documents *A First Class Service Quality in the new NHS* (1998) and *Modernising Social Services* (2000). Northern Ireland adopted their own versions of these changes when *Best Practice - Best Care*, published in April 2001, heralded the introduction of the new agenda in clinical and social care governance. *Best Practice – Best Care* also signalled the introduction of a new body in Social Work the Northern Ireland Social Care Council. The NISCC came into being on 1st October 2001 through the passing of the Health and Personal Social Services Act (Northern Ireland) 2001. The NISCC took over the functions of the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW) and the Training Organisation for Personal Social Services (TOPSS) as well as taking on the new duties of registering and regulating the social care workforce, which is part of the social care governance agenda. One of the first outcomes from the establishment of the NISCC was the issuing of a code of conduct in 2002 to social workers, those qualified and those still in training, social care workers, and their employers. These provide benchmarks against which everyone will be measured. The codes therefore play a part in helping to define quality. They emphasise the values that should for instance underpin practice learning and the carrying out of research such as working in an ethical and professional manner.

Running simultaneously to the changes proposed in *Best Practice – Best Care* were other elements of the social care governance agenda in Social Work being driven by the Department of Health and Social Services and Public Safety in Northern Ireland (DHSS&PS). Interestingly, Preston-Shoot (2004) has also placed the changes in social work education in a broader social policy modernisation agenda. He went on to identify challenges including the potential for disjunction

between policy aspirations and the reality of organisational life. These focused particularly on the qualifying and post-qualifying requirements for Social Work. Following a review a new three-year Social Work Degree commenced in September 2004 which was a year later than in England and Wales. In Northern Ireland unlike the other nations in the United Kingdom the degree will be followed by a pre-registration year for all newly qualified social workers. This is known as The Assessed Year in Employment and is designed to ensure a phased introduction to employment which is appropriately supervised and during which the newly employed social work graduate receives adequate induction and training for their role.

Academic institutions and social work agencies in Northern Ireland, again in common with their English, Welsh and Scottish counterparts, have been working to create robust, relevant and viable social work programmes for the new generations of social work degree students. In Northern Ireland there is a substantial history of effective academic-agency partnerships which from the early 1990s delivered a range of Diploma in Social Work programmes. On the practice learning side, students from these programmes were placed in social work agencies in both the statutory and voluntary sectors. The majority of practice 'placements', around 70%, occur in statutory health and social services Trusts which are largely equivalent to local authority social services departments. Other statutory agencies which employ social workers include the Probation Service for Northern Ireland, which unlike its English counterpart requires qualified social workers to carry out its legislative functions, the Education Welfare Service and Juvenile Justice services. The remainder of practice placements occur in Northern Ireland's vibrant voluntary sector which comprises a mixture of national organisations as well as a large number of local organisations providing a range of social work services across the spectrum of user groups. The organisation of practice learning falls to the regional Placement Allocation Group, a collaborative partnership of academic institutions and social work agencies. Historically this body has been successful in ensuring that the demand and supply equation has been in equilibrium. It could be that the discrete geography of Northern Ireland, the willingness of academic and agency colleagues to co-operate in the interests of social work students and the construction over time of local knowledge and networks has created this positive scenario. It is also worthwhile noting that in Northern Ireland all student placements (practice learning in the

field) have been supervised by holders of the Practice Teacher Award or social workers who are undertaking the Practice Teachers Award course. This post-qualifying course tests competence in the range of placement management, teaching/educating, assessment and reflective tasks which the practice teaching role requires. This is a year long course certificated by N.I.S.C.C.

With the advent of the new degree, universities and social work agencies have formed The Regional Body for the Degree in Social Work whose aim is to ensure consistency, share expertise and provide a coherent system for all aspects of academic and practice learning. Under its auspices the practice learning element of the new degree has been developed by Project Teams which correspond to the Practice Learning Task Force in England and Wales. In December 2002 one of the project teams issued a consultation document on the *Proposals for Practice Learning*. The importance of quality was highlighted in this paper when it stated;

Decisions regarding Practice Learning requirements for the degree in Northern Ireland must therefore be based primarily on improving quality and ensuring that Social Work training is fit for purpose. (p.6)

In March 2003 the *Northern Ireland Framework Specification for the Degree in Social Work* was issued by the NISCC and DHS&PS to 'ensure consistency of standards of course provision for all Students undertaking social work training in Northern Ireland'. The framework replaced the diploma specification and defined the learning requirements and outcomes for the higher standard of an honours degree. This is explained in the document when it states;

It replaces the Statement of Requirements for Qualification in Social Work as set out in *Assuring quality in the Diploma in Social Work* – and as such will provide the basis for quality assurance of the new degree. (p.5)

The framework bases its definition of quality on other documents such as the National Occupational Standards for Social Work and Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Benchmark Statement: Academic Standards – Social Work (2003). The framework document clearly puts the issue of quality in social work training at the centre of the reform agenda.

