A framework for supporting and assessing practice learning

SCIE

Social Care Institute for Excellence

Better knowledge for better practice

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Summary

Learning from practice is an essential feature of a competent workforce. The new social work degree places more emphasis than ever on students being able to learn from practice. This means that the colleges and universities offering the degree and social care employers have a shared interest in developing the workforce.

Higher education needs to ensure that workplace learning is an integrated and high-quality part of the new curriculum; statutory and voluntary social care agencies will have another catalyst to improve their human resources (HR) and standards of practice. The involvement of social care providers in learning and teaching and that of higher education in the quality and delivery of care services will be greater than before.

In this position paper, the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) sets out a skills and qualifications framework that should support practice learning, both in the new degree and across social care organisations. We focus on ways of supporting those whose task it is to assess practice in the workplace ('practice assessors'). We also look at employers' opportunities for organisational development, improved practice standards and human resource development (HRD).

The framework is set in the context – which is also fundamental to the new degree – of incorporating service users' perspectives, of teaching and learning about communication and of working with other professions.

Because this work has been done in the run-up to the new social work qualification, examples we use pre-date or anticipate the new degree. However, we draw together information from a range of sources, including two new surveys undertaken specifically for this paper. The first is a survey of National Organisation for Practice Teaching members ('NOPT survey')[1] and, the second, interviews with higher education institutions providing the new degree programme ('HEI survey').[2] While we focus on the undergraduate degree, in terms of social work qualifications, the framework can be adapted to new postgraduate qualifications, as they appear.

Terminology

'Practice assessor' is used to mean any individual in a workplace who offers a practice-learning opportunity to a social work student. The term, therefore, relates to activity and responsibility, rather than any particular qualification.

'Practice teacher' is used specifically to mean holders of the practice teacher award (PTA).

'Professional' is used throughout to indicate the range of occupations in social care, including but not exclusively those requiring particular qualifications.

'Programme provider' is used for those organisations, including universities and colleges, which provide educational programmes for social work and social care.

[1] NOPT survey see Appendix
[2] HEI survey see Appendix

BACKGROUND

The practice teacher award is a mixed blessing. The HEI survey shows a strong appreciation of the award as a 'gold standard', providing high-quality practice teachers without whom higher education institutions could not attain academic or professional goals.

However, an unintended consequence of the PTA being a stage towards the full post-qualifying (PQ) social work award is that it has become a proxy management qualification – even though the award itself does not focus on management skills. PTA holders have been drawn away from education into first-line management, where the manager's role has not usually included being an educator.

Moreover, the award has its limits. It requires neither the continued professional development of the holder nor for the role of the practice teacher to be considered within the wider context of their employing organisation. Unlike the approved social work qualification (ASW),[3] there are no attendant recommendations for PTA holders to maintain and develop their practice. Practice teachers might only ever supervise one student and the PTA focuses on each particular award holder's work with an individual student in the workplace. The award is not concerned with learning and assessment across the workplace.

Consequently, there is little encouragement for practice teachers to build on the experience they gain from supervising or for an employer to use such expertise as part of its human resource (HR) and workforce development.

NEW ENVIRONMENTS

The centrality of practice learning to the creation of confident and relevant social work professionals is recognised within the degree. The need to reform the way practice learning takes place and its aims have also been part of the development of the new qualification.

The degree is committed to practice-learning opportunities that include the primacy of users' experiences and an understanding and experience of collaborative working with other professions. Achieving these goals requires a shift in perception from individual assessors of individual students to a workplace where every social care worker sees practice learning as their business. The costs of students in the workplace can be set against the benefits of extending learning and raising standards across the workforce.

The Department of Health's (DH) quality strategy has set in train work to support this shift. There are levers, such as the codes of practice[4] and the various social care national occupational standards.[5] Funding has been made available for human resource strategies and workforce planning.[6] The link between practice learning and effective social care agencies is helped by a performance

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[3] Guidance strongly recommends: 'an agreed framework for the professional development of ASWs… Structured arrangements to maintain and develop their competence once appointed are likely to prove cost-effective to local authorities… in ensuring the maximum use and effectiveness of their ASW workforce.' General Social Care Council The Mental Health Social Work Award: social work education post-qualifying training handbook s4 July 2001
[4] Code of Practice for Social Care Workers and Code of Practice for Employers of Social Care Workers September 2002 London: General Social Care Council, 2002
[5] http://www.topss.org.uk/uk_eng/framesets/engindex.htm
[6] LAC (2003)15 Social services national training strategy grant and human resources development strategy grant London: Department of Health, 2003

indicator for practice learning, which takes effect in 2004.

