

REFORM OF PROFESSIONAL SOCIAL WORK TRAINING

Practice Learning Issues Paper

Draft

1 Introduction & Context

1.1 In October 2001 the Minister for Health Social Services and Public Safety announced a programme of radical reform for social work education and training in Northern Ireland which sets the threshold for qualification at honours degree level.

This is part of an overall quality agenda for social work, which includes improving the training for professional social workers, setting standards for social service delivery and the registration of the social care workforce.

1.2 The new degree in social work puts practice at the centre of the training for social work students in order that they learn to become well-informed, confident and competent practitioners. In the “Review of the Diploma in Social Work” (March 1999) JM Consulting highlighted the need to improve practice learning arrangements to meet the increasing demands of professional social work. This requires a radical shift in how students are currently facilitated to learn in practice and provides a unique opportunity to review the current arrangements and introduce new innovative practices.

1.3 It is essential to build on current good practice and existing networks in further developing practice learning opportunities. Partnership arrangements developed for the current Diploma in Social Work (Dip SW) will form a springboard for the changes.

1.4 The last intakes of students to the Diploma in Social Work will continue study until 2007. During this time there will be a continued, although steadily reducing, need for DipSW placements alongside the developments of new practice learning arrangements.

2 Parameters

2.1 The Northern Ireland Framework Specification* (DHSSPS March 2003) for the honours degree in social work specifies the skills, knowledge and final outcomes to be achieved. The degree will require social workers to demonstrate their competence as fully rounded professionals, based on sound understanding of human development; of the systems in which they live and work; and methods of intervention which have been proved to produce beneficial outcomes for people who use social work services.

2.2 The Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC) Rules for the Approval of the Degree in Social Work* (May 2003) sets out the arrangements for approving courses and contributes to the Council's role in promoting high standards of conduct and practice for the social care workforce.

2.3 The Practice Learning Requirements* (NISCC June 2003) further specify the parameters for course provision. Practice learning must include a period of supervised, assessed practice in the workplace using real life experiences. In addition the range of practice learning may include simulation, action learning, skills teaching case studies and project work.

2.4 This paper identifies some of the issues in developing a coherent and comprehensive set of new arrangements for practice learning.

These issues are set out in the following key areas:

- Standards & protection of the public
- Management & Organisation
- Models & Resources

*NISCC Papers are obtainable from NISCC 7th Floor, Millenium House, 19-25 Great Victoria St. Belfast, BT2 7AQ and are on the website :www.niscc.info

3 Standards & Protection of the Public

3.1 Practice learning takes place within a policy and legislative context, and quality requirements that are embedded in the legislation. {These are detailed in Appendix 1}

3.2 Many of the settings for personal social services practice learning will exist within the context of the Health & Social Services (Quality, Improvement and Regulation) Order 2003 and the Duty of Quality. There will, therefore, be important links to the standards for services, which are being developed for use by the Health and Social Services Regulation and Improvement Authority that is being established. All agencies, which provide practice learning, will need to demonstrate the quality standards as specified in such Standards for Services.

3.3 The NISCC Employer Codes of Conduct will have to be met. In addition The Northern Ireland Social Care Council will be developing requirements for agencies providing practice learning opportunities and will be responsible for monitoring these.

3.4 Ensuring standards are met will assist in providing the necessary protection of the public in receiving services from students. The social work students will be registered with NISCC and expected to meet the code of conduct for employees. In addition they will be assessed as safe to practise, in simulated situations, before beginning their work-based learning.

3.5 A crucial part of the quality standards for practice learning will be in the provision of competent supervision, mentoring and assessment, as well as access to the variety and depth of practice learning experiences necessary to produce competent professionals. [This is explored further in section 5]

Questions:

Where should responsibility for monitoring the quality of practice learning, in an agency/trust delivering the practice learning, be located?

How will the practice learning system link with clinical and social care governance and risk management systems?

4 Management & Organisation

4.1 The challenges for quality practice learning arrangements are in providing the required range of learning opportunities for the slightly increased numbers of students over the longer period of the degree the retention of practice learning staff and the management of all key personnel.

4.2 The new arrangements for practice learning must be set within the wider workforce context. The numbers of social workers selected, recruited and trained must meet the identified workforce needs.

4.3 The provision of timely, quality assured practice placements has been a managerial challenge in the life of the Diploma in Social Work and indeed was a feature of previous social work training courses. The relatively well funded system operating in Northern Ireland which has included – (i) funding support for regional allocation, (ii) co-ordination and support for the Voluntary sector, (iii) every placement being funded- has not resolved these issues.

