

# Assessment in social work: A guide for learning and teaching

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## Acknowledgements

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## Questions and messages for educators

One aspect of the brief for this resource guide was to identify questions for educators to consider, arising from the main sources. The questions given throughout Parts Two and Three, together with the 'messages for educators' in Part Three, have been collected together here to serve two purposes. They provide a prompt list for educators (or encouragement that they are addressing the key areas), and they act in place of an executive summary of the issues considered in Parts Two and Three. (Since Part Three builds on Part Two, there is necessarily some recurrence of issues.)

The extent of questions illustrates the multi-dimensional nature of social work assessment and shows the range of knowledge and skills required. The questions also indicate the scale of the task that faces educators in the design and delivery of assessment learning.

### The significance of assessment in social work practice and education

- What do social work students learn about the significance placed on assessment by government and agencies, service users and carers, the professional literature and the requirements of the social work degree?

### Reasons for teaching and learning about assessment

- Are there opportunities for students to consider the 'because of' and 'in order to' reasons for learning about assessment?
- What is the focus of teaching, as between technical competence, transferable principles and critical analytical skills, or some combination, and what is the rationale for the approach chosen?

### The definitions of assessment

- Does teaching rely on one or more of the following four 'types' of definition: process-focused, contingent, contestation-focused, critical social constructionist?
- What are your criteria for choosing the type(s) that are taught and examined?
- What are the implications of your choices, for student learning and for students' understanding and conduct of assessment?

### Risk assessment

- In what ways does teaching on risk feature in the programme?
- Is there an opportunity to explore the contested nature of risk and the different perceptions among different groups about risk and its significance?
- Bearing in mind both the variable levels of attention to risk that may be found in textbooks and the different kinds of risk that preoccupy assessment frameworks, what are the main teaching and learning sources?

### The purposes of assessment

- Do students have the opportunity to study the multiple purposes and interests that assessment may serve and the implications for their role?
- Are there opportunities to consider the purposes of particular kinds of assessment and to practice the explanation and negotiation of purpose with service users and carers?
- Are students able to explore the potentially dynamic relationship between purposes, the potential contradictions between them and the scope for resolving contradictions?

### Who is being assessed?

- In relation to which levels or areas of 'social organisation' does teaching and learning about assessment take place?

### Theories that underpin assessment

- Which underpinning theories appear in assessment teaching?
- What part do the theoretical and value stance and experience of the teacher and students play in the choice of theory in teaching and learning about assessment?
- Are there methods for subjecting these choices (above) to independent examination and for evaluating theories from the range on offer?

### The different timeframes of assessment

- What types of assessment timeframes are taught and are there opportunities for applying or evaluating the main types?
- Are students alert to the possible variation in assessment timeframes as set by government, agency or professional criteria and of possible tensions between them?

### Assessment processes

- If you are using assessment frameworks in teaching the process of assessment, does your selection allow for the variation between the level and types of guidance offered?
- If a form-based approach is included in teaching and learning, are both the pros and cons explored, including the risks of form-led assessment processes?
- Is there scope for exploring the ways in which assessment processes change over time and the factors that influence those changes?

### Evidence-based assessment

- Are there opportunities for students to learn of the debates that surround evidence-based practice?

- Are there opportunities for students to develop the knowledge and skills that different evidence-based approaches to assessment require?

### Legislation, legal frameworks and policy contexts

- Do the learning materials you recommend:
  - > recognise the importance of legal knowledge in assessment?
  - > provide knowledge relevant to the particular national context in which students are expecting to be employed?
  - > make clear the national context to which any particular legal or policy examples refer?

### Organisational issues

- Do the learning materials used pay attention to the nature of organisational employment of social workers and the implications for assessment?
- Are there opportunities to explore the politics of assessment that can surface between social worker and organisation when there are differences over goals, standards, resources or procedures?

### Collaborative assessment with other professions and agencies

- Does learning for collaborative assessment feature explicitly in students' academic and practice learning opportunities?
- What sources and learning methods do you use to ensure that both the interprofessional and inter-agency dimensions of assessment are included in student learning?

### Language, communication and assessment

- What learning materials and opportunities are available to students to ensure that they understand and can act upon the multiple issues of language and communication in assessment?

### Service user and carer perspectives

- How do students learn of service users' and carers' perceptions, expectations and experiences of assessment?
- Do students have the opportunity to draw on their own experiences of being assessed in various contexts in order to reflect on possible user experiences and expectations?

### Involvement of service users and carers

- Do teaching and learning cover the different kinds of involvement of service users and carers debated in UK social work and expected by user and carer groups and social policy?
- Do students have the opportunity to learn how users wish to be involved in the definition and exploration of their issues during assessment?

### User-led assessment

- Do students have the opportunity to explore user-led approaches to assessment including:
  - > the nature and implications of user-defined and user-conducted or self-assessment?
  - > the matrix of models of assessment, from professional/agency-led to devolved user/carer self-assessment, which come into view when assessment is examined for the extent to which it is user-led.

### Traditional, emancipatory and governance values

- What materials and opportunities are available to help students explore the links between values and ethics, on the one hand, and the models, methods and goals of assessment, on the other?

### Anti-racist, anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice

- Are there specific opportunities for students to engage with anti-racist, anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive principles and practice in assessment?

### What should be the content?

- Do learning opportunities predominate in one area or another of the abstract-concrete continuum illustrated, (with its corresponding tendencies, types of knowledge and skills produced, and implications for practice)?
- Alternatively, does teaching cover both of the following:
  - > knowledge of assessment processes, including tools and assessment frameworks
  - > a broader repertoire of transferable theory, principles, skills and social science knowledge for use in assessment?
- Does the content of teaching recognise the mix of stakeholder consensus and difference about the content of the assessment curriculum?
- Are students able to identify specific areas of learning that contribute to their understanding and skills in relation to assessment?
- Are students able to identify particular models, definitions, purposes and theories of assessment taught on the course?

- Are students able to identify particular formal frameworks of assessment taught on the course?
- Do students consider themselves prepared for undertaking assessments during their practice placements?
- The message from the main sources is that social workers need learning opportunities and practice skills along the abstract–concrete assessment knowledge continuum.
- Since there are limits to what can be included in any curriculum, the combination of abstract and concrete content has to be chosen for maximum transferability.

#### Sources: textbooks and assessment frameworks

- *Textbooks and frameworks can become out of date as legislation, policy and practice change, which they do frequently.*
- *Textbooks published overseas or for other national contexts may offer useful insights of subjects neglected locally but should be used cautiously because of their different origin.*
- *There are legislative and organisational differences between the four UK countries, which may restrict the applicability of guidance to a given country.*
- *Reading is an insufficient basis for developing assessment expertise; learning exercises, discussion in supervision and application to practice are needed.*
- *Assessment as presented in textbooks and frameworks represents a complex set of skills and knowledge. Students and inexperienced practitioners need opportunities to explore and learn how to apply what they read, preferably in supervised practice.*
- *Educators and students should be clear on the reasons for choosing particular textbooks and frameworks.*
- *Students should be alerted to any limitations of recommended works and especially to changes of policy and practice since the works were written, and be directed to supplementary reading.*
- *Educators should be explicit about their intended audience and be sure to match content to student level and needs, as between students needing introductory knowledge and those requiring more advanced guidance.*
- *Educators should define how they are using the concept of assessment, bearing in mind that there is no single agreed definition.*
- *Learning should include case studies and exercises to encourage active learning.*
- *The bases of theory and evidence that underpin teaching should be explicit.*
- *Educators should recommend further reading and identify, in particular, important topics that have not been fully covered in teaching.*

#### How may teaching and learning be structured?

- What is the structure of discrete and embedded/infused academic learning opportunities on assessment and its rationale?
- Are embedded/infused learning opportunities clearly 'visible'?

- Does the teaching and learning structure allow systematically for preparation of students for assessment before they enter practice placements?

*Whatever structure, sequence and pattern of modules is chosen for teaching assessment, the clear messages from the research by Crisp and colleagues and the Salford CSWR study are that:*

- *programme providers should be able to articulate how the structure enables learning objectives in relation to assessment skills to be achieved*
- *All stakeholder groups should be able to:*
  - > *understand the assessment learning objectives of the programme*
  - > *identify when the teaching and learning opportunities have occurred.*

#### How may assessment be taught?

- *The best prospect for assessment learning seems to be a combination of approaches in which reading – and lectures, where used – are enlivened by a variety of active learning opportunities allowing for different learning styles.*
- *Agency-based practice learning facilitated by supervision is highly favoured but needs support and preparation via class-based learning and guided reading for students and briefing for practice-based teachers.*

#### What should be the relationship between what is taught and assessment practice in care agencies?

- Are there mechanisms for negotiating the respective priorities of agencies and social work courses in relation to the teaching and practice of assessment?

#### How is student competence assessed?

- How may the analysis of assessment in this guide inform implementation of the requirements for competence in assessment set down for the social work degree by the respective national care councils?
- What arrangements or plans are there for a service user contribution to the evaluation of students' assessment skills?

#### Whose contributions are needed in assessment teaching?

- Has the requirement of service user and carer involvement in social work education been translated into assessment learning opportunities that are effective for students and sustainable for service users? If not, are reasons identified and solutions defined?
- Are agency staff and particularly practice teachers and assessors appropriately briefed on class-based objectives, teaching methods and assessment methods on social work assessment skills?
- Are the expectations of the social work degree course regarding practice learning objectives and opportunities clear and agreed by all parties?

- Are there ways to ensure that learning opportunities extend beyond familiarisation with agency standard assessment forms?
- What opportunities are there for learning with, from and about other professions in relation to assessment?
- Are there learning opportunities in which students can work across agencies and understand the inter-agency and multi-agency dimensions of assessment?
- Are there assessment teaching arrangements that expose social work students to the perspectives of teachers from other professions and disciplines?
- Development appears especially to be needed in the involvement of service users and carers in students' agency-based assessment learning.

## Conclusion

- What are the distinctive ideas about assessment represented by social work programmes and their educators, and do those ideas group into a recognisable discourse or discourses?
- Do particular discourses predominate in academic or practice teaching and, if so, what influences appear to account for this predominance, giving the ideas authority and as embodying 'truth'?
- How does a given discourse stand up against competing discourses, not only in the classroom but in a student's placement and subsequent employed practice?
- How may students be prepared to practice effectively in situations where assessment discourses compete?

# Part One: Purpose and nature of the guide

## 1 Why has the guide been created?

In 2003, SCIE initiated a series of knowledge reviews to support the introduction and subsequent development of the social work degree. The focus chosen for *Knowledge Review 1* was the core social work skill of assessment and was undertaken by Crisp and colleagues (2003, p iv). The review examined the literature on the learning and teaching of assessment in social work education. The review also identified the need for further work on assessment and, accordingly, SCIE commissioned two supplementary studies from, respectively, Crisp and colleagues (2005) and from the Salford Centre for Social Work Research (Salford CSWR) (Shardlow *et al*, 2005). The present guide was commissioned to provide a synthesis of ideas and issues from those three previously commissioned studies of assessment.

The guide examines aspects of assessment in social work and goes on to consider teaching and learning of assessment. The work of the three earlier assessment studies are cited recurrently but the aim is not to duplicate them. The intention is to add value to the studies by expressing their findings in ways that connect with the kinds of questions that need to be considered by educators and others involved in social work education.

Formal curriculum requirements inform the discussion but, as with other SCIE guides, the purpose is not to prescribe a curriculum for the teaching of assessment. The purpose is to explore the issues and choices that have to be made by those involved in providing teaching and learning of assessment in social work education.

## 2 What is the guide about?

The guide uses the three SCIE resources on assessment to:

- examine aspects of assessment in social work
- consider approaches to teaching and learning of assessment
- pose issues and questions for social work educators to consider when planning and reviewing teaching and learning of assessment.

The guide is a 'resource' guide in two senses. First, the guide directs readers' attention to the two reviews undertaken by Crisp and colleagues and to the 60 articles, 16 textbooks and four frameworks they have analysed. Secondly, and more particularly, the guide extracts from those reviews and from the research by the Salford CSWR, sets of ideas, questions and matters for consideration and decision in learning and teaching social work assessment.

### 3 Who is the guide meant for?

The guide is primarily for educators in the social work degree but is also relevant to other levels of teaching and learning. The term educators covers a wide spectrum which includes university teachers, practice teachers and assessors and service users and carers or, as Braye and Preston-Shoot express it, 'experts by experience' (2006). The guide is relevant to students of the degree in thinking about both the subject of assessment and their own learning, whether they are learning alone or with other students and educators. This description does not exhaust the list of stakeholders who may have an interest in the guide and who may also participate in the educator role. Others include practitioners and managers of service-providing agencies, members of the different professions who may contribute to university-based and agency-based learning, and authors and researchers.

The guide also provides the opportunity for educators and students learning at post-qualifying levels to revisit and review issues of assessment. The analysis in Part Two addresses the nature of assessment, its contexts and participants, and values and ethics. This analysis is arguably relevant to students, educators and practitioners at many levels.

### 4 What are the guide's chief sources?

The three primary sources used for the guide are outlined below. The nature of each is summarised by the 'Question answered by the research' and by a description of the sampling strategy and data collection method.

#### Source 1

Crisp, B.R., Anderson, M.R., Orme, J. and Lister, P.G. (2003) *Knowledge Review 01: Learning and teaching in social work education: Assessment*, London: Social Care Institute for Excellence.

#### Question answered by the research

What does the literature say on how learning and teaching of assessment skills in social work and cognate disciplines occurred in the classroom and practice settings?

#### Sampling strategy and data collection

Crisp and colleagues sought literature about learning and teaching of assessment using the following sources:

- online databases in English (contents from 1990 to December 2002)
- papers in-press in two social work journals

- conference abstracts
- electronic discussion lists
- requests for information posted to selected listservers and the SWAPItsn website.

The search identified 60 journal articles that met the search criteria. The majority (nearly 50) were from the USA and England with the remainder distributed among several other countries. The articles were classified under the following headings: country of focus; target group; what was taught and how?; and was the teaching evaluated? (pp 93–4).

## Source 2

Crisp, B.R., Anderson, M.R., Orme, J. and Lister, P.G. (2005) *Knowledge review: Learning and teaching in social work education: Textbooks and frameworks on assessment*, London: Social Care Institute for Excellence.

The study was designed to supplement the knowledge provided by Source 1. The focus on textbooks reflected the substantial potential influence of these sources on social workers' learning. The focus on assessment frameworks responded to the increasing use of these tools in both social work practice and education.

## Question answered by the research

What might a reader and, especially, a beginning social work student or unqualified worker, learn about assessment from a) textbooks and b) assessment frameworks?

## Sampling strategy and data collection

Social work textbooks were sought in two categories: textbooks with a substantial section (one or more chapters or an identifiable section) on assessment; and textbooks entirely on assessment. The books selected were required to have a generalist focus (as distinct from a concern with a specific problem or service group), be currently available in the UK and have a publication date between 1993 and 2003.

A search of introductory texts located ten books with one or more chapters on assessment and six texts specifically about assessment. Three texts were from outside the UK, two being from the USA and one from Australia. A further ten introductory texts were excluded, having no chapter on assessment.

The reviewers collected data from the chosen 16 texts using a proforma covering three kinds of characteristics:

- basic information, such as title, author and intended audience
- aspects of assessment, from definition to whether anti-discriminatory practice was covered

- qualitative features, like accuracy, comprehensiveness and inclusion of features to improve learning.

Turning to frameworks, there is no standard definition of the term 'assessment framework'. Crisp and colleagues therefore devised the following criteria for the selection of frameworks, which should:

- propose a conceptual, philosophical or theoretical basis for assessment practice or some combination
- not be chiefly a data collection tool
- have been devised:
  - > for work with clients in the UK
  - > for national rather than local use
- be accessible without charge over the internet
- be currently recommended for use with specific service populations
- not have been superseded.

Searches identified four examples of standardised frameworks: they were published between 2000 and 2003 and governed assessment with children and families, carers and disabled children, older people and drug users. Each framework was examined to explore its potential 'to educate students and workers about the assessment process more generally than in relation to the specific population for which it was designed' (p 39). Again, a proforma was used to collect data, applying similar categories to those used for the textbooks. Further information on the textbooks and frameworks studied by Crisp and colleagues is given in Section 27 of this guide.

### Source 3

Shardlow, S.M., Myers, S., Berry, A., Davis, C., Eckersley, T., Lawson, J., McLaughlin, H. and Rimmer, A. (2005) *Teaching and assessing assessment in social work education within English higher education: Practice survey results and analysis*, Salford: Salford Centre for Social Work Research (available from Salford CSWR, University of Salford, Salford, Manchester M6 6PU).

### Question answered by the research

What kinds of practices are found in the teaching and learning of assessment on social work programmes and in relation to inclusion of service user and carer perspectives in teaching and learning?

### Sampling strategy and data collection

The empirical study by the Salford CSWR sought information on teaching of social work assessment from four sets of sources: higher education institutions (HEIs),

service users and carers, service-giving agencies providing practice learning opportunities, and former social work students.

Ten HEIs offering qualifying social work education in England responded to a questionnaire on assessment in 2003/4. The information gathered was used, in 2004/5, to inform site visits to a further 13 geographically-dispersed HEIs. The HEIs had volunteered from a selection of 20 chosen for their reputation as providers of 'exemplary teaching and learning opportunities' (Shardlow *et al*, 2005, p 17). At the visits, interviews were held with 21, mainly academic, staff although a small number of practice assessors participated too. Examples were collected of teaching materials in use.

Service users and carers were consulted by focus group discussion with seven groups based in north-west England and selected on advice from Citizens as Trainers (CATs) who had two members on the research team. Participants had greater or lesser experience of educating social workers and were chosen to include difference by age and reason for involvement with social work and to ensure representation of minority ethnic groups.

The research with agencies and practitioners was designated as 'illustrative studies' to recognise the limited samples and the use of the findings to illustrate issues in assessment. The studies consisted of: completed questionnaires from five agencies (four not-for-profit and one local authority social services department) involved in providing social work placements; and 23 qualified social workers from a single cohort of candidates undertaking a post-qualifying child care award. All but one of the social workers held the DipSW, each gaining the award from one of six different HEIs. Ten of the social workers had qualified in 1999 or after and the remainder, except one, between 1994 and 1998.

## Other sources for the guide

The guide draws on a further set of sources comprising the requirements for the social work degree issued by the national care councils of the UK. There are national variations of emphasis in these requirements but they have common roots in three sources:

- national occupational standards for social work (TOPSS UK Partnership, 2002)
- subject benchmark statements: social policy and administration and social work; academic standards – social work (QAA, 2000)
- codes of practice developed jointly by the national councils (CCW, 2002; GSCC, 2002; NISCC, 2002; SSSC, 2003).

The national requirements for the degree establish expectations in the learning of assessment and have a particular relevance to the kinds of questions that educators

must consider. Other SCIE guides and relevant sources are also cited in the text and used to clarify or develop the discussion.

## 5 How was the guide created?

The studies by Crisp and colleagues and by Salford CSWR were analysed in two stages by treating their content like the data of a qualitative study (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). In the first (non-cross-sectional) stage, each source was examined to identify assessment themes and concepts relevant to educators in the social work degree. In the second (cross-sectional) stage the resulting categories were combined into a common framework which was applied across the whole set of sources. This process modified or confirmed the usefulness of categories and resulted in the structure of sections for this report and the allocation of content. The categories were then used to structure the examination of national requirements for the social work degree and, to a lesser extent, other relevant literature.

## 6 How can the guide assist in learning and teaching?

The particular strength of the materials from the three studies is contained in the range of issues identified and the scope they offer for exploring both the multiple dimensions of assessment in social work and the subject of assessment in social work education. The three studies do not, for the most part, provide detailed evidence-based conclusions on how to teach assessment. This guide aims to assist educators in their various roles by identifying issues and choices that they should consider.

## Part Two: Assessment in social work

Part Two identifies the main dimensions of assessment as represented in the key sources for this guide. It also provides a platform and set of reference points on key issues for Part Three, on teaching and learning. The aim of the guide is not to prescribe curriculum content but the following sections and their 'questions for educators' may be used to clarify aspects of the curriculum.

