Is there a shared philosophy of learning in social work education in Scotland?

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Executive summary

This project represents the first attempt to audit the state of learning philosophies at work in social work education in Scotland. It draws on literature and empirical data, including interviews with academics and focus groups with practice partners, students, and service users and carers.

The full report sheds particular light on the following key matters:

- to explore the issue of 'learning philosophies' in social work education in Scotland;
- to better understand how learning, teaching and assessment is approached in social work programmes;
- to assess the merits and demerits of adopting a common philosophy of learning for social work education; and,
- to link these findings to our overall goal of developing a skilled and competent workforce for the future.

Perhaps the most striking point to note is that there was little consistency in evidence, and no single or overarching philosophy of learning emerged from the study.

- Definitions and understanding of 'learning philosophy' or 'pedagogy' were highly inconsistent amongst participants.
- Neither did the literature offer any clear answer to the key questions around social work's actual or potential learning philosophy.
- Learning philosophies were often more implicit than explicit.

Nonetheless, a high level of consistency was evidenced in the approaches taken by HEIs – emphasis on experiential learning, creating critical and reflective practitioners, an emphasis on social justice – and the methods employed – group work, lectures, enquiry and action learning, seminars. This leads us to the view that a shared philosophy of learning is certainly possible.

There was a definite desire among all participants to move forward with a more thoroughly coproduced approach – including service users and carers, students, and practice partners (from practice educators to senior managers and policy-

makers). Whilst HEIs have made a lot of headway in developing creative approaches to the involvement of users and carers, there is still a lot of work to be done in other areas. Practitioners have always been involved in programme delivery, and their contributions appear to be highly valued, but the scope for their participation in the development of learning philosophies is more limited.

Learning philosophy, and, by extension, learning culture and methods, should not only be considered as the domain of universities. A common learning philosophy should be flexible enough to accommodate different contexts and demands, but it should also allow students and qualified workers to move between settings and recognise consistency of commitment and ethos.

Revisiting the relationship between the academy and service providers also provides the opportunity to reconsider the distinction between 'academic' and 'practice' learning and assessment.

We cannot, however, ignore the challenges faced in realising the potential of a shared learning philosophy. This review comes at a time of increasing austerity for universities, local authorities, Third Sector providers, and even the increasing need for students to work, impacts on everyone's capacity to invest in significant new development and innovation.

However, the fact that all partners were unreservedly positive about the value of *co*-developing a more explicit and enabling learning philosophy for social work education and practice is something that should be built upon.

1 Introduction

Social work education in Scotland is provided by eight HEIs and is governed by the *The Framework for Social Work Education in Scotland* (Scottish Executive 2003). Whilst this document defines the guiding principles underpinning professional social work and the standards that students must demonstrate to secure qualification, no attention is given within the Framework to the learning philosophies which inform and underpin social work education in Scotland. As part of the broader review of social work education in Scotland, this inquiry will explore the philosophies of learning currently employed in social work programmes in Scotland and will consider whether there is value in developing a shared philosophy of learning within and across these programmes.

Specific changes in recent years – such as integration, personalisation and self directed support – demand new modes of practice and, hence, create the imperative for HEIs to adapt and accommodate. Some of these changes – in particular, new ways of working with service users and carers, and increased, more integrated working with other professionals – impact, not only on *what* is taught, but *how*, and, as such, are significant issues when considering learning philosophies in social work.

Although the matter has not been formally explored, anecdotal evidence would suggest that different programmes – sometimes even within the same HEI – have adopted different approaches to teaching and learning, based on, amongst other things, different learning philosophies. Undoubtedly, many factors will have impacted on this situation: the pedagogical leanings of staff groups, accommodating to programme structures, available resources, local innovations, and so forth. This project affords, for the first time, an opportunity to review this situation.

There are, of course, many practical and theoretical difficulties involved in undertaking such a review. In practice, and even in theory, it is almost impossible to disentangle matters of pedagogy and curriculum from learning philosophy. Ought they be *determined* by an underpinning learning philosophy,

or are they discrete but interacting elements? This and other vexed questions rather depend on what one means by each term, and, as will become clear, no agreement exists.

This review is particularly timely given the current pace of change in social work and the continued impact of austerity on public funding to both social work services and universities. And whilst it is all too easy to slip into trite and impertinent clichés that we need to 'work smarter, not harder' in order to make 'efficiency gains', it also remains true that constant questioning of how things are done and searching for new and better approaches is a key hallmark of professionalism in social work, as well as in academia. It is in that spirit that we undertake this review.

2 Literature Review

The literature review will begin with a brief overview of the methods adopted by the review, before providing an overview of various definitions of 'a philosophy of learning' in order to be clear about the field under study. It will then go on to briefly highlight the importance of being clear about the purpose of social work education before examining the available evidence about the effectiveness of particular teaching approaches and exploring the value of a common philosophy of learning for social work education. It will conclude by summarising the key themes from the review.

2.1 Methods

An electronic search and advanced search of ASSIA, British Education Index, IBSS Online, Learning Exchange, reSearch Web, Social Care Online, Soc Index, Web of Science Core Collection and IRISS learning exchange website was conducted. Search terms included 'philosophies of learning', 'philosophy of education', 'pedagogy' and 'social work'. Fifty articles were found with a direct link to the topic. Additional material was also identified from the allied disciplines of teaching, education and nursing. Although the team also recognised the value of learning from approaches such as social pedagogy, it was beyond the scope of this review to explore this evidence base.