The project teams produced a paper in April 2005 for discussion on quality assurance and standards for agencies that provide practice learning sites. Before its role was taken over by the NISCC, CCETSW had given agency accreditation as being able to act as practice learning sites. Each agency was required to produce an annual report to CCETSW, which covered areas such as a profile of available Practice Teachers, internal feedback mechanisms, funding arrangements and action plans for the following year. It is anticipated that rigorous standards for practice learning will continue to be expected in the era of the new degree.

A number of developments in Northern Ireland have occurred within both the design and delivery of the new degree in social work. Several are highlighted to illustrate lessons which have been taken from the experience of the Diploma in Social Work, the importance of building on existing strengths and how local research can help shape practice. The next section will therefore explore:

- Preparation for Practice Learning.
- Creative responses to meeting practice learning resource challenges.
- The development of a model for delivering and supporting work-based practice learning.

From diploma to degree

As well as having more students there are a number of other changes with the new degree which are much more fundamental. But just how much has the new degree learnt from the diploma and research on practice learning? The change from a diploma based course to a degree followed a review carried out by independent consultants. They found that the two year diploma course was 'too packed and that students have to cover too much material over a short space of time' (Department of Health and Social Services & Public Safety, 1999). They also felt that moving to the new degree would help to restore confidence in the social work profession. In Northern Ireland the new degree has been divided into two courses - a three year undergraduate course for A level student or equivalents and a two year relevant graduate course also set at degree level. In Britain there are still courses available that offer the social work qualification at

a Masters Degree level. One of the main focuses of the new degree was an increase in the days dedicated to practice learning. Another focus in Northern Ireland has been the specification of practice requirements to ensure that students gain experience and attain competence in areas such as court skills, group work, community development approaches and multi-disciplinary work.

Preparation for Practice

During the lifetime of the diploma agencies in Northern Ireland expressed some concerns about how adequately students were prepared for coming on placement. Authors such as Barlow and Coleman (2003) and Plath (2003) have stressed this need to scrutinise the suitability/readiness for placement. Research conducted by one of the authors in the Southern Health & Social Services Board area of Northern Ireland in 2003 quantified these concerns. The research was conducted with students, tutors and practice teachers undertaking placements during the 2002/2003 academic year. The total population of those involved in placements in that year were 28. These were subdivided into 12 students, 8 practice teachers and 8 tutors. Of these, 21 returned questionnaires, 8 students, 7 practice teachers and 6 tutors.

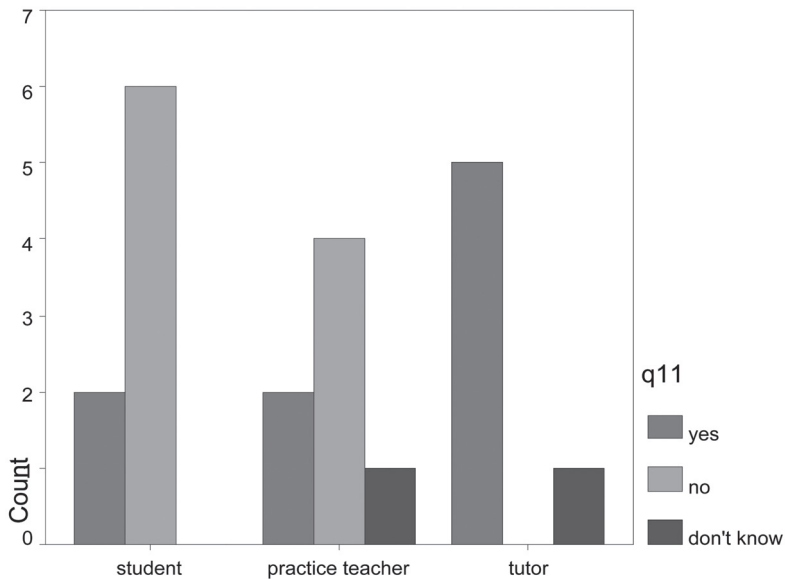
Respondents were asked how well college prepared Students for going on placement. As can be seen at figure 1 (below) the majority of Students (6, 75%) indicated that they felt that their respective courses did not adequately prepare them for going on placement.