### The nature of assessment

#### 7 The significance of assessment in social work practice and education

The idea of professional or organisational assessment is an inherent feature of contemporary practice in care services. Professional or organisational assessment represents the entry of an intentionally rational and systematic approach to the encounter between a social worker and people seeking help or services, who may be individuals, couples, families, groups or communities. The assessor's role may be conceived as gatekeeping, facilitating or empowering but, whichever is the case, the application of some form of assessment implies that a service does not operate entirely on-demand or that special expertise in defining problems or finding solutions exists or is needed. There is a further realm of assessment, namely user-led assessment, that has emerged to modify aspects of the picture of assessment described above and which will be discussed later.

The confident statement in the preface to SCIE's first knowledge review that social work assessment is 'a core social work skill' (Crisp *et al*, 2003, p iv), is supported in a number of quarters, as this guide will show. To summarise:

- government and agency policies and practices place great store in effective assessment
- the assessment process is significant for service users and carers in both conditioning their experience of the encounter with social care services and in shaping the service they receive
- assessment is widely portrayed in the social work literature as fundamental to social work practice with some accounts defining it as a key part of intervention and others regarding it as the essence of social work intervention
- competence in assessment is a formal requirement of social workers who are completing the degree in social work.

In short, of all the skills that social workers may aspire to, assessment seems the one most likely to achieve consensus among practitioners, managers, employers and service users as an essential skill. Agreement as to what constitutes assessment is, however, more elusive, as will be shown later.

### Question for educators

- What do social work students learn about the significance placed on assessment by government and agencies, service users and carers, the professional literature and the requirements of the social work degree?

## 8 Reasons for teaching and learning about assessment

The question 'why teach and learn about assessment?' prompts two kinds of response: 'because of ...' and 'in order to ...'. These categories are not sharply distinguishable but provide a convenient way of grouping the factors involved.

### Because of ...

As outlined in the preceding section, social workers should learn about assessment because of:

- the requirements placed upon degree programmes
- the significance attached to assessment by:
  - > services users and carers
  - > employers of social workers
  - > the profession and its many writers and commentators.

The position is summed up in the study by Salford CSWR:

Assessment is a central concern of learning and teaching within HEIs [higher education institutions], partly driven by guidance but also in recognition of the importance of this task within contemporary practice'.

(Shardlow *et al*, 2005, p 20)

### In order to ...

Aside from the simple re-expression of 'because of' reasons (such as that competence in assessment is necessary 'in order to be awarded the social work degree', most 'in order to' reasons are to do with the idea of assessment as the foundation of social work interventions (Crisp *et al*, 2003, p 1). Hence, the reasons refer to the quality and characteristics of the assessment and intervention processes and to the associated skills of the assessor. Examples are as follows. Social workers should learn about assessment in order to:

- enhance the quality of information gathering
- make assessment empowering
- understand the determination of eligibility
- provide access to solutions and the most suitable services
- offer sensitivity and support at a time that is often stressful.

### Technical vs. critical

Consideration of some 'in order to' questions begins to show the contested nature of assessment. For example, a recurrent debate concerns whether teaching and learning about assessment are in order to produce social workers who are:

- technically competent at the task  
or
- critical thinkers about the task.

Critical thinkers would possess a knowledge base that enables them to examine the assessment tools they may be asked to use and recognise underlying assumptions, for example about the nature or causes of need. A related debate concerns whether social workers should learn the use of particular assessment frameworks or wider 'principles' of assessment that are transferable between settings and kinds of assessment.

There is evidence from the Salford CSWR study that some social work educators feel under pressure from employers of social workers to focus teaching on technical competence in assessment. Service users and carers also have a clear interest in assessment being done in a way that is technically competent. This expectation is plain from the consultations undertaken for the development of the social work national occupational standards (NOS) (TOPSS UK Partnership, 2004).

Similarly, evidence from consultation on law teaching with 'experts by experience' for the SCIE Resource guide 06 indicates that they strongly support education for technical competence, a view that was conditioned by the experience that some social workers did not know the law (Braye and Preston-Shoot, 2006, p 3). However, both the consultations for the law guide and the NOS suggest that service users and carers do not want learning to stop at the level of technical competence. The law guide reports that experts by experience want social workers who are critical thinkers as well. Furthermore, the expectations recorded in the NOS seek social workers whose assessments are creative, review all options within and beyond those immediately available and include the ability to challenge the worker's employing organisation (TOPSS UK Partnership, 2004, p 3).

There is support for a combination of technical and critical competence from two other sources: first, those who argue that social work should aspire to independent

professional standards which include emancipatory values in relation to service users; and second, the regulators of social work education working through standards and benchmarks.

Learning that is restricted to technical competence renders the social worker more bureaucrat than professional and creates over-dependence on the perspectives of the authors of technical assessment tools. Consequently, the social worker's ability to recognise and question a conservative or illiberal assessment tool may be restricted, with corresponding limits on his or her capacity to represent the interest of the service user. It is of note that, while the social work NOS expect social work assessment to be technically proficient, they also make it clear that assessment should be a process of participation and exploration with the service user and should be underpinned by knowledge of models, methods, causes and needs (TOPSS UK Partnership, 2004, Key role 6). In addition, the subject benchmarks statement for social work expect reflective and critical analysis of evidence, a skill that is plainly relevant to assessment (QAA, 2000, para 3.1.4).

### Questions for educators

- Are there opportunities for students to consider the 'because of' and 'in order to' reasons for learning about assessment?
- What is the focus of teaching, between technical competence, transferable principles and critical analytical skills, or some combination, and what is the rationale for the approach chosen?

## 9 The definitions of assessment

Assessment is widely agreed to be of great importance, but that is where agreement ends and contestation over what it is begins. For the purpose of their literature review, Crisp and colleagues stated that assessment 'involves collecting and analysing information about people with the aim of understanding their situation and determining recommendations for any further professional intervention' (2003, p 3). Two years later, however, their review of textbooks concluded that there is no single definition and the review of assessment frameworks found the same (Crisp *et al*, 2005). This conclusion can be confirmed by reference to the summaries of reviewed textbooks and frameworks provided by Crisp and colleagues in their appendices.

The reviewed definitions are not repeated here. Instead, the definitions have been analysed to identify distinctive characteristics and to assess whether those characteristics are shared among authors. The result of the analysis is a set of approximate groupings or 'ideal types' of definitions. The types do not characterise perfectly the sources on which they are based but they do indicate sets of tendencies

and perspectives that help in reflecting upon approaches to assessment. The analysis suggests four types of definitions found in the textbooks and frameworks reviewed by Crisp and colleagues:

- process-focused
- contingent
- contestation-focused
- critical social constructionist.

This simple, four-part typology conceals variation, especially among process-focused definitions which predominate in the works reviewed by Crisp and colleagues (2005). Furthermore, while some reviewed approaches to assessment fall very clearly into one or another of the types, other approaches overlap the types. Overlap is most likely to be found between process-focused and contingent types. Contestation and critical constructionism represent different theoretical paradigms from the others and are less likely to combine elements with them, although they do overlap with one another insofar as they share a critical perspective on contemporary policy or practice.

### Process-focused

The process-focused group of definitions concentrates on assessment as an essential, practical function that must be carried out with professional sensitivity and competence. Of all the approaches, process-focused definitions are the nearest to an implicitly technical, even 'scientific', view of the assessment task as a set of methods to be learned and professionally applied. The concept of assessment itself is not thought to raise fundamental questions. Attention is directed to providing clear guidance on what to do, what questions to ask and procedures to follow, in making an assessment. Examples combine, in some form, the activities of information-gathering from service users and carers and other sources, exploring facts and feelings, analysis, understanding the situation, making judgements and determining action or recommendations. These activities may be found in the other types, including the critical social constructionist type, but there the very idea of assessment is treated as problematic and activities such as analysis and understanding the situation are used to question the process itself.

Process-focused approaches vary on a number of dimensions. They are:

- more or less oriented to judgements based on professional or organisational criteria and procedures
- more or less oriented to need, eligibility, service user aspiration or resource availability
- more or less oriented to care or control.

The approaches also vary by their conception of assessment as:

- a distinct stage
- a series of distinct stages
- a fluid and dynamic process throughout the life of the 'case'.

### Contingent

The contingent type has some similarities with the process approach but is contingent in the sense that the nature and direction of assessment is taken to differ according to particular independent factors. It is implied either that the approach to assessment is determined by a given independent factor, or variable, or that a given approach to assessment is particularly suited to that variable. Variables that are influential on assessment include:

- the type of service for which assessment is being made
- the goals of assessment
- the conceptual framework or map chosen to make sense of assessment.

### Contestation-focused

The contestation-focused type differs from process-oriented approaches in not viewing assessment procedurally, but shares with contingent approaches the recognition that other variables condition assessment. However, the focus is on the conflict or contestation between variables. Hence, the approach defines assessment as an area of contestation between different policies, perspectives and priorities represented, for instance, by:

- emphasis on need vs. eligibility
- social worker idealism vs. realism
- needs vs. risks vs. resources.

### Critical social constructionist

The critical social constructionist type proceeds from the view that the act of assessment involves the construction of meanings as distinct from the determination of objective facts and causes of problems. The understandings that constitute assessment are socially constructed by those involved, reflect their contexts and may be contradictory. The assessment made by the social worker represents his or her construction of a narrative or story about the situation in question and may, accordingly, reflect the perspective of the social worker more than of the client. In the process, particular people become defined as service users or carers and 'clienthood' is constructed (Hall *et al*, 2003).

The critical aspects of the approach are found in the challenge to traditional, process-focused definitions of assessment and in the analysis of unequal power both in the assessment relationship and in the ideas and policies that influence those involved. Together with this critique, the approach envisages ways of thinking about and doing assessment that reflect on the narrative construction process and shape it in the interests of service users and carers. The critical social constructionist type shares aspects of its approach with the 'exchange model' of assessment, which recognises that people are experts in their own problems and should be engaged by the social worker in a collaborative exchange to define and tackle issues (Smale *et al*, 1993 and 2000).

The contestation and critical social constructionist approaches treat the idea of assessment as problematic. They provide critical perspectives on:

- the social and political contexts of assessment
- other assessment approaches that take social and political contexts for granted.

Neglect of social and political contexts may stem from the professional's preoccupation with the skilled conduct of the assessment process. Yet a process dimension is inescapable for social workers and their educators. In some form, a repertoire of technically and professionally proficient steps of the kind described in some textbooks and practice guides (Nicholls, 2006), is indispensable if assessments practice is to take place. But it is also important for the social worker to be able to submit the process to critical review and revision. To be able to do so, social work students need to encounter all of the types in their learning. The case for this strategy echoes the earlier debate between technical and critical competence.

The Salford CSWR study observes that the lack of consensus about what constitutes assessment and its contested nature raise fundamental questions for educators and students in deciding what should be taught and the methods to be used (Shardlow *et al*, 2005, p 47). There are no absolutes in responding to these questions but later discussion will set out and discuss the kinds of choices unearthed by the SCIE-commissioned assessment studies.

### Questions for educators

- Does teaching rely on one or more of the following four 'types' of definition: process-focused, contingent, contestation-focused, critical social constructionist?
- What are your criteria for choosing the type(s) that are taught and examined?
- What are the implications of your choices, for student learning and for students' understanding and conduct of assessment?

## 10 Risk assessment

Risk assessment is a significant component of many assessments and requires discussion in its own right. Risk is mentioned only briefly in the analysis above but risk issues could feature in all of the definitional types.

Risk is an aspect of assessment in a number of social work textbooks, more notably those published in the UK (Crisp *et al*, 2005). Risk is also a common feature of the four assessment frameworks reviewed by Crisp and colleagues, a fact that reflects the authorship of the frameworks by UK government agencies and the resolve of governments to place issues of risk at the forefront of policies in social care and health. This resolve gains strength from the significance attached to risk issues in several public inquiries. In England, the Victoria Climbié Inquiry reported on the essential elements of future good practice in childcare, stating the importance of training in risk assessment and risk management (Secretaries of State, 2003, para 17.61). In Northern Ireland, lack of awareness of risk factors at management and operational levels were defined as significant failings in the cases of the children David and Samuel Briggs (DHSSPS, 2005). These examples illustrate the concern over children at risk, but worry about risk also, for example, 'permeates assessment work with older people' (Nicholls, 2006, Sec. 3).

Risk can be defined as 'the possibility of beneficial and harmful outcomes, and the likelihood of their occurrence in a stated timescale' (Alberg *et al* in Titterton, 2005).

The aim of risk assessment is to consider a situation, event or decision and identify where risks fall on the dimensions of 'likely or unlikely' and 'harmful or beneficial'. The aim of risk management is to devise strategies that will help move risk from the likely and harmful category to the unlikely or beneficial categories. An enlarged idea of risk management based around the concept of 'safeguarding incidents' introduces the idea of professional and organisational learning from near misses (Bostock *et al*, 2005).

Most models of risk assessment recognise that it is not possible to eliminate risk, despite the pressure on public authorities to adopt defensive risk management (Power, 2004). There are attempts to counter these defensive tendencies via person-centred risk assessment (Titterton, 2005) and the urging of some service users who advocate non-paternalistic models of assessment and care and seek support for calculated, beneficial risk-taking (Department of Health, 2005). There is also growing institutional resistance represented by the Better Regulation Commission, which has declared that 'enough is enough' and argue that it is time to reverse the incremental drift into disproportionately burdensome risk regulation (Berry *et al*, 2006).

Crisp and colleagues note the increased emphasis on risk assessment in the UK in recent years and their review includes two textbooks in which this is the main

subject. As with definitions of assessment, no common approach to risk was found. Treatment of risk varied from the detailed, including case examples, to the brief, with some books not mentioning risk at all in the context of assessment (Crisp *et al*, 2005, p 21). This finding suggests that educators need to choose teaching texts carefully if important subject matter is not to be omitted.

A key purpose of all four assessment frameworks is the identification and management of risk. However, the objectives of the frameworks are different and therefore the nature of risks that are of concern are different too. The frameworks for assessment of children and families and of older people addressed service-user vulnerability and avoidance of significant harm, and, in relation to older people, loss of independence. The guide on carers' assessment focuses on the risk of breakdown of the carer role (Crisp *et al*, 2005, p 47). This finding suggests that the learning offered by each framework differs and any one may be insufficient to cover the necessary range of the subject.

The requirements of the social work degree directly support attention to learning on risk assessment. Key role 4 of the NOS and the social care code of practice both cover assessment of risk. Reflecting the less risk-averse approach described above, however, both the NOS and the codes also expect social workers to respect risk-taking rights and to help inform risk-taking. Service user and carer interests, consulted on their expectations for the NOS, sought support for appropriate risk-taking (TOPSS UK Partnership, 2004, para 2j). The NOS augments these liberal aims with a set of expectations that both contextualise the risk assessment role and convey its complexity. Social workers are expected to balance rights and responsibilities in relation to risk, regularly re-assess risk, recognise risk to self and colleagues and work within the risk assessment procedures of their own and other organisations and professions (Key role 4).

### Questions for educators

- In what ways does teaching on risk feature in the programme?
- Is there an opportunity to explore the contested nature of risk and the different perceptions among different groups about risk and its significance?
- Bearing in mind both the variable levels of attention to risk that may be found in textbooks and the different kinds of risk that preoccupy assessment frameworks, what are the main teaching and learning sources?

## 11 The purposes of assessment

At first sight, the answer to the question of the purpose of social work assessment seems self-evident. It is the assessment of need, isn't it? Or is it a judgement about eligibility? No, it's a calculation of the match between need and available resources.

But then there is the evaluation of risk and of urgency. And so the debate may go on, dispelling any sense that the purpose of assessment is self-evident. It is not surprising that the review of the literature by Crisp and colleagues found that social workers undertake assessments for a range of purposes and that there is no consensus on what those purposes are (Crisp *et al*, 2003).

The response to the question of purpose will vary according to the level at which purpose is being analysed. The examples given above, about need, eligibility and so on, tend to imply person-centred encounters between the social worker and, say, an individual or family. If the focus shifts from this inter-personal level to the wider societal level and endeavours to link the two, different concepts come on to the agenda. It becomes possible to see assessment as a small but significant operational step multiplied hundreds and thousand of times across agencies in the service of groups of policies or more general social, economic and political goals.

For example, assessments are shaped by policies to protect vulnerable children and adults, to integrate people who are socially excluded and to prolong or improve independence and the ability to work. These care-focused social objectives connect with other, control-oriented goals that are also part of the influence on assessment and condition its purpose, especially in the statutory sector and among the agencies the sector commissions: for instance, control of abusers, management and reform of offenders, rationing of demand and containment of public sector costs.

Looked at in this way, assessment becomes not only multi-faceted but multi-layered in ways that are seldom visible in the assessment encounters of individuals. The wide reach of assessment is demonstrated in the view that assessment has for many years been 'an important tool for policy makers to achieve greater efficiency and effectiveness' in services (Clarkson *et al*, 2006). The importance and distinctiveness of the assessment encounters of individuals are not diminished by the wider analysis. Assessment is one of the key arenas in which, influenced by service and policy objectives, particular versions of 'clienthood' are constructed or revised (Hall *et al*, 2003). Individual assessments may be made on the basis of 'professional judgement' or a set of independent, agency criteria, but both are carriers of judgements and priorities formulated outside the assessment situation.

It is evident that assessment does not have a purpose but *purposes*. One way to explore the picture further is to ask, 'for whom or what is assessment being undertaken?' and to concentrate on where the main emphasis is found. This approach embodies the idea that assessment takes place in the service of particular interests and, far from being a singular and fixed entity, will shift as those interests pull it in different directions. Five kinds of purpose are distinguished in Fig. 1 and the text that follows. Each 'purpose' is represented by the assessor acting as agent of a set of interests or goals and being cast in a corresponding role.

**Fig. 1 Five purposes of assessment**

<b>Purpose: interests or goals for which the assessor is agent</b>	<b>Assessor role</b>
1 individual and public protection	risk assessor
2 service user and carer needs	'traditional' professional
3 service user and carer representation	advocate
4 agency function, policy and priorities	agency representative
5 other professions or agencies	proxy

### 1 Risk assessor

All four assessment frameworks reviewed by Crisp and colleagues (2005) were centrally concerned with protection and risk, supporting the view that concern with risk is a significant element of social care services. The purpose is the protection of individual service users and carers, other members of the public and staff. In a different sense, the aim is also protection of the agency from liability and reputational risk (Whittington, 2006).

National codes of practice for care workers emphasise the role of risk assessor and protector of service users (CCW, 2002; GSCC, 2002; NISCC, 2002). The related concern of wider public protection and safety (Ritchie *et al*, 1994; Francis *et al*, 2006) is a duty of care services across the UK, driving efforts at cooperation between departments and appearing explicitly in the title of some responsible departments, such as the Northern Ireland Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

### 2 'Traditional' professional

In this typically person-centred manifestation, the purpose of assessment focuses on needs and expectations, problems and solutions, and weaknesses and strengths, mediated by the social worker's professional judgement. The level of involvement of the service user may vary from recipient through contributor to active partner. In some cases the worker is a facilitator whose enabling role, as outlined in the NOS, helps users and carers themselves to assess 'their needs, circumstances, risks, preferred options and resources' and to make informed decisions about them (TOPSS UK Partnership, 2004, Key roles 1, 2.4).

### 3 Advocate

Key role 3 of the NOS introduces the idea that social workers must assess the kind of role they are needed to play in a given case and to judge whether, for instance, they should act as advocate. This statement adds weight to the contention here that the assessment process not only constructs the role of client, as indicated earlier, but also of worker. The role of advocate connects with a set of expectations recorded from consultations with representatives of service users for the NOS (TOPSS UK Partnership, 2004). According to the consultation, social workers are expected to help others to represent themselves, advise on and involve independent advocacy, challenge lack of access to services and challenge their own organisation on behalf of others, seeking new service options where they are needed (TOPSS UK Partnership, 2004; Crisp *et al*, 2003, pp 1–2).

### 4 Agency representative

This role is characterised by the task of implementing agency policy and priorities. It may conceivably incorporate any of the other roles and purposes discussed here but its main characteristic is that the worker's primary reference point is what the agency requires and is there to do, sometimes called 'agency function'. The agency's function and related resources and duties are empowering to workers and their assessment role. However, functions and resources are also defined and given boundaries. Assessment may contribute to that boundary-keeping by determining eligibility, distinguishing priorities and rationing services. Assessment also commonly plays a key part in defining the element of social control that should be part of any intervention, again deriving its authority from the agency function. It is not hard to see the potential for tension between service-providing and rationing and between care and control, or for conflict with the other roles and purposes described in this section.