LEARNING FROM, ABOUT AND WITH OTHER PROFESSIONALS

Issues of practice learning and professional development are shared by allied professions and agencies. For example, within the health service, workforce development confederations seek to boost practice-learning opportunities.

Shared concerns are recognised in Guidance on the Assessment of Practice in the Workplace (2002) from the workforce regulator for England, the General Social Care Council (GSCC) and the workforce development body for social care, Topss. These joint guidelines draw on inter-professional and other vocational training to help inform the debate in social care.

The guidelines should complement areas where different professions are already working closely together, for example, in multi-disciplinary drugs and alcohol, child protection or older people's teams. These settings offer:

■ learning from social workers and allied occupations about how to use similar skills;

■ learning from the scope and remit of other professional roles, which can in turn help to define the scope and remit of social work;

■ learning from social care and other professionals about the nature of professional identity and behaviour;

■ learning how to put into practice the particular contribution that social work can make to effective services for users and their carers and supporters.

THE KEY CONTRIBUTION OF PRACTICE LEARNING

Practice learning and practice assessors have a key role in the growth of a robust learning culture in social care. The NOPT and HEI surveys suggest some of the conditions and approaches that create effective learning environments.

'Critical mass' seems to be an important factor in sustaining large numbers of practice placements over time. Those employers which are able to offer large numbers of placements on a regular basis often have large pools of practice assessors, perhaps backed by more experienced colleagues; a core team responsible for developing practice across the workforce; staff who are undertaking training, practice development and in-house qualifications, as well as further professional qualifications.

'Thinking big and thinking wide,' as one NOPT respondent says, goes beyond individual practice teachers working with students. Some social care employers, for example, use experienced practice teachers to support various colleagues, including less experienced practice teachers; those who perhaps do not wish to complete the full PTA and professionals in related occupations.

Additionally, some programme providers and social care employers use 'long-arm' or 'off-site' practice assessors, including practitioners based elsewhere in the organisation; independent practitioners

and independent practice assessors. Initially, such arrangements may have been to compensate for a scarcity of PTA holders but they have evolved into effective whole-agency approaches.

Example 1
This agency works to the principle that 'those who can practise can teach'. 'Assisted' practice assessors, provided by a staff development team, are offered support ranging from individual supervision, through joint assessment of a student, to arm's-length assessment of a student. This model offers 'apprenticeships' to inexperienced practice assessors who want to develop their skills, as well as to practice assessors from other professions and to staff who want to make a limited contribution to practice teaching. The organisation has successfully created a large pool of practice assessors.

Example 2
This agency has integrated the 'long-arm' system; it uses its long-arm practice teachers as mentors and supervisors for its in-house practice assessors. This makes best use of the practice teachers' expertise in adult learning, while avoiding some of the difficulties of using individuals who do not work within the organisation or who are no longer in direct practice of any kind.

Example 3
This agency uses its experienced PTA holders as mentors and supervisors to other staff who are contributing to practice learning. This allows managers and other more senior staff to take on a practice-teaching role.

Some employers recognise the need to develop practice assessors who do not have the practice teaching award. These employers offer introductory programmes that concentrate on the skills for adult and vocational learning. Such programmes help to prepare and encourage staff, who might go on to do the award, and highlight transferable and multi-disciplinary principles and skills.

Example 4
A five-day introductory programme on reflective and observational practice skills and on assessment skills.

Example 5
An introductory programme focusing on participants' expertise in direct practice and how they transfer these skills to working with students.

Example 6
An introductory programme applying assessment skills and anti-racist principles to practice teaching.

Finally, programmes specifically about the new degree are getting under way:

Example 7
A five-day preparation for practice assessors in the new degree, developing personal teaching profiles and linking competencies to the degree requirements.

Figure 1 sets out the range of functions in these examples and how they work together.