2.2 Defining 'philosophies of learning'

'Philosophies of learning' is a term that is not regularly used in the literature on social work education. Instead, discussions seem to focus around the term 'philosophy of *education*' or 'pedagogy'. Philosophy of education has been described in reference to its purposes: to understand and guide education. In the introduction to his comprehensive anthology, *Philosophy of Education*, Curren (2007) highlights five key questions that pre-occupy those interested in the philosophy of education: What are the aims of education? What authority does it rest on? What responsibilities does it entail? How, or in what manner, should it be carried out? What should its content be? Drawing on similar ideas Jordan et al (2009:6) define the philosophy of education as the 'purposes, processes, nature and ideals of education.'

Philosophy of education can trace its origins back to ancient Greece and the work of Aristotle and Plato. Although public education did not exist in ancient Greece, Curren (2007) explains that thinkers such as Aristotle and Plato believed that education was essential to achieving a just and well run society, and there was much debate about whether arete (virtue, goodness, or excellence) could be taught. This highlights how the aims of education have always been at the centre of philosophical discussions about education.

'Pedagogy' has been defined as 'the study of the methods and activities of teaching' (Cambridge Dictionary). Although pedagogical approaches are clearly underpinned by one or more philosophical perspectives, discussions of social work pedagogy tend to focus on methods of learning and teaching social work. There is also discussion in the literature about a signature pedagogy for social work. Signature pedagogy, as discussed by Shulman (2004), refers to the unique defining features or distinctive educational components that prepare students for practice. The Council on Social Work Education (2008) in the United States propose that practice placements should be regarded as the signature pedagogy of social work – arguments about this will be explored as the review progresses.

In this review we will use the term a 'philosophy of social work education' in order to facilitate a broader discussion which takes into consideration issues that are relevant to both teaching and learning.

2.3 The purpose of social work education

Definitions of social work and its aims are contested and continually changing (Cree 2003). While the *Standards in Social Work Education* (Scottish Executive 2003) outline the minimum standards a student must achieve in order to qualify as a social worker in Scotland, debates remain about which particular skills, knowledge and values are most important for qualifying social workers. The *Changing Lives: Report of the 21st Century Social Work Review* (Scottish Executive 2006) suggests that there should be a focus on core values, and the knowledge and skills to develop therapeutic relationships. Questions about the

aims and purpose of social work cannot be fully explored in this review but are crucial to any philosophy of learning or philosophy of education for social work. As this review will show, particular methods of teaching and learning are more or less effective for supporting particular types of learning. In order to know the best way of teaching social work, we must be clear about what social work is and the kind of social worker we are hoping to develop during the course of qualifying and post qualifying education. Even then, however, it would be wrong to assume that, even in broad terms, all students, or cohorts of students were the same – not only is there an obvious difference students entering SCQF Level 10 and Level 11 programmes, but different HEIs will exhibit consistently different demographics.

2.4 The effectiveness of teaching and learning approaches

Social work education in Scotland is a partnership between universities, practice agencies, students, and service users and carers. The Learning for Effective and Ethical Practice Project (LEEP) in Scotland, which aimed to bridge the gap between academic institutions and practice settings, concluded that practice learning 'should not be seen as the preserve and responsibility of practice agencies, just as teaching is not just the responsibility of university staff' (Clapton et al 2008: 337). The literature also highlights the significance of partnership with students, other professional groups (Croisdale-Appleby 2014; Barr and Sharland 2011) and with service users and carers (Duffy and Hayes 2012), although these themes cannot be explored in detail here. Any philosophy of learning must incorporate notions of partnership, give due consideration to practice and academic settings, and consider how the two interface. This literature review will highlight key findings in relation to learning which are relevant to both settings.

How students learn in any setting will be influenced by a number of factors including their particular style of learning, personality traits and previous experiences of learning. From the literature, experiential and constructivist models of learning appear to have the greatest impact on learning where the student is an active participant in the learning process, based on the principles of adult learning (Shuell 1986; Biggs and Tang 2011; Neuman and Blundo 2008;

Jordan et al 2009; Crawford et al 2015). As Shuell (1986: 429) explains, 'what the student does is actually more important in determining what is learned than what the educator does'. There is also significant evidence that students are most likely to learn by doing. Race (2007: 11) suggests there are five factors that underpin successful learning: wanting, needing, doing, feedback and digesting. Indeed, motivation for learning seems to be an important factor in learning; educators should seek to understand and develop the student's personal motivation to learn and some evidence suggest that student led approaches are more likely to foster intrinsic motivation in learners (Lai 2011).

Race's model shares similarities with Kolb's (1993) universally popular model for learning which advocates: active experimentation, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and concrete experience. Social work educators have been applying Kolb's model for many years, experimenting with methods that seek to maximise opportunities for active participation, reflection, experimentation and application of theory to practice; approaches include: the use of case examples (West and Watson, 2000; Gibbons and Gray, 2002), use of art, film or literature (Zickler and Abbott 1999; Ello 2007 ; Liles 2007; Pickard et al. 2008; Rambaree et al. 2012; Turner 2012; Walton 2012), collaborative projects and peer feedback (Price et al., 2007; Zeman and Swanke, 2008; Crawford et al 2015), and problem based or inquiry-based learning (Boud and Feletti 1997; Ross 1997; Plowright and Watkins, 2004). The notion of the flipped classroom,[1] which often incorporates a range of these approaches and technology driven teaching methods to enhance active learning, is growing in popularity among social work educators (Holmes et al. 2015). Recent evidence also suggests that experiential learning brings additional benefits in terms of increasing resilience, emotional regulation and empathy (Grant and Kinman 2013).

[1] The flipped classroom is an instructional strategy and type of blended learning that reverses the traditional educational arrangements by delivering content outside the classroom (often through viewing lectures ahead of class online). Discussion and engagement with the content of the lecture then becomes the focus of the time spent in the classroom, with guidance from the instructor or educator.