### 5 Assessor as proxy

The clearest example of this purpose is when the social worker is engaged in assessment to provide information to facilitate the decision-making of others, such as the law courts (Crisp *et al*, 2003). A second example is found in the care councils' codes of practice, which expect the social care worker to advise other professions and agencies of risk assessment findings (CCW, 2002; GSCC, 2002; NISCC, 2002). A third but weaker example concerns participation in multi-disciplinary assessments. The example is weaker because the social worker is only partially the agent of the other disciplines (and sometimes not at all), owing a duty in the process to one or more of the other roles and purposes described here.

The five categories of purpose and agent have been described separately but in the real world of practice they are found in various combinations. Their relationship is dynamic. One purpose may tend to predominate in a particular assessment or type of employing agency with other purposes coming into play and even competing as the assessment process unfolds.

### Questions for educators

- Do students have the opportunity to study the multiple purposes and interests that assessment may serve and the implications for their role?
- Are there opportunities to consider the purposes of particular kinds of assessment and to practise the explanation and negotiation of purpose with service users and carers?
- Are students able to explore the potentially dynamic relationship between purposes, the potential contradictions between them and the scope for resolving contradictions?

## 12 Who is being assessed?

The historical development and strongly statutory base of much social work in the UK have been associated particularly with work with individuals and families. Typically, assessment and the tools and frameworks that support it assume intervention to be at these levels. Work with groups and communities has always been recognised in training and practice, and Crisp and colleagues note that newly qualified social workers are expected to have some understanding of assessment in relation to these levels too (2003, p 1).

However, group and community work have not achieved equivalence with individual and family work. The result is said in some cases to be assessments that are unduly individualised or narrowly family-focused and that overlook other important social factors. Accordingly, there is support for learning opportunities in community audit and profiling that include consideration of wider factors in assessment (Shardlow *et al*, 2005, p 23). The NOS for social work explicitly recognise assessment at all these levels of social organisation, stating that assessment may concern individuals, families, carers, groups and communities (TOPSS UK Partnership, 2004, Key role 1, 2.4). This range suggests scope for examining links between the problems of individuals and wider social problems, as in the 'holistic' approach to assessment identified by Crisp and colleagues, which includes an analysis of people's social situation, networks and wider social issues (Crisp *et al*, 2005, p 160). This degree of holism was, however, the exception among the textbooks reviewed.

Social workers have commonly encompassed parties other than service users in their assessments, for example, by considering the suitability of service providers to meet the requirements of a given service user. This is one of many judgements that are made as a consequence of the assessment process and consideration of the means for meeting service user needs or goals. The primary focus of assessment has nevertheless remained on the service seeker, the individual, partners, family and carer and, to a lesser extent, the group or community. However, the growth of interprofessional and inter-agency practice has made the perspectives and contribution of other professional and agency stakeholders an increasing feature of the assessment process.

### Question for educators

- In relation to which levels or areas of 'social organisation' does teaching and learning about assessment take place?

## 13 Theories that underpin assessment

The question of whether there is a theory that underpins assessment is sometimes asked and debated without saying what is meant by theory and its relationship to assessment, so some clarification is needed. Theory and assessment have two possible relationships.

In the first relationship, a theory *about* assessment examines and seeks to explain its nature and processes or the social or political functions it performs. The critical social constructionist perspective (see page 20) offers one possible theory *about* assessment.

In the second relationship, a theory *of* or, more precisely, *for* assessment suggests the possible existence of a systematic set of ideas that informs what information is collected, how to collect it and how to use it in forming understandings and recommendations. At its best, the theory would be underpinned by understandings of human experience and action, offer explanation of the situation being assessed and how to respond, and be supported by compatible models and tools for conducting the assessment.

The Quality Assurance Agency subject benchmarks for the social work degree suggest that this is precisely the kind of theory that students should be learning. For example, the benchmarks expect students to understand theories on the causes of need and about models and methods of assessment (QAA, 2000, 3.1.4/5).

The use of 'theories' in the plural in the preceding sentence gives away a particular complication that faces educators, students and practitioners. As Crisp and colleagues report in their 2003 review, there is no single theory for assessment. This

conclusion is supported by the Salford CSWR study of higher education institutions teaching social work programmes (Crisp *et al*, 2003, p v; Shardlow *et al*, 2005, p 47). The Salford study found that students are not being prepared for a single paradigm or approach to assessment and suggests that different approaches are shaped by the teacher's own theoretical and value stance and mediated by the level of the student's own knowledge, skill, values and theoretical position.

There is no lack of underpinning theoretical perspectives on offer, although they are more likely to be found in textbooks than in the frameworks examined by Crisp and colleagues. Only the children's framework discusses the need to underpin practice with theory but does not identify specific theories (Crisp *et al*, 2005, p 47).

The textbooks offered a variety of different theoretical underpinnings to assessment including:

- from psychology and social psychology: behavioural theory, psychodynamic approaches and solutions-focused and task-focused perspectives
- varieties of post-modern perspectives, including narrative and discourse analysis and critical constructionism
- models based on systems theory and social exchange theory (Crisp *et al*, 2005, p 19).

The reviewers suggest that the plurality of theories for assessment may account for the diverse advice given to readers on the information they should collect in assessments (Crisp *et al*, 2005, p 19).

### Questions for educators

- Which underpinning theories appear in assessment teaching?
- What part do the theoretical and value stance and experience of the teacher and students play in the choice of theory in teaching and learning about assessment?
- Are there methods for subjecting these choices (above) to independent examination and for evaluating theories from the range on offer?

## 14 The different timeframes of assessment

Timeframes, that is, duration of focus, on assessment may vary with the service, setting or nature of the problem or issue. Timeframes may also vary according to factors already described, including the definition and purpose of assessment and the underpinning theory that informs it.

In some instances assessment begins at first contact, sometimes in response to a crisis, and is relatively short. Assessment may precede intervention or represent a service in its own right, for instance, for a court or where the social work role is solely to assess for separately commissioned services. In other cases, there may be several

assessment-focused contacts with service users and carers over an extended period (Crisp *et al*, 2003). The ongoing approach acknowledges that the needs of clients change over time, especially following critical events (Crisp *et al*, 2005, p 47). The Salford CSWR study found both time-limited, briefer models and longer-term assessment models (Shardlow *et al*, 2005, p 47).

An analysis of the textbook summaries provided by Crisp and colleagues (2005) suggests that there are four chief types of assessment timescale:

- ongoing
- a recognisable, time-limited stage or point in the history of a 'case'
- a combination of recognisable stage and ongoing
- variable between ongoing and recognisable stage depending on the situation.

There is a fifth position in the textbook summaries that sees assessment as inseparable from intervention and service delivery (Crisp *et al*, 2005, pp 157–8).

Some authors clearly advocate one or other of the four types outlined above, some describe what they have observed, while others advocate one model, typically the ongoing kind, but comment that it is often not achieved because of a range of constraints (Crisp *et al*, 2005, pp 90, 153).

Three of the four assessment frameworks were found to view assessment as an ongoing process rather than taking place at a fixed point in time (Crisp *et al*, 2005, p 47). However, particular timeframes may be differentiated within the overall process. Hence one of the three, the children's framework, distinguishes 'initial assessment' – 7 days – and 'core assessment' – which must be completed within a maximum of 35 working days (Department of Health, Department for Education and Employment and the Home Office, 2000, para 3.11). The document also refers to 'specialist' commissioned assessment.

It should be noted that timeframes and targets for assessment set by government and agencies vary over time and between service user groups and are subject to review. This variation means that practitioners need to know the prevailing requirements of their agency. There may be tensions between some agency target times and some professional timeframes or between either of these and the staff time available.

### Questions for educators

- What types of assessment timeframes are taught and are there opportunities for applying or evaluating the main types?

- Are students alert to the possible variation in assessment timeframes as set by government, agency or professional criteria and of possible tensions between them?

## 15 Assessment processes

Crisp and colleagues found differences among and between textbooks and frameworks in the extent of information offered on the assessment process. The framework for children and families offered as much detail on the assessment process as many of the textbooks reviewed, and possibly more. By contrast, the framework for older people provided relatively little on process, taking readers to be skilled already in assessment (Crisp *et al*, 2005, p 56).

However, the reviewers comment that each framework includes some expectations about the assessor and the assessment, covering factors such as interview timeframes, expected information, content of the report and matters of consent, confidentiality and disclosure (Crisp *et al*, 2005, p 49). Some frameworks also offer structured recording instruments and supplements giving suggested tools. This applied, for example, to both the children and families framework and the framework for integrated care of drug users (Crisp *et al*, 2005, App 4). However, the authors of the children and families framework are at pains to point out that the aim is to offer a conceptual map for systematic analysis and recording rather than a practice manual (Crisp *et al*, 2005, p 164).

The national occupational standards (NOS) for social work do not set out detailed learning expectations on the assessment process. The same is true of the requirements of the pre-registration 'assessed year in employment' (AYE) for newly qualified social workers in Northern Ireland (NISCC, 2005a). The requirements for the degree and for AYE are defined by the six NOS key roles. The six roles are expressed in line with the NOS task of stating outcome standards but leaving detailed content for determination by educators, learners and employers (TOPSS UK Partnership, 2004). Hence the NOS opt for outlining a project management-like sequence in which assessment, goals and planned action are linked to planned outcomes and modified by regular reassessment of risk (Key role 1, unit 3).

Two views arise from the analysis by Crisp and colleagues of the treatment of process in the frameworks (Crisp *et al*, 2005, p 57).

- Assessment frameworks do seem to offer a useful contribution to learning, provided that students do not lapse into using them mechanistically, in a form-led, checklist approach to assessment.

- No assessment framework can be assumed to be suitable generally for teaching students about assessment. Educators will need to evaluate and select carefully to ensure that chosen frameworks cover what is required.

When Crisp and colleagues turn to textbooks, they confirm a theme predictably familiar from other strands of their analysis. There was no common conceptualisation of the assessment task. The reviewers also note that the focus of the assessment process varies. Assessors are in some cases encouraged to use lists of questions, domains to be covered or assessment tools. In other cases the emphasis is on critical understanding of the process and assumptions that are made about service users and their needs.

Furthermore, the information to be collected shifts over time with the emergence of new or competing theories and philosophies: for instance, from the diagnostic, psychoanalytic approach to correlation of variables associated with offending; from a focus on problems and deficits to solutions and strengths; and from resource-led assessments to needs-led assessments with the advent of community care reforms in the early 1990s (Crisp *et al*, 2005, p 20). There are echoes here of earlier discussions and links to the idea that assessment is constructed professionally, culturally, organisationally, politically and economically.

### Questions for educators

- If you are using assessment frameworks in teaching the process of assessment, does your selection allow for the variation between the level and types of guidance offered?
- If a form-based approach is included in teaching and learning, are both the pros and cons explored, including the risks of form-led assessment processes?
- Is there scope for exploring the ways in which assessment processes change over time and the factors that influence those change?

## 16 Evidence-based assessment

Two aspects of evidence-based assessment are considered here:

- 1 learning to identify, gather and use evidence in making assessments
- 2 the use of evidence to support and evaluate given approaches to assessment.

First, it is necessary to provide a brief context for evidence-based approaches. The growing promotion of evidence-based or knowledge-based approaches in the UK has been associated with a number of developments related to the goal of improved quality in services and professional decision-making. These developments include clinical governance in the NHS, clinical and social care governance in the Northern Ireland health and social services and related quality regimes in social care in other

parts of the UK, together with the establishment of SCIE and the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) (Whittington, 2006).

The idea of evidence-based practice raises a number of questions:

- What is the nature of the knowledge or evidence to be applied and how it was produced?
- How are practitioners to access the evidence?
- What can be done to help practitioners use evidence to inform practice?

Evidence-based practice tends to polarise views among both practitioners and researchers along the following dimensions:

- between 'scientific' ways of producing social and psychological evidence and 'humanistic' approaches
- between the priorities of the professionals/service providers and service users
- between managers and frontline staff.

(Marsh and Fisher 2005; Whittington, 2006)

### The use of evidence in making assessments

In line with the general development of evidence-based approaches, some textbooks encourage the use of research-based evidence in assessment, explicitly discussing the strength of evidence in support of various assessment approaches (Crisp *et al*, 2005, p 154). Some texts also describe the influence of research evidence in shaping assessment in relation to offenders and 'looked after children'. Others, while citing references of various kinds, engage in no explicit discussion of research evidence and give no guidance on the extent to which research findings shape the practice advocated (Crisp *et al*, 2005, pp 26–7). This approach hardly seems likely to encourage a rigorous approach to evidence among readers.

Each assessment framework advocates an evidence-based approach. To paraphrase, this means in the children and families framework (Crisp *et al*, 2005, p 55):

- using knowledge critically from research and practice
- systematic recording and updating of information, distinguishing sources such as observation, records of other agencies and information from family members
- evaluating continuously the effectiveness of the intervention and modifying action accordingly
- evaluating interventions to develop practice wisdom.

Two of the frameworks provide typologies that categorise types and sources. The typology in the framework for older people is used to cross reference in-text citations (Crisp *et al*, 2005, p 54). The framework on the care of drug users offers a

typology that distinguishes five types of research source: systematic reviews, narrative reviews, primary research studies, user consultations and working groups and other consultations (Crisp *et al*, 2005).

The systematic use of evidence is expected by the requirements of the social work degree. The academic benchmarks expect knowledge of factors underpinning the selection and testing of relevant information; and knowledge of the place of evidence from international research in assessment and decision-making processes in social work practice (QAA, 2000, paras 3.1.4/5).

### The use of evidence to support or evaluate given approaches

None of the works reviewed by Crisp and colleagues, except two of the frameworks, explained systematically the evidence supporting particular guidelines that were offered. However, the Salford CSWR study of social work programmes found that:

Modules related to the nature of research and evidence supported the development of a critical analysis of assessment tools and frameworks, enabling students to reflect on their epistemological basis, thus gaining a clearer understanding of the knowledge informing such materials.

(Shardlow *et al*, 2005, p 24)

The case for enabling students to develop skills in accessing, evaluating and applying research-based evidence is twofold. First, these skills provide a systematic and reviewable approach to improving both the content of assessment information and the quality of the method. Second, students with research skills are able to keep themselves updated in environments where the pace of change and demand for new knowledge are both rapid (Braye and Preston-Shoot, 2006).

### Questions for educators

- Are there opportunities for students to learn of the debates that surround evidence-based practice?
- Are there opportunities for students to develop the knowledge and skills that different evidence-based approaches to assessment require?

## Contexts

The following sections build on those above by exploring further some of the main contexts of assessment.

### 17 Legislation, legal frameworks and policy contexts

The requirements for the social work degree have a general expectation that social workers will understand legal contexts, refer to legal requirements when making assessments and ensure that their knowledge of legal policy and procedure are up to date (TOPSS UK Partnership, 2004, Key role 6; QAA, 2000, Sec 3). However, there are additional implications for teaching and learning about assessment that arise from devolution, the recognition of national needs and priorities in the UK and differing legal systems and service organisations.

The requirements for the social work degree in each of the UK countries expect knowledge of the national legislative and organisational contexts (e.g. Welsh Assembly Government CCW and SSIW, 2005, p 81). In Northern Ireland, this requirement is supported by curriculum guidance for the social work degree. The guidance lists legislation, policy guidance and regulations relevant to social work in the province and addresses multiple contexts from the historical, political, legal and organisational to the psychological and interpersonal (NISCC, 2005b). National variations also affect the learning covered by the degree in different countries. For instance, learning on criminal justice is integral to the curriculum in Northern Ireland and Scotland but not in England and Wales (Braye and Preston-Shoot, 2006, p 3).

There are numerous examples of variation in the knowledge that social workers in particular countries require. The eligibility criteria established under the 'fair access to care' policy entail key information for social workers working in local authorities in England as well as offering material for teaching and learning of assessment (Department of Health, 2003). Protection of service users is a common feature of assessment systems but different legislation supports the objective, for example, in England and Northern Ireland (Braye and Preston-Shoot, 2006, p 33). Differences between the two countries are also found in the assessment of community care services and assessment of carers (p 44). Human rights legislation applies to all four countries but there is special provision for language in Wales and employment in Northern Ireland (p 78).

As well as instances of marked national differences in legal and policy requirements, there are more subtle variations around common themes. This is well illustrated by the idea of common assessment. Each of the UK countries has undertaken work on a system for the conduct of common or single assessment. In England, for instance, the National Service Framework for Older People led to work on a single assessment

process (SAP) (Department of Health, 2001a and 2006). In Northern Ireland, separate work has been undertaken on a single assessment tool (SAT), also focused on work with older people (DHSSPS, 2006). In Wales, an electronic common assessment framework (CAF) is in development (Children in Wales, 2006).

The review by Crisp and colleagues provides a clear alert for educators on national variation and the SCIE law guide sets a strong example by using illustrations of the law from different UK countries and making the origins clear (Crisp *et al*, 2005; Braye and Preston-Shoot, 2006). Textbooks are not always so clear. The reviewers found that they dealt with legislation in four ways:

- explicit discussion of legislation
- legislative awareness but only brief reference to the law
- legislative awareness but no reference to the law
- no mention of the law.

Some texts in the first category paid particular attention to legislation in England and were of value to readers practising there, provided that the legislation had not become out of date; they were plainly of less value to others.

Three of the four assessment frameworks sampled by Crisp and colleagues are published by the Department of Health (DH) and the fourth by the Scottish Executive. Some of the DH frameworks have subsequently been adapted in Wales and Northern Ireland to reflect the respective national policy contexts (e.g. National Assembly for Wales, 2001; Welsh Assembly Government, 2006; DHSSPS, 2003). Two frameworks, the carer's assessment and the children and families framework were explicitly framed with respect to particular legislation while the other two make only passing reference to legislation (Crisp *et al*, 2005, pp 51–2). All the frameworks may make useful teaching aids, but their particular national and legislative contexts need to explicitly stated.

### Questions for educators

- Do the learning materials you recommend:
  - > recognise the importance of legal knowledge in assessment?
  - > provide knowledge relevant to the particular national context in which students are expecting to be employed?
  - > make clear the national context to which any particular legal or policy examples refer?

## 18 Organisational issues

There are plenty of examples in the foregoing sections to make it clear that assessment does not take place in a vacuum. It is driven, enabled and constrained by

a number of factors, and one of them is the social worker's organisation. Social work in the UK is typically carried out in organisational employment. It is through organisations, large and small, that policies are interpreted or formulated, resources, including staff, are secured and skills and other services are deployed. Accordingly, professional values, objectives and decision-making are pursued in an organisational context.

This intersection of the organisational and the professional is clearly manifest in the national occupational standards (NOS) for social work (TOPSS UK Partnership, 2004). To paraphrase, the NOS expect social workers to:

- be accountable for their assessments (as part of organisational and professional accountability for their own practice)
- work within the risk assessment and risk management procedures of the organisation
- contribute to the management of resources and services
- manage, present and share records and reports
- critically evaluate their own performance in light of knowledge and evidence of cause, need, risk, options, and models and methods of assessment
- use organisational and professional supervision to review the above
- reflect on the implications of needs and demands assessed, the relevance of assessment methods, the suitability of resources to respond and the effectiveness of response
- use the reflections above to contribute to personal, professional and organisational learning.

These expectations and objectives may generally be accepted by social workers but tensions can arise when some injunctions are followed. For instance, working within the risk procedures of the organisation may not always be compatible with the expectation from service users and carers (also stated in the NOS) that social workers should support appropriate risk-taking and be willing to challenge their employing organisation. This example draws attention to the politics of organisational employment of social workers.

Politics are prone to surface particularly around issues of resources and service standards, which have a key bearing on assessment, and are implicitly recognised in the NOS themselves. Take, for example, the monitoring of effectiveness in meeting need. Social workers should have access to organisational systems required by the employers' national codes to enable them to report inadequate resources or operational difficulties (TOPSS UK Partnership, 2004, p 7). As a further resort, social workers who find that national service standards are not being met are expected to seek advice from professional organisations about appropriate courses of action (TOPSS UK Partnership, 2004, Key role 5 15.2.d).

