

Finding the way forward: Planning for practice learning in the West of Scotland

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Summary: Locating sufficient student practice learning opportunities (PLOs) has been a long-standing challenge in social work education. This article highlights key findings of a study carried out in the West of Scotland to inform a move from a reactive approach to regular crises in PLO provision towards the development of a long term strategic plan for social work practice learning in the region. The study involved a combination of methods, including literature review, local audit, focus groups and consultation with individuals and organisations in the West of Scotland and the rest of the UK. The study found local and national evidence of innovation in developing new models of practice learning to meet the demands of 21st Century social work in Scotland as well as a growing concern that an emphasis on finding sufficient PLOs should not compromise the quality of the learning opportunities available to social work students. Some of the study's implications for practice learning in the West of Scotland and further afield are explored.

Keywords: practice learning; placement; social work; practice learning opportunity

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Introduction

Changing Lives, the report of the 21st Century Review of Social Work in Scotland, set out a challenging agenda for the social work profession. The four year honours degree level qualification in social work, introduced in Scotland in 2004, was recognised by the Review as essential to meeting increasing demand and complexity in social work practice (Scottish Executive, 2006a). The centrality of practice learning within the social work degree was recognised from the early days of the development of the qualification. The policy paper 'Confidence in Practice Learning' made the case for radical change in the culture, organisation, funding and delivery of practice learning to meet the challenges of social work into the 21st Century (Scottish Social Services Council and Scottish Institute for Excellence in Social Work Education, 2004). Crucially, the need for cultural change was stressed and, in particular, a shift towards all workers seeing the support of practice learning as part of their job, rather than solely the preserve of the student's agency-based practice teacher. Key to these developments was an increase in 'the quality, variety, and quantity of practice learning' (p.1).

The degree has brought significant changes to practice learning in Scotland, both increasing the number of days students spend in direct practice (to up to 200 days), and placing greater emphasis on ensuring that students gain experience in a broad range of settings and with different service user groups before they can qualify. The greater stress placed on practice learning as a preparation for skilled social work practice has also underpinned the development of new Practice Learning Qualifications (PLQ and PLQ(SS)) designed to be accessed by a very wide range of social services employees as well as service users and carers (Scottish Institute for Excellence in Social Work Education, 2006). These changes are part of a wider agenda in Scottish social services, to increase the professionalism of the workforce, and improve outcomes for service users and carers through qualification, innovation, and regulation (Scottish Executive, 2006a).

The Learning Network West is one of four Scottish Social Services regional networks that support the learning and development of the workforce across Scotland. The learning networks are funded by the Scottish Government and aim to act as catalysts for learning and development within the social services workforce, bringing together practitioners, employers, universities, service users, carers and other

partners in each of the four geographical areas to share knowledge, experience, and resources (Scottish Social Services Learning Network, 2009). The Learning Network West covers a large and diverse geographical area that takes in both the very urban areas in and around Glasgow as well as much more rural and remote locations, such as the Mull of Kintyre and the more southerly Scottish Islands. One of the roles of the Learning Networks is to work with its partners, including local agencies and Universities, to support the practice learning of social work students. Uniquely in Scotland, the Learning Network West also takes on a co-ordinating role in social work practice learning, matching agency learning opportunities with the learning needs of individual students in their area.

Over recent years there has been growing anxiety in the West of Scotland about shortage of PLOs. Such concerns are not new in Scotland or elsewhere in the UK (Bruce and Lishman, 2004; Shapton, 2002), but recently in the West the very real possibility that demand for PLOs could significantly outstrip the supply, so delaying or even preventing students from completing this essential element of their qualifying training, has highlighted the need for a different approach to this perennial problem. The Learning Network recognised a pressing need to move from increasingly regular crises in PLO availability to a more proactive and anticipatory approach to the provision of practice learning. In May 2008 the Learning Network commissioned an independent study to help them and their partners gain a better understanding of current and future supply and demand of PLOs and to plan more effectively for the future. This work was also seen as an opportunity to examine different models of practice learning in the UK and elsewhere in the world, both in social work and other professions, and to assess the benefits of introducing new approaches to practice learning in the West of Scotland. This article summarises some of the study's findings, and relates these to two central themes that emerged during the project: the development of new models for practice learning and how best to achieve a balance between quality and quantity in social work practice learning. Our account will draw on local examples of innovation and good practice in the West of Scotland and link these with evidence from examples of research and models used in other parts of Scotland, the UK and the rest of the world.

