



Enhancing social work students' learning experience and readiness to undertake practice learning

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Project Focus

A growing body of research argues the need to develop a new social work pedagogy more firmly grounded on empirical evidence of what works (Fook et al., 2000; Trevithick et al., 2004; Richards et al., 2005; Orme et al., 2009; Wilson and Kelly, 2010). However, knowledge and understanding of how students acquire, apply and develop professional social work knowledge and expertise remains quite limited.

This project set out to evaluate the effectiveness of social work education by analysing student perceptions of the strengths and limitations of their education and training on the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW), Queen's University, Belfast (QUB) at different stages of their 'learning journey' through the programme.

The author's primary aim in undertaking this study was to contribute evidence-based understanding of the challenges and opportunities students identified themselves within contemporary practice environments. A secondary aim was to test the effectiveness of key approaches, theories and learning tools in common usage in social work education. The authors believe the outcomes generated by the project demonstrate the value of systematically researching student perceptions of their learning experience and feel the study provides important lessons which should help to inform the future development of social work education not only locally but in other parts of the UK.

Northern Ireland Context

In 2003/04 the introduction of an undergraduate degree qualification as the standard entrance level requirement to the social work profession across all four countries of the UK was aimed at addressing concerns about the quality of the previous sub-degree qualification, the Diploma in Social Work (DipSW) and enhancing the overall quality of educational provision (GSCC, 2002; NISSC, 2003; Orme et al., 2009). Since then, concern about competence standards in social work has once again become a major issue in the UK in the wake of the baby Peter case and a succession of further child care tragedies which have tarnished the profession's image among government and the general public (Lord Laming, 2003; DCSF, 2009). The recent National Task Force Report has recommended a further overhaul of the content and delivery of social work

education in order to ensure that practitioners are equipped with the requisite knowledge and expertise to make sound decisions, particularly in situations involving risk (Department of Health, 2009). In Northern Ireland requirements for the new degree were established by the regulating authority, the Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC). NISCC developed its own core principles for NI by increasing the time spent by students on practice learning, emphasising the need for academic learning to support practice learning, stressing the need to improve training in communication skills and underlining the importance of developing critical reflection and producing graduates skilled in the practical application of theory (NISCC, 2003). To complement developments in qualifying training Northern Ireland was the first region in the UK to introduce an Assessed Year in Employment (AYE) for social work graduates. The intention of AYE (which is likely to be introduced throughout the rest of the UK following the recommendations of the National Task Force) is to provide protected caseloads and additional training and support to assist newly qualified social workers make the transition to employment. In order to become fully registered as social workers at the end of the AYE staff are formally assessed by their employing agencies to decide whether they are competent or need additional training to reach the required standards.

The BSW degree at QUB commenced in 2004 and is among the largest social work education and training programmes in the UK, providing both a three year route for undergraduates (UGR route = 80 students) and a two year route for graduates (RGR route = 50 students) with relevant degrees. Teaching on the BSW degree is generic and, in addition to academic input, the BSW includes two assessed practice learning opportunities (PLOs). The first PLO of 85 days duration is undertaken during the first semester of the second year, and the second of 100 days undertaken in semester two of the third year. This study focuses on the experiences of students undertaking both BSW routes at different stages during the final year of their social work education. (Both UGR and RGR student groups are taught together during the first semester of their social work education at QUB and undertake PLOs at the same time during the second semester of the final year). The research examines student experiences of both academic preparation and practice learning, explores their inter-relationship and evaluates the effectiveness of the different components of social work education in preparing students for professional practice. The main aims of the research were to:

- Identify strengths and limitations of current approaches to teaching and assessment aimed at preparing students for practice.
- Identify student experience of applying a range of social work theory, skills and values during their practice learning experiences.
- Explore the relationship between academic teaching and practice learning experience and to identify both the opportunities and challenges commonly experienced by students in acquiring and developing professional competence.
- Ascertain student perceptions of their readiness to undertake practice.
- Highlight aspects of good practice and areas for further improvement in teaching and assessment approaches to preparing students for practice.