The examples and significance of organisational pervasiveness in assessment and in questions of resources suggest that organisational matters should have a central place in learning about assessment. It appears, however, that discussion of organisational dimensions is not widespread in the textbooks reviewed, although some authors do pay particular attention to organisational constraints on the scope and number of assessments (Middleton in Crisp *et al*, 2005, pp 147–51).

The assessment frameworks deal with organisational dimensions patchily. The children and families framework includes two chapters on organisational arrangements to support effective assessment of children in need as well as roles and responsibilities in inter-agency assessment (Crisp *et al*, 2005, p 170). The framework for older people anticipates development of practical resources like assessment tools and refers briefly to the organisational implications of shared assessment and inter-agency working (p 185).

It is paradoxical to speak of the way that assessment frameworks address organisational matters when they are organisational artefacts themselves. The same is true particularly of locally developed assessment tools and procedures. For some social work students making client assessments in agency-based practice placement and using local assessment tools, the tools are for that moment, in a sense, the organisation. This experience provides opportunities for learning about the relationship of organisations and assessment at the same time as examining the pros and cons of standard assessment tools.

### Questions for educators

- Do the learning materials used pay attention to the nature of organisational employment of social workers and the implications for assessment?
- Are there opportunities to explore the politics of assessment that can surface between social worker and organisation when there are differences over goals, standards, resources or procedures?

## 19 Collaborative assessment with other professions and agencies

The 'modernisation agenda' initiated in public policy by the New Labour government in 1997 gave powerful new impetus to the concepts, promoted by earlier governments, of collaboration and partnership between professions and services. In the years that followed, the ideas of partnership and joint working informed a large body of social policy initiatives and now underpin long-term planning (Whittington, 2003a; DHSSPS, 2006).

During the period, a series of terms came into common use in social work education and practice, including 'interprofessional', 'multi-disciplinary', 'inter-agency' and

'multi-agency'. In addition to the nuances that sometimes separate the use of these different terms, three points are important to note for the purposes of this guide:

- the terms tend to represent two discourses in education and practice, the interprofessional and the inter-organisational (Whittington, 2007)
- learning in both discourses has the common goal of 'learning for collaborative practice', a term that transcends the terminological differences within and between the discourses (Whittington, 2003a)
- learning for collaborative practice with other professions and agencies has become a core expectation of social work education at qualifying and post-qualifying levels.

The significance of the first point for social work (and other professional education) is, in part, as follows. Educational spheres that are concerned with professional learning tend to be preoccupied with the *interprofessional* learning discourse and may neglect *inter-organisational* learning. In short, learning to work with doctors, nurses or teachers is not the same as learning to work with the cultures, working practices and priorities of, say, primary healthcare teams, mental health units or local schools. Neglect of the inter-organisational discourse can present a problem for social workers whose effectiveness in practice depends increasingly not only on managing interprofessional relationships but inter-agency networks too (see case examples in Whittington and Whittington, 2006). Social workers have to bridge these two related discourses and need assistance in making the necessary connections from academic and practice learning and from available models (Whittington, 2003b).

The second point above locates educational common ground between interpersonal and inter-organisational discourses in their learning objectives. Examples of the third point are found in social work post-qualifying expectations (e.g. GSCC, 2005) and in requirements for the social work degree given in the benchmarks for social work education (QAA, 2000) and in the NOS. Key role 2 of the NOS expects planning and review of social work practice with other professionals (TOPSS UK Partnership, 2004). Similarly, social workers are expected to work effectively in multi-disciplinary and multi-agency teams and networks (Unit 17). The developing literature is reviewed in publications on interprofessional learning and on partnership work in social work education (Taylor *et al*, 2006; Sharland and Taylor, forthcoming).

Given the recognition of these developments in practice and education, it is notable that Crisp and colleagues found several textbooks with little or no content on interprofessional or inter-agency assessment. This means that care must be taken in the choice of texts if they are to relate to contemporary practice in UK social work.

All the reviewed assessment frameworks anticipated that assessment may be multi-disciplinary, reflecting the origins of the frameworks in government departments and

in the modernisation agenda. The framework for children and families is particularly explicit about the responsibilities of different agencies and professions and contains two chapters on roles and responsibilities in inter-agency assessment of children in need. The framework for older people refers to the organisational implications of shared assessment and inter-agency working (Crisp *et al*, 2005, p 185). All the frameworks recognised that a variety of professional views may be needed and that they should be sought in a manner that avoids the service user having to repeat information to different service providers or professionals (Crisp *et al*, 2005, p 49). This connects to the development of single assessment processes (SAPs) (ADSS, 2004) and to common assessment frameworks such as the one being developed for Wales (SCIE, 2006).

Engaging with the interprofessional and multi-agency dimensions of assessment requires recognition of two aspects of assessment: first, that assessment is a key skill in several disciplines in the fields adjacent to social care (Crisp *et al*, 2003, p 1); and second, that assessment is a function of many agencies. Recognition of this 'multi-assessment environment' is important because it gives the prospect of common ground between social workers and others, and the potential for professional differences that must be recognised and negotiated (Whittington and Whittington, 2006; Whittington, 2007).

Collaboration with other professions and agencies is one of two key dimensions of collaboration in which social workers must develop competence. The second is collaboration with service users and carers (see page 46).

### Question for educators

- Does learning for collaborative assessment feature explicitly in students' academic and practice learning opportunities?
- What sources and learning methods do you use to ensure that both the interprofessional and inter-agency dimensions of assessment are included in student learning?

## 20 Language, communication and assessment

Communications are fundamental to social work practice and to assessment in particular, and their importance was recognised by the educational institutes consulted in the Salford CSWR study (Shardlow *et al*, 2005, p 23). The teaching and learning of communication skills is the subject of a separate SCIE resource guide (Diggins, 2004). The three commissioned sources for this guide paid special attention to language and assessment, from which four issues emerged:

- the use of plain English
- the use of languages other than English

- the use of non-verbal language
- the use of interpreters.

The Salford study heard from service users and carers about the importance of using plain English and avoiding professional and organisational jargon. Plain English does not in itself assure effective communication since English is not the first language of some service users and carers. Furthermore, some service users will seek to be provided with a service in their first language. The All Wales Framework for Assessment in a Social Work Degree expects understanding and promotion of assessment in the national language of the service users and carers (Welsh Assembly Government CCS and SSIW, 2005, App 1).

Some service users with hearing impairment require assessment to be conducted in a non-verbal language. For assessment with this group the social worker needs appropriate signing skills or an interpreter, and interpreters are also needed for assessments being undertaken between parties with different languages. The service user and carer respondents in the Salford CSWR study commented on the importance of trained, independent interpreters and the need for social workers to be skilled in their use.

There are other communications issues. A service user's understanding of assessment or participation in the process may be affected, for example, by learning disability, mental illness or impaired memory. In addition, some methods of assessment use written forms, sometimes involving completion by the service user or carer. Plain language, multi-lingual versions and intelligible expression will help to make forms accessible but levels of literacy or cognition may vary and require sensitive handling. Furthermore, it is important that provision exists for people whose vision is too poor to read forms or written information.

Given the fundamental importance of communication in effective assessment, it is remarkable that only two of the books reviewed by Crisp and colleagues discussed assessment in relation to service users whose first language is not English. And only one book, from the USA, referred to using interpreters in assessment, including mention of signing interpreters for hearing impaired clients (Crisp *et al*, 2005, pp 25–6).

The frameworks for assessment of children and families and for older people refer to the needs of service users or carers whose language is not English and to communication with people with sensory disability. The fact that the two others do not is a reminder of the significant gaps that can occur in what otherwise may be taken as authoritative guidance. Clearly, these particular frameworks do not individually offer a comprehensive blueprint for teaching and learning in assessment. With the exception of those mentioned, the textbooks and assessment frameworks provided a poor basis for teaching to meet the expectations of the NOS that social

workers should 'recognise and facilitate each person's use of language and form of communication of their choice' (Key role 1, 3c, p 20).

Electronic forms of communication, using computers, the internet and other text-based or voice-based media continue to expand and feature increasingly in assessment. Social workers have growing access to online sources of information relevant to assessment and some users and carers communicate with agencies by email. Furthermore, websites offering online self-assessment of eligibility for social care services are appearing (Kent County Council, 2006). These new methods seek to offer choice, independence and flexibility in assessment for services. To achieve these goals without adding to social exclusion, the designers and operators of the systems have to contend with similar issues of language and communication to those raised above, along with questions of service user access to the technology and skills in its use.

#### Question for educators

- What learning materials and opportunities are available to students to ensure that they understand and can act upon the multiple issues of language and communication in assessment?

## Service users and carers

The following sections consider the relationship of assessment and service users and carers from three aspects:

- the perspectives of service users and carers on assessment
- involvement of service users and carers in assessment
- user-led assessment.

It should be emphasised that the practice in this guide of referring to service users and carers together does not imply that their interests or needs are identical or never in tension. However, a number of matters relevant to 'involvement' do apply broadly to both groups and this point is relied upon here. Occasionally, a summary phrase may refer only to service users but this is not to exclude carers. Researchers and practitioners engaged in more in-depth and focused consideration of needs and interests than is attempted here, including social work assessment itself, should always allow for diversity and for the possibility of differences both among and between service users and carers.

Section 23, on user-led assessment, departs from the established pattern of the guide in using the three SCIE-commissioned sources as key reference point, venturing into a related area of developing assessment policy and practice. The section concludes with an analysis that produces five models of assessment, distinguished by the extent to which they are user-led.

### 21 Service user and carer perspectives on assessment

The review of textbooks by Crisp and colleagues found no clear evidence of service users or carers contributing directly to the books. A small number of texts included direct feedback from service users and carers on the assessment experience. However, several books encouraged readers to try to understand the experience of being assessed. In the case of frameworks, only one, on integrated care of drugs users, described feedback from service users, who had been consulted in focus groups about the experience of being assessed (Crisp *et al*, 2005, p 51).

Two other sources provide graphic descriptions of service user perspectives. The first source is the values and expectations statement in the NOS (TOPSS UK Partnership, 2004, pp 2–4) and may be paraphrased as follows.

- Conduct active, searching, creative assessments.
- Review all options before deciding on a plan.
- Consider alternative options when services needed are not available.
- Involve others in the whole process.

- Be honest about options and limitations.
- Assess risk and support appropriate risk-taking.
- Lobby on others' behalf.
- Challenge one's own organisation on behalf of others.
- Challenge lack of access to services.
- Facilitate independent advocacy.
- Help others to represent themselves.

The second source of service users' and carers' views is provided by the research undertaken for SCIE on assessment by the Salford CSWR (Shardlow *et al*, 2005). A number of the views expressed were similar to the sentiments expressed in the NOS expectations statement. For instance, there was a desire for dependability, for strong advocacy on the service user's behalf and to see the worker stand up to management. The service users and carers in the Salford CSWR research spoke of their experience of professional social work assessment. Some of the remarks underline the discussion of language in Section 20:

Respondents pointed to the need for clarity both about the social work role and also the meaning of 'assessment'. The respondents expressed the view that those who used services were often not clear about the aims or nature of the assessment processes used within social work. For example, service users and carers felt there was a lack of understanding by professionals about the need for plain English and considered that professionals tended, albeit unconsciously, to use jargon. Similarly, the respondents commented upon the importance of trained, independent interpreters and the need for social workers to be educated in the use of interpreters and the inherent risks in using family members, particularly children, as interpreters when making an assessment.

Fear of social workers and anxiety about what they might do were very real issues for the respondent groups. The negative public image of the social work profession and experiences of past bad practice were seen as a barrier to the creation of trust. The need for social workers to provide re-assurance and to spend time trust-building, were considered to be paramount elements of good social work practice. This was a strong message that social workers needed more time to build relationships and understand the prevailing culture of the wider service user group. Indeed, respondents lamented the fact that they were often in a position of having to educate and train each new social worker about their culture, their condition, or about resources in the area. Respondents considered there to be a need for social workers to conduct preparatory research prior to the assessment visits. The African Caribbean Mental Health Service highlighted the fact that they were 'not always ill' and an holistic assessment should include getting to know them when well and when unaltered by medication.

(Shardlow *et al*, 2005, pp 33–4)

In collaboration with the respondents, the research team compiled a list of key points for an 'ideal' assessment (Fig. 2).

**Fig. 2 Suggestions made by members of users' and carers' groups about good practice in assessment (Shardlow et al, 2005, pp 35–6)**

<p><b>The right to a full assessment – there should be full and easy access to assessment for all groups</b> <i>If you have English as a second or third language and your child is disabled, how do you know your entitlement? (Member of Blackburn Asian Blind Association)</i></p>
<p><b>The need for flexible services</b> <i>In our culture, we do not really have appointments; we came from a place where you would just turn up if you wanted to see an official. (Member of Iranian Community Group)</i></p>
<p><b>Avoiding stigma of requesting help</b> <i>People here are from a generation who would not ask for help ... I said I would look after my wife through sickness and in health, I don't see myself as a carer, I am a husband. (Member of Bolton Dementia Carers Support Group)</i></p>
<p><b>Social workers should be well prepared – by researching the general culture or condition of the group/community/individual prior to the assessment</b> <i>They should tell you all the information you might find useful about rights, finances about social facilities and groups like ours. (Member of Manchester People First)</i></p>
<p><b>Social workers should be honest (and accurate) in their assessments</b> <i>It was full of false praise like 'she brushes her hair lovely, she dresses very well' – it wasn't realistic because some days I don't bother getting dressed! (Member of African Caribbean Mental Health Group)</i></p>
<p><b>Social workers should speak to service users and carers independently</b> <i>You can't complain about being exhausted in front of them [the person you are caring for]. (member of Bolton Dementia carers support group)</i></p> <p><i>The Social Worker didn't even talk to me; she spoke to my mum and then went. (Member of Learning Disabled People's Group)</i></p>
<p><b>Social workers should write records of assessments jointly with service users and carers</b></p>
<p><b>Social workers should make arrangements for trained interpreters and independent advocates to be part of the assessment process</b></p>
<p><b>Social workers should not have low expectations of people</b> <i>I have a degree, but because I am visually impaired, they always want me to go for jobs in call centres – they need to show us opportunities to improve our lives. (Member of Asian Disability Group)</i></p>

### Questions for educators

- How do students learn of service users' and carers' perceptions, expectations and experiences of assessment?
- Do students have the opportunity to draw on their own experiences of being assessed in various contexts in order to reflect on possible user experiences and expectations?

## 22 Involvement of service users and carers in assessment

There is growing understanding of the factors that help to make user involvement work (Beresford and Branfield, 2006). A central factor is to have user knowledge taken seriously by professionals and policy-makers. Where this has happened, service users and carers have become regarded increasingly as key participants in the assessment process, an expectation that service user and carer interests made clear in the consultations for the NOS (TOPSS UK Partnership, 2004). Service user involvement has arisen as a direct or implicit challenge to earlier assumptions and practices. For example, the trend towards involvement has been supported by the emergence of solutions-focused and strengths-based models of practice (Parton and O'Byrne, 2000; Morgan, 2004). These models question approaches that focus assessment on problems and weaknesses and seek to build on the knowledge, abilities and past successes of the service user.

Some of the textbooks reviewed by Crisp and colleagues (2005) stress the critical nature of involvement. No longer confined to the role of respondents in the social worker's gathering of information, service users and carers are active contributors at the centre of assessment. A further approach sets out the respective expertise of service users and social workers, describing them in a collaborative exchange. Assessment and what follows depends on the reciprocal contribution of the service user's special knowledge of themselves and their situation and the social worker's skills in exploring problems, negotiating solutions and accessing resources. Other texts similarly recognised the importance of service user and carer views but drew attention to the statutory duties of many social workers and their obligation to make professional judgements about care and control.

Similar considerations affect frameworks. Partnership with service users and carers is valued but it is recognised that in some assessments a collaborative approach cannot be sustained if there are concerns about harm or abuse. Some textbooks also noted the pressure on assessors from the 'public' (represented usually by the news media and party political interests) not to make mistakes or to allow risky behaviour that may result in harm and outcry. It is implied that such pressures may narrow scope for service-user involvement.

All the assessment frameworks regard involvement of service users and carers as integral to the assessment process (Crisp *et al*, 2005, p 50). They also emphasise that the needs of the person being assessed are paramount for the purpose of the assessment and that those needs should not be overshadowed by the needs of other family members. In the case of the carer's assessment, the carer is the client or service user and a participant in a carer-centred assessment.

Taken together, the British textbooks and frameworks are the more reliable source of information on involvement of service users and carers in assessment when

compared with overseas publications. The declared commitment to this approach in UK social work and social policy is, according to Crisp and colleagues, not evident in the passages on assessment processes in the two US textbooks or, to any extent, in the Australian text (2005, App 1).

### Questions for educators

- Do teaching and learning cover the different kinds of involvement of service users and carers debated in UK social work and expected by user and carer groups and social policy?
- Do students have the opportunity to learn how users wish to be involved in the definition and exploration of their issues during assessment?

## 23 User-led assessment

The growing validation of service user and carer perspectives has gained expression in assessment partly through ideas of 'user-led', 'user-defined' and 'self-assessment', which go well beyond usual notions of 'involvement'. None of the SCIE-commissioned studies examines these specific ideas closely, but they are the subject of increasing interest in policy, practice and research and deserve discussion in this guide. It is not possible to examine the ideas comprehensively here but two fundamental dimensions of user-led assessment can be distinguished and used to explore aspects of the subject. The two dimensions are found in a consideration of key elements of assessment, which comprise the definition of the process and criteria to be used in the assessment, and the roles played in the conduct of assessment. Hence, a fully user-led assessment consists of:

- user-defined assessment
- user conducted assessment, also known as self-assessment.

An assessment must be 'defined' before it can be undertaken. Defining the assessment means constructing the process and criteria. It is not within the scope of this guide to research empirical examples but the chief mechanism by which service users and carers are likely to be involved in defining assessment is via local or wider arrangements for representation and consultation.

Regarding user-conducted or self-assessment, one study defines self-assessment as 'assessment that is completed by the subject of the assessment without the immediate involvement of professionals' (Griffiths *et al*, 2005, p 17).

The authors stress that self-assessment comprises not only self-report (as in describing one's needs or situation) but especially self-completion or direction of the process and oneself as the potential beneficiary (p 6). They also warn, first, that self-assessment raises complex questions about the accuracy of assessments made, the

effectiveness of the process, and the experience for users; and second, that the evidence base in social care for each of these questions is, for the moment, sparse (pp 6, 8–10 and 56).

Nevertheless, user-conducted or self-assessment is a growing feature of both social care and health care. Historically, professional (and bureaucratic) models of the relationship of service providers to service users tended to treat users' views in assessment as inexperienced and subordinate. These models persist in some process-focused approaches (see Section 9) but have been modified in social care by a number of influences. Service users and carers themselves have become more organised, vocal and influential (Beresford, 2006). Social work practice has been additionally influenced by values of self-determination, respect for persons, empowerment, partnership and accountability. And established practices have been modified by the user-oriented strands in government policy.

Examples are found in the recognition of service users' accounts of their needs under Conservative community care policies of the early 1990s and in the promotion of service users' perspectives under successive New Labour programmes since 1997. Self-assessment is part of the legacy of these policies along with developments such as:

- direct payments for self-arranged care and individual budgets (SCIE, 2005; PSSRU, 2006)
- the 'in-control' programme ([www.in-control.org.uk](http://www.in-control.org.uk))
- the promotion of self-monitoring and self-management of long-term conditions and the Expert Patient Programme (Griffiths *et al*, 2005; EPP, nd)
- the participation of 'experts by experience' in inspections of local councils by the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI 2006).

Self-assessment methods range from professionally initiated questionnaires, through self-assessment algorithms to web-based systems with feedback (Griffiths *et al*, 2005). Paper-based assessments have predominated but online examples are multiplying in social care, where some promise 'an instant decision' on whether a person is eligible for specific help and equipment (Kent County Council, 2006).

