A Critical Review of Practice Education in England

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Most programmes of professional education and training across the globe have an element of practice learning. Whether the profession is medicine, nursing, law, teaching, or social work, practice learning is seen as a core element. Depending on the profession and country, these periods of practice learning that take place outside of the university or educational provider are known by various terms such as practice education, field education, or the practicum. It is the time when students (sometimes referred to as trainees) are expected to understand how knowledge informs their practice, and vice versa, and how theory links with practice. It is also a time when, ideally, they are supported by an experienced practitioner, their practice teacher, and colleagues.

Social work education in England has had a long tradition of structured and organised teaching and assessment of students whilst learning their craft in a practice environment. However, despite many positive aspects, there have also been many problems caused by constant change impacting on its development. In this chapter, we discuss two main changes: the first, the regulation of practice education and the second, the expansion of employment led routes, moving away from traditional programmes in universities and other higher education providers. It is unclear whether these changes bring about the outcomes expected, and research is currently ongoing.

Regulation

While English social university-based training started in the city of Birmingham in 1908, the regulation of social work education was not introduced until 1962. This was followed by the establishment of the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (C.C.E.T.S.W.) in 1970, the first statutory U.K. regulator for social work education (see Ixer, 2016). Since then, several government regulators have been given responsibility for the legal functions of social work education. C.C.E.T.S.W. lasted from 1970–2001 and was replaced by four devolved bodies. For England, this was the General Social Care Council (G.S.C.C.); for Wales, the Care Council for Wales; for Northern Ireland, The Northern Ireland Care Council; and for Scotland, The Scottish Social Services Council. These bodies jointly produced one U.K. set of codes for all social care workers and began to establish registration for all social workers, but devolution

has a significant impact in this context and others. In England, unlike the other countries, two government departments (Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care) have been involved in regulation. This has sometimes led to less than coherent messages to the field. In part, as a result of the austerity measures that followed the financial crisis of 2008, but also reflecting a crisis of confidence in social work discussed later in this chapter, the Coalition Government closed the G.S.C.C. in 2012 and passed its functions to the Health and Care Professions Council (H.C.P.C.). Unlike England, the other U.K. bodies continued as national regulators and continue to have wider social care workforce responsibilities. It was not until 2019 that a new sector-specific body was established and H.C.P.C. functions transferred to Social Work England (S.W.E.). Because of the complexities of regulation in England, the main regulatory changes are summarised in a chronology as an appendix.

There are various routes to social work qualification in England, including post-graduate or undergraduate and employer-led, including apprenticeships. Despite many organisational and policy changes in England affecting social work education, one tenet of placement or practice experience is common, whatever the route to social work qualification. This is the importance attached to offering students varied and, where possible, contrasting placement experiences. Traditionally, for those on an undergraduate or post-graduate route, a first placement has often been in a voluntary sector or not-for-profit organisation, followed by a placement in a statutory social work organisation. The latter is usually in a local authority or the National Health Service (N.H.S.), although there has been some flexibility around accepting placements in organisations fulfilling or supporting statutory functions, such as fostering agencies. However, over the years, statutory placements have significantly reduced because local authorities are not required to offer placements and have often argued that they lack the resources to take students. S.W.E. has now directed that all students must have at least one statutory placement and defines this as providing 'the legal functions students need to experience across adult and children's services' that can be accessed. What is different now is that its guidance defines what legal functions mean (S.W.E., 2019a).

Steps to formalising Practice Education in England

Prior to 1970, the social work qualification consisted of a Letter of Recognition issued by the Home Office (Central Government), which acknowledged person-specific training. Under C.C.E.T.S.W., two new qualifications emerged: the Certificate of Qualification in Social Work (C.Q.S.W.) followed by the Certificate in Social Services (C.S.S.). The latter was mainly intended for residential childcare for which individuals trained whilst they worked, while the C.Q.S.W. was a 2-year university-based course with practice placements.