Figure 1
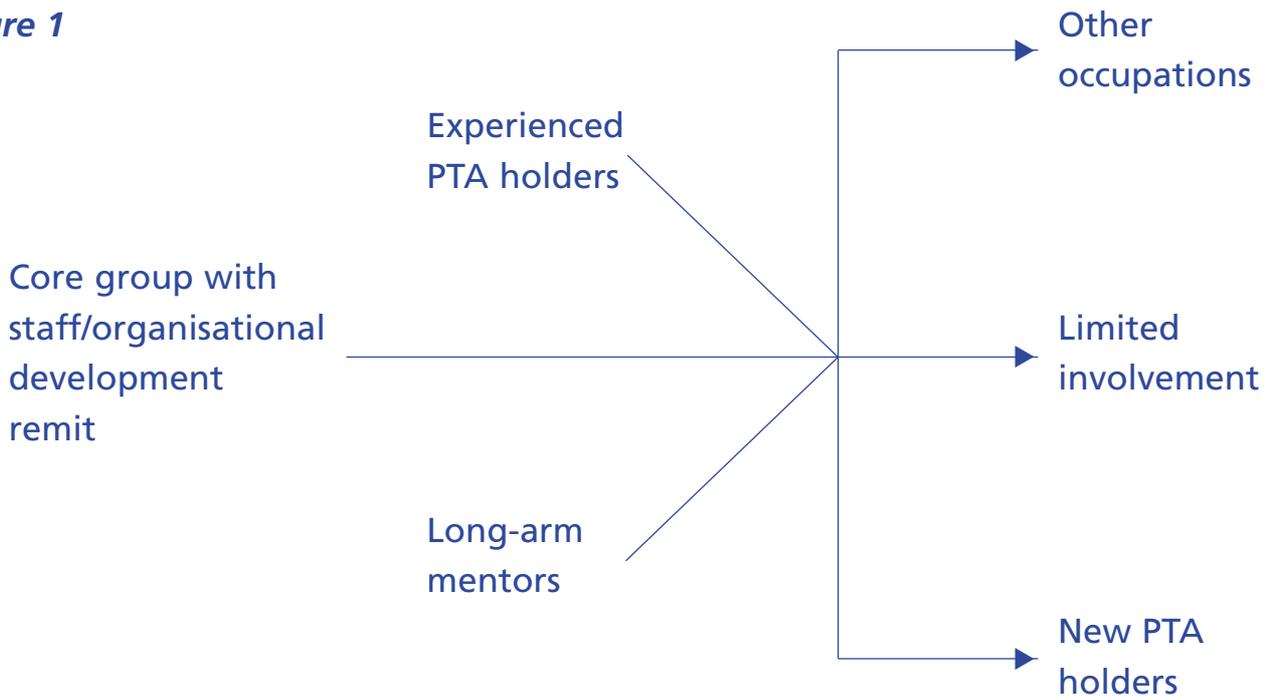
A FRAMEWORK FOR DEVELOPING THE LEVELS AND SKILLS OF PRACTICE ASSESSORS

Figure 2 sets out a framework that matches functions to skills level, applies to a range of professional staff and sets practice learning for the new degree within the context of a social care agency's development of both its human resources and practice standards.

Stage 1
An experienced worker offers their own practice for shadowing or observation by a student. The worker provides commentary and explanation to help the student learn from what they have seen. The worker can be a social worker or someone in a related area, including a service user in a user-based or user-led organisation. The worker should contribute to the HEI's assessment of the student's capacity to act appropriately and safely in a practice environment prior to the start of formal practice learning.

Stage 2
An experienced social worker or other social care worker offers the student a supervised practice placement in a setting that does not require legal intervention or statutory risk assessment. This stage might, over time, merge with stage 3, as sufficient support for assessors and relevant qualifications are developed. The worker should contribute to or undertake the agency's assessment of the student's performance in practice.

Stage 3
An experienced social worker and practice assessor offers a supervised practice placement in a setting that could include legal intervention and statutory risk assessment. The worker should undertake the agency's assessment of the student's performance in practice, including the final assessment of whether the student is 'ready to practise'. With appropriate training, the worker should contribute to the supervision and

Figure 2

Each function can operate at all stages below it.