Although most studies are not comparative and do not utilise control groups, evidence collected from students and educators suggests that active approaches are valued by learners and are often seen as more effective than more teacher led approaches such as the traditional lecture. There is some evidence, however, that knowledge acquisition is more likely in more traditional classroom settings (Mergendoller et al.2000; Dochy et al.2003). Teater (2011) suggests that both approaches seem to have merits and argues that it is crucial that all teaching includes close attention to learning outcomes, which should be at least partly co-constructed with learners to maximise motivation and investment in learning. She recommends that assessments should incorporate opportunities for learners to revisit their own learning outcomes and rate their progress.

It is well recognised that practice learning plays a crucial role in the professional and personal development of social work students (Scottish Executive 2003). The centrality of practice and practice learning is a recurring theme in the literature (Tham and Lynch 2014, Wayne et al 2010, Domakin 2014, Macrae 2010). Domakin (2014:718) argues that field practice learning opportunities 'have a more profound and lasting impact than classroom teaching'; particularly in relation to what social work students say they remember about their training, the integration of theory and practice, and the development of skills. The key factors in achieving successful practice learning include the knowledge and enthusiasm of the practice educator, the ability of the practice educator to help students reflect on practice and personal feelings, alongside the ability to link practice with values.

Students value the practice wisdom of practice educators and appreciate opportunities to 'shadow' experienced practitioners. Modelling in the supervisory relationship enables students to learn about how to develop relationships of trust with service users. Ford et al (2006:79) extend the concept of modelling to academic staff, arguing that it is also crucial for academic staff to model practice that is acceptable and desired in their relationships with students. Hermsen and Emregts (2015) also highlight the importance of academic staff and practice educators being able to transfer their own enthusiasm for the profession and concern and care for service users to the students; they argue that a model of professional loving care (PLC) should be at the heart of social work teaching,

encouraging the development of empathy and respect for clients as the first priority in all teaching.

The extent to which field practice learning opportunities represent a signature pedagogy is debatable. Larrison and Korr (2013) contest this notion on the basis that practice learning opportunities are not unique to social work, and propose an alternative signature pedagogy comprising of three key features: Thinking and performing like a social worker, fostering transformative awareness and nurturing personal and professional growth. Wayne et al. also discuss reservations that field education is 'not presently implemented in a manner consistent with its designation as signature pedagogy' (2010 cited in Boitel and Fromm 2014:609). Broitel and Fromm (2014) also highlight the variability in the selection, quality and training of practice educators and further argue that practice agencies may not have the learning opportunities to complement academic learning. Given the importance of practice learning, there is very little research about a systematic evaluation on the process of learning in practice learning opportunities (Maidment 2003).

Holden et al.'s (2011) systematic review of research evidence attempted to establish if field instruction was superior to a no treatment control condition or to established alternatives. Due to the total lack of studies including a control/ contrast condition, their review identified no eligible studies. This highlights a significant knowledge gap in our understanding of social work education.

2.5 A common philosophy of education for social work?

The review of available literature uncovers a diversity of approaches to teaching and learning across social work education, which suggests that responding to your particular educational context can encourage innovation. However, there is a vast body of literature on philosophy of education more generally that suggests educators, in whatever context they work, should have some clear overarching philosophical principles which underpin their curriculum and guide their behaviour as educators. Looking across the literature some principles begin to emerge which could be a useful starting point for HEI's and partner practice agencies who wish to further develop their philosophy of learning:

- The importance of an ethical stance towards students, colleagues and service users and a commitment to challenging wider systems of social injustice. The writing on the ethics of teaching suggests educators need to demonstrate enthusiasm for the profession and commitment to the values and ideals of the profession. Reflected in the statement: 'I will treat you with respect and care. I will value you in the same way you are expected to value the service users you work with'. It also suggests an ongoing commitment to one's own learning as an educator and a willingness to be vulnerable (Saleebey and Scanlon 2005).
- A commitment to foregrounding the needs, perspectives and experiences of service users to enhance empathy and ethical practice. This includes encouraging students to 'become acquainted with the lived experiences of individuals and groups' (Campbell and Ungar 2003:52).
- A commitment to understanding the needs and strengths of learners and being flexible and eclectic in the approaches used in teaching to meet the needs of a diverse student population (Matto et al. 2006).
- A dialogical approach. Moving away from active-knowledgeable worker/ teacher and passive-ignorant client/ student approach to teaching and working in genuine partnership with students to enhance active learning and reflective practice, whilst acknowledging the tension inherent in the role of the tutor and practice educator as assessor (Campbell and Ungar 2003; Rancière 1991; Wang 2012). A willingness to explore technology which may be able to assist in this (Holmes et al. 2015).
- Pedagogies that build on students' knowledge and desire to learn, rather than instructing and guiding them in what they lack (Rancière 1991).
- Engaging students in a reflective journey that includes a consideration of their own attitudes to learning and develops habits which support them to maximise the available learning in any situation (Maclellan 2015).
- The need to find teaching methods that help students bridge the gap between theory and practice; whilst developing the critical thinking skills that allow them to interrogate what counts as knowledge in social work and the role of the practitioner in developing theory for practice (Sung-Chan and Yuen-Tsang 2006).

2.6 Conclusions

The review of social work education carried out by Carpenter (2003) criticised the lack of research on the outcomes of methods in social work education based on the quality of evaluative studies. Feedback from modules was essentially descriptive with little information about what had been learned or how effective the learning had been. When reviewing the knowledge base related to philosophies of education for social work education, key themes emerged:

- The paucity of literature relating to the philosophy of learning and the need for further research.
- The importance of practice learning, although, there is a particular gap in research on the process of learning in practice learning opportunities.
- The need for genuine partnership between practice partners, students, academics, and service users and carers, which can be achieved by further collaboration in the design, delivery and evaluation of social work programmes.
- The need for creative methods of learning. Learning styles will vary amongst students and it is therefore important to have a range of approaches to meet the differing needs of students.
- The importance of students taking an active role in their own learning. In keeping with a constructivist approach to learning, the role of the teacher would become more of a facilitator.
- Training for practice educators and academic staff is also highlighted as a key issue (Croisdale-Abbleby 2014). Philosophies to enhance teaching and learning are more likely to be understood and operationalised by those who have been given the time and opportunity to reflect on their own practice and how they might apply available evidence and theory within their educational context.