Methodology

A dual methodological approach was deemed most appropriate (Lingard *et al.*, 2008), involving: (a) a three-stage survey of social work students before, during and after their final practice learning experience; and (b) focus groups with a purposive sample of this student cohort before (n= 9) and after their final practice learning opportunity (n=12) (Barbour, 2007). Use of these different research methods enabled the collection of quantitative and qualitative data via the survey and more in-depth qualitative data through focus group discussions with students. Surveying students before, during and after their final practice learning experience facilitated the collection of data on student perceptions of: their readiness for final practice learning opportunity; their experience of applying knowledge, skills and values during this experience; and their perceived competence and preparedness for their first year in employment on completion of their final practice learning opportunity. Focus groups with students before and after their final practice learning opportunity allowed for the collection of more in-depth qualitative data focused on the effectiveness of university preparatory teaching and practice learning experiences in preparing students for their first year in professional practice.

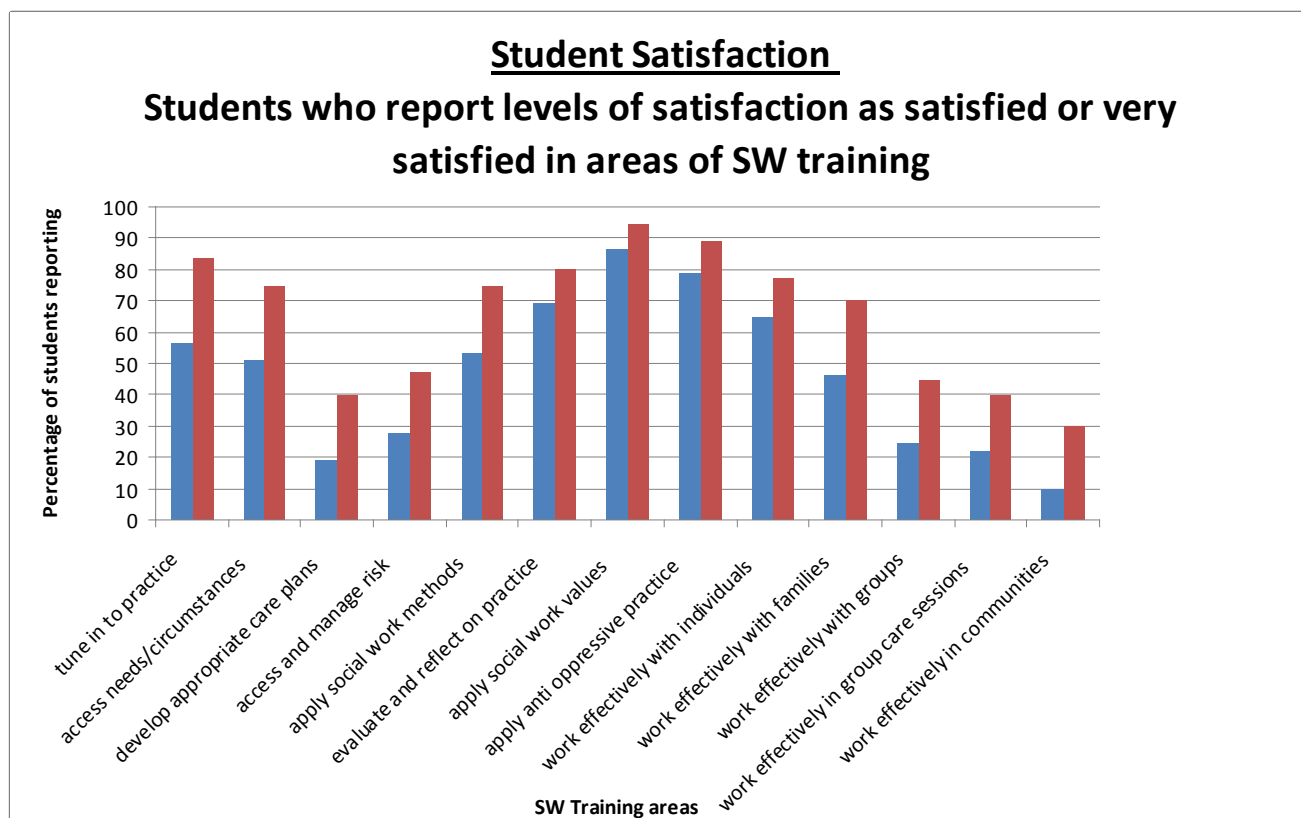
The main limitation of this study was that it was depended on student self-reporting which is necessarily subjective. The research did not include the perspectives of social work tutors or practice teachers which may have provided a more holistic, triangulated study. However, the student learning experience is central to the debate about professional competence in social work and investigating student perspectives was the core aim of the study. As the survey was conducted over three stages, numbers of responses varied as the attendance of the student group at data collection time changed at each stage. However, a good response rate was achieved at each survey stage (96 students completed the first survey, 95 the second and 83 students completed the final questionnaire) so the impact of changing numbers of respondent is minimal. Finally, exploration of the implications of demographic factors including age, gender, disability, was restricted due to the low numbers of males, school leavers and disabled students in this particular student cohort. However, limited numbers of these particular groups of students is a common feature of student cohorts undertaking social work education.