How did the Student's views compare with the other two groups? Practice Teachers were somewhat divided about their opinions on the college preparation. As can be seen in figure 1 above, two (29%) of Practice Teachers considered that the college preparation was adequate however four (57%) felt that it was inadequate and the remaining Practice Teacher did not know.

Tutors perhaps not surprisingly have a different view about the standard of college preparation. Five (83%) believed that the preparation was adequate while the remaining Tutor stated they did not know.

The next question invited the three groups to comment on how important they viewed college preparation. All respondents scored it either very important or extremely important. The Tutor group scored it most highly with all 6 respondents scoring it as extremely important.

Figure 1
College preparation



Given the importance Tutors place on college preparation it was concerning that the Students and Practice Teachers who responded expressed the views they did in this research.

The results of this research gave validity to wider held views that college preparation had to be improved and the NISCC addressed this in the introduction of the new degree. In order to ensure the student's fitness to undergo a period of assessed practice and to protect service users it is now a requirement in N. Ireland that all students pass a 12 week module known as 'Preparation for Practice'. This module as well as the theory input, includes a significant amount of video role play sessions which are critically evaluated by the student's peers and tutors. The module is jointly presented by tutors and practitioners so that the case scenarios that are video role played are as close to real practice situations as possible. At the end of the module the students are assessed by a tutor and an agency representative on a case scenario on which they complete a *preparation for engagement exercise*, ('tuning-in'), a video role play and an evaluation. If they fail to pass they cannot proceed to what were previously known as placements. As the authors have participated in presenting this module on two sites in Northern

Ireland we feel we can speak knowledgeably on the quality of these programmes. In comparison to what existed previously in the diploma this approach has certainly been a great improvement and students get to practice their skills in a safe environment. It is also a great example of partnership working on a Northern Ireland wide basis as the module was developed regionally and each site delivering social work training is presenting the same material. This approach allows for the assessment of all 300 students per year in Northern Ireland to be completed on a uniform basis.

This model the authors would contend could be presented as an exemplar and it compares favorably in duration and content to what is being delivered in England and Wales. The Practice Learning Taskforce in England for example uses an exemplar for fitness to practice which entails the following,

The students do a minimum of one day shadowing overseen by their Practice Learning Manager (a Practice Teaching Award holder) and they also have a structured conversation with a service user and carer ... Each student writes a report of the conversation, which includes a reflection of what they have learnt from the experience. The student receives feedback from the person they interviewed, both on their interpersonal skills and also on the accuracy of their report'. (2005, p.14)

While this is a good model of user/carer involvement the content and duration are of a much reduced level than the Northern Ireland model.

Creative responses to meeting the practice learning resource challenges

One of the reasons why all courses struggle with providing sufficient learning opportunities for students undoubtedly is resources. As described earlier Northern Ireland appears to be better off for qualified practice teachers than England and Wales but the increased number of students and increased length of practice learning opportunities have placed strains on its system. Northern Ireland like other areas of the United Kingdom has had to come up with creative solutions to the increased demand.