3 Methods

The initial plan was to derive data from three main sources: a review of the current literature on the philosophy of social work education – also taking in some wider aspects of social work education; a series of interviews and focus groups with the key partners[2] in the provision of Social Work education, *viz.* academics, practice educators, students and service users and carers; and, an analysis of HEI programme review documentation. Whilst the last area was always going to be a minor strand, the variation and nature of the documents available was such that it proved impossible to provide any clear overview.

3.1 Literature review

An electronic search and advanced search of ASSIA, British Education Index, IBSS Online, Learning Exchange, reSearch Web, Social Care Online, Soc Index, Web of Science Core Collection and IRISS learning exchange website was conducted. Search terms included 'philosophies of learning', 'philosophy of education', 'pedagogy' and 'social work'. Fifty articles were found with a direct link to the topic. Additional material was also identified from the allied disciplines of teaching, education and nursing. Although the team also recognised the value of learning from approaches such as social pedagogy, it was beyond the scope of this review to explore this evidence base.

3.2 Focus groups

Five focus groups were conducted with key partners in social work education. These included:

- One focus group with practice partners with responsibility for learning and workforce development across Scotland;

[2] Throughout the report we have used the term 'partners' to refer to those directly involved in active participation and/or responsibility for Social Work education, specifically, universities, service providers from all sectors, independent practice educators not attached to service providers, students and service users and carers. Where the term 'stakeholders' is used, it refers to a wider group including people who have an interest, though not a direct involvement in education.

- One focus group with Practice Educators who contribute to qualifying social work programmes across Scotland;[3]
- Two focus groups with social work students, conducted in Glasgow and Edinburgh, and with representation from 7 of 8 educational providers;
- One focus group with services users and carers, with representation from five of eight HEI service users and carer groups.

Individual focus groups lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were recorded digitally. Transcripts were analysed and synthesised using thematic analysis. Recorded sample data is as detailed below (Table 1).

Table 1: Focus group makeup

Focus group	Location of interview	Number of participants/ gender balance
Practice partners	Stirling	11 (9 female, 2 male)
Practice educators	Edinburgh	8 (7 female, 1 male)
Student group 1	Edinburgh	7 (6 female, 1 male)
Students group 2	Glasgow	8
Service users and carer group	Glasgow	6 (4 female, 2 male)

3.3 Interviews

8 telephone interviews were conducted of an hour's duration with 5 male academic staff and 3 female academic staff (see Table 2). Detailed notes of each interview were taken, which were then typed and emailed to the member of staff for approval.

[3] An invitation to contribute by email was also extended for interested practice educators who were unable to attend.

Table 2: Interviewees

	Number	Gender balance (F:M)
Senior academics	5	2:3
Programme leaders	3	1:2
Total	8	3:5

3.4 Document analysis

Documentation from programme reviews was sought initially from the Scottish Social Services Council. This was done in the expectation that programme learning philosophies would be found there, either explicitly or implicitly. However, two things became clear. The first was that the SSSC did not hold this material in any single location. In the end, we obtained information relating to seven out of the eight HEIs. This covered a total of fifteen routes to qualification. Most of the institutions had separate documentation for the different programmes, others were combined. The second, which only became apparent in time, was that the nature of the documents was very different, making them incommensurable.

As a result, the project team decided to make use of salient points from the data in the section on agency perspectives. Any attempt to write up a discrete documentary analysis would have been highly skewed and misleading.

4 Academic perspectives

As noted above, this section is made up predominantly of telephone interviews with tutors, supplemented, where appropriate, with data from the document analysis.

4.1 Learning philosophies in social work education

For most of the academics interviewed, philosophy of learning related to the ethos, values and principles underpinning the programmes, with one academic describing it as an over-arching concept to 'influence and direct' how the content of the curriculum is delivered.

4.1.1 Adult learning

Self-directed learning was linked to the principles of adult learning to give students more responsibility, with the consequence that the role of the academic becomes more of a 'facilitator'. Partnership working was also highlighted as a philosophy of learning, a collaborative approach in which both students and academics are engaged in a joint learning process. Building strong, nurturing relationships with students was also considered central. According to one academic, research into effective outcomes for students confirms the crucial role played by student-centred learning. This was reflected in the widespread use of methods such as Enquiry and Action Learning, and self-directed approaches, in preference to 'traditional didactic' approaches. This was a strong feature in several review documents also – particularly for Masters level programmes.

4.1.2 Critical and reflective practitioners

The importance of shaping critically reflective practitioners was a recurring theme, 'creating a culture of constructive and critical student learning within a context of values, respect and tolerance.' The centrality of an activist philosophy was emphasised to 'facilitate autonomy, independence and to develop critical thinkers.' Also, as one review document put it, students need to be able to 'understand the routes of policy, risk aversion and why specific decisions are made', and be 'able to make a positive contribution to society.'

4.1.3 Values and social justice

The concept of social justice ran through the interviews, both as a theoretical approach and as a learning philosophy that helped to shape how the curriculum was developed. As one academic observed: 'The notion of social justice is of central importance as a philosophy underpinning the course, which is exemplified by a commitment to critical pedagogy', involving a strong value-based model of education, emphasising students' own learning for socially just practice, and social outcomes.

4.2 Learning, teaching and assessment

A good deal of the underpinning learning philosophies had to be inferred from the approaches taken to learning, teaching and assessment. Though, it was also noted that learning outcomes can be heavily influenced by other factors, such as having academic staff who are 'knowledgeable and passionate' about their subject. The range of methods of teaching and learning appear to be broadly similar across the programmes; using a variety of approaches to connect with the differing strengths and learning styles of students. In this section, we review some of the main themes and approaches to emerge.