Findings

Findings of the research can be summarised under three core themes: student satisfaction with preparatory teaching and practice learning; student perceived competence across knowledge, skills and values; and student preparedness of first year in employment. As there is not scope to provide detailed findings on each survey stage in this summary, the majority of responses reported in this summary are based on the final survey of students at the end of their final practice learning opportunity. However comparisons are also drawn with earlier survey results where applicable.

Student satisfaction with preparatory teaching and practice learning.

As Figure 1 shows the majority of students were satisfied with the BSW course overall.



In particular, students reported satisfaction with the diversity of the course curriculum, teaching inputs and practice learning opportunities. Typical student comments included:

“Lecturers are approachable and supportive and prepared me for AYE. The content of the course was diverse enough to prepare for the numerous challenges I will face”

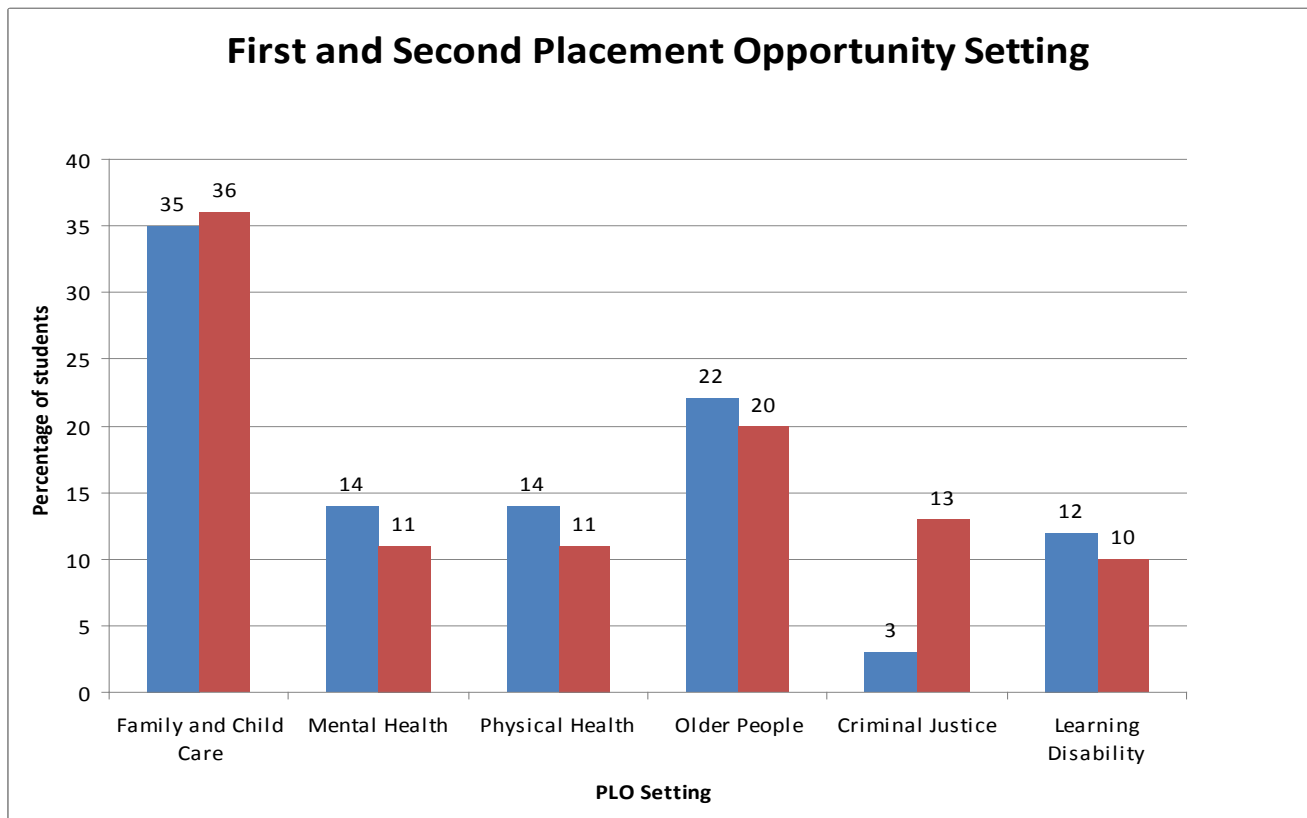
“Super teaching inputs, quality and varied teaching materials. Excellent for promoting evidence based practice and confidence to challenge within the practice learning placement. Have really enjoyed the course even though it was tough and very challenging it was also inspirational...I fully believe that I have developed into a much more efficient and considerate practitioner”