Function stage	Who	What stage of social work degree	Undertakes	Assessment responsibilities	Preparation/ qualification
4	Social worker	Year 3+	Agency development and co-ordination of placements. Links to organisational learning.	Final practice assessment	Full programme/ organisational development
3	Social worker	Year 3	Statutory/legal learning opportunity. Supports assessors at functions 1 & 2	Final practice assessment	Full programme
2	Social worker/ social care assessor/ other relevant professional	Year 2	Offers student practice opportunity	Contributes to on-going assessment	Short programme/ NVQ etc
1	Any worker/ setting	Year 1	Offers student own practice and commentary on own practice	Contributes (to higher education institution) statement for fitness to undertake practice learning	Introductory short programme/ NVQ etc

mentoring of stage 1 and stage 2 workers and to the organisation's other practice development activities.

Stage 4
An experienced social worker and practice assessor with responsibility for co-ordinating practice learning and liaison with higher education within their employing organisation's wider HR remit. Through appropriate training and experience, this worker should contribute to the supervision and mentoring of stage 1, stage 2 and stage 3 workers and oversee problematic placements.

LEARNING ACROSS THE WIDER ORGANISATION

Having an organisational-development perspective to support practice learning seems crucial. Those social care agencies able to provide and sustain practice learning do so on a large scale by integrating it with their wider staff and standards development. Such an approach allows practice learning to contribute to the agency's overall practice development. This chimes with Davies & Connolly's findings[7] that practice teachers and their colleagues are challenged and stimulated by students:
The students bring new ideas to the office (p343).

Davies and Connolly note two more concrete advantages:
… taking students helps recruitment, both in the sense of bringing would-be employees into close contact with an office and so encouraging them to apply

for vacancies, and also because it provides a hands-on opportunity for the agency to experience the work of would-be applicants (p344).

… students were contributing actively to the throughput of the agencies in which they were located (p341).

Other comments gathered through the NOPT survey echo Davies & Connolly's findings about major disincentives to practice learning, such as a lack of administrative support or practical essentials including adequate office space.

As part of their general preparation for practice learning, employers could benefit from:

■ an organisation-wide audit to establish how many PTA holders are in post and how many are active or able to contribute in some way to practice learning for the new degree;
■ an investigation of and commitment to essential administrative, IT and other office support for students;
■ longer-term work to integrate practice learning in the organisation's workforce development strategies.

RECIPROCAL INTERESTS: EMPLOYERS AND HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Practice learning for the degree can fit in the wider context of organisational development. This suggests that there are strong reciprocal interests between employers and programme providers and that there need to be new

[7] Davies M & Connolly J 1994 Health & Social Care 2 pp339-346

relationships between the two.
Some of the DH's requirements of and support to social care agencies offer ways to strengthen these relationships. The work done to support practice learning in the new degree and the development of human resource and workforce strategies could also inform the social care sector's training strategies and standards frameworks. Figure 3 sets out some of these elements and suggests how employers could fit them together.

Two recent initiatives offer higher education, social care agencies and service users vehicles for collaborative working in order to train an effective skilled workforce. They are:

- learning resource centres, which can assist organisations in creating the organisational-development and critical-mass approaches (explained above) as a supportive pre-condition for practice learning, both for students and for the workforce;
- skills labs, which are the responsibility of programme providers but could draw on the expertise of service users and practitioners to offer rehearsal opportunities to students, particularly in communication skills.

FUTURE WORK

Experience and expertise will grow over time as higher education and social care work together on the new degree. At present, there are two particularly fruitful areas that could be developed. One is training frameworks to support the assessment of practice learning. The other is the role that programme providers can play in ensuring practice standards.

Training frameworks

There are a series of developments set in train by Topss training and development strategies, national occupational standards and the GSCC codes of practice. Figure 2 indicates further work that will support skills development and qualifications for functions 2 and 3. There is also a place for organisational development programmes and qualifications to support function 4 and which could contribute to management development frameworks.

There is scope for programmes and qualifications that support an employer's status as a learning organisation, perhaps linked to the government's new performance indicator for practice learning. Some of these programmes and qualifications could be multi-disciplinary and reflect learning from and with other professionals, which is a key aspect of the social work degree.