Some of the possible gains of user self-assessment include:

- recognising and using the expertise of service users and carers
- challenging cultural values about the dependency of particular groups
- guiding people to sources of help and clarifying eligibility
- where online methods are used, providing 24-hour access to assessment
- providing an early alert to need
- speeding up provision by removing the wait for professional assessment
- enabling service users to prepare for professionally conducted assessment

- obtaining an evaluative check on services currently being used. (Griffiths *et al*, 2005; Priestley, 1998; Qureshi, nd)

No single form of self-assessment is suitable for all service users or types of need. Some service users and carers may prefer an autonomous self-assessment, others peer-supported self-assessment (PSSRU, 2006) while still others seek professionally supported self-assessment or assessment led by a professional (Griffiths *et al*, 2005; Qureshi, nd). Furthermore, there are limits to self-assessment where lack of accuracy may cause harm or where extreme risk to service user, carer or the public requires professionally controlled assessment.

To summarise, user-led assessment comprises two dimensions:

- user-defined assessment, in which service users and carers play a role in constructing the process and criteria for the assessment
- user-conducted assessment, or self-assessment, in which service users and carers undertake the assessment, usually applying predetermined processes and criteria.

Analysis using these two dimensions results in five models of the service user and carer relationship to the definition and conduct of assessment. The models are outlined below and shown in Figs. 3 and 4:

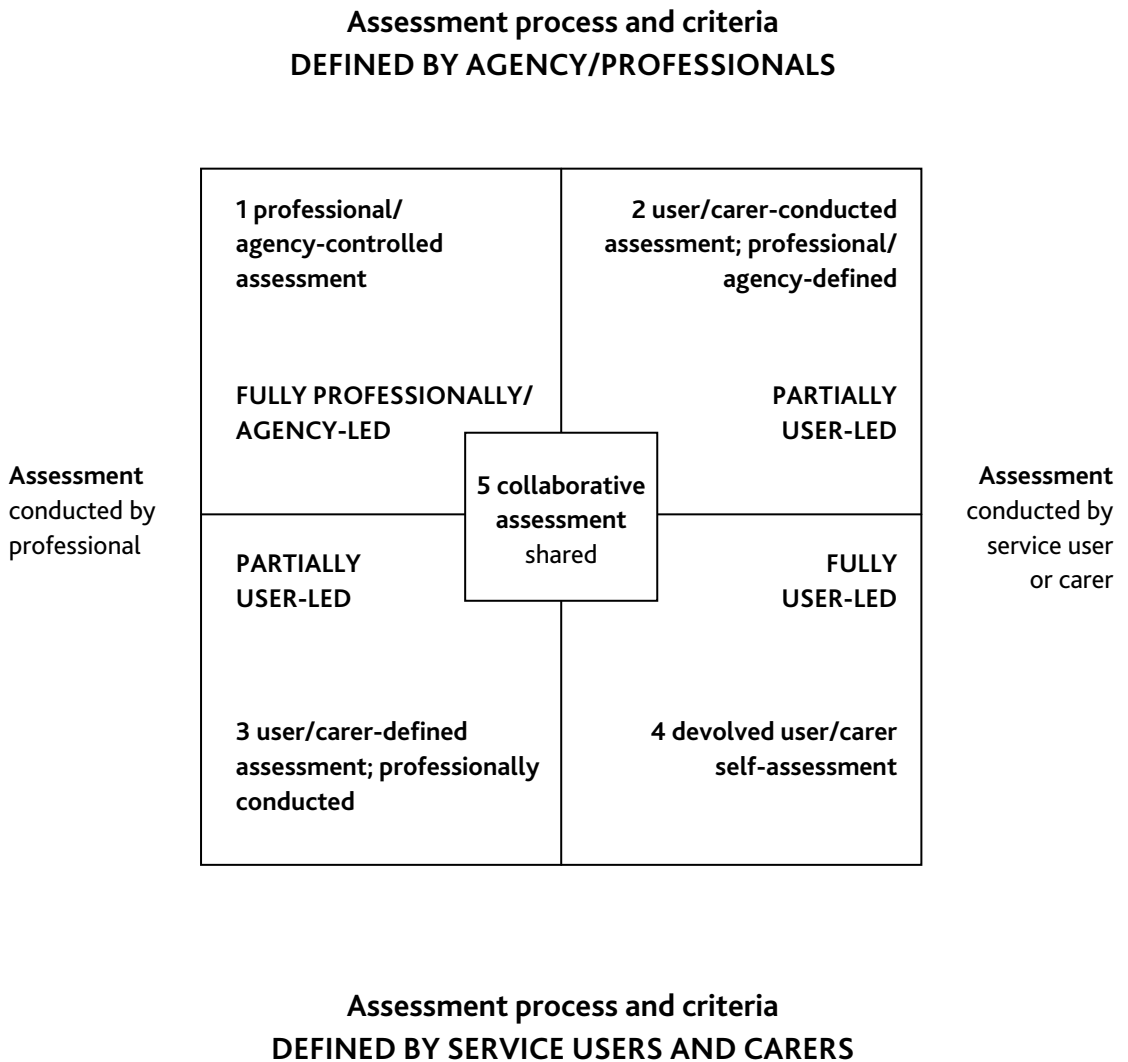
- 1 professional/agency-controlled assessment
- 2 user/carer-conducted assessment, professional/agency-defined
- 3 user/carer-defined assessment, professionally conducted
- 4 devolved user/carer self-assessment
- 5 collaborative assessment.

All the models except the collaborative one represent extreme points on the two intersecting dimensions. They provide a starting point for classifying real-world examples such as those given in the works by Griffiths and colleagues (2005) and Qureshi (nd). Some real-world examples can be expected to match the models closely while others will display characteristics of intermediate points on the intersecting 'defined' or 'conducted' dimensions.

The movement towards greater user control of services has encouraged innovation in aspects of user-led assessment. Nevertheless, Griffiths and colleagues write that 'even the most innovative self-assessments require appropriate action by professionals' (2005, p 7) and Qureshi remarks that 'it is generally still for professionals to make the final decision about allocation of public resources'. Eligibility thresholds of some kind seem inescapable where public resources are being used but service user groups and others press the case for maximising self-determination within these constraints (Hudson and Henwood, 2006).

Clearly, the developing ideas of user-led assessment do not dissolve questions about the relationship of service users and carers, on the one hand, and professionals and agencies, on the other. They do, however, help to crystallise questions about degrees and types of involvement and make them available for debate and negotiation.

**Fig. 3 Matrix of five assessment models distinguished by the extent to which they are user-led**



**Fig. 4 Further outline of five assessment models distinguished by the extent to which they are user-led**

Model of assessment	Description	Comment
<b>1</b> <b>professional/agency controlled</b>	<b>fully professional/ agency-led</b> assessments in which the agency and professionals control the process, criteria and conduct of the activity.	represents the minimum of user/carer involvement; usually advocated in social work only in cases of significant risk to service user, carer or public.
<b>2</b> <b>user/carer-conducted</b>	<b>partially user-led</b> self-assessment by the service user or carer applying processes and criteria that have been defined and defined by agencies and professionals.	devolves the conduct of the assessment but maintains agency/professional control of other aspects.
<b>3</b> <b>user/carer-defined</b>	<b>partially user-led</b> service users and carers have defined the process and criteria through prior representation and consultation but professionals conduct the assessment of individual situations.	a reversal of model 2 above.

<p><b>4</b> <b>devolved</b></p>	<p><b>fully user-led</b> service users or carers have defined the process and criteria through prior consultation and a user or carer now conducts the self-assessment</p>	<p>reverses the 'professionally controlled' model and might be entitled 'user/carer controlled' except that where public services are implicated, 'devolved' allows for background 'official' governance to fulfil duties of care, probity and accountability.</p>
<p><b>5</b> <b>collaborative</b></p>	<p><b>shared</b> occupies a mid-point between the four polarities, combining professional and user/carer definition and conduct of assessment.</p>	<p>the other four models characterise the polar extremes of the two dimensions; this model represents symmetrical participation by service user/carer and agency/professional – it is a 'symmetrical exchange' model of assessment.</p>

### Questions for educators

- Do students have the opportunity to explore user-led approaches to assessment including:
  - > the nature and implications of user-defined and user-conducted or self-assessment?
  - > the matrix of models of assessment, from professional/agency-led to devolved user/carer self-assessment, which come into view when assessment is examined for the extent to which it is user-led?

## Values and ethics

Values are statements of belief about morally good or bad conduct (Clark, 2000). In social care and social work, ethics are typically expressed as descriptions or codes of required professional conduct, representing the active form of values (Whittington and Whittington, 2006). Section 24 is a broad but brief review of some of the values and ethics that relate to assessment. Section 25 looks at a particular set of values that were highlighted in the review by Crisp and colleagues (2005).

### 24 Traditional, emancipatory and governance values

Three streams of values may be identified in social work (Whittington and Whittington, 2006).

- The 'traditional' stream flows from assumptions about person-centred service to fellow citizens and the high intrinsic worth of every individual who must be treated with respect and, wherever possible, afforded confidentiality and self-determination.
- The source of the 'emancipatory' stream is social reformism and the belief that social and personal problems are explained by the way societies structure and distribute their wealth, opportunities and esteem.
- The 'governance' stream springs from the expanded organisational and managerial contexts of social work practice and emphasises probity, partnership, risk management, accountability to stakeholders and involvement of stakeholder, including service users and carers.

Values and ethics in UK social work are contained and codified in three main sources:

- the codes of practice for social care workers and their employers (CCW, 2002; GSCC, 2002; NISCC, 2002; SSSC, 2003)
- the values and ethics statement of expectations of the UK social work national occupational standards (NOS) (TOPSS UK Partnership, 2004)
- the code of ethics of the British Association of Social Workers (BASW 2002).

Examples of traditional, emancipatory and governance streams of values may be found in all three codes. Commonly the streams of values co-exist, flowing concurrently through daily practice but, occasionally, they mix with turbulent results, for example when governance values define risk assessment in terms that conflict with practice led by person-centred or emancipatory values.

The study of values and ethics is a central feature of social work education. Social work, as the Quality Assurance Agency academic benchmarks point out, is a moral activity in which practitioners make and implement difficult decisions about human

situations that involve the potential for benefit or harm (QAA, 2000, 2.4). There are also strong arguments for linking the study of values and ethics with teaching and learning of assessment in social work. One reason, to borrow from the experience gained in law teaching, is because ethics can be used as a lens through which to examine assessment models and their underlying assumptions (Braye and Preston-Shoot, 1997).

More directly, a consciously ethical approach to practice is a professional obligation for social workers and supported by the national care councils' code of practice for social care workers cited above. Values and ethics provide social workers with leverage in promoting the interests of service users and carers and offer a counterbalance to trends that might reduce assessment to form-led routines. Additional leverage is provided by employer codes (also cited above), which specify employer obligations to have written policies and processes on confidentiality, equal opportunities and discrimination.

The argument for ethically informed, values-based assessment is endorsed in the findings of the Salford CSWR study of higher education institutions:

Participants were clear that the development of values appropriate to social work was central to the application of assessment and there were examples of exercises engaging with notions of difference and diversity, focused on the use of the self. This allowed for the recognition that assessments are rarely value-free, are influenced by what social workers bring to the process and informed later critical analysis of specific assessment technologies.

(Shardlow *et al*, 2005, pp 23–4)

### Question for educators

- What materials and opportunities are available to help students explore the links between values and ethics, on the one hand, and the models, methods and goals of assessment, on the other?

## 25 Anti-racist, anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice

Anti-racist, anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practices have different histories but overlapping meanings (Tomlinson and Trew, 2002). As values, they represent a significant dimension of the emancipatory stream described above and have been translated into practices that form an integral part of the education and work of social workers.

Crisp and colleagues found that the terms are distinctive to the UK textbooks reviewed. In the non-UK examples, terms like 'difference' or 'social division' are applied to race and gender. Most of the books referred to issues of discrimination and

disadvantage. However, it is notable that few of the books gave detailed attention to anti-discriminatory practice *in assessment* (Crisp *et al*, 2005, pp 25–6). The terms anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice are not specifically used in any of the assessment frameworks but all the frameworks embody the objective of overcoming discrimination.

The NOS for social work expect anti-discriminatory and inclusive practice in the assessment phase of work as well as at other stages (TOPSS UK Partnership, 2004, Key role 1). The academic benchmarks also spell out expectations in this area. Social work degree students should understand the nature of social work in a diverse society with particular reference to prejudice, types of discrimination, empowerment and the constructive challenge of individual, institutional and structural discrimination (QAA, 2000, paras 2.4 and 3.1).

#### Question for educators

- Are there specific opportunities for students to engage with anti-racist, anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive principles and practice in assessment?

## Part Three: Teaching and learning of assessment

Assessment is a central concern of learning and teaching within HEIs, partly driven by guidance but also in recognition of the importance of this task within contemporary practice.

(Shardlow *et al*, 2005, p 20)

The study [of HEIs] demonstrated that social work education providers are clear about the need to have assessment at the core of programmes.

(Shardlow *et al*, 2005, p 30)

Part Three builds on the platform of information provided in Part Two, continuing the exploratory process by focusing directly on issues in the teaching and learning of assessment in social work education. The core sources are again the three SCIE-commissioned studies described on page 10. There are further 'questions for educators' and, in addition, some 'messages for educators'.

## Learning content, structure, methods and participants

### 26 What should be the content?

The headings from the analysis and discussion in Part Two are summarised below as an alert to possible learning content.

- The significance of assessment in social work practice and education
- Reasons for learning about assessment
- The definitions of assessment
- Risk assessment
- The purposes of assessment
- Who is to be assessed?
- Theories that underpin assessment
- The different timeframes of assessment
- Assessment processes
- Evidence-based assessment
- Legislation, legal frameworks and policy contexts
- Organisational issues
- Collaborative assessment with other professions and agencies
- Language, communication and assessment
- Involvement of service users and carers in the assessment process
- Service user and carer perspectives on assessment

- User-led assessment
- Values and ethics
- Anti-racist, anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice in assessment

A number of debates are woven into these different topic areas in the assessment sources used for this guide. The debates will be discussed under the three sub-headings below with relevant questions and messages for educators included as they arise.

### Principles vs. tools and frameworks

Crisp and colleagues argue that graduating social workers must understand the 'principles' of assessment (Crisp *et al*, 2003). The essence of principles in this instance is their transferability (p 41). Tools and frameworks may offer useful exemplars for learning, but there is a worry that they may also induce a kind of 'trained incapacity' in which social workers' skills are restricted and non-transferable between settings or client groups. Predictably, there is no consensus on principles but reflection on the discussion in Part Two suggests items for a working list which educators and practitioners may revise as necessary.

- Ensure that the process is informed by service-user and carer perspectives.
- Involve service users and carers and understand the nature and implications of different kinds and degrees of involvement, including user-led assessment.
- Have clear objectives.
- Understand the theory that underpins the approach.
- Use appropriate language and other communication.
- Have good technical knowledge of relevant law, frameworks and methods of assessment.
- Be systematic and rigorous with evidence on which judgements are being made, appreciating any limitations.
- View the method and your conduct of assessments self-critically.
- Weigh the potential harms and benefits of risks.
- Ensure that assessment methods, processes and outcomes are ethical.
- Take an anti-racist and anti-discriminatory approach and value diversity.
- Ensure appropriate interprofessional and inter-agency collaboration.

Other lists of principles are available, offered less abstractly as practical benchmarks in the conduct of assessment and possible guides to curriculum development (for example, Nolan and Craddock in Crisp *et al*, 2003, p 11).

The knowledge required by students does not stop at transferable assessment principles. Students need to support their ability to conduct the assessment process with a broad repertoire of knowledge and skills. Crisp and colleagues identified four

particular areas of wider knowledge that were necessary in conducting assessments (Crisp *et al*, 2003, pp 29–32). In summary, the areas were:

- skills in critical thinking
- research skills
- knowledge of the particular service user groups being assessed and of social contexts
- knowledge to inform the conduct of the assessment.

Critical thinking has a variety of meanings and, as yet, there is limited evidence on how it may best be developed among undergraduates. Nevertheless, the teaching of skills in critical thinking is frequently advocated to ensure that professional social work education is more than the acquisition of technical skills. Indeed, the ability to think critically is said to be a defining feature of competent social work practice (Heron, 2006). A body of ideas is envisaged that assist the student or practitioner in looking beneath the surface appearance of information in order to enhance the validity of judgements and decisions (see Developments in Burgess, 2005).

Research skills are included to enhance the gathering and assessment of information.

Knowledge of the service user groups and social contexts refers to knowledge about the needs, impairments and capacities of, say, older people or people with learning disabilities as well as the wider social and political environments in which social problems occur.

Knowledge to inform the conduct of the assessment is concerned, for instance, with determining the appropriate environment for conducting assessment; forming judgements about the kinds of contribution the service user seeks, and is able, to make; and timing the transition from assessment to intervention.

On the other side of the principles vs. tools and frameworks debate, Crisp and colleagues found in their 2003 study a substantial literature on tools for assessment. The literature tends, however, to relate to training programmes for qualified workers and to be 'agency-based' (2003, p vi). The reviewers' 2005 study examined specific assessment frameworks from government agencies. Some frameworks include useful practical guidelines and, despite worries about non-transferability mentioned above, much of the guidance is transferable to the assessment of other populations, although readers are left to work this out for themselves (Crisp *et al*, 2005).

Assessment frameworks of the kind described in the 2005 review provide ready-made vehicles for introducing research findings directly into practice. They offer empirically grounded guidance and standardise assessment. The effect is to limit the consequences of poor conceptual skills among assessors, to control idiosyncrasy and reduce inconsistencies and omissions (Crisp *et al*, 2005, pp 37–8). The greater

explicitness that frameworks introduce is said to produce recommendations that are more transparent and verifiable (p 38). They are also proposed as useful tools in teaching about assessment (p 40).

However, explicit headings for information collection do not guarantee the quality of the collection process or of the judgements subsequently made. There is evidence of variation between assessors in the quality of interpretation and in their familiarity with the guidelines they should be applying (Crisp *et al* 2005, p 39). In short, assessment frameworks are not likely to be sufficient alone to guarantee good assessment (p 40). For similar reasons, frameworks are unlikely to be sufficient on their own as teaching tools.

The three chief studies used for this guide broadly accept that assessment frameworks can contribute usefully to teaching and learning on assessment. But they also express concern that there are pressures to confine learning to the domain of the predetermined framework, with potential detriment to the development of assessment skills and versatility of social workers. The view is encapsulated by a respondent:

we can end up without reflective thinking so we are going to try to get the students to very clearly critically analyse the tools they are using and also to think about alternatives.