C.C.E.T.S.W. acknowledged both the importance of learning in practice and the centrality of the practice educator role in supporting students' learning, as well as in assessing them against minimum competence standards. Much later, C.C.E.T.S.W. announced its mandate for a 3-year degree unifying all other qualifications into one (1985). This was known as 'Paper 30 − the Diploma in Social Work', which was implemented 4 years later (CCETSW, 1989). C.C.E.T.S.W. also began to be more prescriptive about requirements and inputs in the length of placements. Courses were required to provide a minimum of 200 placement days normally spread over two placement periods. These were compulsory and could not be substituted by, for example, accredited prior learning. Because social work is delivered in many settings, placements could include schools, hospitals, prisons, voluntary and community projects, and statutory services. Students were also required, for the first time, to reflect on their practice.

The Diploma in Social Work was designed to help address the placement supply problem. Educational providers were required to work in partnership with employers to ensure an agreed workforce analysis that included resources available for placements. It was intended that such partnerships would plan and agree to placement numbers in advance based on how many social work graduates were needed in that area. The success of these partnerships relied upon the effectiveness of relationships between employers and education providers. However, strategic planning was limited, and most local authorities had neither the resources nor skills to collate accurate data to ensure effective strategic workforce planning.

Meanwhile, a Practice Teaching Award was introduced as part of a post-qualifying national programme; for the first time, recognition was given to the role and function of the practice educator who was responsible for training and assessment.

Practice Education Policy Shifts Since 2000

In 2003, the government attempted to raise the quality and profile of social work education by making it an all-graduate profession, while retaining the same placement requirements as the Diploma in Social Work. The deficits around workforce planning remained, so it was difficult to identify how many social workers were needed without reliable workforce data, which was largely absent. In essence, education providers (universities in the main) recruited into their programmes, some of them expanding their intake considerably, without linking this number to local workforce need and, in particular, placement capacity. Possibly as a result of this, several employers complained that students were not getting the right placement experience and, therefore, were being inadequately prepared (Baginsky et al., 2010). In part, this was because there was over-recruitment of students and an under supply of good quality placements.

Social work education often becomes the scapegoat for other failures in the social work system. This was evident in the proceedings of the government's Children Select Committee on Social Work (2009) where there was significant criticism of the standards of entry into social work education but also a concern at the failure of employers and higher education to work in partnership. Then, as presently (2020), there was high turnover amongst social workers, leading to high vacancy levels. Newly qualified social workers were expected to bridge the gap, assuming responsibility for some cases that should have been held by experienced practitioners. This distorted the narrative of social work at that time, and some of it remains today.

The government established a Social Work Task Force (S.W.T.F.) in late 2008. This met for the first time in February 2009. It came in the wake of the death of 'Baby Peter Connolly' and the subsequent Serious Case Review (S.C.R.) and trial (see Jones, 2014). Peter Connolly had been murdered by his mother and two others, and the case was a tipping point in the way the public and politicians viewed the profession of social work. The S.C.R. found that his death could have been prevented and that the practice of all agencies involved with the family had been inadequate.

Although the impetus for the S.W.T.F. arose in children's services, its remit covered social workers in any setting, as did its recommendations (S.W.T.F., 2009). The Social Work Reform Board (S.W.R.B.) was subsequently charged with implementing the task force's recommendations (S.W.R.B., 2012). Based on a S.W.T.F. recommendation, an optional 30 days of practical skills training, known as 'Skills Days', were introduced. These skills days were part of the original 200 days of placements. They were intended to address concerns from employers that university courses were too academic and, as a result, many social workers were graduating without the necessary skill set for the specific group with whom they were to work (Baginsky et al., 2010). What they did not do was address the situations into which newly qualified social workers were placed and had to manage, which were leading to many of the accusations of the inadequacy

of their preparation. Later, the Practice Teacher Award was replaced by Practice Educator Professional Standards (P.E.P.S.), which set out the minimum requirements for practice educators in a two-stage process (British Association of Social Workers, 2019), but as they were neither enforced nor required by the regulator, they remained helpful good practice guidance.