Methods

The research study was carried out by external consultants with the remit of undertaking the following four activities in order to inform an options appraisal for practice learning in the West of Scotland:

- An audit of current practice learning requirements and provision within the West of Scotland Area.
- The identification of trends and future demands for practice learning.
- A review of the literature on different models of practice learning.
- A review of the range of practice learning models in social work and other related professions across Scotland and the rest of the UK.

Addressing this broad remit, which included several overlapping strands of inquiry, required the collection of data from a range of sources using a combination of both quantitative and qualitative methods, summarised below:

- A review of the literature relating to practice learning, with a particular focus on social work and Scotland, but including relevant evidence from other professions and from other parts of the UK and the world. Two previous literature reviews of practice learning in Scotland had particular relevance to this review and were drawn on extensively. (Dick et al., 2002; Bruce and Lishman, 2004).
Search terms used were Social work education, practicum, practice teacher, practice assessor, field educator, practice learning, practice placement.
- Local audit of quantitative data on PLOs in the West of Scotland held by thirteen local authorities, four universities, and the Learning Network West.
- Two focus groups involving eight representatives from three universities, two voluntary organisations and three local authorities, and written comments from an additional two universities. The aims of the focus groups were to hear about how local employers and universities managed practice learning currently and to seek examples of innovation in practice learning. A topic guide was devised and used with both focus groups.
- Consultation, by telephone or email, with key informants in Scotland and other areas within the UK; including social

services organisations in the independent and statutory sectors, representatives of various programme providers from a number of Higher Education Institutions (for example, teaching, occupational health, social work) and Skills for Care in England.

- Searches of information, standards and reports on professional, regulatory and statutory websites (for example, Nursing and Midwifery Council, General Teaching Council Scotland, General Social Care Council.)

The aim of using this range of methods was to develop an understanding of the issues surrounding PLO sufficiency from a range of different standpoints, both local and national, in the context of current published literature in this area. It is important to note, however, that the inquiry excluded a number of important perspectives and therefore provides only a partial picture of the practice learning landscape in the West of Scotland. Firstly, due to time constraints, the quantitative audit only gathered information about numbers of local authority PLOs, so excluding some significant PLO sites in the voluntary sector and NHS, for example. Secondly, the qualitative element of this study did not access the views of some key partners in practice learning in the West of Scotland, including service users, carers, students, and professionals from disciplines other than social work. More detailed information about study methods and the full findings of the study can be obtained from the project report (Gordon et al., 2009).

This article will start by exploring our quantitative and qualitative findings about the sufficiency of PLOs in the West of Scotland, linking these with related research literature. We go on to explore evidence for the evolution of different models of practice learning, both locally and further afield, drawing on existing research, our consultation, and qualitative findings from this study. Finally, we highlight some central questions raised during the study about balancing quantity with quality in practice learning, a theme that emerged from all five methods used in this inquiry.

Practice learning opportunities in the West of Scotland

During 2007-08, 379 students from the four main Universities that offer the social work programme in the West of Scotland undertook PLOs in the area, just slightly fewer than the previous year, but considerably fewer than the previous high of 479 in 2005-06, when there had been large cohorts of students completing the previous qualification, the Diploma in Social Work, as well as new degree students (Gordon et al., 2009). There were therefore no indications of a marked increase in demand for PLOs suggesting that current difficulties related to a decline in the number of agency PLOs available to students. However, it is also important to note that we experienced considerable difficulty obtaining a full picture from the quantitative data collected due to gaps in the information held, different methods used to organise and present data, and the corruption of a student database maintained by the Learning Network West, so the figures used for this study have to be regarded with some caution.