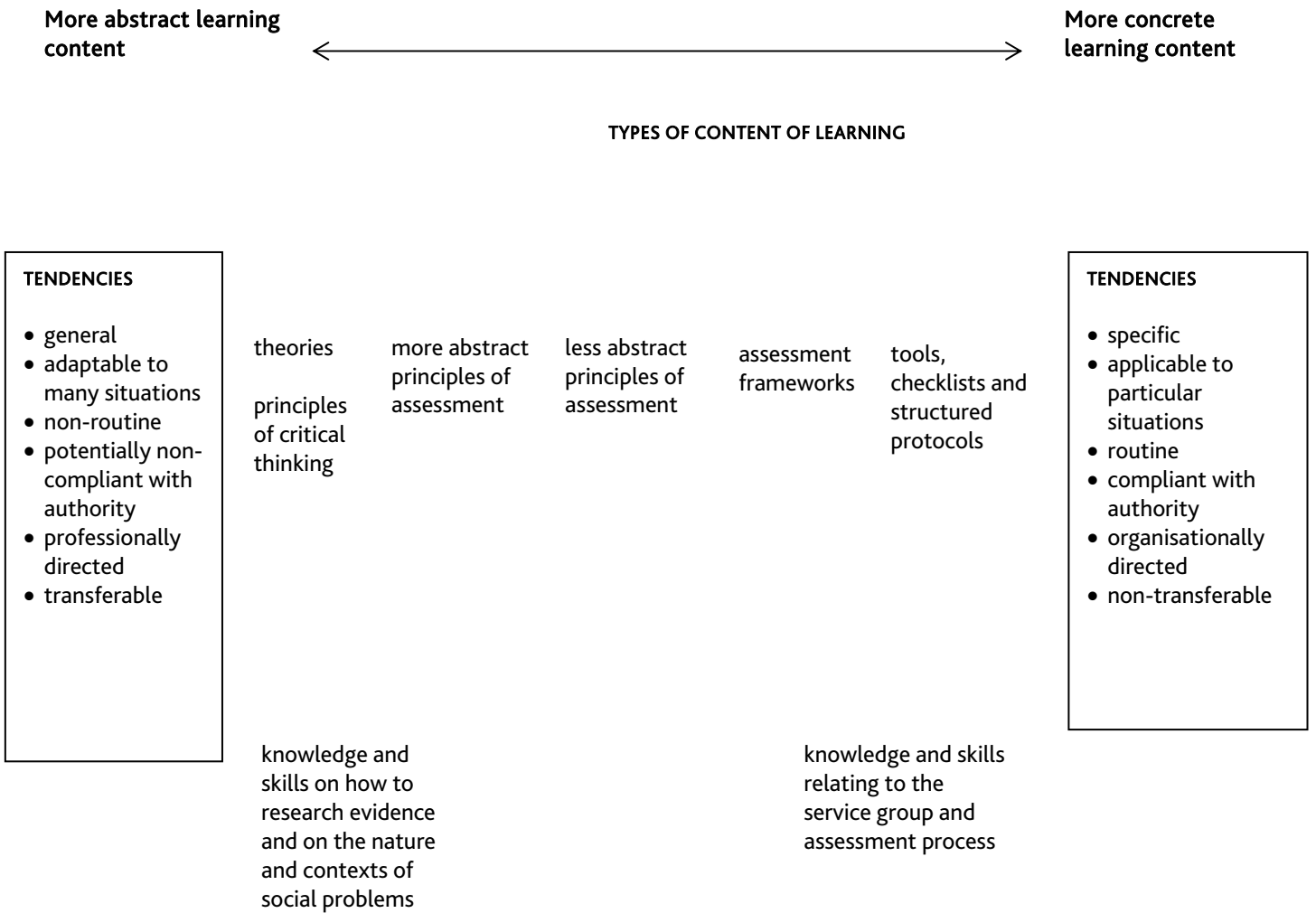
(Interviewee, HEI study, Shardlow *et al*, 2005, p 25)

The different strands of the debate are, in fact, more complex than the 'principles vs. tools and frameworks' polarity suggests. The position is illustrated in Fig. 5 using a continuum from 'more abstract learning content' to 'more concrete learning content'. The figure locates the types of content that have been discussed in this sub-section. The figure also suggests that the two kinds of learning content produce knowledge and skill with characteristic and contrasting tendencies:

**More abstract content of assessment learning** tends to produce knowledge and skills that are general, adaptable to many situations, non-routine, potentially non-compliant with bureaucratic authority, professionally directed, transferable and less accountable.

**More concrete content of assessment learning** tends to produce knowledge and skills that are specific, applicable to particular situations, routine, compliant with bureaucratic authority, organisationally directed, non-transferable and more accountable.

**Fig. 5 Content and tendencies of assessment learning: an abstract–concrete continuum**



Where the emphasis should be placed in teaching and learning is debated among educators, learners, employers and service users but the outcome should not ultimately be of an either/or kind. Social workers need learning opportunities and practice skills along the entire abstract–concrete continuum. Furthermore, since there are limits to what can be included in any curriculum, the combination of abstract and concrete content will need to be chosen for maximum transferability.

### Questions for educators

- Do learning opportunities predominate in one area or another of the abstract–concrete continuum (with its corresponding tendencies, types of knowledge and skills produced, and implications for practice)?
- Alternatively, does teaching cover both of the following:
  - > knowledge of assessment processes, including tools and assessment frameworks
  - > a broader repertoire of transferable theory, principles, skills and social science knowledge for use in assessment?

### Messages for educators

- The message from the main sources is that social workers need learning opportunities and practice skills along the abstract–concrete assessment knowledge continuum.
- Since there are limits to what can be included in any curriculum, the combination of abstract and concrete content will need to be chosen for maximum transferability.

### Consensus vs. difference in stakeholder views of the assessment curriculum

The literature review by Crisp and colleagues raised the question:

To what degree, if any, is there a consensus among key stakeholders (for example, employers, social work academics, service users) as to what students should learn about assessment prior to qualifying as a social worker?

(Crisp *et al*, 2003, p 41)

The Salford CSWR study took up this question (Shardlow *et al*, pp 50–1). It reports considerable variation both within and across stakeholder groups about what social work students should learn. There were indications of tension, for example, between higher educational institutes and agencies over the nature of the assessment task. Crisp and colleagues also refer to the tension between the training requirements placed on social work educators and the expectations of agencies who want social workers to be able to operate employers' assessment tools and national frameworks (2003, p 37). The expectations of some service users also look set to produce

tensions. They told the Salford CSWR researchers that social workers should be 'loyal advocates' even in the face of management opposition, regarding loyal advocacy as the essence of the assessment function (Shardlow *et al*, 2005, p 51).

These kinds of findings are more than differences of self-interest among stakeholder groups and reflect the range of different understandings of assessment. The findings are of limited help in determining the content of assessment learning if the goal is to include only those topics on which there is a consensus. However, it is abundantly clear already that, while there may be many points of agreement, assessment is a highly contested area. It is to be expected that a full stakeholder consensus will be hard to find. The content of learning must reflect that reality.

### Question for educators

- Does the content of teaching recognise the mix of stakeholder consensus and difference about the content of the assessment curriculum?

### Diffuse vs. specified learning

There are concerns in the assessment studies used for this guide that the teaching of assessment may in the past have been too diffuse. Section 28 will look at the structure of teaching and learning, but staying with the present focus on content, the findings from the Salford CSWR study note that former students from DipSW programmes had limited recall of assessment content (Shardlow *et al*, 2005, p 52). Gaps in preparation for undertaking assessment in practice placements were also indicated. It is not known whether these findings would be replicated in a larger sample but, on the assumption that recall of learning opportunities is a better indicator of learning having taken place than no recall, the following questions for educators are suggested, prompted by the Salford findings. The questions are informed in part by issues covered in Part Two.

### Questions for educators

- Are students able to identify areas of learning that contribute to their understanding and skills in relation to assessment?
- Are students able to identify particular models, definitions, purposes and theories of assessment taught on the course?
- Are students able to identify particular formal frameworks of assessment taught on the course?
- Do students consider themselves prepared for undertaking assessments during their practice placements?

## 27 Sources: textbooks and assessment frameworks

The textbooks and frameworks reviewed by Crisp and colleagues have been cited frequently. This section says more on the review of these two sets of key sources for teaching and learning. Textbooks and frameworks are important because they are widely read and have 'the potential to lead to significant changes in practice' (Crisp *et al*, 2005, p 63).

Crisp and colleagues conclude that textbooks and frameworks represent complementary aids to the teaching of assessment rather than alternatives. The power of textbooks rests partly in the expert authority they convey on what should be taught but this needs to be approached critically. Otherwise, textbooks may come to drive the curriculum and socialise both educators and students (Agger, 1989 in Crisp *et al*, 2005, pp 3–4). In this way, what is included, or indeed omitted, from these sources may serve to reinforce prevailing attitudes or practices in relation, say, to gender, class or race (Wachholz and Mullaly, 2000 in Crisp *et al*, 2005, p 6). Frameworks may contribute to similar effects, especially if they come with the authority of government agencies, which is a feature of the frameworks reviewed by Crisp and colleagues in the 2005 review. Equally, however, textbooks and frameworks may challenge social practices. The point is to view them critically.

There were three predominant patterns among the generalist social work textbooks analysed (p 13):

- process-oriented, which included distinct chapters on assessment
- theory-oriented, which tended to give a diffuse treatment of assessment across the chapters
- practice-setting oriented, which followed a similar pattern as the theory-oriented texts.

The generalist books varied widely in the attention given to assessment and, overall, the textbooks examined were pitched to different audiences: some were plainly directed to beginning social work students, making few assumptions about prior knowledge; others were aimed at readers who were near to qualifying or already qualified (Crisp *et al*, 2005, p15). Not all books were directed specifically to a UK audience. Some well-known texts originated in the USA and reflected the current debates and preoccupations in North American social work (p 92).

Turning to frameworks, there are many kinds of guidance available to practitioners, especially within agencies, but Crisp and colleagues define an 'assessment framework' as going beyond mere guidance in its inclusion of an explicit theoretical or conceptual base (2005, p 40). The authors also argue that a framework should offer guidance on the domains or areas of information that should be encompassed in an assessment, but not necessarily the tools for collecting the information (p 41).

The choice of frameworks for review recognised the employment of many social workers in statutory settings and the relevance to statutory practice of assessment frameworks. Four documents met the selection criteria and were selected for study. Two of them are classed by the reviewers as 'stand-alone' assessment frameworks and are published by the Department of Health. Their intended audience is wide, covering a range of professional groups, and is assumed to require introductory information about assessment and need. Crisp and colleagues suggest that there are similarities between these frameworks and some introductory textbooks. The two frameworks are:

- Department of Health, Department for Education and Employment and the Home Office (2000) *Framework for the assessment of children in need and their families*
- Department of Health (2001b) *A practitioner's guide to carers' assessments under the Carers and Disabled Children Act 2000.*

The two other selected documents are also aimed at a range of professional audiences but assume substantial expertise in the practice of assessment and in how to work with the target population. This observation has clear implications for the use of the documents in teaching. The first is published by the Substance Misuse Division of the Scottish Executive and the second by the Department of Health:

- Effective Interventions Unit (2002) *Integrated care for drug users: Integration principles and practice*
- Department of Health (2001a) *National service framework for older people.*

Crisp and colleagues were unable to find sufficient evaluation data in their first review (2003) on which to recommend particular approaches as best practice in relation to assessment. However, in their second review (2005), the authors do provide clear guidance on the use of key sources, in three forms. First, their sampling criteria provide a basis for evaluating textbooks and frameworks not covered in their review. Second, their appendices show the analysis of all the textbooks and frameworks in the review. Third, they give advice that is applicable to the use of sources but also more widely in course design and this is paraphrased in the messages below (2005, pp 67–8).

### Messages for educators

- Textbooks and frameworks can become out of date as legislation, policy and practice change, which they do frequently.
- Textbooks published overseas or for other national contexts may offer useful insights on subjects neglected locally but should be used cautiously because of their different origin.
- There are legislative and organisational differences between the four UK countries, which may restrict the applicability of guidance to a given country.

- Reading is an insufficient basis for developing assessment expertise; learning exercises, discussion in supervision and application to practice are needed.
- Assessment as presented in textbooks and frameworks represents a complex set of skills and knowledge. Students and inexperienced practitioners need opportunities to explore and learn how to apply what they read, preferably in supervised practice.
- Educators and students should be clear on the reasons for choosing particular textbooks and frameworks.
- Students should be alerted to any limitations of recommended works and especially to changes of policy and practice since the works were written, and be directed to supplementary reading.
- Educators should be explicit about their intended audience and be sure to match content to student level and needs, as between students needing introductory knowledge and those requiring more advanced guidance.
- Educators should define how they are using the concept of assessment, bearing in mind that there is no single agreed definition.
- Learning should include case studies and exercises to encourage active learning.
- The bases of theory and evidence that underpin teaching should be explicit.
- Educators should recommend further reading and identify, especially, important topics that have not been fully covered in teaching.

Some of these issues will be revisited in later sections.

## 28 How may teaching and learning be structured?

The questions that emerged from the commissioned studies about the structuring of teaching and learning of assessment in social work are of three overlapping kinds:

- What information is there on the overall structure of assessment teaching?
- Should teaching be in discrete, assessment-focused modules or embedded/infused into other parts of the curriculum?
- When should academic teaching of assessment be timed in relation to practice learning on placement?

### Information on the overall structure of assessment teaching

The Salford CSWR consultations with higher education institutions (HEIs) identified three aspects of structure in the teaching of assessment (Shardlow *et al*, 2005):

- the incremental curriculum (p 22)
- 'module-specific' teaching and learning (p 24)
- learning through practice (p 27).

The incremental curriculum describes a pattern observed by the researchers in which, at level one of an undergraduate programme, students are introduced to a broad

theoretical understanding of the range of knowledge necessary to inform assessment. Subsequently, modules on assessment are introduced, typically at levels 2 and 3 of the programme.

'Module-specific' teaching and learning of assessment followed two main forms:

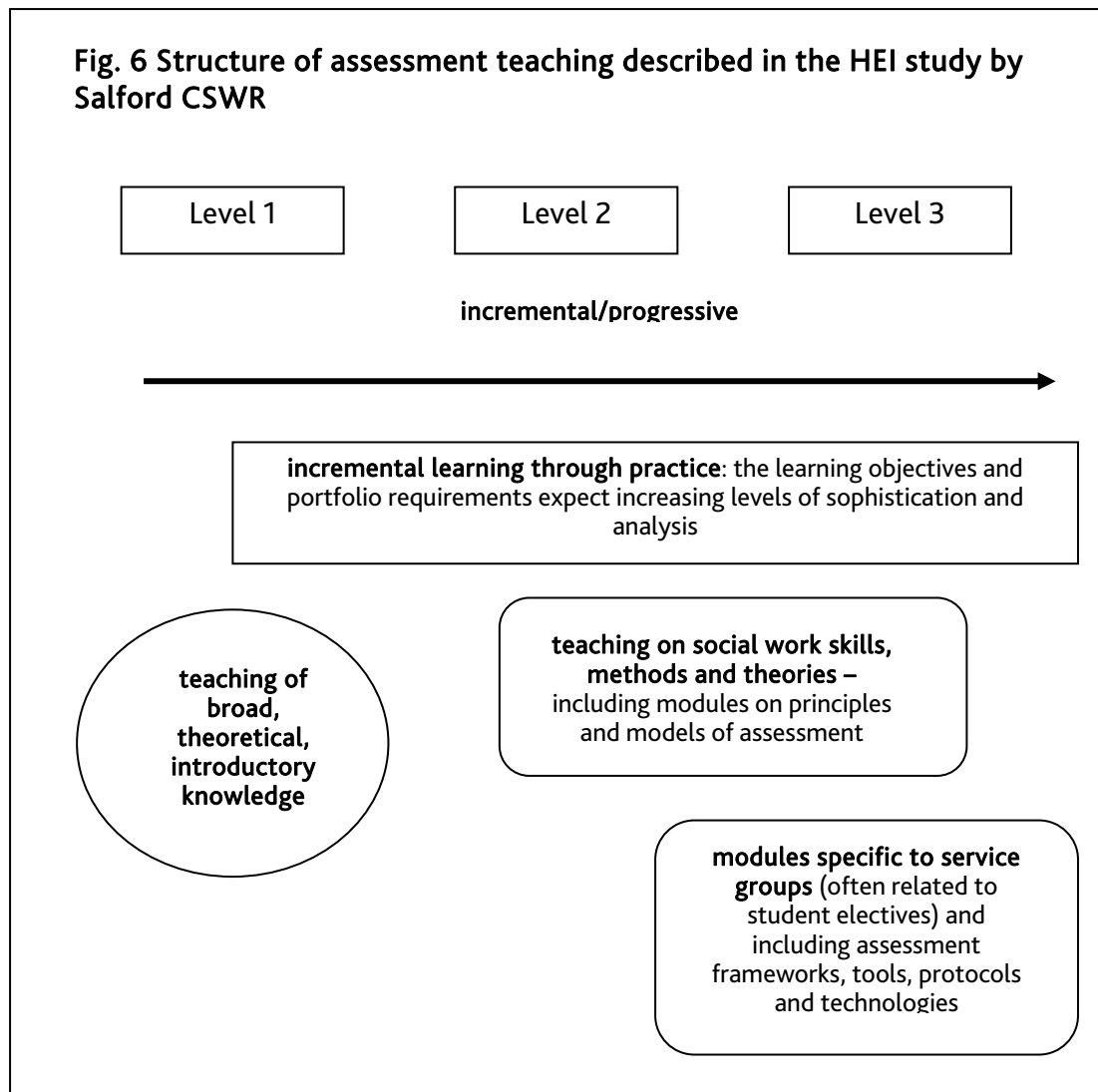
- a component of teaching on social work skills, methods and theories that specifically explored principles and models of assessment
- modules that were specific to service-user groups.

In the second type, the specialist subject areas (often student-elective modules) included consideration of the assessment technologies and tools favoured within policy and practice.

Learning through practice reflected the incremental curriculum. Increasing levels of sophistication and analysis were required as levels progressed from 1 to 3. This was exhibited in the learning objectives and portfolio requirements at different levels.

The three structural aspects described by Salford CSWR are brought together in Fig. 6.

**Fig. 6 Structure of assessment teaching described in the HEI study by Salford CSWR**



The figure does not represent an evaluated structure and so stands as a descriptive example not a prescription. Furthermore, the example does not address or resolve the two other kinds of questions relevant to decisions about teaching structures, which are discussed below.

### Discrete or embedded/infused?

The terms embedded and infused conjure slightly different imagery and precise definitions are elusive, but the terms tend to be interchangeable and are generally used, in relation to assessment, to refer to one of two kinds of learning opportunity. In the first kind, learning opportunities are said to be provided implicitly, for instance, during the study of the nature or causes of social problems; in the second kind, assessment is included explicitly but as an aspect, for example, of the wider study of research methods. By contrast, discrete modules would focus explicitly and primarily on assessment.

The literature review by Crisp and colleagues found that assessment teaching tended to be embedded in the curriculum and clustered with other learning objectives. It was rare to find assessment taught as a discrete module. The review identified only three examples of courses reporting a separate module on assessment and most of the group of former students in the Salford CSWR study reported no discrete teaching (Crisp *et al*, 2003, p 9; Shardlow *et al*, 2005, p 40).

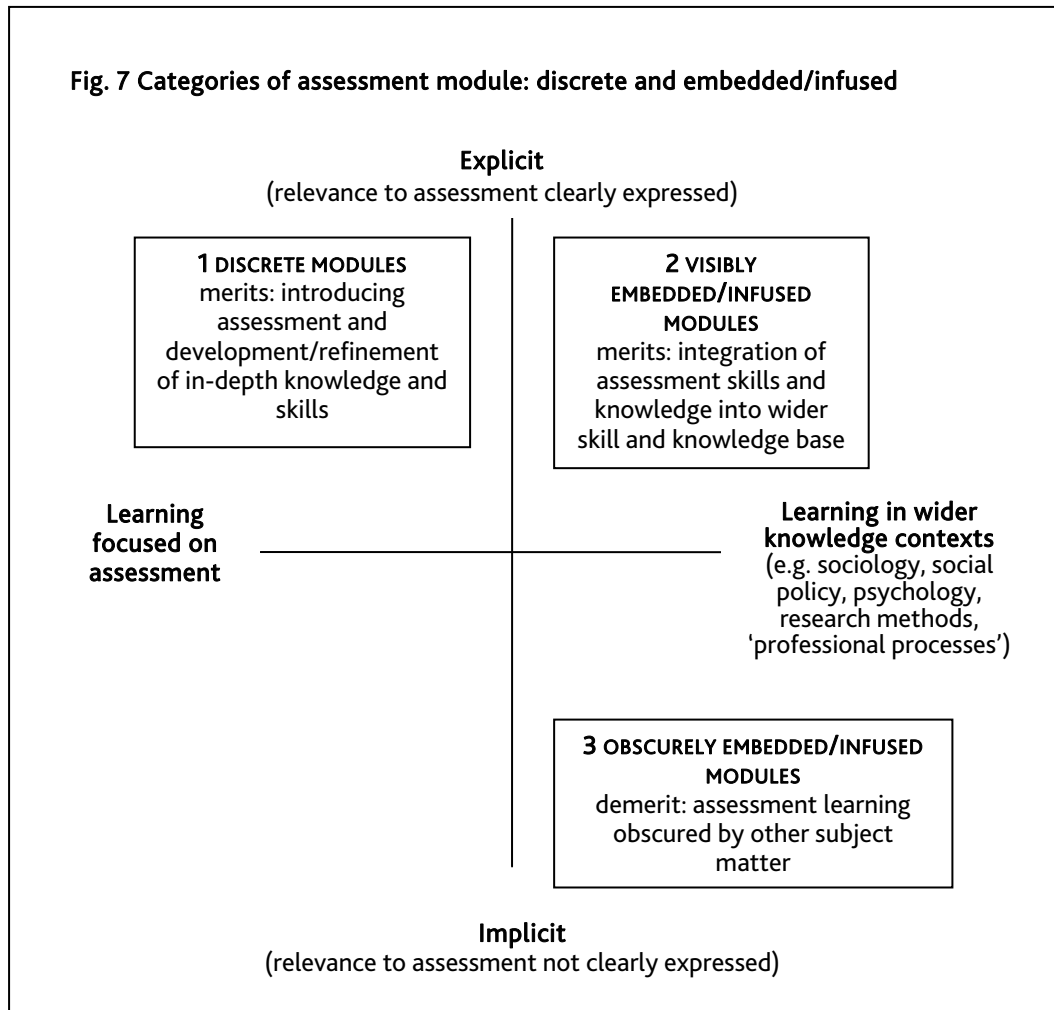
However, the Salford study's HEI consultations reported discrete and embedded teaching. The study found that 'there were often discrete modules on assessment', which were typically preceded by 'basic modules on social policy, sociology and psychology' (Shardlow *et al*, p 22). The basic modules were described as helping students to understand the range of knowledge that informs assessment and are reported as examples of embedding assessment within the curriculum (p 22). These findings contrast with the pattern described in law teaching: Braye and Preston-Shoot (2006) observe that the favoured approach to law in social work programmes, at least initially, is teaching by discrete modules (p 7).