4.2.1 Experiential methods

Discussing experiential methods, respondents highlighted: small group teaching, skills based learning and use of real life scenarios. Descriptions of experiential learning included simulated case conferences, role play and problem-based learning. 'Students can see the value of experiential learning once they start practice learning and feel that it is a valuable preparation'.

Respondents also foreground inputs from field practitioners and service users and carers as valued approaches. Each was felt to provide an authentic sense of the reality of social work, with the latter also demonstrating the impact that social work involvement can have on the lives of service users and carers. The involvement of service user groups in teaching programmes appeared to vary across the universities, although all demonstrated a commitment and a recognition of the importance of service user input. One academic described the service user and carer group as the 'pillar of our programme', where service

users are represented at different levels from admissions through to chairing the programme board.

4.2.2 Practice learning

As one would expect, effective practice learning was identified as a critical part of the learning experience. For some universities, however, the struggle to provide sufficient quality practice learning opportunities became the dominant issue, rather than pedagogy or philosophy. The increasing dependence on independent practice educators was flagged up as an issue by one academic because of the challenges inherent in maintaining consistency and quality. Some universities reported approaches which combine academic and practice based learning to support integration. For example, four days per week on practice learning and one day at university, with the rationale that practice learning experiences can thus be linked and applied to theory.

4.2.3 ELearning and technology enhanced learning

Although, not emerging so much through the interviews, the review documents highlighted that the use of technology in social work education continues to increase. Reported uses ranged from the delivery of supporting materials to interactive blogs; provision of information for students and practice educators to marking students' work.

All social work programmes appear to have embraced and embedded technology to some degree and in some form, bringing both benefits and challenges.

> The use of social media, both as a positive, in terms of being an aid to communication and dissemination of information and a negative, in terms of creating possibilities for exploitation and abuse, is here to stay, and social work teaching requires both to take advantage of the possibilities offered by social media, and the risks that are presented.

Many HEIs made specific mention of a Virtual Learning Environment, either to enhance or support existing approaches, or to create new ones. Some were able to use them to create virtual spaces that included Practice Educators. Above all, however, the emphasis was on blending 'technology enhanced' learning.

Whilst the digital literacy of students is, from the outset, much higher, and increasing, than in the past, nonetheless, this comes with an important caveat,

> While students commence with the School of Applied Social Studies often as skilled digital individuals in the field of social media it would be wrong to assume that the transference of those skills to an academic environment is straightforward.

To which we would also add the transference to practice learning settings.

4.3 Gaps and tensions

Financial, time and resource constraints represent key challenges for academics in designing and delivering the curriculum. This has an impact on how innovative academic staff can be in terms of modular development, which requires considerable time and effort. Additional challenges are posed by the demands of regulatory bodies and the Scottish Government, which can compete with other internal pressures from universities. This comes down to a question of how best to use scarce resources – something facing all partners.

5 Partner perspectives

As outlined, five focus groups were conducted with partners involved in the delivery of social work education in Scotland (see Table 1, p.12). The following provides a summary of their views.

5.1 Learning philosophies in social work education

Practice partners engaged in lively discussion of the meaning of learning philosophy, how it was understood and why it mattered. In common with academics, for most it was understood as an overarching ethos or approach to learning, associated with core values and principles. It could be owned by individuals – in the case of a practice educator, or groups – in the case of an organisation or team. For some, philosophy of learning was also about a *culture* of learning, or the absence of it.

Students and practice partners described various learning philosophies, or elements thereof, at play within social work qualifying education, most of which were common across groups. Both groups recognised and placed emphasis on:

- An active, participatory and self-directed approach;
- Learning as an iterative and life-long process;
- Critical and reflective learning: including significant reflection on self and identity as a developing professional;
- A generic approach: focussing on learning, inquiry and critical thinking skills that can be applied across professional settings; and,
- A value based, social justice and/or political approach to learning and practice.

The first four elements were identified by students across programmes, although emphases within programmes differed, in particular, self-directed learning was more prominent in post-graduate routes. An explicit value/social justice based philosophy was observed in programmes provided by at least four of the eight HEI providers. Practice partners also foreground an 'integrated', 'partnership', and 'collaborative' philosophy as key to social work learning (though many observed that this was currently fragmented and 'not working'). Practice

partners also discussed the emergence of an outcomes-focused approach to professional learning.

Discussing the issue of learning philosophy in practice, much of the above emerged in discussion of what *ought* to be in place, rather than what was. Practice partners felt there was no clear or shared learning philosophy within social work practice. However, developing a philosophy of learning was considered an important opportunity to strengthen social work's identity, contribution and standing in an integrated landscape. Relatedly, practice partners identified the importance of creating a learning culture, across all levels of social work organisations. Practice partners also highlighted the importance of 'managing expectations' of newly qualified social workers and of 'creating a continuous learning culture': where 'qualifying education is seen as a springboard', where it is 'ok not to know', and where 'becoming a social worker happens over the first few years'. Each of these ambitions and philosophies was felt to present a particular challenge within observed cultures of managerialism, unrealistic expectations, public sector budget cuts, fear and blame.

Service users and carers did not engage directly with the concept of learning philosophy. Rather, participants focused on the desired outcomes of professional learning and endorsed a philosophy and approach that supports outcomes of professional integrity, character and relational qualities and skills. These issues are discussed further below.

5.2 Learning, teaching and assessment

5.2.1 Learning and teaching – approaches and methods

Students highlighted a variety of learning, teaching and assessment methods, most of which were common across programmes and institutions. Notably, discussion in this area focused mostly on methods used within HEIs – suggesting perhaps that students consider this the primary learning and teaching site. Conversely, practice partner discussion focused mostly on learning methods used in practice, reflecting their view that this component of social work education was most in need of review, development and investment.