A number of different explanations for the apparent dearth of PLOs were given by practice teachers, agency representatives, and University staff in the West of Scotland. They all highlighted decreasing availability of agency based practice teachers to supervise and assess students on PLOs. The reasons given for this decline were very similar to those provided in previous accounts of PLO insufficiency in the literature (for example, Bruce and Lishman, 2004). Practice teachers described the difficulties of combining large workloads with practice teaching. Some found that practice teaching was not sufficiently valued by their employers, sometimes being seen as 'an add on' to other working duties rather than an important contribution to the organisation in its own right. This is a finding that has been regularly reported on in the practice learning literature, a survey of practice teachers in one area in England finding that only 47% were satisfied with the overall level of agency support they received while supervising a student (Torry et al., 2005). More encouragingly, the literature also provides evidence of the benefits for agencies in offering PLOs, including improved staff recruitment and retention (Parker et al., 2006). For example, Doel et al. (2007, p.227) describe a breakthrough in practice learning in one area in England, brought about by a shift to seeing students as resource rather than a burden. This type of evidence, which was not highlighted by employers or other respondents in this study, could be used in the

West of Scotland to strengthen the argument that organisations can themselves gain from supporting practice teachers and their colleagues to offer PLOs to social work students.

Other significant factors impacting on practice teacher availability raised by respondents included: the changeover from the Practice Teaching Award to the PLQ(SS) with a resultant two year gap in the training programme; lack of adequate remuneration for practice teaching (linked by some to reported loss of additional payments for practice teaching, arising from Single Status Job Evaluation in local authorities); additional demands arising from longer PLOs; and, on occasion, a lack of very practical facilities for students, such as desk space or access to telephones and computers. The loss of funded Practice Teaching Units (PTUs), which formerly took quite large numbers of local students, was also seen as significant. Not only did the units take large numbers of students but the experienced practice teachers employed by the PTUs were seen as offering a lot of informal support to other practice teachers as well as tutoring on the practice teaching programme (Gordon et al., 2009). Kearney (2003) suggests that this kind of 'critical mass' is significant in sustaining large numbers of PLOs, enabling experienced practice teachers to support less experienced colleagues.

Two further areas of strain in matching students with appropriate learning opportunities were highlighted. The Learning Network West described growing difficulties in placing more marginal students, and those with very particular learning needs. These were partly seen as being related to a lack of more experienced practice teachers, especially those formerly employed by the PTUs. Agencies also described difficulties in locating suitable PLOs for students from rural and remote areas where there is usually less choice of placement setting as well as additional financial and human costs associated with travelling long distances to undertake practice learning.

Changing models for practice learning

Whilst at first sight employer and university feedback in the West of Scotland presented a discouraging picture of steady decline in PLO availability and ongoing concerns about meeting the learning needs of future students, participants in this study also told us about considerable

local innovation in practice learning. One of the biggest changes described related to a substantial shift in the models of practice learning in regular use in the region. (The term 'Model' is used here to describe ways of organising, structuring and delivering practice learning, with potential for several different models to be used during a single PLO). In particular, there seemed to be a move away from previous reliance on a 'traditional' singleton model of one agency-based practice teacher assessing one student towards alternative or additional models involving use of 'long arm' practice teachers and group supervision of students.

The 'singleton' practice teaching model, involving a practice teacher from the employing agency supervising and assessing a student in the practice teacher's agency base alongside undertaking other social work duties, is a very familiar one in social work education in the UK, and has been described as almost 'a synonym' for practice learning (Dick et al., 2002, p. 29). Before the introduction of the Social Work Degree the Scottish Social Services Council (2003) described three models in regular use: the singleton practice teacher, and two models involving the use of 'long arm' practice teachers, based outwith the PLO setting, working alongside a link (or workplace) supervisor within the practice agency. These 'long arm' practice teachers could either be employed by the agency offering the PLO or self-employed independent practice teachers.

A number of different 'long arm' arrangements were highlighted during this study, including increased employment of independent practice teachers, secondment of social services staff to undertake practice teaching, and universities directly employing practice teachers to supervise agency based students (Gordon et al., 2009). Whilst many of these arrangements appear to have been initiated as interim models, accounts of their increasingly regular use suggest a steady change in local practice. For example, in the West of Scotland, 'Circle' has recently employed a member of staff for a one year pilot period, to co-ordinate practice learning and to provide practice teaching in a range of settings to students working with vulnerable families, including children and families affected by parental substance misuse (Sugden, 2008). Doel et al. (2009) have also found similar evidence in England of the emergence of a more consistent model where increasingly workplace based supervisors provide the day to day contact and supervision of the student's practice learning, with support from experienced off-site practice educators with responsibility for the student's overall assessment.