However, concern was expressed in relation to procedural aspects of social work practice. Some students indicated that, although the preparatory teaching encourages students to think critically, develop their theoretical knowledge and learning critical analysis skills, it does not focus enough on the technical aspects of fulfilling agency procedures and completing agency related recording systems. For example:

“Very well from the evidence – based knowledge point of view, less though in terms of applying procedures, guidelines such as before my PLO I had never completed UNOCINI, it was totally new, now I feel competent only because it was main PLO which enabled me to gain this skill/ knowledge”

Students are offered a wide range of first and second practice learning opportunities

Figure 2: Range of first and second PLOs



The majority of students (93%) reported feeling satisfied or very satisfied with their practice learning opportunities. However, in qualitative survey comments and focus group discussions some students expressed concern about the range of practice learning opportunities available throughout the course, particularly if they were placed in settings with no social workers on site (e.g. day care) or placed in similar settings for both placements (e.g. two adult services settings or two hospital-based placements). These students believed they were disadvantaged by not having opportunity to develop their knowledge of the statutory field work social work role or the social work role in family and child care and protection.

“No social worker on first PLO. Would a student who is training to be a teacher be sent to a placement with no teacher? Same for a Nurse?/Doctor?/Optician?”

“The day centre placement gives a broad overview of the social process but the lack of social workers in the setting is disadvantageous as you are not given the opportunity to challenge, observe or evaluate social work practice in action... the centre staff were unaware of the social workers professional role... Also from a student learning perspective I think that in your second placement you are having to play catch up as you have not had the opportunity to experience social work practice first hand so instead of refining you social work practice skills you are only learning some of the skills yet there is an expectation that you should be refining core skills.”

Students also reported difficulties in accessing opportunities to engage in group work and community development learning opportunities.

“I was in physical disability with older people and I did my group work with younger people and it didn’t work really well with it because they didn’t fit.”

“Opportunities for group care need to be identified with the placements... I had to go looking outside of my agency and go and find community development projects.”

Another key issue for students during PLO was the importance of the university tutor role in relation to advocating for the student and ensuring their needs and rights were represented.