Teaching Partnerships, Employer-led Routes and Their Implications for Practice Education

The pressure under which English social work departments operate, including high caseloads and high staff turnover, impacts on the numbers of placements available in the right places and when needed, as well as the relevant learning opportunities. In turn, these affect the quality of outcomes that can be expected and achieved. As the S.W.T.F. pointed out, responsibility is shared by employers as well as education providers. The supply of placements tied to demand for social workers and the principle of linking workforce need to social work education resurfaced in the Government's Teaching Partnership initiative (Department for Education (D.f.E.), 2019). A teaching partnership brings local employers and education providers together to prepare, plan, monitor, and evaluate the delivery of a social work programme with the aim of improving the quality of teaching, committing to provide placements, and raising the quality of social work applicants. It is reported to have 'stimulated a new level of collaboration' between employers and education providers which led to better relationships at all levels (D.f.E., 2019, p. 5). They provide a mechanism to get details of placements across several authorities and are reporting increases in volume and type of placement because there is agreement on the number of placements and their type. However, these are early days, and there is considerable variation between these partnerships as far as effectiveness is concerned (Baginsky et al., 2018). It remains to be seen how they will fare when they are no longer funded by central government.

More prominent in current social work education in England, and a move that has been of great interest internationally, has been the development of employer-led routes of social work qualifying. This is not new in the English context, as employers, mainly local authorities, have had a long tradition of sponsoring (paying for) selected employees to obtain a professional qualification while guaranteeing their placements. During the 1980s, such secondments accounted for almost half of all social workers who qualified (C.C.E.T.S.W., 1992). However, it was an expensive route, with employers paying university fees on top of salaries. Later financial pressures contributed to the decline of such programmes, although the Open University remains a substantial provider of social work education through its distance learning programme.

The government and local authorities have reversed this decline by introducing and funding new employer-led hybrid routes. 'Step Up to Social Work', 'Frontline', and 'Think Ahead' are post-graduate routes for selected applicants. An undergraduate apprenticeship route has also been introduced. The rise in employer-based routes indicates employers' greater interest in alternative approaches to university-based social work education. For employers, the attraction of employer-based routes is that 'practice' experience is their central component with far less time spent on classroom-based learning.

Step Up, Think Ahead, and Frontline are employer-led routes into social work. Step Up and Frontline for working with children and young people, although the qualification is generic so that graduates can choose to work in other sectors. Think Ahead is for mental health social work. Step Up is based on a partnership between a group of local authorities and an education partner or partners. These routes are designed to attract 'high performing' graduates that might otherwise not have viewed social work as a preferred career and are highly competitive. The government provides a bursary to cover living costs and pays all university fees and expenses.

These are fast-track routes to qualification. Step Up meets the same standards as other routes, which means that, upon successful completion, Step Up trainees are eligible to register as social workers 14 months after embarking on the training instead of the traditional 2 years for post-graduates and 3 years for undergraduates. By contrast Frontline and Think Ahead are run by independent organisations funded by central government. Trainees attend a residential course before working in a training team or 'hub' managed and supervised by an experienced practitioner.

The apprenticeship route is different in being a 3-year undergraduate programme. It meets the same social work standards as all other qualifying programmes, but apprentices stay in their social care employment settings and receive a salary while they train as social workers. In essence, they learn whilst they work. They undertake contrasting practice experiences to supplement their learning. In their last year, they work in a front-line social work team and follow a nationally agreed assessment process.

All four employer-led programmes illustrate how, in England, the traditional model of practice education is changing for both the learner, trainee or student, the practice teacher or mentor role, and, of course, for the employer of both parties.

The Role of the Practice Educator

At local level, traditional social work programmes ensure the quality of practice educators through their own procedures. Each programme must be approved by the regulator, S.W.E., as are the metrics used to measure outputs of learning. S.W.E. explains how programmes become approved but not individual compliance to a particular standard. Programmes self-report compliance to the standard and, unless there is a complaint or reason for the regulator to carry out an inspection, approved programmes have substantial autonomy, despite the calls over the last few decades for greater government oversight. The Professional Standards (P.E.P.s) discussed above are only voluntary (B.A.S.W., 2019). They do not address the standard of practice education but do outline the status, role, and task of the practice educator. So, for example, S.W.E. requires practice educators taking students on final placement to be currently registered social workers (S.W.E., 2019b), acknowledging that some practice experiences may be in settings where there are few registered social workers.