The 'long arm' approach is one that lends itself to enabling students to undertake their PLO in more than one setting, and potentially in more than one agency. Anne Spiers (2008) has recently described the advantages of an 'Extended link supervisor' model in Edinburgh City Council, where a student who is mainly based in one agency, is enabled to access additional learning opportunities in another setting to meet specific learning needs, degree standards, and a more recent requirement for Scottish social workers in training, the Key Capabilities in Child Care and Protection (Scottish Executive, 2006b). The use of this model was being actively considered by one of the West of Scotland universities at the time of our study. Agency representatives in the focus groups also talked about the increasing extent to which they are networking with other organisations to broaden the range and challenge of learning opportunities available to students to meet the full range of learning outcomes required by the degree and the Key Capabilities.

Models of group supervision have also recently come more to the fore in the West of Scotland. The design and delivery of group supervision varies, but was seen by focus group participants as offering a good medium for student learning as well as potentially reducing the workload for individual practice teachers (Gordon et al., 2009). Some time ago Bamford and McVicker (1999) summarised a strong case for group supervision in social work training, as well as suggesting some potential drawbacks, and there is an emerging body of literature which builds on and confirms much of their work. Opportunities conveyed by group supervision included peer support, sharing of experience, reduction of the power differential between practice teacher and student, and gaining a better understanding of social work practice through discussion. The literature highlights the importance of practice teachers' group work skills, and Lindsay (2003, pp.21-22) suggests that in an 'ideal model', group and individual supervision of students alternate to ensure that students benefit from individual attention from the practice teacher as well as the group process. During our local consultation we heard from universities and agencies about a growing interest in supplementing current practice learning arrangements with opportunities for group supervision of students. University respondents described these arrangements as having a number of benefits, including the development of new practice learning sites, encouragement to current mentors and link supervisors to undertake the PLQ(SS), opening up of new opportunities for student learning, and more efficient use of current resources.

The increased use of both long arm and group models in the West of Scotland seems to partly be a pragmatic response to dwindling availability of agency-based practice teachers. At the same time these models also evidently offer opportunities to meet the aspirations of 'Changing Lives' (Scottish Executive, 2006a) and the social work degree itself. For example, they provide students with opportunities for integrated and partnership working across different settings, as well as opportunities to learn from each other about the needs of different service users and services. These are not new approaches, but their increased use in the West of Scotland suggests that this may be a good time to take stock of how these arrangements are working, and find ways to support these naturally emerging practice learning models drawing on evidence from previous work, such as the LEEP (Learning for Effective and Ethical Practice) Projects conducted in Scotland to inform the development of the social work degree (which can be accessed through the Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services [IRISS] website).

New directions for practice learning in the West of Scotland

The literature review conducted for this study suggested some other potentially productive models of social work practice learning which are less prevalent in the West of Scotland. One example of these is the 'Service Delivery Model'. Most models of practice learning involve students learning from 'experts'. However, there is growing interest, nationally and internationally, in the potential for students to offer a 'live' service, where students themselves take responsibility for social work provision. Typically such initiatives have strong roots in promoting social justice and enabling students to act as agents of change and innovation (Butler, 2007). The literature stresses the resources, energy and commitment required to develop and sustain new initiatives of this kind, but this study nevertheless suggested that there is a need for local stakeholders to set time aside to think 'out of the box', drawing on accumulated evidence from evaluations of both national and international projects of this kind. We heard that there is already some interest in a service delivery model in the voluntary sector in the

West of Scotland, although there were reported to be questions about whether sufficient finances are currently available to support this type of initiative.