Practice standards

Closer collaboration will mean that programme providers are more involved with social care agencies' practice standards. Some programme providers already have 'whistle-blowing' protocols, which focus on the role of students who encounter poor practice. However, this approach usually concentrates on the consequences for the student's learning. Agreements and practice codes at organisational level would be a more effective influence on practice standards. The effect on standards is a concrete example of mutual benefits, built on shared responsibilities, that can be achieved through practice learning.

Figure 3
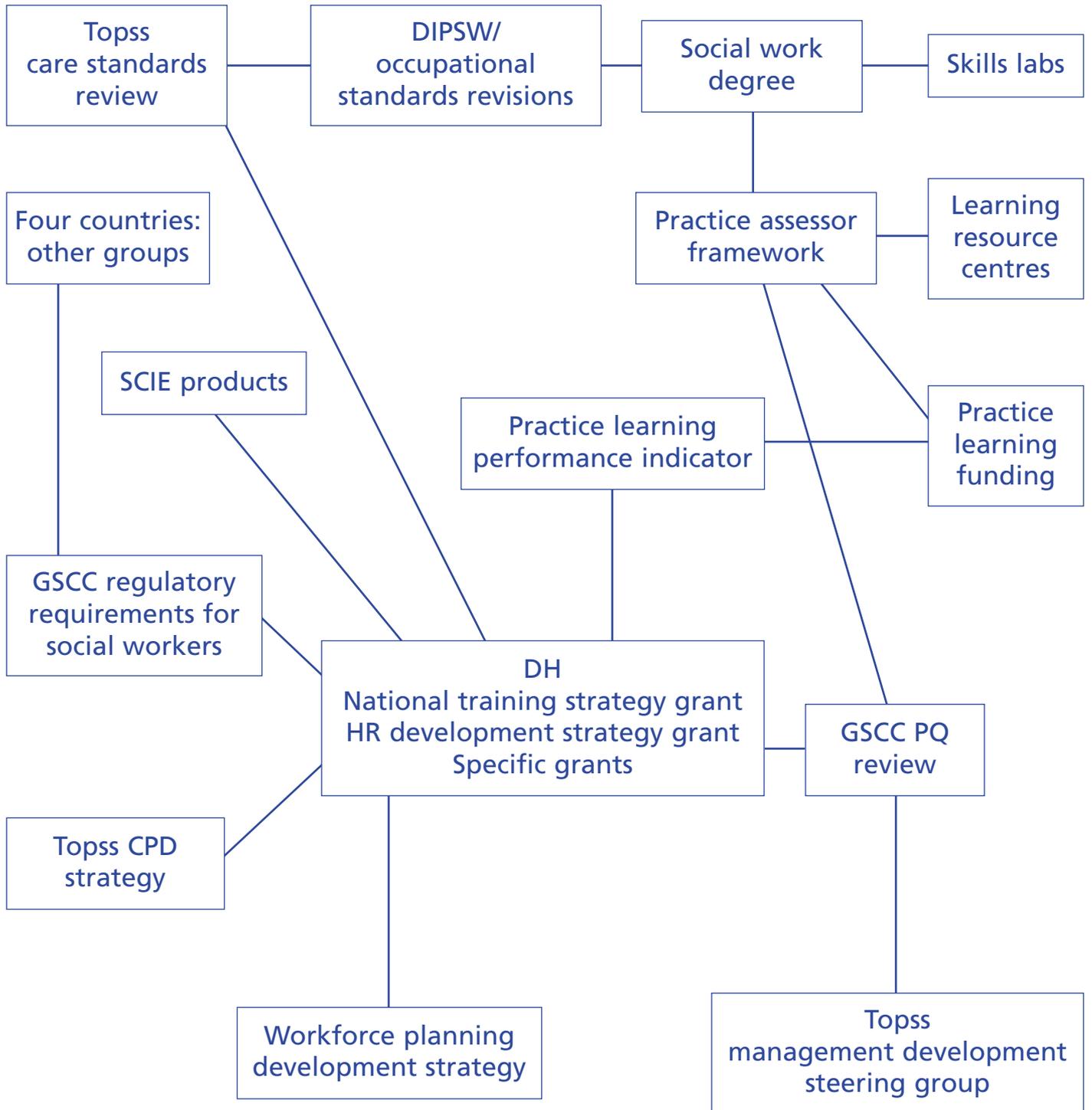
Appendix

THE NATIONAL ORGANISATION FOR PRACTICE TEACHING SURVEY

NOPT generously supported a survey of its members' opinions. Respondents returned a questionnaire and a number of these were followed up with telephone interviews and provided documentation. As NOPT members, respondents are particularly interested in practice learning and it is unlikely that inactive award holders are well represented in the data. ('Inactive award holders' means those who do not continue to work with students once they have completed their portfolio.)