In-keeping with the above described learning philosophies, students identified a strong emphasis on active, interactive and reflective learning methods. These methods were seen to promote *integrated* learning outcomes, including integration of knowledge and experience, theory and practice, the personal and professional self, and knowledge, values and skills. Here, commonly cited learning methods included: interactive lectures, group work, discussion, critical deconstruction and debate, presentations and peer learning. Relatedly, students described a strong emphasis on *applied* learning and assessment approaches, including: case study work, problem based learning, enquiry and action learning, engagement with service users, carers and professionals, project based learning and role play. Students also described a 'varied' approach to learning and assessment: 'the course is so varied so there is something for everyone', as well as variations between institutions.

Unsurprisingly, students studying at a distance placed emphasis on on-line methods of learning; including e-reading, video and audio resources and case studies, and on line tutorials, though many of these methods were also employed in campus based programmes. Distance learning courses were felt to have the added value of 'allowing access from anywhere in the world' but were felt to limit opportunities for regular and meaningful peer learning.

Practice based learning was valued by all, though students and practice partners repeatedly made reference to the 'huge variations' in practice learning experiences for students (more on which below).

5.2.2 Assessment

Described methods of assessment were broadly consistent across programmes and were reported to include a mix of essays, continuous assessment, group work, presentations, practice portfolios, project reports and research dissertations. Students and practice partners felt assessment practice was generally balanced though many observed an undue privileging of academic outputs (both in terms of assessment content and assessment practice[4]).

[4] For example, in most institutions academic assignments were awarded a grade while practice assessment was awarded a pass or fail. Accordingly, assessed practice outcomes made no contribution to honours or merit classifications.

Students from one programme countered this and described more applied assessment approaches based on practice projects (including, for example, a policy consultation and a professional development event). Interestingly, while these arguably more integrated approaches to learning and assessment appeared to appeal to students, some practice partners expressed concern about the location of what was perceived to be 'academic work' in practice. As one practice partner observed:

> We often get students who are in middle of writing an essay or doing a project, which makes them take their eye off the ball.

This observation seems significant and suggests that attempts to integrate academic and practice learning are good in theory but challenging in practice. Relatedly, it raises questions of what is the 'ball': practice or learning?

5.3 Methods and approaches deemed most effective

There was considerable agreement across the participants in regard to which methods were most effective in supporting professional social work learning and outcomes. All groups highlighted the importance of:

- Previous life experience, i.e. what the learner brings to the learning journey;
- Applied and real world approaches: including case study work, role play, enquiry and action learning, and learning with and from service users and carers;
- 'Hands on', 'project based', applied and practice-orientated assessments; and,
- Reflective learning *relationships*, i.e. between students, academics, tutors, practice educators, service users and carers and/or peers.

Students also placed value on: (i) 'foundational modules' – which introduce different practice fields, user groups, practice methods and outcomes; (ii) 'theoretical learning', when there is sufficient time to grasp and reflect on theory; (iii) the perceived 'balance' between academic and practice learning; (iv) 'time' – with undergraduate programmes being seen to offer richer/ less stressful learning opportunities, and (iv) applied opportunities to understand

social work from an international perspective (i.e. through the ERASMUS programme[5]). Again, students appeared to value the diversity of the methods employed, with different methods being seen to support different learning outcomes.

As before, practice based learning was identified by all as a particularly effective learning method though again discussion in this area consistently foreground the diversity of practice learning experiences and opportunities. Routinely, reflections in this area were preceded or qualified with: 'I think it depends where you go …', 'it depends on the agency/ practice educator …'. As one student expressed it:

> In this placement my practice educator is very good … reflective logs every week, supervision is very good, lots of shadowing. … I didn't have that in my first placement. I think the practice educator would have made a very good link worker. He was knowledgeable about practice but just left you to get on with it.

For students and practice partners, these variations were seen to have significant implications for graduates' 'readiness for practice'.

In respect of practice-based learning and teaching methods, students and practice partners placed particular value on active, critical and reflective supervision. Both individual and group supervision was considered key to developing reflective, self-aware, resilient, effective and autonomous learning professionals. Relatedly, it was considered key to supporting the integration of theory and practice. Students also placed value on the use of critical and reflective tools within supervision and practice. As the following quotes express:

> …it gives you a good idea of where you are at, it helps you manage and reflect on workload, learning, pressures … though this varies across practice educators. (student)

[5] The Erasmus Programme is an EU exchange student programme that has been in existence since the late 1980s. Its purpose is to provide international exchange options for students learning within the European Union.

> …it's important because we are not training technicians, we're training people who are working with very complex issues in multi-various contexts. This becomes even more important with integration. (practice partner)

Practice partners went on to highlight that this was, 'not always happening in ways that we would like or think'.

Practice partners also identified the following approaches as particularly effective:

- Leadership and mentoring, with a focus on personal and professional growth and development (i.e. beyond caseloads);
- Genuine learning partnerships and co-ownership;
- Secondment and 'grow your own' schemes: which were seen to offer benefits of experience, more time and co-ownership; though Local Authority funding cuts, changing demographics and expectations were seen to obstruct this approach; and,
- Depth of learning: practice partners identified a need to make more of the '100 days' available for individual practice learning opportunities: 'currently it's about quantity and volume, finding a place for the student to go. It needs to be about quality.'

Again, partners foreground that learning is an iterative and continuous process and that organisational cultures need to recognise and support that. The prospect of a probationary year was considered important here, but practice partners cautioned that this should not be seen as a salve:

> It sounds good but only if located within a strong philosophy or approach to what social work learning is. It can't become a third PLO, leaving things to be dealt with there. Learning needs to be strengthened across the path.