Moving to the individual level, practice educators often have considerable influence over their students' careers (Hackett & Marsland, 1997). Caffrey and Fruin (2019) argue that the role, accountability, and transparency of the practice educator's decision may be largely unchallenged. This could create issues of equality and fairness, especially if the practice educator, for whatever reason, views the student unfavourably and there is limited recourse for the student to challenge. This is because the issue of power is not necessarily shared and lies with the practice educator. This may be inevitable because, unlike the marking of an assignment, which can be scrutinised, usually by two members of teaching staff, the quality of the learning relationship between the practice educator and student is not subject to the same examination and measurement. Externality comes from the scrutiny of each practice educator's report by teaching staff and sometimes by an external examiner and a layperson representing service users or clients. Of course, such reports are the outcome of a comprehensive process based on a learning relationship in which details of discussions are neither recorded verbatim or possibly even acknowledged by the practice educator. They are likely to comment on the presence or absence of social work values of integrity, honesty, and respect, although such details are less commonly mentioned if there is no cause for concern in relation to the student. There are balances to maintain between overburdening the practice educator with a tight prescription of what to assess and enabling them to exercise their own professional judgement whilst hoping that this is done fairly.

It is less easy to address the more systemic challenges, such as the overall findings that certain groups do less well in social work education than others, despite social work being an inclusive profession. Hussain et al. (2007) used the regulator's data for 1995–1998 to show that those from an ethnic minority or who were disabled did less well than others not so defined, which was supported by social–work–specific research from Fairtlough et al. (2014). Reasons for this were complex, and these studies do not always take into account the demographics of practice teachers or teams. However, if such groups do less well than other groups, it opens the possibility of them being treated less favourably in the practice teacher relationship where the power dynamic continues to remain mainly with the practice teacher. Of course, without research on such outcomes, we cannot be sure.

Practice Education within Social Work Debates

Practice education in the English context reflects tensions about the place and form of professional education in social work. Employers who have complained about the disconnect between practice settings and universities, and opted for employer-led training, have sometimes reduced their placement offer to universities. Debates have continued about the purpose of practice education, how it can be quality assured in a fair way, and how new models of employer-led programmes are influencing traditional academic routes. The role of web-based learning and support in practice education remains to be considered in depth and, in the context of the global COVID-19 pandemic, may become a very familiar feature of social work practice education. Social work programmes are beginning to rethink the way they deliver education and question the rationale for such traditional modes of pedagogy.

Learning from England's Experiments: Back to the Employer!

A new world of practice education in England is emerging as a hybrid model integrating previous arrangements within new systems. It broadens ambitions that learning in placement should be about 'learning gain' for both the student or trainee and for the practice educator or team. There may be room to develop such an approach with an emphasis on what students or trainees have gained rather than focus on any deficits. Changing the focus of the conversation to what all parties have gained fits more with the Appreciative Inquiry model (Cooperrider & Whitney 2005). Such an approach switches the emphasis from deficit to asset and takes a more positive and appreciative approach.

Developing a hybrid model of practice education may help to build a consensus about practice education and sustain its effectiveness. It may help to address some of the long-standing inconsistencies in assessment, the criticisms of unfairness and bias, and the imbalance of power between the parties involved. There may be room to engage with others internationally and to explore whether the narrative of practice educator is one of authority and control over the learner or of emancipation and transformation, reflecting a commonality in learning relationships. As employer-led social work programmes are showing, the dyadic relationship between the practice educator and student is changing to something that is much more engaging and dynamic as students work in teams or groups. Working in different types of settings, such as group placements or in the 'hub' model of 'Frontline' and 'Think Ahead', might foster more open relationships and emphasis on learning for all. Making the role and process of practice education more transparent might help transfer some of the assessment responsibility from the educator to the student/trainee, allowing greater freedom on the latter's part to explore, imagine, practice, and challenge traditional ideas of praxis. The concept of praxis is a key idea in practice

education, but, over the years, it has been challenged by a focus on outputs and outcomes for service users or clients. The process of praxis from a Hegelian perspective is about taking action to change the world. The world, to the student or trainee, is their placement or learning opportunity, and the action is that directed by the employer, regulator, practice educator, and education provider. There may be room to offer students greater freedom to take their own action supported, but not directed by, the practice educator in the context of their employment responsibilities. We would suggest that the student is a greater expert on their own learning than others. This learner-led process switches from pedagogy to what Knowles (2011) describes as andragogy, to an 'adult control' paradigm of education and is more likely to lead to 'deep level learning' (Entwistle 1988; Ramsden 1992).