NOPT members were asked about the range of activities they undertake as practice teachers and any other activities for which they thought the PTA might equip them.

Respondents fell into four main categories.

1. Those who described the traditional role of taking on individual students on a one-to-one basis. These included comments such as: "I'm not sure what else a practice teacher could do." A number said that they were now in other posts, noticeably as team managers, and so considered they were unable to contribute to practice learning.

2. In contrast were those respondents who considered their skills were neither used nor recognised to their full potential by their employing

organisation. Some of the team managers included in the first category may also have fitted in here. Respondents in this second category tended to be enthusiastic, suggesting an undimmed yet frustrated resource. Their suggestions for other work that they could do included:

- practice development of whole teams, especially those they manage;
- continuing professional development with individuals and work groups across their organisation;
- contributing to their organisation's workforce planning.

3. A number of respondents had applied the skills they had learnt as practice teachers to other areas of work on their own initiative and considered this transfer of these skills as an essential part of their expertise. These staff saw themselves as workplace educators and their PTA skills as enhancing their roles and managers and supervisors of individuals and teams. This group of respondents frequently mentioned induction of new staff members, including those returning to work, as an area to which they contributed. These examples may illustrate the confines of autonomy within the organisation, with respondents applying their skills within the traditional definitions of their job title.

4. Respondents who said that their organisation recognised and supported their expertise. A number

of these respondents, like those in the previous category, worked as operational managers and practitioners but were used by the organisation to contribute to workplace learning through, for example:

■ practitioner workshops;
■ pre-placement induction for students;
■ supervising and otherwise supporting practice assessors;
■ contributing to the planning and teaching of college programmes.

Other respondents had jobs specifically about learning and were often part of a dedicated staff team. Some of these focused on organising student learning, that is, overseeing and managing practice learning within their employing organisation. But a number were able to combine their work with a staff development function, for example:

■ mentoring staff;
■ inducting new staff;
■ assessing staff progression;
■ training and support for staff supervision.

The range and scope of these activities and the respondents' experiences suggest that combining student learning with staff development enhances both activities. This is one of positive benefits of developing a 'learning culture'.

THE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS (HEI) SURVEY

Interviews were held by telephone. The scope of the project did not allow for a comprehensive survey, so a sample of 10 universities and colleges that were

preparing for the new degree was used. Their willing co-operation enabled the interviews to be conducted within a tight timeframe and to yield a wealth of information about approaches.

The 10 institutions covered different regions and offered routes to the degree. They were selected, in consultation with the General Social Care Council (GSCC) and Department of Health's (DH) practice learning task force, because they were relatively well advanced in designing practice learning for the degree.

This paper draws on information about the aims and methods of preparation for and delivery of practice learning and staff roles in providing practice-learning opportunities.

There was a strong sense among respondents of the importance of certificated training for practice assessors and the development of 'learning cultures' in social care agencies.

The survey found that recurrent factors influencing practice-learning design were:

■ an anticipated change in the type of students. Older, experienced students, typical of the diploma in social work (DipSW), will not disappear but there will be undergraduate students who come straight from secondary education, have little work experience and little knowledge and few clear expectations of social work and social care;
■ the need to verify that students are safe, as practitioners, to have contact with service users;
■ the need for learning opportunities

to be cumulative, building towards the final learning goals, and applying national occupational standards and other requirements or codes;

■ a commitment to increase service-user involvement in all dimensions of the degree;

■ a growing recognition of multi-disciplinary practice.

The following sections bring together examples drawn from the NOPT and HEI surveys, as well as other sources, such as existing DipSW and PTA programmes. They are set out in terms of the chronology of the degree. Implications for employers, regarding practice-learning arrangements, and for practice-assessor skills and awards are noted.

PREPARATION

Preparation requires a number of activities: for example, students have to get ready to undertake practice-learning opportunities and they also have to prepare to undertake 'cumulative learning', or learning from experience, as they move through the degree.