4.4 Current arrangements since the introduction of the Diploma in Social Work have included a training programme for practice teachers (funded) with an award. In addition there has been funding to support workload easement. However these have not ensured the retention of quality and experienced practice teachers in that function, as they have progressed through their social work careers.[This is further explored in section 6]

4.5 Directors of Social Work, Directors of Human Resources and Chief Executives in the voluntary sector now need to consider these issues, and identify the implications for social work career structures.

Questions:

Where (at what level) should management responsibility for planning and delivering practice learning opportunities be sited in an agency/trust delivering practice learning?

How can practice learning volume be linked to work force planning?

How should the different roles be formulated and sited within the workforce (e.g. tutoring, supervision and direct observation of actual practice, mentoring/teaching, assessment of competence)?

4.6 Regional approach to practice learning.

4.6.1 The Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC) Rules for the Approval of the Degree in Social Work* (May 2003) set out the terms of reference for a Regional Body that will oversee all aspects of course provision including practice learning arrangements across Northern Ireland. It will be for the Regional Body to ensure that all course providers have access to the required range of quality practice learning.

4.6.2 The Regional Body will wish to ensure that practice learning opportunities reflect the diversity of social work practice in all settings, with its increasingly complex and flexible patterns for care provision, protection and rehabilitation. Students in learning to practise need to learn in the most up to date, cutting edge service development areas and gain experience in the totality of social work in all its settings. Some aspects of social work provision, which are absolutely crucial to students learning, are not provided in high volume e.g. sensory impairment, child psychiatry and court room situations.

4.6.3 Assessed practice learning should be contrasting in order for students to understand acquire and demonstrate transferability of knowledge, skills and values in practice. This contrast will normally be achieved through variations in assessed practice learning experiences. Practice learning arrangements should make innovative use of real life practice; of provision across voluntary, statutory and community sectors; of dual/multi site learning; of shared learning with others, including services users, other disciplines and professions; of learning from current and previous life and work experiences.

4.6.4 It is essential therefore that a regional approach is developed to optimise all existing resources, assure quality and consistency

and permit access to the right learning at the right time for all students.

Question

How can we best stimulate innovative and creative approaches to practice learning opportunities?

5 Models and Resources

5.1 The DHSSPS has a finite pool of funding to resource the increase in practice learning provision.

The current system includes funding for all student placements, funding support for the Voluntary Organisations Forum (VOF), voluntary sector student units and the Regional Placement Allocation process. Choices need to be made on the deployment of these resources to meet the demands of increased provision and extended practice learning time.

Each of these functions is considered herewith.

5.1.1 One to one Practice Teaching

The traditional model for supervision, support and assessment of student practice learning is the one to one model. The practice teacher is responsible for the administrative arrangements, managing the placement and providing the student with individual teaching, supervision and assessment. Practice teachers have been trained and accredited in Northern Ireland (see 4.4.)

5.1.2 Voluntary Organisations Forum

This is an umbrella organisation for the voluntary sector, funded by the DHSSPS through NISCC. Its function is to support the individual, singleton practice teachers in small voluntary organisations, providing practice teacher support, supporting the development of new placement sites and providing long arm practice teaching when required.

5.1.3 Student Units (Voluntary sector)

Some practice placements are currently provided through specially funded and staffed student units in the voluntary sector. These units develop and support small voluntary sector placements, on-site supervisors and act as practice assessors for voluntary sector practice teachers on the Award programme.

There are some advantages to this approach including the support which can be provided to singleton practice teachers; managing complex, dual/multi sites; ensuring consistency of assessment and standards across a number of learning sites.

5.1.4 Long arm practice teaching

There are examples of experienced practice teachers taking on the role of long arm practice teachers, both in the statutory sector and by independent practice teachers. This requires an on site supervisor in the workplace to provide day to day support and supervision to the student. This role has emerged to supplement the singleton practice teachers and meet placement targets.

Issues

Please identify and comment on the range of models you would like to see in place.

Are there alternative models which could be developed?

5.2 Regional Placement Allocation

5.2.1 The Regional Placement Allocation Group manages the allocation of social work placements across Northern Ireland. The membership of this group comprises representation from the three Diploma in Social work Partnerships – USSET, EBP, QUEST. In addition there are representatives from agency providers not represented on the partnerships.

5.2.2 The regional placement allocation process uses the data relating to the student needs, practice teacher profile and placement site opportunities, to match the student to a particular placement. It is not always possible to meet the student's identified

learning needs in the placements offered. There is no system, at present, to enable the Regional Placement Allocation Group to identify or predict placement sites in advance.

5.2.3 The funding allocated by the DHSSPS has secured a regional placement allocation co-ordinator to support the group's work.