The English experience is revealing how it is important for employers to work more closely with education providers and vice versa. This should help foster a joint understanding learning approach that seeks to develop social workers as confident and independent learners, but also foster co-design and collective ownership of this approach. It would encourage employers and education providers to view the education, and not just the training, of the next generation of social workers as a joint enterprise and dispel any tendency to view it as the education provider's sole responsibility. It would also make it more likely that both would own and accept responsibility for the assessment outputs and, ultimately, the programme's outcomes. Because current English standards on practice education are presented as 'outputs', they hold relevance to this new model. However, paying attention to inputs (process) also fosters greater consistency and scrutiny. This is critical to practice education because it develops the individual learner's ability to gain the skills that will support their own life-long learning and continuing professional development. It is the opposite of surface learning, which enables an individual to learn for a specific short-term goal, such as passing an exam, writing an essay, or meeting a practice educator's directed task.

Critical Analysis

To analyse the overall environment of practice education in England raises some critical questions that are rarely asserted and, when they are, rarely responded to, listened to, or acted upon. From the material we have presented in this short chapter, it is clear that social work programmes benefit from a partnership and collegiate approach to training and educating students. Generally, partnerships share resources, ideas, ownership, and risk. However, when there have been major tragedies in social work, mainly in children's departments, the government has intervened in social work education, citing universities, not employers, as providing poor standards of training that create social workers who are not equipped to manage the complexity of social work practice. The assumption, here, is that, if the input from universities were better, social workers would then be better equipped to support families and protect children, a theme raised in a government commissioned report on social work education (Narey, 2014). Such tragedies are a complex phenomenon. The government moved social work to being an all-degree profession, raised entry qualifications to narrow the profile of entrants, and brought in new routes to training at post-graduate level, all part of a proclamation of raising standards and, hopefully, reducing tragedies such as the death of the child Peter Connolly in 2007 (Department of Education, 2008). However, there is little evidence that correlates, for example, individual student academic profile at entry level with later practice outcomes, as suggested by Croisdale-Appleby (2014, p. 9). This leads to the question of whether continued government changes to social work education, often occurring after major tragedies, have not been able to produce the intended outcomes. It may be argued that regular change has created instability within the sector, much of which neither understands nor owns such changes (see Appendix 1 of change timeline).

Flux and change in English social work education have impacted on its sustainability, sector confidence, and consistency in outcomes. What is needed is evidence-based policy change that drives the right type of change at the right time. As described above, the government's 'Teaching Partnership' initiative produced positive outcomes in social work education (D.f.E., 2019). However, such partnerships rely on government funding and, as this runs out, sustainability is uncertain. Initiatives that are reliant on short-term government funding often face this problem. Should social work partners find other ways to achieve self-reliance when the incentive is not just financial but also benefits all through practice experience, ideas, values, and outcomes for end users? Should the regulator require employers to work within social work education partnerships? Because of a lack of research in this area, we are unclear of the difference and the impact different routes may have to improve social work practice. In reviewing the past 50 years of social work regulated education (see Ixer, 2013), there is a case for consolidating what we know and researching uncertainties.

There is much to celebrate in what has been achieved in England in helping to provide social work students with a rigorous education that helps to integrate the theory aspect of their experience into practice. The role of practice educator in supporting, educating, and assessing students in practice should not be seen in isolation to academic scrutiny, potentially allowing for fairness and equality to be addressed in all quarters. The practice educator has a similar role in all routes to qualification and continues to have a powerful influence over student learning outputs (e.g., making the recommendation of pass or fail). Such recommendations are completed in isolation from common U.K. academic protocols of quality assurance, such as double marking, moderation, external examination of the process, and so on. Developments among many programmes, such as a Practice Assessment Panel, are helping to break down this isolation and provide quality assurance of the evidence supporting the recommendation, although they do not review the process that leads to recommendations. This implies that programmes are only interested in outputs rather than how they are achieved. There have been suggestions that a register of minimum standards for all practice educators in England would bring quality consistency to the sector, but this would need substantial consultation and clear evidence of being worth the effort.