Year one aims: the HEI interviews show that much activity relating to practice learning in the first year focuses on preparation for professional practice to be begun directly in year two. Some degree programmes will start this preparatory work before students formally begin their course. Examples of year one aims are:

■ to ensure that the student is safe to practice;

■ to induct students into the nature and context(s) of social work and social care, laying the foundations for social work identity;

■ to establish the idea of professional practice, to be further developed in years two and three.

Year one methods: in their first, preparatory year, students are learning to learn, as well as learning for practice. Both activities can take place individually and in groups. Methods include students:

■ using pre-course open learning workbooks;

■ acquiring skills for learning from experience, including observation, critical thinking and using supervision;

■ using learning logs, research and inquiry methods and other analytical and reflective accounts;

■ learning about values and codes of conduct, tasks and responsibilities, preliminary occupational standards and daily life in social care agencies;

■ having contact with users and carers and learning about their experiences and perspectives;

■ shadowing social workers;

■ shadowing other professionals;

■ undertaking structured observation of social workers at work;

■ practice simulation and using skills labs;

■ volunteer or community group activity.

In year one, a student moves from learning about practice, to learning from the practice of others, and on to learning through a limited experience of their own involvement in practice. Typically, the first year is designed to lay the foundations for the following two years.
Year two aims: year two marks a transition to learning for professional practice, with the focus on the student's individual experience within practice settings. National occupational standards (NOS), the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) benchmarks and related 'critical competencies' determine the focus of the

learning opportunities offered to students. Multi-disciplinary and multi-agency working and statutory work gain prominence. The goal is to develop reflective, professional practice.

Year two methods: preparation in year two consists of experiences that both precede and happen at the same time as practice learning. They include:

■ practice-orientation programmes that supply conceptual frameworks for placements, including for assessment practice;
■ placement handbooks, related induction and guidance on expectations;
■ pre-placement shadowing;
■ mapping service users' experiences;
■ concurrent workshops, seminars and learning sets directly linked to practice learning experience;
■ supported transition into year three.

Ways of delivering the above include:

■ single-agency and network placements;
■ placements in paid work;
■ multi-disciplinary and multi-agency working;
■ work in both the statutory and independent sectors;
■ work in settings with both generic (or multiple) and specialist functions;
■ timetables with block and concurrent sessions. For example, three days in practice, two in college.

Year three aims: year three concentrates on consolidation, integration and ensuring that students have had appropriate learning opportunities, such as statutory, multi-disciplinary and specialist learning.

Year three methods: preparation methods similar to those in year two are used, plus:

■ preparation for final competency requirements;
■ modules related to specific service users;
■ transition into employment.

Ways of delivering the above are similar to those in year two, plus:

■ placement opportunities that complement the second year experience (so, specialist if students previously had a generic placement; statutory and voluntary; single discipline and multi-disciplinary);
■ risk and legal interventions.

ASSESSMENT OF LEARNING

For year one of the degree, colleges and universities report that they will assess students' own analytical accounts. These accounts might include statements from the organisations that provided the shadow, user, volunteer or community experiences. At this stage (that is, prior to formal practice learning), such statements could contribute to:

■ the higher education institution's judgement about a student's safety;
■ an assessment of a student's capacity to learn from exposure to and analysis of the practice assessor's own direct practice, through shadowing or observation;
■ a specific assessment of the student's own practice within statutory or other settings, including readiness to undertake legal interventions and risk management.

REFLECTION AND REVIEW

This area appears to have been planned in less detail, according to the HEI survey results. This might be because the students' activity in this area will develop incrementally over the course of the degree.

However, self-recording as a precursor to analysis and reflection is built into some degree programmes from an early stage through various means, including learning diaries, 'critical-incident' descriptions and formal observation of practice.

Learning-to-learn activities, which can be particularly helpful to all students in the first year of their degree, also contribute to reflective practice and to a social work student's developing sense of professional identity. Such activities include acquiring critical thinking skills and observation skills. 'Using supervision' activities could also be useful to students, both in developing their own learning skills and their preparation for the workplace.

National vocational qualifications (NVQ), with their use of portfolios, offer useful examples. Universities or colleges – in particular, those with NVQ assessment centres – could build on this expertise.