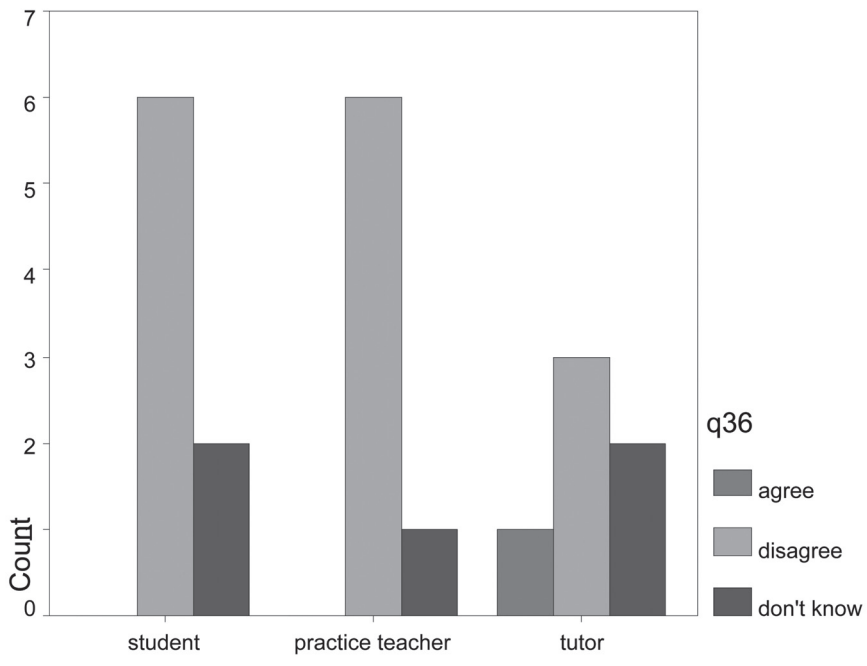
Supervision in the practice teaching/practice learning context can include the functions of Management, Development, Education and Support.

In Northern Ireland during the lifetime of the Diploma in Social Work the most common experience for a student has been a single site placement supervised by a qualified singleton practice teacher. As the general workloads in social work have increased there has been a proportionate drop off in singletons taking students. This resulted in the growth in *off-site* practice teachers taking a number of students across a range of sites. Students being supervised by *off-site* practice teachers were sometimes based in social care sites and this necessitated taking work from other settings. The introduction of the new degree has required a further move away from a predominantly singleton based, individualist model to a 'mixed model' which allows for learning in more group settings. This model envisages a situation where '*off-site*' practice teaching arrangements are in place with one practice teacher supervising students on different sites at the same time.

One of the most common responses to the resource issue has been the greater use of what is sometimes referred to as group supervision. Group supervision can be defined in a number of ways. Its most common expression is in relation to the management of a large number of staff. In settings with a large workforce where it would be impractical to provide one to one supervision some agencies use a group supervision model. This model deals with the efficient operation of the agency rather than looking at the individual needs of the supervisee although this can be addressed on an informal basis between the team manager and the member of staff. Group supervision can also be used by small teams in addition to the individual supervision normally provided. This model tends to focus on peer group learning for example where one member of the team brings a case to present and the team then discuss the learning involved. Group supervision in practice learning appears to be an attempt to combine the models of maximising the resource of the practice teacher with the idea of peer learning.

There has been a divergence of opinion about the appropriateness of group supervision in Northern Ireland and a number of pieces of research have examined the subject. The study by Byrne (2004) examined the perceptions of singleton practice teachers, students and tutors towards group supervision. The findings were interesting in that when the quantitative data was examined solely you would believe that the respondents were definite about their view of

Figure 2
Group supervision



dismissing its value. To be precise 15 (71%) of all respondents disagreed with the statement that the quality of placements would be improved if there were group supervision instead of individual supervision and only 1 (4.8%) agreed, while the remainder stated they did not know. This suggests a clear statement from the respondents that they do not support the concept of group supervision in practice learning. When the responses were examined by group the differences between the three groups can be seen from the chart at figure 2.

The qualitative data however qualified the quantitative data somewhat as a number of respondents commented that group supervision in addition to individual supervision may be beneficial.

A study published in 2004 by Trevor Lindsay from the University of Ulster was more positive in its appraisal of group supervision. The main benefits identified by Lindsay were as follows,

The most commonly cited benefit was the opportunity to give and receive peer support. The increased range of available learning methods was considered a major advantage by practice teachers. Students felt there was

significant benefit from opportunities to hear of other's experiences and to be able to share ideas about how to deal with problems and situations.

Key learning identified by Lindsay was that:

- At times when using group supervision the practice teacher concentrated too much on individual issues.
- Students were reluctant to make links between practice and their own life experiences in a group setting.
- Group supervision should only be used after students had time to familiarise themselves with their individual practice teachers.
- Groups should not be larger than three or four.
- Practice teachers should not make comparisons between students.
- Groups should be made up of students at the same stage of development as it can be disempowering to students to be in a group with more experienced students.

Lindsay concluded that group supervision when done well contributes significantly to student learning. A small number of students had some reservations but found the experience to be a positive one overall. The practice teachers were convinced of the benefits of group learning and the consensus was that a system of alternating group supervision with individual supervision allowed them to draw on the benefits of approaches most effectively.