Conclusions

England has a complex and structured process of training and assessing students in practice that has been established over many years. As acknowledged, the problems with the current system of social work education, with regular changes in routes and standards, buffer against the good work that many practice educators, employers, academics, and students encounter. Moreover, new regulation brings about a new opportunity. S.W.E.'s regulatory philosophy seems driven by core values of enhancement rather than minimum standards and an openness to include social work stakeholders by engaging with them in every aspect of the regulatory process (S.W.E., 2019c). Nicky Morgan, M.P., then Secretary of State for Education in England, stated: 'I also want us to be confident that every new social worker joining the workforce has received high quality initial training' (Morgan, 2016). While practice education has always been held as important to the overall success of social work education, there is continued debate about what makes good practice education, but there is limited research to inform such a debate. A mix of input and output standards to bring consistency and greater quality to the system of practice education remains an ambition. A more systematic approach to researching this area should be an aim of the sector. The social work community needs to be able to evidence its approach, giving greater public confidence in a system that needs rigor, reliability, effectiveness, and sustainability.

Finally, at the time of writing, the world is experiencing a major pandemic, and universities in England, social work employers, and teams are quickly learning new ways of working. In one British university, the University of Winchester, the social work department created a virtual placement as an alternative to suspending placements during the early COVID-19 pandemic. The alternative of suspending or delaying the opportunity of students becoming social workers was seen as unfair. This provided new opportunities that seem limitless in relation to learning gain (see Appendix 2). Now may be an optimal time to rethink what is important to practice education; the agency that needs to employ good social workers; the body that provides the education, the practice educator or similar, who trains and assesses the student on placement; and most importantly, the student who should be at the heart of whatever process is in place for developing and preparing excellent social work practitioners Given the way COVID-19 has transformed the way social work and social work education are being delivered, the sector may rethink the purpose of social work education. COVID-19 might be the catalyst for a once-in-a–life-time change, helping the sector to examine, in particular for practice education, different or even better ways of training students in placement, such as the alternative placement idea. This challenge has been publicly raised by the new social work regulator (Conway, 2020). The pandemic may provide an opportunity to explore innovative ways to augment student learning in the practice environment.

Appendix 1

Chronology of Key Events

To give a clearer timeline of key events in social work education, the following is a chronology; however, these events must be seen in relation to other policy changes that impact social work education.

- 1962 – Formal regulation of social work training in the U.K. starts (Council for Training in Social Work).
- 1970 – Regulation for social work education under statue renamed Central Council for Social Work Education and Training (C.C.E.T.S.W.).
- 1972 – C.C.E.T.S.W. initiative to expand social work training across the U.K.
- 1973 – First ever values in social work developed (C.C.E.T.S.W.).
- 1974 – C.C.E.T.S.W. publishes 'Paper 4' integrating law in social work education.
- 1975 – Development of first 'student unit' to support students in placement.
- 1975 – 'Paper 9.1' development of the Certificate in Social Services (C.S.S.).
- 1975 – Tangible political support for social work education – first Secretary of State visit to a social work programme.
- 1976 – 'Paper 13' (C.C.E.T.S.W.) published 'Values in Social Work'.
- 1977 – 'Paper 17.1' (C.C.E.T.S.W.) begins the 'Post Qualifying' framework.
- 1979 – Press release calls for more black and ethnic minority people in social work.
- 1979 – New study published recognising role of independent assessors in placement assessment.
- 1980 – C.C.T.E.S.W. sets up its own quality assurance department with external assessors integrating practice with theory.
- 1980 – Birth of the C.S.S. and C.Q.S.W. qualifications.
- 1980 – New assessment of practice placements published.
- 1985 – First announcement of need for 3-year degree for qualification.