Agency and university staff in the focus groups also discussed the involvement of service users in the process of student assessment. It was said in one focus group that many service users were becoming increasingly “professional’ in terms of their input to service delivery, although there was still much room for development of service user and carer involvement in practice learning. There are a number of opportunities here, including the potential for service users to access PLQs to support their involvement in a range of practice learning activities, such as student assessment. Again there are lessons to be learned from the literature. For example, Ager et al. (2005) have set out good practice guidelines for the involvement of service users in social work education in Scotland. These are based on the principle that ‘the participation of service users and carers should be based on agreed values and principles of involvement’, emphasising the importance of going ‘beyond tokenism’ (Ibid: 3).

New learning technologies are making a growing contribution to social work and social work education, including practice learning. However, Dick et al. (2002), reviewing the literature, found only limited reference to their application in social work practice learning, and e-learning was not discussed in the West of Scotland focus groups. Cooner (2004) suggests ICT developments will increasingly enable students to access a very broad range of learning opportunities through, for example, simulations, virtual shadowing, and rapid access to evidence-based research and policy information, as well as social interaction with tutors and students, using a medium that is becoming increasingly familiar and comfortable for many students. In the West of Scotland there is potential for development of these methods to support changing practice, for example to support and enhance group supervision, or provide additional support to students in non-social work settings.

‘Classroom’ and ‘field’

Although practice learning has traditionally been associated with social work practice in the field there is a growing acknowledgement that practice learning can take place in a wide range of settings, both in the field and the classroom (Dick et al., 2002). This study heard about increasing partnership working between universities and a range of social work and other agencies in the West of Scotland, crossing traditional boundaries between the field and the academy. Growing flexibility and movement between universities and practice learning agencies has also been highlighted in a review of the first year of the social work degree in England (Doel et al., 2007).

The focus groups provided good examples of fruitful dialogue between partners. For example, both academic and agency staff agreed that one factor influencing PLO sufficiency related to a pressure point in January every year when many students start PLOs at more or less the same time. Practice teachers also suggested that there was more Universities could do to standardise written evidence requirements to encourage practice teachers to take students from different degree routes. In both cases there was evidence of a willingness of agency and university staff to engage and begin to find workable solutions to minimise such barriers. Another local example of collaboration was provided by The Glasgow School of Social Work and South Lanarkshire Council where academic staff were involved in teaching at the PLO site. This model was perceived by focus group participants to be labour intensive for the staff involved but effective in meeting student learning needs and offering potential to ease the practice teacher’s workload. This model is now being favourably looked at by other local agencies (Gordon et al., 2009).

Quality and quantity

Both the qualitative and quantitative findings from this study provided evidence of increasing difficulty in locating a sufficient number of learning opportunities. At the same time is there a risk that, by putting so much emphasis on ‘the numbers game’ of PLO availability, that issues of PLO quality are neglected? Wilson et al. (2008, p. 37) have recently

asked whether it is possible to meet 'raised expectations' about the quantity of practice learning required without such a loss of quality. For example, a recent evaluation of the English Social Work Degree found concerns about the ability of some agencies, especially in the private and voluntary sectors, to provide sufficient quality in terms of the range of learning experiences and levels of support they offer to students (Evaluation of the Social Work Degree Qualification in England Team, 2008). These concerns were mirrored in some of the contributions to the West of Scotland consultation. For example a university respondent, talking about PLOs in non social work settings, said,

From personal experience, agency staff find it difficult to recognise the level, responsibility and pacing of work ... despite link worker training and discussion.

At the same time the requirements of the degree make it very clear that there is a strong expectation that social work students should have experience of diverse practice settings, involving 'providers, like hospitals and new community schools, who can provide new experiences and the opportunity to develop skills in integrated settings' (Scottish Social Services Council and Scottish Institute for Excellence in Social Work Education, 2004, p.3). Review of the literature has demonstrated not only the increasing diversity of 'non-traditional' PLOs available to social work students, including those in health, police, social care, and service user-led settings, but also the potential for these placements, if well planned and supported, to offer very high quality learning to students, as well as positive impacts on the practice learning site itself (see, for example, Miller, 2007).