Relatedly, practice partners observed that effective professional learning outcomes were less dependent on a particular learning opportunity or method and more on realising genuine learning partnerships, with attention to the interplay of what each actor brings – including learners, academic educators,

practice educators and others. Some universities were felt to do this better than others, though generally learning partnerships were felt to be 'fractured'.

5.4 Gaps and tensions

Approaches to practice co-ordination and practice learning emerged as a key tensions and an area for further review. As one student expressed:

> The whole placement co-ordination needs to be rejigged and re-assessed because it is just not good enough: not enough placements, not enough statutory, told too late …

Relatedly, both practice partners and service users and carers identified a need to attend to the culture, policy and infrastructure needed to facilitate and sustain a genuinely collaborative approach to professional social work learning, where 'professional learning is everyone's business'. Current commitment in this area was observed to be dependent on 'good will' and 'not good enough'.

'Expectations' and 'time' also emerged as tensions with a perception across participants that 'too much is expected in too little time'. This was particularly acute amongst post-graduate students where the pace of learning was felt by some to be 'too quick' and 'too demanding' (though this was acknowledged as good preparation for the reality of practice). Some students felt there was not enough time to: 'grasp the theories', 'assimilate learning', and, significantly, cover the 'practical and procedural stuff', required for diverse fields of practice. Significantly, participants drew distinctions between learning methods which supported professional learning and development and those which supported technical 'confidence' on entering a new or specialised practice setting. Students wanted to see more attention to the practical and technical elements of practice, as perceived gaps in this area, alongside high employer expectations, often left them feeling unprepared and deskilled on entering practice. Time did not permit discussion of where, how and when this might best take place.

Students and practice partners were alert to the complex challenges in the above and questioned whether expectations of qualifying programmes, and by extension students and newly qualified social workers were realistic. As one student suggested: 'there is something about how much you can realistically do.'

Relatedly, in different ways, students, practice partners and service users and carers identified a need to develop a clearer philosophy of social work, as a means of addressing the perceived ambivalence about what we want and what we expect from social work education in Scotland. In particular, many identified a need to clarify expectations in respect of 'readiness', technical experience and generic knowledge, values and skill.

5.5 Merits and demerits of developing a common learning philosophy

Participants expressed no single or strong view regarding the merits or demerits of developing a common philosophy for social work education. However, most placed value on the opportunity to *collaboratively develop* a philosophy of learning for social work education. Key here was the opportunity to move towards a co-owned and co-productive learning philosophy for social work education in Scotland.

Both practice partners and students saw value in developing 'a more consistent approach' to the way social work is taught' though both groups were clear that a 'common philosophy' should not obstruct diversity and creativity across providers. Diversity across programmes and institutions was felt to provide an important and valued element of choice in social work education.

Practice Partners foreground a need to develop an explicit, coherent and shared philosophy of learning that might impact on and transform existing practice cultures – which were observed to be weak in their commitment to professional learning. As outlined, this was felt to be an important opportunity to strengthen social work's identity and standing in an integrated and uncertain landscape.

6 Findings and recommendations

6.1 Project aims

Reflecting the project brief, the aims of the project were identified as follows:

- to explore the issue of 'learning philosophies' in social work education in Scotland;
- to better understand how learning, teaching and assessment is approached in social work programmes;
- to assess the merits and demerits of adopting a common philosophy of learning for social work education;
- to link these findings to our overall goal of developing a skilled and competent workforce for the future.

This final section reports on the study findings as they relate to the above aims.

6.2 Learning philosophies in social work education

Little has been written about philosophy of learning for social work education in the UK, although some work has been done to explore possibilities for a distinctive *pedagogy* for social work education. Pedagogy is defined as 'the study of the methods and activities of teaching' (see below).

There is evidence of various philosophies of learning, or elements thereof, 'at play' within social work qualifying programmes. Most philosophies, or principles, appear common across programmes (albeit with different emphases) and connect with the limited literature in this area. Described philosophies, or principles, appear to co-exist and are mostly implicit rather than explicit. Those most commonly cited include:

- an integrated, co-owned, and co-productive approach
- an active, strengths based and dialogic approach to learning and practice
- an ethical/ value based/ social justice approach to learning and practice
- critical and reflective learning and practice

- generic learning
- learning as an iterative and life long process
- an outcomes focussed approach

As is evident, no single or overarching philosophy of learning emerged from the analysis.

Practice based learning emerged as a pivotal feature of effective social work learning, and of professional learning more broadly. However, very little is written on the content, process or outcomes of practice learning and issues of learning philosophy are rarely explored. In part, this paucity of review and analysis was felt to be mirrored in practice learning settings where practice partners report an increasing emphasis on 'practice' over 'learning'. This shifting emphasis, or retrenchment, was linked to evolving contexts and cultures of austerity and managerialism and to the absence of an infrastructure for practice based learning. Notwithstanding, practice partners were unreservedly positive about the value of *co*-developing a more explicit and enabling learning philosophy for social work education and practice.

6.3 Best practice in learning, teaching and assessment in social work education

Perhaps reflecting the multiple philosophies and principles that gather within the frame of social work education, this project suggests a varied, integrated and innovative approach to social work learning, teaching and assessment in Scotland. Yet, there is a lack of research evidence about best practice in learning, teaching and assessment methods. This is complicated by competing views regarding the aims and outcomes of social work education and of social work more broadly. Achieving clarity on these issues is crucial to developing an effective philosophy of learning for social work education and practice.