- 1987 – C.C.E.T.S.W. sets up specialist group to develop greater opportunities in social work for black people (Black Perspectives Committee).
- 1989 – Birth of 'Paper 30' integrating all qualifications into a unified Diploma in Social Work.
- 1991 – Publication of 'One Small Step Towards Racial Justice' to support new unified social work qualification outlined in 'Paper 30'.
- 1991 – Residential childcare initiative leading to specific childcare pathway in qualification and later a new post-qualifying award.
- 1992 – First coordinated response to finding good, quality placements acknowledging the problem.
- 1992 – New initiative to develop more good, quality practice teachers in placements, e.g., social work and joint nursing initiative.
- 1992 – Birth of National Occupational Standards for social work.
- 1992 – First discussion on replacing C.C.E.T.S.W. with new registration body.
- 1993 – Warner Inquiry led to special post-qualifying level childcare award in 1998.
- 1995 – New initiative to have only accredited practice educators to raise standards.
- 1997 – C.C.E.T.S.W. to be replaced by the General Social Care Council (G.S.C.C.).
- 1998 – Devolution across U.K. creates seven new bodies: three sector skills bodies in Wales, Northern Ireland, and Scotland, two in England covering adults and children, and one holding the U.K. Sector Skills license.
- 2000 – Birth of Sector Skills Council – sector-specific standards-setting bodies across the U.K.
- 2001 – First Code of Practice for the entire social care workforce.
- 2007 – Practice Learning Task Force set up to develop better supply of quality placements.
- 2008 – Social Work Task Force set up.
- 2012 – College for Social Work set up; closed 2016.
- 2012 – G.S.C.C. abolished, and functions transfer to the Health and Care Professions Council (H.C.P.C.).
- 2019 – Social work functions transfer from H.C.P.C. to Social Work England (S.W.E.).
- 2019 – S.W.E. publishes new standards on practice placements and new definition on what constitutes a statutory placement.

Appendix 2

At the start of 2020, the U.K. began to be affected by the global COVID-19 pandemic. By March 2020 all social work programmes in England were faced with the task of either suspending programmes or delivering in a different way. An example of creative practice was to continue with the placement but, instead, of risking students' health by going out into the placement environment, students were given a virtual placement. The following is an example of how one social work programme not only managed this but also learnt something new about other ways students learn.

The South Coast partnership is made up of six local authorities and a university.[1] They are part of the government funded Step Up to Social Work initiative. The students have three placements – 20-days as an introduction to children's social work, 50 days in an adults' settings, and finally, 100-days in children's statutory social work. The three placements are part of one module in which they have to meet learning outcomes through building a portfolio of evidence. Students had already completed a 20-day placement and were about to start their 50-day placement before the crisis and lockdown was implemented. Consequently, they were unable to start their planned placement in adult social services. However, unlike other programmes that

suspended their placements, this partnership decided that the placement should continue as a virtual learning experience. The following is a snapshot of how this worked.

To suspend a programme brings huge consequences. During the early months of the Coronavirus crisis, no one knew when national restrictions would be over, putting students at risk of not being able to complete the course on time and not qualifying or entering the social work profession when they expected. Using a mix of approaches, the students entered a programme of 50-days of online learning, structured individual and group supervision, and tutorial group seminars. During this 50-day placement, students sought to identify a range of alternative evidence to direct placement experience as a contribution toward the final portfolio. They used recognition of prior learning processes whether in education or employment to present evidence that could be matched against the learning outcomes. They researched particular themes from their own learning pathways and identified particular issues about which they could write in two formative pieces of assessment. In essence, they could not only use prior learning and evidence from any source but also generate new evidence to contribute toward their final portfolio when their 100-day placement was complete.

This experience taught the programme a number of things that otherwise might be lost:

- Students come onto a programme with a vast amount of prior knowledge, social capital, and emotional intelligence that is not always recognised.
- Students learn at different paces.
- Step Up to Social Work students have vast experience and are independent learners who can be given more responsibility to manage their own learning and require less structured coaching and teaching. This, in turn, made the idea of a virtual placement possible.
- Because this group of students are more mature/experienced, they are able to use their peer group as a resource to aid and accelerate learning.
- A placement is not about the physical contact and experience of being in placement over a number of days but more about learning wherever it takes place.

It raises the possibility that, for students, learning may not need the standard number of days in placement. There is no evidence that shows whether students who have 200 days of placement are more ready to practice than those that experienced 100 days.

However, it is acknowledged that all students gain value-added experiences from placements that would be lost in virtual placements. Students enjoy these placements, but placements are sourced for learning and not enjoyment. The partnership has shown how learning can be refocused to explore alternative and more creative approaches to student learning, which must increase opportunities for students to excel in expressing their natural talents that might otherwise be lost.

It is recognised that these are early days, and the experience of a virtual placement has not been fully evaluated. However, there are many positive features that could support students to learn in alternative ways and support the principle forwarded in this chapter – a focus on learning gained rather than the number of days in a placement.

Note

1 Hampshire children's services, Wokingham children's services, Portsmouth children's services, Isle of Wight children's services, Southampton children's services, West Sussex children's services and University of Winchester.

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