“You need somebody to be on your side... who is there for you, your representative... you sometimes don’t get the opportunity to speak to your tutor separate from your practice teacher... to kind of say what you want to say.”

This was particularly important for students who experienced difficulties during their practice learning opportunity. Many students reported high stress levels during practice learning. Stress was often related to the demands of their practice learning setting, unexpected learning challenges or the amount of written work expected from students by their practice teachers. 31% of students felt that their practice teacher demanded too much written work and 36% of students had experienced unexpected learning challenges during their PLO (e.g. death of a service user and personal disclosure issues in the sectarian contexts). Typical student comments included:

“They don’t realise the amount of work and time you put into tuning-ins ... and then at the back of your mind is your assignments and then you’re frightened”

“You question yourself, you start to doubt yourself, am I irrational, am I over-reacting, am I being emotional? Am I struggling with this? I’ve done a degree before here in psychology which is a tough degree too... I’ve also worked in stressful jobs... in residential childcare... in hospital ... which I know I can handle but... I never had any anxiety levels like this.”

“You want to be seen as fit for practice... I almost became like a robot, I stepped out of every emotion I have and just went into work... and that’s just the way I worked the whole way through placement.... the stress in this has been unbelievable.”

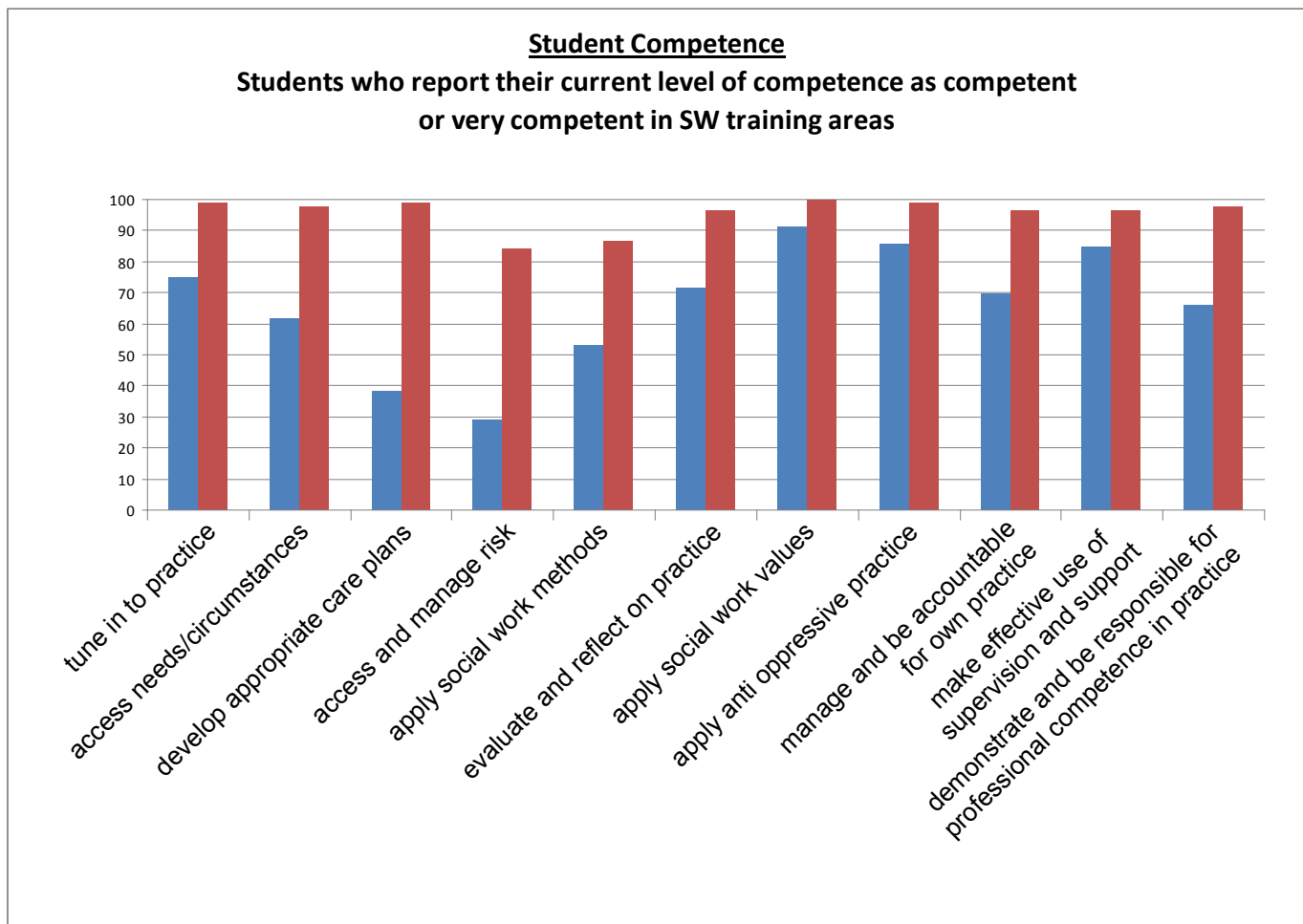
“You are powerless as a student... the power does very much lie with the practice teacher. You don’t want to draw attention to yourself. You don’t want to make yourself look like you’ve got issues... you kind of feel that your head’s on the chopping block because you’re a wee student.”