'Quality' can be measured in a number of different ways and through the eyes of different stakeholders. For example, Parker (2007) summarises evidence about student satisfaction, which is associated with, for example, feeling empowered as a learner, regular feedback about performance, and opportunities to learn from constructive role models. However, student satisfaction is only one possible measure of the potential success of different arrangements for practice learning, and does not necessarily relate to improved outcomes for service users and carers. One of the challenges here is then to define 'quality' whilst taking account of the range of stakeholder perspectives, including, crucially, those of service users and carers. Whilst there is a growing literature about practice learning in social work and other professions,

there remain difficulties in generalising from these sources, which are not all evidence-based, and are frequently derived from small scale, and localised pilots and demonstration projects (Mulholland et al., 2005). The research also tends to be descriptive, and whilst offering a helpful perspective on process, rarely reports on outcomes, a consistent failing of research into social work education (Carpenter, 2005).

There are existing tools that have been designed to measure aspects of quality, such as the Practice Learning Quality Evaluation Tool [PELQUET] (Pettini, 2006) and, in Scotland, The Standards for Practice Learning (Scottish Practice Learning Project, 2006). However, we did not find evidence that these tools were in regular use in the West of Scotland or other areas of the UK during this study or find published research that uses these or other frameworks for measuring quality. A recommendation arising from this study was therefore that practice learning stakeholders in the West of Scotland seek ways to embed similar measures in their existing and developing practice learning arrangements, and use these to help monitor the quality as well as the quantity of practice learning.

There is also a need to develop more effective systems for collecting and storing information about the availability and nature of PLOs in both statutory and independent sector settings in the West of Scotland that can be used for matching, evaluation, and forward planning. This mirrors an important lesson from review of the literature about the importance of gathering accurate information about practice learning on a routine basis to inform both research and comprehensive strategies for practice learning (Parker et al., 2006). The West of Scotland may also benefit from lessons learnt from initiatives in other geographical areas, such as the English National Database for social work student practice learning opportunities, 'LeaRNS' (Skills for Care & CWDC, 2008). Social work education may also be able to learn from examining the ways in which other professions are addressing similar debates around the quality of practice learning. There are parallels to be drawn with the training of other professionals, such as health care staff, where there has been a history of difficulties in locating PLOs with sufficient support for students (Mulholland et al., 2005). We need to be keeping a close eye on, and learning from, the experience of developments in other disciplines that require students to undertake work-based learning, such as the Scottish National Database for student teacher placements, 'Practicum', a Scottish Government funded project designed to match

students with suitable work-based opportunities (Scottish Executive, 2007). These examples of potential cross-fertilisation of ideas and strategies between different geographical areas and professions provide a helpful demonstration of the benefits of casting the net widely when exploring the options for practice learning.

Conclusion

This review of current provision, literature, and of local, national, and UK wide perspectives on practice learning was undertaken to help inform a strategic approach to practice learning in the West of Scotland. In particular, the review has explored different ways of meeting current and future demand for PLOs for social work students in the area. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the findings of this review do not provide a simple answer to the difficulties of identifying and supporting good quality PLOs in the West of Scotland. Like the Practice Learning Task Force in England (cited in Cyngor Gofal Cymru, 2008, p.53) we have to conclude that, 'there is no one model of practice learning which works the most effectively'. This is partly because the evidence of positive outcomes for different models is, as we have seen, still fairly slim. The findings also suggest that there is no 'one size fits all' in practice learning, so that different students, in different practice settings, and different geographic areas may need different approaches to their learning arrangements. There is nevertheless some encouraging evidence of potential new (and renewed) directions for practice learning.

It seems likely that the way forward for practice stakeholders in the West of Scotland, and perhaps other areas, will involve working on a number of simultaneous fronts to meet current and future PLO demand without compromising the quality of the student's learning experience. One strong unifying thread that applies to all the models explored in this study relates to the importance of very good communication between universities, agencies, students, service users, carers, and others with an interest in the provision, support, and outcomes of practice learning. Another is the importance of flexibility, and the need for a shared willingness for these partners to collaborate in different, and sometimes unfamiliar, ways. Both the literature and local consultation have also

stressed the importance of achieving and maintaining clarity of roles and boundaries. This study suggests that the first step in making any planned changes to practice learning in the West of Scotland will be to ensure that all stakeholders are meaningfully involved and open to using a very wide range of evidence of what works in practice learning.

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