The divergence of opinion on group supervision is not only present in Northern Ireland as there are also issues with its use in England and Wales. In the Practice Learning Taskforce's document *New Approaches to Practice Learning* (2005) for example the exemplar cited on group learning recognises some of its limitations:

The group learning works where there is a commitment to it, a willingness to take risks and a desire to learn from one another as peers rather 'consulting the oracle'. However, some students and practice teachers are more comfortable with this than others. Some students perhaps those who are most anxious, are unhappy with a practice teacher who is not expert in the particular placement setting of the student. This perceived lack of credibility and the feeling of being judged by the criteria of 'expert in this service user group' rather than 'expert in practice learning' can deskill group leaders. (p.41).

This model from Wolverhampton however is on the whole positive about group learning while accepting more work needs to be undertaken,

Although the evidence suggests that the full potential of group learning has yet to be achieved, the structures are in place for students to learn more from one another, which educational research suggests is the most influential way in which students learn – from their peers. Clearly, this takes much groupwork skill from those who lead these groups. (p.42).

If group learning is to be used on a larger scale then these pieces of research and practice examples inform us on its best practice. It should be used in addition to individual supervision, group size *as suggested by Lindsay (2004)* should be restricted to 3/4 students, the students should be at the same stage of development, the students should be in similar practice learning settings and the practice teacher should have recognised group work skills.

In the authors' own geographical area other group learning initiatives have been developed such as group induction. Given the recognised importance of proper social work inductions, measured against the increased demand on resources, organising group inductions has proved invaluable. Group inductions were organised in the SHSSB in 2004 in a number of Trusts for those in the Child and Family Care Programme of Care originally to prevent managers having to have a number of individual meetings with students. The process has now evolved into a structured 2 week programme which is also open to newly qualified social workers and is held three times a year in January, May and October. The feedback from students is very positive and they feel the group approach to induction is very beneficial especially as it covers social work processes as well as meeting with key members of staff. It is also beneficial to managers and practice teachers as it reduces the time commitment for them within the student's induction. The situation for the person co-ordinating the programme however is somewhat different as they have to dedicate a significant amount of time to organising the induction. It could be argued that having such a structured induction organised in advance for students reduces their opportunity to act on their own initiative and develop contacts with key staff. The programme however is flexible and does allow for the student to make individual contacts to supplement the structured programme. A group induction therefore does appear to have merit especially for those within the same programme of care and at

the same stage of development. The only issue that has arisen is how to accommodate those students in Adult Programmes of Care as they tend to be less numerous and are in a wide variety of settings.

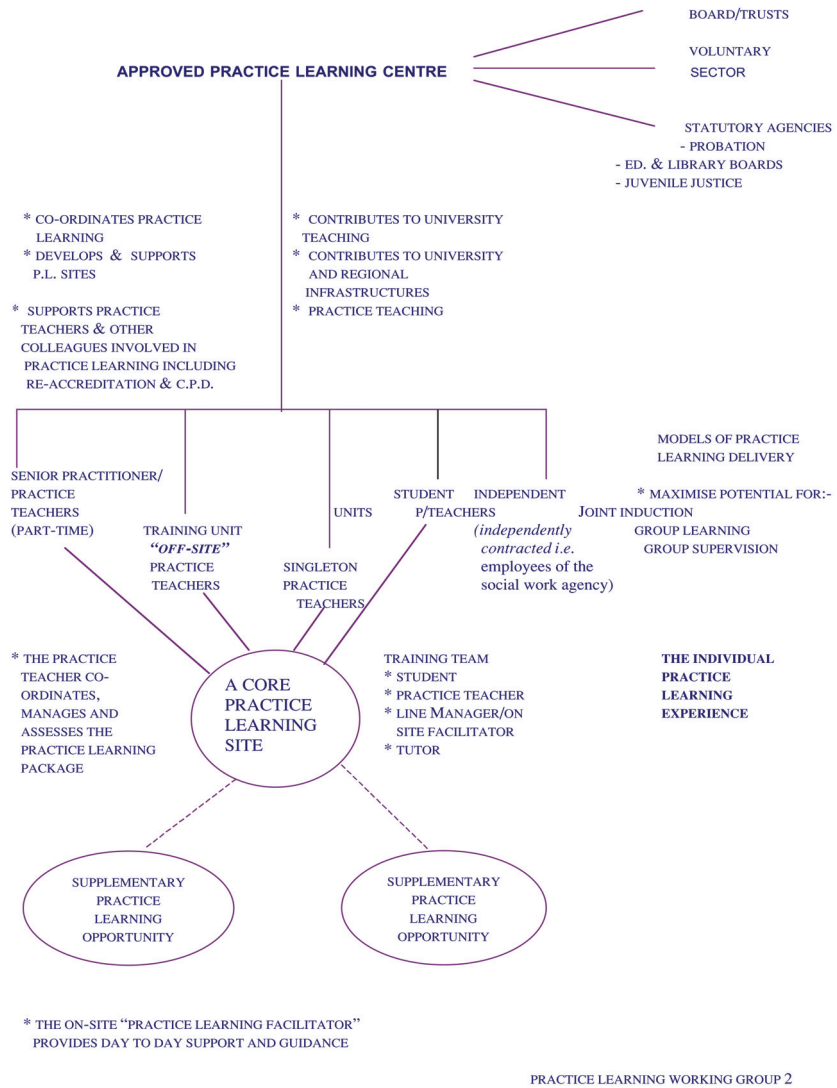
The development of a model for delivering and supporting work-based practice learning