Notwithstanding the above, there was broad consensus across the literature and those consulted on the methods deemed most effective for professional social work learning. These connect closely with the philosophies or principles outlined above:

- Previous life experience, i.e. what the learner brings to the learning journey;
- Experiential, active, applied and real world approaches: including case study work, role play, enquiry and action learning, practice based learning and learning with and from service users and carers;
- 'Hands on', 'project based', applied and practice-orientated assessments; and,
- Reflective learning *relationships*, which offer opportunities for in-depth learning between students, academics, tutors, practice educators, service users and carers and/or peers.

Participants also highlighted the importance of 'foundational' and theoretical learning, of adequate balance between theoretical and practice learning, and of allowing time for in-depth and continuous learning. Perhaps most significantly, there emerged a consensus that effective social work learning and practice was less dependent on a particular learning opportunity or method and more on realising genuine learning partnerships, with attention to the interplay of what each partner brings and is responsible for. Noting the consensus around this view, this may provide a foundation on which to develop a shared learning philosophy for social work education.

6.4 Developing a shared learning philosophy for social work

As outlined, the findings from this project did not produce any strong or clear view regarding the merits or demerits of developing a common philosophy of learning. This may reflect the emergent and under explored nature of this issue in social work education in Scotland. However, most placed value on the opportunity to co-produce and co-own a shared philosophy of learning for social work education and practice, whether at a local or national level.

Currently, primary responsibility for planning and driving forward such developments lies with HEIs. However, without the fully committed participation of all partners, at all levels, there is no prospect of effective coproduction. That said, one of the additional key advantages of a common learning philosophy is

its potential to extend into, and revitalise, the learning culture of organisations. It would enable practice educators to recognise and work with the commonality of programmes; enhance the PRTL agenda by helping qualified workers to understand that they were not moving into a new learning culture, so much as resituating it.

This does create a number of challenges, of course, not least of which is the need to develop a learning philosophy that is sufficiently flexible to accommodate the diversity of: student demographic, SCQF level, programme design, etc.

6.5 Tensions and challenges

For all of the strength, innovation and commitment evident in the above discussion the project also foregrounded key challenges in developing a philosophy of learning for social work education, be that individual or shared, local or national. Each needs to be understood and acknowledged if they are to be addressed effectively.

6.5.1 Time and resources

Financial, time and resource constraints represent increasingly key challenges for academics and partners in delivering social work education. This has an impact on how innovative and responsive lead providers and partners can be in terms of the development of new approaches, teaching and learning resources, and partnerships, which require considerable time and effort. There are also challenges to:

- maintain and develop links with colleagues in other institutions to share best practice ideas;
- maintain, develop and enhance the involvement of service users and carers, particularly with the ending of any specific resource to do this.

6.5.2 Conflicting demands

Additional challenges are posed by the, sometimes conflicting, demands of universities, regulatory bodies, and the Scottish Government. For instance, in

addition to their responsibilities for the delivery of education, universities also have obligations to provide disinterested comment on society, primarily through research activity, regardless of the consistency with policy – a requirement shared, to some degree, by Honours and Masters-level graduates.

6.5.3 Expectations

Expectations of newly qualified social workers also emerged as a tension with a perception across participants that 'too much is expected in too little time'. Relatedly, there exists a view that NQSWs were not always best prepared as new practitioners. Although these are perennial issues, they raise a question as to whether agencies' expectations of the level of *specificity* of graduates' knowledge and skills is realistic. On the other hand, it may be that there is more generic mismatch in expectations about what is core and how it is best achieved.

6.5.4 Developing strategic relations

There was a widespread recognition that there needed to be greater and improved integration between practice and academic learning, at all levels. Indeed, this may be the time to consider eliminating the putative difference between the two altogether. Relatedly, practice partners and service users and carers identified a need to attend to the culture, policy and infrastructure needed to facilitate and sustain a genuinely collaborative approach to professional social work learning, where 'professional learning is everyone's business'. The fundamental absence of any real forums or opportunities for strategic discussion and development to take place in this area was considered significant.

6.6 Recommendations

Recommendation One: Better links must be forged between the *partners* in the delivery of social work education, i.e. universities, agencies, service users and carers, and students themselves. These partnerships must involve a recognition of the demands on each partner and their interests, whilst also acknowledging that, if it is to work, all have key responsibilities.

Recommendation Two: All stakeholders must have a shared and realistic expectation about graduate social workers – recognising that one is not fully developed even at the point of graduation.

Recommendation Three: There is clearly a need for much more research, empirical and theoretical, into philosophies of learning and education in social work. This has to go beyond the small-scale evaluations of particular methods to integrate into a much more coherent overall philosophy.

Recommendation Four: More innovative approaches to learning and assessment that embed both practice and academic aspects of learning should be developed, allowing for the enhancement of learning in all aspects of programmes. This depends on the fundamental reorientation of the relationship between universities and practice partners noted above.

Recommendation Five: In addition to blurring the distinction between 'academic learning/work' and 'practice learning/work', there needs to be a further diminution of the barriers between the academy and practice. The presence of practitioners in classes is a vital and valued part of students' learning, equally, academics have more to offer practitioners than is perhaps currently being realised.

6.7 Merits and demerits of developing a common learning philosophy

Overall, then, participants expressed no single or strong view regarding the merits or demerits of developing a common philosophy for social work education. However, most placed value on the opportunity to *develop collaboratively* a philosophy of learning for social work education. Key here was the opportunity this might present to co-own and co-produce a learning philosophy for social work education in Scotland.

Practice partners placed value on the opportunity to develop an explicit, coherent and shared philosophy of learning that might impact on, and transform, existing practice/ organisational cultures – which were observed to be weak in their commitment to professional learning. As outlined, this was felt to be an important opportunity to strengthen social work's identity and standing in an

integrated and uncertain landscape. Both practice partners and students saw value in developing 'a more consistent approach' to the way social work is taught', though both groups were clear that a 'common philosophy' should not obstruct diversity and creativity across providers. Diversity across programmes and institutions was felt to provide an important and valued element of choice in social work education.

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