In view of the great and longstanding importance attached to assessment by virtually all stakeholders, it seems surprising that Crisp and colleagues did not find clearer and more extensive evidence of discrete modules on assessment. The authors suggest that one possible reason for the apparent dominance they found of embedded or combined approaches is that assessment implicates so many areas of knowledge and skill. The findings of the Salford study implicitly support this hypothesis in reporting that, among respondents in HEIs:

There is a recognition that effective assessment is a culmination of knowledge, skills and values gained within the whole programme, and it would be difficult to state that any of the current programme content does not have relevance for undertaking an assessment.  
(Shardlow *et al*, 2005, p 21)

There are strong educational arguments, however, for discrete teaching on assessment, and for making the assessment learning component of embedded teaching explicit. In some forms of embedding it is difficult, as Crisp and colleagues say, to differentiate teaching on assessment from other parts of the curriculum. Where the relationship of teaching activity to learning on assessment is not explicit, students may believe that they have learned little on assessment (2003, p v).

Crisp and colleagues argue that if assessment is to be taught by embedding it in the curriculum, it is important to make explicit the assessment learning objectives and to articulate how they are to be achieved (p 41). This is not to suggest that all subjects must be taught with direct reference to assessment – there are many areas of learning vying legitimately for attention. It is to propose that where the teaching of



assessment is planned in an embedded form, the learning implications should be visible.

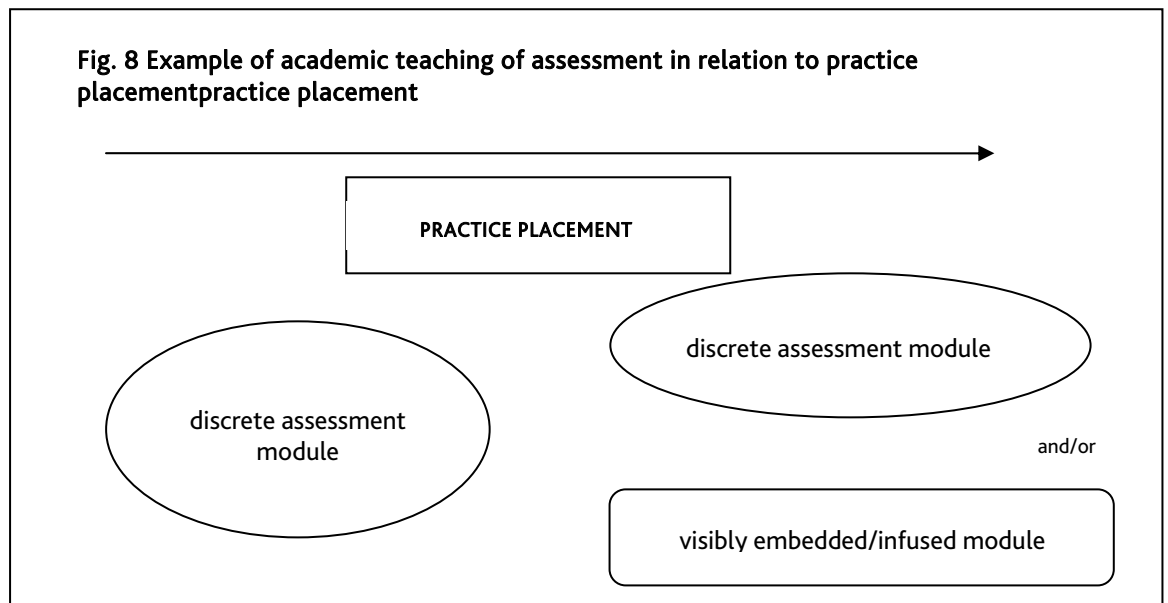
The discussion implies that, from the perspective of assessment teaching, there are three categories of module: discrete, visibly embedded/infused and obscurely embedded/infused. These categories are summarised in Fig. 7. It appears that discrete and visibly embedded/infused may be complementary categories rather than alternatives.

### Academic teaching of assessment in relation to practice placements

The Salford CSWR study concluded that the cohort of former social work students 'generally ... felt unprepared by their courses to engage with assessment in their placements' (Shardlow *et al*, 2005, p 41). While some respondents reported good experiences, others said that they had received little or no preparation. There were suggestions that some students were expected to learn solely by doing the

assessments in practice. Research reviewed by Crisp and colleagues found that a quarter of social work graduates considered that their preparation to conduct assessments was poor or less than adequate (Crisp *et al*, 2003, p 36). The reviewers suggest that this may partly reflect the clustering or embedding of assessment with other learning, as discussed above, instead of in distinct modules (pp 36–7). The clear implication is that some planned and explicit teaching on assessment is needed prior to placements. A model is available in law teaching.

Braye and Preston-Shoot (2006) report a common view in the teaching of law in social work that legal frameworks should be encountered by students prior to engaging in practice learning on placement. The authors report, as well, the view that understanding will be enhanced if legal frameworks are also taught, or revisited, after a period of practice (p 7). Applied to assessment teaching, this model might take the form, first, of a discrete assessment element in preparation for the practice placement (see Kearney, 2003pp 14–15). Subsequently, learning about assessment should again be explicit but might either be in discrete, dedicated modules or visibly embedded in a wider frame of teaching, or both. The example of this model is illustrated in Fig. 8 below. The modules will vary in their introductory or more advanced content depending on the stage of learning and placement.



### Questions for educators

- What is the structure of discrete and embedded/infused academic learning opportunities on assessment and its rationale?
- Are embedded/infused learning opportunities clearly 'visible'?

- Does the teaching and learning structure allow systematically for preparation of students for assessment before they enter practice placements?

### Messages for educators

Whatever structure, sequence and pattern of modules is chosen for teaching assessment, the clear messages from the research by Crisp and colleagues and the Salford CSWR study are that:

- programme providers should be able to articulate how the structure enables learning objectives in relation to assessment skills to be achieved (Crisp 2003, p 41).
- all stakeholder groups should be able to:
  - > understand the assessment learning objectives of the programme
  - > identify when the teaching and learning opportunities have occurred (Shardlow *et al*, 2005, p 52).

## 29 How may assessment be taught?

This section refers to the factors that affect the choice of teaching methods in assessment, or that should do so. The section also outlines the different methods, grouping them into categories. The categories are approximate since there is in reality much overlap.

### Factors affecting teaching and learning methods

When it comes to recommending method in the teaching of assessment, a rare consensus seems to break out. In what seems like a nascent orthodoxy, the studies of assessment by Crisp and colleagues and Salford CSWR are unambiguous: learning opportunities for assessment should be 'active' and provide opportunities to apply theoretical learning (Crisp *et al*, 2003; Shardlow *et al*, 2005). A similar and equally strong recommendation is given in the guide on law teaching (Braye and Preston-Shoot, 2006).

When attention turns to recommending particular methods on the basis of evidence, however, the picture is less clear. Crisp and colleagues report that evaluation of teaching is rare in the assessment literature and is mostly confined to levels of satisfaction among students and teachers. The reviewers conclude that lack of evaluation data makes it difficult to recommend any particular approach.

However, there are many examples of methods available for educators to consider (pending more research on effectiveness), and the examples range from the favoured active methods to those where the learner is more passive. For example, the Salford study heard from the group of former students about formal lectures, discussion

groups, case study presentations, observation, role play, computer-based learning and practice placements (2005, p 43). Among class-based methods, the formal lecture was the type recalled by most of those respondents. Crisp and colleagues and Salford CSWR both cite literature that cautions against reliance on instructional methods like lectures in teaching assessment (Crisp *et al*, 2003 p 19; Shardlow *et al*, 2005, p 43).

The level of resources available will tend to shape the methods chosen in teaching assessment (Shardlow *et al*, 2005, pp 21 and 30). Staff-intensive methods or those requiring expensive equipment may not be feasible in some UK social work programmes (Crisp *et al*, 2003). The effectiveness of particular methods may also be shaped by the age of students, according to the Salford study (p 30). The report suggests that it may be necessary to devise methods that allow for the younger age profile of students compared with social work students formerly, to take account of different levels and kinds of experience.

The quality and effectiveness of learning is also argued to be influenced by the type of contributors to the process. Contributions by staff of different academic disciplines, agency staff, service users and carers and other professions will add to the scope for creativity in learning design. A policy of working in partnership with these different groups is recommended for greater access to the range of perspectives on assessment that its complexity requires (Crisp *et al*, 2003, pp 40–1).

There is a clear view in the SCIE-commissioned assessment studies that learning through practice is indispensable and that methods should be sought to provide this (Crisp *et al*, 2003). Methods include both classroom-based or classroom-initiated learning and agency-based learning. Special value is placed on teaching that connects the two, with the classroom teaching providing preparation for agency-based learning (Shardlow *et al*, 2005). The Salford study of HEIs found that placement documents on learning objectives and portfolio requirements showed a clear expectation of assessment as a core and developing skill.

### From less active to more active learning: examples of methods

Textbooks, lectures and frameworks

Completely passive learning is a contradiction in terms since some engagement is needed by the learner. Nevertheless, reading textbooks and listening to lectures are at the passive end of the spectrum. Crisp and colleagues espouse active learning methods and, accordingly, examined textbooks for examples that would enliven the text. The reviewers show, in the appendices, those texts that include 'learning activities' such as questions for the reader to answer, and case studies. Most of the reviewed texts use case studies to illustrate assessment (2005). The reviewers also found that about two-thirds of books recommend further reading.

None of the frameworks includes learning exercises. However, two do use case examples to show how they might be implemented or, in the case of the care of drug users framework, to show the process from the client's perspective and to indicate good practice. The frameworks for assessment of children and families and care of drug users include numerous recommendations for further reading. Crisp and colleagues argue that if frameworks are to be used in social work education, this should be done in the context of professional supervision. The reviewers add that the aim should be to induce a critically informed approach to assessment, avoiding the idea that competent practice comes from following printed guidance.

Other kinds of written learning method were identified by the Salford CSWR study. An example is the 'educational card' developed by the Bolton Dementia Carers' Support Group. The card is designed to inform anyone making an assessment, and especially new or inexperienced practitioners, about dementia and the particular requirements of the card carrier (Shardlow *et al*, 2005, p 95).

Caution has already been reported about the suitability of didactic methods like lectures for teaching assessment. It seems that lectures may have the distinction of being the most common but least recommended method (Crisp *et al*, 2003, p 19). Lectures may be resource-efficient but used alone lack the active learning component believed to be essential in assessment learning. Nevertheless, Crisp and colleagues concede that structured teaching about assessment in lecture-like format has a place in an overall strategy that uses other, more active involvement of students.

#### Self-audit

Engagement of students in more active learning may be facilitated by the use of 'learning self-audit'. The method is discussed by Braye and Preston-Shoot in the law guide (2006, p 25). Self-audit can provide the student, tutor and practice teacher or assessor with a baseline against which learning objectives can be set and progress reviewed. The audit can be coupled with a learning styles review in which preferred and characteristic styles of learning are identified and scope for trying other styles considered (Honey and Mumford, 1992). Logs can be used to monitor and review progress of learning and the learning methods and styles adopted (Kearney, 2003).

#### Concept-focused analysis

Earlier discussion of the range of concepts in play in the field of assessment referred to the importance of assisting students to approach the subject in a critical way. Analytical frameworks and structured exercises can provide useful tools in developing critical capacity. The Salford CSWR study identified an example of a learning exercise in which students test their knowledge of different models of assessment and explore their responses alongside a sample analysis (pp 60–1). The

exercise is taken from the work of Smale and colleagues (1993 and 2000) who identify three models of assessment:

- the questioning model
- the procedural model
- the exchange model.

Smale and colleagues characterise the key assumptions and perspectives typical of each model. For example, they identify:

- the location of expertise
- who tends to define the assessment agenda and goals
- the forms of communication and information gathering.

The questioning and procedural models are characteristic of 'process-focused' definitions of assessment described in Section 9 (see page 19). The two models are similar in assuming that expertise in determining the nature and solution of problems is held not by the service user but primarily by others, namely the social worker (questioning model) or managers and policy-makers (procedural model). The exchange model recognises social worker expertise but assumes that people are 'experts in themselves' (Smale *et al*, 2000, p 140). This assumption conditions the definition of goals and the communications between social workers and service users and carers, which take the form of an exchange in which power in assessment is shared. There are similarities between the inclusiveness and user-validation of the exchange model and aspects of the 'critical social constructionist' approach described in Section 9 and the 'collaborative' model of assessment outlined in Section 23.

The teaching exercise cited by Salford CSWR invites students to consider and describe the characteristics of each of the three models proposed by Smale and colleagues and to enter them on to a grid. The sample analysis is then available to students to compare and debate their responses.

#### Video and IT-based learning

Video and IT (information technology) are used in a range of methods and are more accurately described as technologies than teaching methods. However, their importance in learning justifies discussion under a separate heading.

Crisp and colleagues and the Salford CSWR study describe use of video in learning assessment skills. Students may use video for consideration of pre-recorded case material, recording and playback of interviews and in 'skills labs' to practise active listening, interviewing and assessment roles. Video used in some of these ways provides classroom-based practice learning (also discussed below). Former students

with experience of video and role play reported favourably on its value in preparing to undertake assessment (Shardlow *et al*, 2005).

Learning that employs information technology (IT-based learning or e-learning) has multiple forms, which include ways of accessing formal knowledge and learning resources, and providing involvement with learning networks (Rafferty, 2003). Examples are given by Crisp and colleagues of computer-aided instruction and networked systems for joint student development of assessment tools (2003, p 20). The Salford study describes risk assessment teaching in which students could visit general and specific websites on risk ([www.sra.org](http://www.sra.org); [www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2002/11/15734/12653](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2002/11/15734/12653)) as well as a site on heuristics (here meaning mental shortcuts) in decision-making (p 82). The heuristics exercise demonstrates the use of learning opportunities from outside social care (in this case from aviation, a key context for risk and decision-making). Examples may be found at the following sites: [www.hf.faa.gov/Webtraining/Cognition/CogFinal036.htm](http://www.hf.faa.gov/Webtraining/Cognition/CogFinal036.htm) and [www.hf.faa.gov/Webtraining/Cognition/Heuristics/Heuristics2.htm](http://www.hf.faa.gov/Webtraining/Cognition/Heuristics/Heuristics2.htm). Crisp and colleagues note that e-learning depends in varying degrees on the computer proficiency of the learners and the time taken to learn the software.

#### Case-based and problem-based learning

Case-based and problem-based learning methods are found in examples given by Crisp and colleagues, Salford CSWR, Kearney (2003) and Burgess (nd), and are summarised in Fig. 9. The methods link directly with the next category, on classroom-based practice learning. The methods sometimes use video- and IT-based learning (University of Edinburgh, 2006).

**Fig. 9 Case-based and problem-based learning**

<b>Method</b>	<b>Elaboration</b>
case studies	favoured for enabling the teaching of skills in relation to particular client groups while 'assisting development of knowledge in several content areas' (Crisp <i>et al</i> , 2003, p 13)
client review presentations	involve presentation of assessments to fellow students, teaching staff and service users, followed by discussion and feedback (Crisp <i>et al</i> , 2003, p 14)
analysis of case-relevant material in films, theatre and novels	Crisp <i>et al</i> , 2003, pp 14–15
observation, coupled with reporting and reflection	for example, observation of children, court business or case conferences to increase awareness of behaviour, feeling content and process (Crisp <i>et al</i> , 2003, pp 15–16; Kearney, 2003)
'standardised clients'	in which actors perform to a standard script giving all students the opportunity to experience the same situation (Crisp <i>et al</i> , 2003, pp 16-18)
interactive workbooks	consisting of questions and answers on assessment (Kearney, 2003)
learning from service users and carers	for example, interviewing users on their experience of assessment (Kearney, 2003) and by practising assessment skills in simulated assessments designed by users ('Citizens as trainers' in Shardlow <i>et al</i> , 2005, p 95)
problem-based learning (PBL) and enquiry and action learning (EAL)	methods which engage students as active learners working cooperatively, promote learning through dialogue and reflection and seek to enhance motivation by using applied scenarios and problems (Burgess, nd).

Practice learning that is based or initiated in the classroom

These methods bring together and expand methods described in previous categories and include practice in skills labs and video role play. Learning may be entirely by simulation or link into agency-based practice, for instance through classroom-based application of assessment methods to cases, possibly supervised by the tutor. Problem-based learning (PBL) and enquiry and action learning (EAL) belong in this category as well as in the previous one when, for example, the scenarios and learning objectives they use extend beyond the identification of skills needed, to simulated practice of those skills.

Many of the methods described focus on assessment involving individuals and families. However, the Salford CSWR study refers to the teaching of community profiling, which may be used as a prelude to a community project. A widely cited text in community profiling is the practical guide *Community profiling: auditing social needs* (Hawtin *et al*, 1994). Additional sources include a basic online guide, which suggests steps that can be taken 'to gather information about a particular neighbourhood in Britain or Northern Ireland' ([www.infed.org/community/community\\_profiling.htm](http://www.infed.org/community/community_profiling.htm)), and a paper on the development of a module for social work students on poverty, deprivation and discrimination (Ferry and Watson, 2001). The paper places experiential community profiling at the centre of the approach, using it to bridge the gap between theory and anti-oppressive practice.

The Salford study also identified a module designed for students of health and social care to work jointly in a series of assessment-focused interprofessional workshops (Shardlow *et al*, 2005, pp 69–76). The workshops use case-based scenarios, supported by video and IT lab work, and their learning outcomes include the following:

- understanding the role and interaction, both positive and negative, of interprofessional groups and teams in assessment in health and social care
- understanding forms of uni-professional and interprofessional assessment and how they contribute to holistic care
- appreciating the possible implications of interprofessional assessment for client choice and for the values of the professions involved
- understanding and being able to evaluate team working and the benefits of interprofessional assessment.

Agency-based practice learning

Sources widely agree that agency-based practice learning offers potentially rich and valuable opportunities for applying and developing knowledge and skills in assessment. Examples of learning opportunities include (Crisp *et al*, 2003, p 22):

- shadowing/observing and questioning experienced workers
- supervised 'live' assessments
- joint assessments with a fellow social worker or colleagues from other professions.

Community profiling is also applicable to placement-based learning and extends the scope of assessment beyond an individualised focus (Shardlow *et al*, 2005, p 23).

Supervision is regarded as a key context for learning, providing a forum for articulating and challenging the assumptions of students and agencies and for active reflection on student practice (Crisp *et al*, 2003, p 22). Former students in the Salford CSWR illustrative study reported the critical role of skilled supervision in facilitating learning of assessment skills. However, agency-based practice learning and supervision, for all their potential merits, are not a panacea in the teaching of assessment. Crisp and colleagues point out the vast array of matters that have to be covered in supervision and the variation of teaching priorities among practice teachers. It is therefore risky to take for granted that supervision will represent a substantial and effective source of assessment learning (Crisp *et al*, 2003, p 22) but training and briefing of practice-based teachers will help.

### Messages for educators

- The best prospect for assessment learning seems to be a combination of approaches in which reading – and lectures, where used – are enlivened by a variety of active learning opportunities allowing for different learning styles.
- Agency-based practice learning facilitated by supervision is highly favoured but needs support and preparation via class-based learning and guided reading for students, and briefing for practice-based teachers.