As a result, students felt that the personal tutor at university should play a key role in ensuring students are well supported during practice learning and reassuring students at times of high stress or anxiety.

Student perceived competence across knowledge, skills and values.

As expected, student reports of competence across key areas of social work practice increase as they progress on the course. Figure 3 below compares student competence across these key areas prior to and following final practice learning experience, clearly illustrating progressive development in all areas.

Figure 3: Student competence prior to and following final practice learning opportunity



Student perceptions of their levels of competence at the end of their practice learning opportunity and prior to first year in assessed employment provide interesting insights into the areas that need further development. The majority of students felt competent or very competent at: working with individuals (86%); working with families (80%); assessing needs/circumstances (98%); and assessing and managing risk (84%). However, students felt unsure or not very competent about their ability to: use their legal authority (40%); work effectively in communities (41%); work in conflict situation where you need to challenge service users (29%); and work with challenging behavior from service users (24%). Student concerns about dealing with conflict situations, resistance and challenging behavior are clearly areas that need further emphasis in the teaching curriculum and in practice learning experience.

“... it’s ok with the theory of all that stuff but when you’re actually faced with one-to-one confrontation what do you do?”

“Some service users... don't want to be working with you... I don't feel the course actually helps you towards actually working with people who are resisting....”

A number of students strongly valued the support they had received in supervision from their practice teachers – particularly where the latter had used role play or rehearsal – to help them develop their skills in dealing with resistance or aggression presented by service users.

“My practice teacher actually did a role play with her two students, we acted out the professional role with her, some of the experiences she's had. You don't really understand it until you're met with the resistance or aggression and having just to act it out it even alerts you to the skills that you do have that you mightn't think you had.”

Findings also indicate that students often adopt, or are encouraged to adopt, a procedural approach to reflection during their practice learning opportunities. This is often due to the assessment requirements of the practice learning module as students must complete written pieces to demonstrate ability to prepare for contact with service users ('tuning in') and to evaluate their practice. Some students reported that Practice Teacher expectations of these written pieces varied in terms of length and became a written procedure rather than an opportunity to meaningfully reflect and learn from practice experience.

“You're told at the start you have to tune-in with every service user... they were 4000 words, because you're doing so much you were just kind of spilling it all out... and there wasn't that much thought put into it... reflecting is really about thinking what was going on there, but you're doing it very superficially and I think by the end of it you don't know what happened there... you don't get to delve into why am I thinking like this, why am I doing this, how do you assess that...”

Student preparedness of first year in employment.