Under the auspices of the new Regional Body, the umbrella organisation comprising the academic institutions delivering social work programmes, the social work agencies in Northern Ireland and representation from the N.I.S.C.C., a number of short-life working groups were established to explore particular aspects of practice learning requirements for the new degree in social work. One of these groups, chaired by one of this article's authors, examined models of practice learning. The outcome of this work was the production of a universal model of practice learning which incorporated the tasks of commissioning, organising and delivering practice learning. (See figure 3).

This model and the principles underpinning it were subsequently incorporated in the standards paper produced by the NISCC (to be published in 2006).

A number of aspects of this model are worthy of comment. Firstly it establishes an organisational responsibility for the provision of appropriate practice learning opportunities. It also recognises that with social work agencies providing such opportunities an infrastructure is necessary to support, develop and quality assure practice learning and to service the academic-agency partnerships which deliver the social work degree. The model also identifies that practice learning in social work agencies can be provided in a number of ways. In the SHSSB for example while for the past 25 years practice teaching has been provided by very experienced members of the Training Unit who would have multiple students during the year and 'singleton' practice teachers who in conjunction with their practitioner or first-line management posts take one student per year. In a more recent development, partly to develop a career opportunity for staff wishing to specialise in practice teaching and additionally as a creative response to an increase in student numbers, a range of specialist practice teacher posts have been introduced whereby the post-holder works with perhaps six students over the year. Finally the concept of a core practice learning site where the student is based

Figure 3
A model for the organisation and delivery of practice learning in Northern Ireland



with the possibility of availing of supplementary learning opportunities from other social work teams or services is identified in the model. This arrangement was developed as a response to the longer duration of agency practice learning and the broader range of learning requirements heralded by the new degree. While it may be that the student can meet all their learning requirements in the core site, the facility to gain supplementary experiences may be required to meet for example group care or community development learning needs.

Conclusions

In the body of this article the authors have identified a number of developments arising from the introduction of the Degree in Social Work. While these have occurred in a particular context – that of Northern Ireland – it is anticipated that the discussion provides ‘food for thought’ to colleagues involved in social work education elsewhere.

The authors would contend that Quality should be at the centre of any change. On occasions the availability of resources has compromised the pursuit of quality – this must be strongly challenged. One way of meeting the issue of scarce resources is to maximise what already exists. This entails creativity and ‘thinking outside the box’. Seeking out new partnerships, sharing skills and expertise and working co-operatively are to be recommended.

In the authors’ view and experience the importance of thorough preparation in all aspects of practice learning pays dividends. This must include involvement as appropriate by service users and carers and indeed some development work is being undertaken by academic institutions in Northern Ireland on this topic. Examples of current practice include the participation of service users in role plays in universities/colleges and the inclusion of service users and carers in producing course content. Group approaches to student learning are also to be commended – but not at the expense of diminishing the role of individualised support and mentoring.

‘Improvement by Degrees’ building on the lessons learnt so far from Northern Ireland and elsewhere should lead to better trained social workers. This in turn should improve the quality of social work services and a more competent and confident workforce.

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