## 30 What should be the relationship between what is taught and assessment practice in care agencies?

The review by Crisp *et al* (2003) and the Salford CSWR study suggest possible tensions between course and agency perspectives and priorities. The ingredients of these tensions can be outlined as follows.

- Educators have a role in teaching principles of assessment that are transferable and provide a measure of independence of any given assessment tool/framework.
- It is important that social workers are able to think critically about the assessment tools they are expected to use in an agency.
- Employers need social workers who are familiar with current assessment tools/frameworks.
- It takes time to teach assessment that goes beyond routine tools and it is important that time is used productively.

- Social workers may discard training on assessment that does not seem readily applicable to current practice.

In one programme, the response was as follows:

we've taken a conscious ... decision ... that we're not teaching students [just] to fill in forms ... and ... we've come under pressure from our partner agencies...  
(Shardlow *et al*, 2005 pp 26)

The Salford CSWR study describes the HEI case as follows:

Study participants indicated that it was common practice [during modules] to invite students to complete assessment forms that were used with the specific service user group. These included the *Framework for the Assessment for Children in Need and their Families*; those associated with the *National Health Service and Community Care Act, 1990*; the *National Service Framework for Older People*; and a range of other protocols and tools, including risk assessments. However, occasional concern was expressed that this could be too functional and that it would simply train students to complete forms, rather than reflect on how they are constructed and completed. It may also lead to an over-emphasis on statutory settings rather than reflecting the broad range of social work agencies and their associated contextualised assessment approaches.  
(Shardlow *et al*, 2005, pp 25–6).

A partnership between social work programme and agency is an important basis for managing the tensions outlined. Partnership should help to avoid stereotypical perceptions of academic institutions as remote from the realities of practice and of agencies as steeped in bureaucratic procedures. In principle, the two organisations have complementary orientations – that is, the design of degree programmes is practice-oriented, agencies are expected to meet defined service and quality standards, and both parties are required to be service user-oriented.

#### Question for educators

- Are there mechanisms for negotiating the respective priorities of agencies and social work courses in relation to the teaching and practice of assessment?

### 31 Examining student competence in assessment

Examination of student competence in assessment did not emerge as a major set of findings of any of the three main studies and consequently does not occupy a major section of this guide. However, the Salford CSWR study gained some information from the HEI (higher education institute) consultation, with similar findings on

methods of evaluating competence from the illustrative study of former students. The following extract describes the information gathered from HEIs:

Two main approaches were identified by participants [HEIs]. First, there were teaching and learning activities such as role play and group presentations which were not formally assessed but were used to assist students in developing their awareness of the use of self. This was undertaken either through the opportunity for self-reflection; through peer review or by tutor feedback.

Second, the main formal assessment was undertaken by assignment, predominantly linked to an area of practice with which the student had a particular interest. It was expected that the student would demonstrate the theoretical understanding of the chosen assessment process or context, highlighting the legal and organisational influences on this. Occasionally this assignment would be linked directly to their work on placement, allowing a more in-depth consideration of the complexities of the task and linking this with their actual practice. Assessment skills were a part of all placement assessments and linked to National Occupational Standards.

Assessment of student practice assessment skills was primarily undertaken by the practice supervisor, although there was evidence of service user involvement in the overall assessment of students' abilities. This could take various forms, including video and audio evidence by the service users; a pro-forma feedback form provided by the programme or consultation with the practice supervisor and others. Programmes varied in their emphasis on the inclusion of service user feedback, with some having this as an evidence requirement whereas with others it was an expectation. There was limited evidence that service users were asked to comment specifically on the assessment abilities of the student, however the qualities commented on were valuable constituent elements of the assessment process, for example communication skills.

(Shardlow *et al*, 2005, p 28)

A number of the teaching methods described in the preceding section may be used as assessment media and examples of this are evident in the extract above.

### Questions for educators

- How may the analysis of assessment in this guide inform implementation of the requirements for competence in assessment set down for the social work degree by the respective national care councils?
- What arrangements or plans are there for a service user contribution to the evaluation of students' assessment skills?

## 32 Whose contributions are needed in assessment teaching?

Assessment is multi-dimensional, both conceptually and in its practical application. It gains these multiple dimensions in part from the different stakeholders and other parties who have both an interest in the way that assessment is defined and carried out and a contribution to make in delivering or supporting learning opportunities. The review by Crisp and colleagues and the study by Salford CSWR convinced the researchers that partnership with the various interests is essential in building the necessary assessment learning opportunities (Crisp *et al*, 2003, p 41; Shardlow *et al*, 2005, p 53). In addition to the social work teachers and students, the main stakeholders and contributors are:

- service users and carers
- agencies and staff involved in practice learning
- other professions and agencies
- other academic teachers.

### Service users and carers

It is a requirement of social work degree programmes that service users and carers are involved in all parts of the degree (see discussion and guidance in Levin, 2004). This requirement was initiated in 2002 and came too late to have an impact on most of the literature reviewed by Crisp and colleagues (2003). The reviewers found that, with very few exceptions, the views of service users did not appear in the literature on teaching of assessment (pp 37–8). This finding contrasted with their perception that models of assessment taught on many social work programmes place great store in partnership with service users and in removing the hierarchy of active social worker and passive client (p 38).

Similar contrasts are found in the Salford CSWR study. The majority of former students in the illustrative study could not recall any course strategy to include service users in their assessment learning (Shardlow *et al*, 2005, p 42). In addition, the HEI study found that service user involvement remains inconsistent. The report notes concerns by respondents about 'the responsibility placed on service users to undertake tasks for which they may not be adequately equipped or supported' (p 30). There were related worries about costs and funding restrictions. One HEI respondent reported:

Having service users and agency staff attend as leaders of/contributors to classes involves guest lecturer fees. It is also time consuming for staff organising the module. (p 30)

However, the level of commitment to involvement of users and carers found in the HEI study was strong:

Social work programme providers had a clear commitment to the involvement of service users and carers in their programmes generally. All had incorporated this as either a formally specified requirement of their courses or made strong recommendations that it should be so. Service user and carer perspectives were viewed as an essential part of the learning and teaching, although this did not necessarily have to be delivered by service users and carers themselves. (p 29)

An HEI respondent said: 'I do not feel there is one effective way, the approach needs to feature as a core part of all of the course' (p 29).

The report continued:

Programme providers all expressed a desire to increase the involvement of service users in the teaching of assessment. There was one example of a module solely designed and delivered by service users which included issues around assessment within that group context. (p 29)

Examples of service user involvement from the HEI study were not all related directly to assessment but were transferable:

There was a high level of reported service user involvement within modules, with clear indications that where a culture of involvement had developed there was a higher participation rate. Sampling of student work by service users was indicated by one programme as a quality assurance process. Participation of service users as consultants on programme development was also highlighted in several cases, although not specifically around assessment as a discrete task. One programme had developed an initiative where service users were involved in assessing an interview with students, who had to demonstrate their understanding of user involvement. (p 29)

The Salford CSWR study found that the chief area of service user and carer involvement in the teaching of assessment was in relation to teaching within the HEI as distinct from teaching in practice agencies (p 37). A similar pattern was found from the consultation with service users and carers who reported involvement with HEIs in class settings rather than with agencies and practice settings.

All the service user and carer groups consulted emphasised the importance of involvement in the teaching and learning. They viewed their participation in the teaching of assessment as essential because, 'without an understanding of perspectives grounded in the experience of service users and carers, learning about good practice was not feasible' (p 33). The study reports that:

Two groups had extensive involvement (CATS and YIPPEE) both in working at a strategic level with educators (for example: participating in curriculum

development) and in delivering educational sessions for students on professional social work courses. The service users and carers groups were most involved in the delivery of some components of the educational experience. Knowledge of the learning objectives which were part of professional social work education programmes was limited. (p 33)

Involvement could go further. The 'experts by experience' cited in the law resource guide for SCIE by Braye and Preston-Shoot (2006) gave examples of the value of their participation in a number of different aspects of degree programmes, all of which are relevant to assessment knowledge and skills (pp 48–9):

- learning objectives
- curriculum design
- live involvement with students in the classroom
- preparation of video material
- preparation of case study material for use in teaching
- marking students' assessed work.

Commitment among HEIs to extend service user and carer involvement is reported in the Salford CSWR study and in other recent work (Braye and Preston-Shoot, 2006). The Salford study points out that development of service user and carer involvement in assessment teaching and other areas have costs and states that 'adequate resources need to be provided on a long-term basis to enable the development' (Shardlow *et al*, 2005, p 53).

### Question for educators

- Has the requirement of service user and carer involvement in social work education been translated into assessment learning opportunities that are effective for students and sustainable for service users? If not, are reasons identified and solutions defined?

### Message for educators

- Development appears especially to be needed in the involvement of service users and carers in students' agency-based assessment learning.

### Agencies and staff involved in practice learning

Practice teachers and assessors and their agencies are clearly indispensable to the development of assessment knowledge and skills. The purpose of the partnership recommended between social work programmes and agencies by Crisp and colleagues and the Salford CSWR study is two-fold: first, to secure the involvement of agency staff in student learning and examination of competence; and second, to

enhance understanding among practice learning contributors of learning objectives and theoretical approaches to assessment. The report of the Salford CSWR study gives a particular example of this second objective in describing the goal of gaining the commitment of practice teachers and assessors to the critical perspectives on assessment expected in degree programmes. The researchers heard in the HEI study that:

the critical understanding of assessment was not always reflected in the teaching of assessment on placement, where there was a more functional approach to assessment techniques. Engaging with practice teachers and supervisors to develop teaching on assessment was seen as a positive development to address this, including through practice teacher/assessor workshops.  
(Shardlow *et al*, 2005, p 27)

In some statutory agencies teaching of assessment is a bit formulaic.  
(HEI respondent, p 27)

Practice assessors and practitioners ... can be quite mechanical about assessment ... a form filling exercise.  
(HEI respondent, p 27)

Partnership with agencies is also seen as a way of aligning agency-based learning with course objectives in relation to service user and carer involvement in student learning and other values pursued in the social work degree. Anecdotal evidence suggests that providing course materials online, and enabling students and practice teachers and assessors to access the materials both separately and together, can enhance a common approach.

The findings of the Salford CSWR HEI study and illustrative study of agencies prompt the following questions for educators.

### Questions for educators

- Are agency staff and particularly practice teachers and assessors appropriately briefed on class-based objectives, teaching methods and assessment methods on social work assessment skills?
- Are the expectations of the social work degree course regarding practice learning objectives and opportunities clear and agreed by all parties?
- Are there ways to ensure that learning opportunities extend beyond familiarisation with agency standard assessment forms?

## Other professions, agencies and academic disciplines

Social work practice has become widely recognised as an interprofessional activity. This means that, in order to achieve social work goals as shaped by users' needs and agency objectives, social workers have to get work done in collaboration with other professions and occupations. In some cases collaboration in assessment is a policy requirement or a function of predetermined roles and procedures. In others, it is simply good practice.

The recognition of interprofessional practice has been accompanied by growth of interprofessional education and support for the method of choice: that is, learning 'with, from and about' other professions (Barr *et al*, 2005, p xxiii). Crisp and colleagues located examples of interdisciplinary training on assessment in their literature review but the only published examples involved qualified social workers (2003, p 3). An England-wide study of social work programmes commissioned by the Department of Health, found many initiatives in joint learning for collaborative practice (although data was not collected specifically on assessment learning) (Whittington, 2003c). The pattern of examples seemed, most typically, to consist of periods of shared learning between students of separate professional programmes. There remain relatively few integrated professional joint-award programmes, while initiatives in which students from different professions learn together throughout their courses also remain in the minority (Taylor *et al*, 2006).

The pattern described above explains the importance placed by social work educators on investing in educational partnership with other professions, faculties and students inside and outside the university (Whittington, 2003a and 2003c). Interprofessional educational structures have to be built, and maintained, on existing professional structures. In short, cooperation has to be constructed and, without cooperation, it is difficult to develop and sustain opportunities for interprofessional teaching and learning, including learning on assessment.

Social work is an inter-organisational activity as well as an interprofessional one and this implicates assessment, as discussed in Section 19. Almost all respondents in the study of social work programmes cited above recognised the distinction between interprofessional and inter-agency dimensions of collaboration and provided data on the factors that assisted and hindered learning for each (Whittington, 2003c). The good news from the research is that many of the factors that benefit the development of learning opportunities for interprofessional collaboration also benefit opportunities for inter-agency learning. The factors included, particularly, placements in a variety of settings and especially in multi-disciplinary teams and agencies; having staff and visiting teachers who are committed to collaborative practice; and learning that takes place in course and agency environments with good cross-agency links and permeated by collaborative ideas and values.

Finally, cooperation is also needed with contributory teachers who, depending on the structure of the faculty and teaching arrangements, may include, for example, teachers in law, sociology, psychology, social policy and ethics. Each discipline has a potential contribution to make to teaching and learning about assessment and exposes students to different perspectives on the subject.

#### Questions for educators

- What opportunities are there for learning with, from and about other professions in relation to assessment?
- Are there learning opportunities in which students can work across agencies and understand the inter-agency and multi-agency dimensions of assessment?
- Are there assessment teaching arrangements that expose social work students to the perspectives of teachers from other professions and disciplines?

## Conclusion

Social work assessment shares a number of features with other major areas of study in social work education. For instance, assessment is multi-dimensional, as this guide has shown, a fact that presents logistical as well as pedagogic challenges to both educators and students confined by time-limited courses. Assessment is also a contested topic with no absolute arbiter of the 'correct' approach. Accordingly, education on assessment cannot be reduced to learning 'the approach' since there are competing approaches and different conditions or contexts in which they are claimed to be appropriate. Learning 'how', has to be accompanied by learning 'who', 'what', 'when', 'where' and 'why'. The aim of this guide has been to assist in making these features of assessment more explicit and thereby assisting educators, and their students, in engaging with them.

This concluding section takes up three sets of issues:

- research on the teaching and learning of assessment
- suggested reflection on the 'construction' of assessment
- key contexts in the future practice of assessment (connecting to earlier coverage).

### Research

In addition to the features mentioned above, assessment shares with other major areas of study in social work a need for information on the outcomes of teaching and learning. Work has been in progress on the general question of outcomes since 2005, aiming, through the OSWE Project (Evaluating the Outcomes of Social Work Education), to build the capacity and capability of social work educators to evaluate social work education (Burgess, 2006). Although teaching and learning of assessment is not the specific focus of the OSWE constituent projects, it is a clear candidate for future research attention as capacity and capability for evaluation expand. The material in this guide suggests that many factors will have a claim on researchers' attention in evaluating outcomes, including learning content, structure, method and participants. The potential subject matter for research is wider still, however, and is suggested in the discussion and questions for educators on page 88.

### Reflection on the construction of assessment

It was argued earlier in this guide that it may be useful to think of assessment in its many dimensions as a construction shaped by a number of possible influences, that is, cultural, economical, political, organisational and professional. Each of these influences exercises its effects on the goals of assessment and the forms it takes, in more or less powerful ways. The models of assessment taught on social work courses, found in agencies and applied by social workers in their assessments, 'carry'

these influences. This is not to say that people and organisations are unavoidably docile and unwitting 'carriers', but if influences are to be understood and responded to in an informed way, they must be unearthed and reflected on. An important task of educators is to facilitate the reflective process with students. The analysis offered in this guide hopes to assist in the task.

It may be possible to cast further light on the social construction of assessment by thinking beyond the particular models and types that this guide has discussed, to assessment as discourse. A discourse defines what may be 'said' about a subject, governing how it can be meaningfully discussed; language, visual imagery and moral positions constitute the discourse. The language of a discourse draws its boundaries and defines its content. Participation in that discourse, by courses, educators, agencies, authors of textbooks and frameworks, service users and practitioners, constructs and sustains it by the expression and application of its ideas. Reflection on the discourse of assessment would include examination of the following elements (adapted from Hall, 1997):

- **statements about assessment** that give a particular kind of knowledge of it – such as, 'assessment is a core social work skill' (Crisp *et al*, 2003); it is 'an important tool for policy makers' (Clarkson, 2006); 'self-assessment recognises ... the expertise of service users and ... carers' (Qureshi, nd)
- **the rules and practices** that prescribe particular ways of talking about the topic and exclude others, governing what is 'sayable' and 'thinkable' at a given historical moment – for instance, that 'officials', not users and carers, set eligibility thresholds
- **the 'subjects' who personify the discourse** – for example, historically, the deserving or undeserving poor, the 'needy' or deprived client, the empowered service user
- **how particular kinds of knowledge of assessment gain authority** – for instance through the activities of government, university courses, professional publications and associations, care agencies, service user and carer movements
- **the practices within organisations and institutions** for dealing with the subjects whose conduct is being regulated or organised – such as frameworks, eligibility criteria, theories of need or behaviour
- **the emergence of different discourses over time**, in which prevailing ideas are supplanted by new conceptions of assessment that have the power and authority to regulate social practices in new ways – for example, from decline of the ideas of absolute agency control towards the rise of user-led models.

A moment's reflection on the foregoing agenda shows two things. First, that this guide itself constructs and is constructed by the ideas outlined above. Second, that assessment as described in the sources for this guide seems actually to consist of more than one discourse. For example, the technical, procedurally oriented, agency-

controlled, eligibility-focused approaches discussed at different points in the guide appear to represent aspects of a particular assessment discourse. Furthermore, that discourse is challenged by rival approaches. Some social work educators in the Salford CSWR study sought to promote an alternative. They invoked terms like 'formulaic' and 'mechanical' to characterise the disapproved discourse and to distinguish it from a favoured one that is reflexive and humanistic (Shardlow *et al*, 2005, p 27). Reflecting on assessment in the ways described in this section raises a number of questions pertinent to social work education.

### Questions for educators

- What are the distinctive ideas about assessment represented by social work programmes and their educators, and do those ideas group into a recognisable discourse or discourses?
- Do particular discourses predominate in academic or practice teaching and, if so, what influences appear to account for this predominance, giving the ideas authority and as embodying 'truth'?
- How does a given discourse stand up against competing discourses, not only in the classroom but in a student's placement and subsequent employed practice?
- How may students be prepared to practise effectively in situations where assessment discourses compete?

The kinds of systematic reflection on the nature and construction of discourses in assessment suggested here do not apply solely to assessment. Similar questions are relevant to learning for other domains of practice. Nor are these questions 'merely abstract and theoretical'. They seek to advance the aim of improving the experience of people who use social care services by improving understanding both of the complex arena of assessment and of the enterprise of teaching and learning.

### Assessment and future practice contexts

The social work and social care workforce of the future (ADSS Cymru, 2005; Department of Health and Department for Education and Skills, 2006; RPA, 2006) will need to function effectively as collaborative practitioners in two significant contexts:

- a care system that strives increasingly to be interprofessional and based on integrated organisational structures and inter-agency partnerships
- services that are user-involved.

The contested nature of assessment has been a discussion point, so it is important to note that the second of these contexts represents a significant area of consensus in assessment, that is, recognition by government and social work of the principle of involvement of service users and carers. There is also an emerging understanding that

different and extended forms of involvement in assessment, discussed in Sections 21–23, are needed to respond to the various needs and expectations of service users and carers.

Taking the two contexts together, social work brings distinctive contributions to each, particularly its social work values and a social model of care. Furthermore, assessment is a critical arena for ensuring that a social perspective and social work values contribute fully to the provision of care. However, the ability of social work and social care to make these contributions will depend on more than the knowledge and skills in collaborative practice needed to negotiate with different professions and organisations. The ability to make an effective contribution will also depend, in the reported words of a government minister, on having ‘parity of status and esteem’ [with other professions] (Brindle, 2006). The implied alternative, the report states, is to remain a junior partner.

Achievement of professional parity is a complex matter and depends on a number of conditions. One is government endorsement, and the role and authority structures that accompany it. Another is recognised professional competence. Recognition of professional competence in assessment requires continued research and development of the knowledge and skills base, and effective social work education. These measures are unlikely to remove contestation from the field of assessment, and that should not be the test of effectiveness of research and education. Effectiveness will be found more reliably in the ability to improve the quality of the service users’ and carers’ experience of assessment and its outcome.

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