Question

Should there be a regional approach to allocating practice learning provision? If not please suggest alternative models.

How should the practice learning matching processes be undertaken?

How can individual student need be catered for?

5.3 Learning from other disciplines

5.3.1 It will be beneficial, in this revised approach to practice learning, to look at how other professionals, including Nurse Education, Allied Health Professionals, Medicine, Youth and Community Workers, Legal Professionals and Teachers educate, train and induct their students. One example for consideration might be the medical model of separating the teaching and assessment functions. All general practitioners provide teaching and learning opportunities for medical students. The assessment is then, generally, carried out by an assessment centre approach where examiners test the student's knowledge through a range of written and oral questions.

5.3.2 As well as learning from good practice it may be preferable in the HPSS to have congruent systems across the professions. The opportunity of learning opportunities in multi-disciplinary teams should be further explored.

Questions

What ideas, approaches used by other professionals could be introduced to social work practice learning?

6. Funding arrangements

Costing for placements in the 1980s examined both the cost to service agencies in meeting the supervision needs of students, actually accommodating students on site and offset these costs against the contribution that those students made to the business of the agency. It was estimated that at least a third of the cost was offset by the students' contribution to work. This formula informs the present funding system.

6. 1 Position in the rest of the UK

There is no single approach being developed in the United Kingdom. Different proposals are being considered in each country. Two of particular interest, to this discussion, are as follows.

One region is proposing to devolve the responsibility for practice learning for individual students to the local authorities. Each authority will be allocated a number of students as they begin their degree. The Authority will then be responsible for allocating suitable learning opportunities throughout the three-year period.

In another region the Higher Education Institutions will be funded for placement provision and will commission and oversee the quality.

The funding arrangements have been agreed as follows.

Two main funding streams:

- a) a daily fee per student which varies across the levels (1, 2, 3) of assessment, with increased funding for level 3 practice learning;
- b) funding to support the creation of quality learning environments.

6. 2 The commissioning policy for practice learning provision in Northern Ireland rests with the DHSSPS. In some situations the resourcing has not reached those delivering the service (the practice teachers) and employers have used various methods to "reward" them. However such mechanisms have been unable to fully deliver the "Resourcing Practice Placements for the Diploma in Social Work" (1995) Policy aim - of ensuring that practice teachers had a reduced workload to allow for student supervision and support. The release of time was one of the key mechanisms for assuring the safety and quality of practice.

6.3 The DHSSPS recognises there will be an increase in volume of practice learning needed for the new degree. In establishing commissioning processes it is essential that quality standards are secured. New arrangements for practice learning provision will need to be costed and performance measurement systems built in to any new commissioning process.

Questions:

How can the funding support best be deployed to purchase practice learning to the required standards?

How can practice learning providers feel valued

Where should commissioning responsibilities lie?

7. Action Plan to reform practice learning

The following outlines the proposed action plan to take this process forward.

A Practice Learning Strategic Group will explore these issues.	Oct. 2003
A discussion paper will be drawn up and circulated.	mid- Oct.03
An extensive consultation process will follow engaging with all interested parties.	Oct./Nov. 03
A Departmental Circular will be produced to define arrangements for Boards and Trusts. Voluntary sector guidelines will be issued.	Jan. 04

Questions asked through out the paper

1. Where should responsibility for monitoring the quality of practice learning in an agency/trust delivering the practice learning be located?

2. How will the practice learning system link with Clinical and social care governance and risk management systems?

3. Where (at what level) should management responsibility for planning and delivering practice learning opportunities be sited in an agency/trust delivering practice learning?

4. How can practice learning volume be linked to work force planning?

9. How should the practice learning matching processes be undertaken?

10 . What ideas, approaches used by other professionals could be introduced to social work practice learning?

11. How can the funding support best be deployed to purchase practice learning to the required standards?

12. How can practice learning providers feel valued?

13. Where should commissioning responsibilities lie?

Any further comments

Appendix 1

Legislation

- Health & Personal Social Services Act(Northern Ireland) 2001 Part 1 which established the Northern Ireland Social Care Council with particular reference to sections 10 (amended by Article 44 HSS Quality Order 2003)13 and 14.
- The Health and Social Services (Quality, Regulation and Improvement) (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 and Part IV Article 34 which sets out the “Duty of Quality” and is the vehicle for establishing the Regional Authority.
- NISCC Rules for the Approval of Courses leading to the Degree in Social Work

Quality requirements specific to Practice Learning

- NISCC Requirements for Practice Learning
- NISCC Quality Assurance Requirements
- NISCC Code of Conduct for Employers and Employees
- Quality Assurance agency Benchmarks for Social Work Education including Practice Learning