The large majority of students felt prepared or very prepared for their first year in assessed employment (AYE). Almost two thirds of students felt prepared or very prepared for family and child care (63%), older people (63%) and physical disability (52%). However, some felt unprepared or very unprepared for working in mental health (48%), criminal justice (64%) and learning disability (51%). Student feelings of preparedness for particular settings were mostly related to their type of practice learning experience with students feeling less prepared to work in settings they had not experienced in practice learning placements.

“Depends where you are based for AYE... if it is related to my PLO's then yes but I would feel unprepared in a field I have no experience in.”

“I don't feel prepared to work in a field work team as both PLO were residential. Very apprehensive about getting a job in field work.”

“At point of interviews I feel my PLO's were similar therefore I am at a disadvantage compared to

others.”

In the final survey, students were asked to identify areas of unmet learning needs. The majority of students (51%) identified managing risk as a top priority for their future learning. Other unmet learning needs students included time management, dealing with drug and alcohol misuse and experience of court work.

49% of students rated that their anxiety about commencing AYE as medium and 32% rated it high. Students expressed uncertainty about agency expectations for newly qualified social workers and support available including protected case load and supervision. Interestingly, students also reported a lack of confidence in their practical skills for applying for jobs and securing employment. Finding employment is clearly a key priority for students and it would be important for universities to consider providing further inputs on applying for jobs and interview skills. These are certainly areas that could be addressed by the university social work agency partners in terms of student careers guidance.

Key Lessons from the Research

Overall, the findings of this study indicate high levels of student satisfaction with preparatory teaching and practice learning opportunities during qualifying training. Whilst the results provide a degree of reassurance about the quality of the current degree programme at QUB the research also indicated a number of areas in which the student learning experience could be further enhanced and highlighted key learning priorities for continuing professional development during AYE.

1. The findings delineated what students perceived as the main components of good supervision from practice teachers. It was evident, for example, that students strongly valued practice teachers who were able to demonstrate in a practical way, through role play or rehearsal, how they could work with challenging behaviour in their practice with service users.
2. Students found the routinised and instrumental forms of reflection they experienced in some practice learning sites unhelpful and at odds with the type of reflective learning typically encouraged in academia. Such findings indicate the need for tutors and practice teachers to work together to develop greater consistency between academic and practice learning and create learning environments which are more conducive to promoting the development of analytical and critical reflection skills required for professional practice.
3. The results highlight the value placed on tutor support and advocacy particularly during practice learning when many students appear to experience high levels of anxiety. An important lesson from these findings is that education programmes need to ensure that tutor support is consistently provided to students throughout the full duration of qualifying training.
4. Whilst students were generally satisfied that university preparation had helped them to develop theoretical knowledge and understanding relevant for work in family and child

care they were less confident about their preparation for working with adult service user groups. Clearly, there is a danger that qualifying courses may prepare students less well in areas, such as mental health, which also have direct relevance to practice in family and child care work. In preparing students for family and child care work (where most jobs in the UK are located) it is essential for programmes to ensure an appropriate balance within the curriculum and that knowledge and understanding of other service user groups is not neglected.

5. The findings underline the value of having an AYE during which students receive appropriate induction and ongoing support and training. The study highlighted that many students still felt very uncertain about their skills precisely in those aspects of practice they would be most likely to be tested on as newly qualified social workers in family and child care. In this context the findings suggest that working with challenging behavior and conflict and developing skills in using authority are among the key priorities that agencies need to focus on with students undertaking AYE to ensure that knowledge and skills acquired during initial qualifying training are consolidated and further developed.

Overall, the findings of this study raise issues about the extent to which the learning needs of qualifying level students can be adequately addressed within an already crowded generic social work degree course. Nevertheless, the results of this research would endorse the recommendations of the National Task Force for a comprehensive review of social work education and the establishment of an Assessed Year in Employment. The findings suggest that a review of social work education should not only consider the academic curriculum but also practice learning and how these two domains might be better integrated. In prioritizing the learning outcomes to be addressed within qualifying training greater clarity about what can realistically be achieved through qualifying training and what learning needs are more appropriately addressed during AYE should help to ensure that social work students are adequately prepared to face the challenges they are likely to encounter within contemporary practice environments.

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