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# **Title: Enhancing Practitioner-Led Education in Social Work: Developing a Secondment Project**

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## **Abstract**

This paper illustrates the development of a secondment project designed to enhance practitioner-led social work education in a Higher Education Institution. The project was developed as part of a Teaching Partnership initiative to establish joint working and standardised approaches to social work education between Higher Education Institutes and Local Authorities across a UK region. Highlighted is how the project utilised a six-stage strategy designed to gather information to produce an evidence-base to support the implementation of a pilot practitioner secondment arrangement. The paper discusses strategies used to gather information from a range of stakeholders to inform the project, the project outcome and some considerations for future secondment arrangements. Contributing to a limited source of literature, challenges and limitations of developing formal secondment arrangements and delivering practitioner-led education in Higher Education Institutes are highlighted. This paper will assist Higher Education Institutes and Local Authorities in the design and implementation of formal secondment arrangements where these are identified as in need of development.

**Key words:** Practitioner-led education, seconded practitioner-lecturer, teaching partnerships

## **Introduction**

This paper illustrates the development of a secondment project designed to enhance practitioner-led social work education in a Higher Education Institution (HEI). The secondment project was designed as part of a Teaching Partnership (TP) development. The TP referred to in this paper is responsible for

bringing together all Local Authorities (LAs) and HEIs across a UK region who provide social work training and education. As a Department for Education/Department of Health (DfE/DfH) funded vehicle for reform under the UK government's TP initiative, all TPs are concerned with developing standardised joint working arrangements across a range of social work education activities. Benefits for social work education of formalised arrangements between LAs and HEIs have been evaluated across several TPs within the UK (Berry-Lound, Tate & Greatbatch, 2016). As a regional alliance the overall aim of the TP discussed is to contribute to the development of social work education and training and assist in preparing students for practice.

### ***Background***

To enhance the quality of social work education, while contrasting in many ways and, for example, in terms of their recommendations for social work education reform, the Narey (2014) and Croisdale-Appleby (2014) reports both highlighted the need for formal partnership arrangements between HEIs and LAs. As the main employer of registered social workers in the UK, TP initiatives were intended to be partnerships led by LAs. Designed to enhance collaborative working between HEIs and LAs, there was clear expectation TP arrangements would bring practitioners more directly into several HEI processes including teaching. TPs aimed to enhance under-graduate and post-graduate training for social workers by creating a stronger emphasis on the relationship between theory and practice and by bringing both academics and practitioners into each other's field of expertise. The DfE/DfH funding for TPs was made available alongside Government funding for several 'fast track' graduate routes into social work including Frontline, Step-Up and Think Ahead. Employer-led, fast track routes require student social workers to be embedded within LAs throughout their training. The narrative for the new fast track routes was they would produce social workers who could 'hit the ground running' in comparison to those qualifying through traditional routes. Practitioner involvement in traditional routes through TP arrangements was intended to create input into HEI social work programmes which would help newly qualified social workers (NQSW) to be additionally work ready.

Methods of teaching social workers in HEIs differs from general higher education programme curricula as education is concerned with developing the way students think, perform and act with integrity while cultivating a professional identity (Shulman, 2005; Adams, Hean, Sturgis & Clark, 2006). HEIs providing social work education are required to foster professional capability based on standardised programmes approved by the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC). However, approaches to teaching, content and the materials utilised will vary dependent on the professional background, expertise and/or specialist interests of academic staff (Croisdale-Appleby, 2014). This

raises some questions about quality and consistency of social work education in the classroom. However, all education providers are subject to the HCPC monitoring and programme approval is dependent on agreed curriculum criteria being delivered (HCPC, 2014).

Students must practise social work to become a social worker, therefore practice placements remain a key aspect of social work education (Strydom, 2014). Schulman (2005) discusses 'signature pedagogy' as the characteristic way in which a student learns to become a professional in a specific field. However, whether practice-based learning constitutes the signature pedagogy of social work remains a debated topic (Wayne, Bogo and Raskin, 2010; Larrison and Korr, 2013). Higgins (2015) suggests social work education in England is narrowing to a focus on statutory roles to the exclusion of teaching on the wider definition of social work (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014). Holt & Kelly (2018) suggest predominantly practice-based training may not allow students space to develop critical reflection and analytical thinking skills. Similar to traditional teaching programmes, this raises questions about quality and consistency of social work education within fast-track schemes. Holt & Kelly (2018) further argue, where social work training is principally practice-based, this does not allow for transferability of academic learning into, for example, the skills and attributes needed to exercise professional judgment in complex scenarios. While debate continues about the efficacy of practice-based learning, literature appraising pedagogic value of practitioner-led education in the classroom remains limited (Williams, Mostyn & Fyson, 2009).

Williams et al. (2009) asked a sample of 131 under-graduates enrolled on nursing and social work programmes to complete a questionnaire rating practitioner-led education. The study identified many positive characteristics included how students are encouraged to consider the importance of collaborative practice and the need to identify links between 'theoretical and practical aspects of their courses' (Williams et al., 2009, p. 100). Discussing experiential learning, Rogers (1969, p. 158) states 'significant learning takes place when the subject matter is perceived by the student as having relevance for his own purposes'. Considering evidence students value links made between theory and practice, drawing on the findings of Williams et al. (2009), it is apparent practitioner-led education can benefit social work education by utilising 'real-life' practice examples for teaching purposes.

However, Williams et al. (2009) highlight limitations of unsanctioned and/or non-standardised practitioner secondment arrangements. These included students' concerns practitioners as 'guest speakers' on professional programmes were not always aware of the whole syllabus, and therefore in some cases repeated previously learned material. Students commented on inconsistent quality of teaching and how, for example, practitioners on occasion did not possess an appropriate level of teaching skills and/or tended to present biased views of professional debates. Although, while nursing

students were identified by Williams et al. (2009) as more likely to communicate dissatisfaction with teaching quality, student social workers were appraising of practitioners' knowledge of specific practice areas. Williams et al did not include any information about the kind of teaching undertaken by practitioners or the specific knowledge and skills they possessed. However, the authors did note how teaching across social work and nursing programmes was presented by practitioners up to 50% of the time. Given the potential positive impact on students' learning experience, while recognising challenges and limitations of informal arrangements, the TP discussed in this paper sought to design a project to develop a standardised template for the formal secondment of practitioners to teaching on HEI social work programmes.

### **Project development**

The secondment project was developed across a 12-month period beginning March 2017. Project development commenced after the TP Programme Committee made up of representatives from 12 LAs and 6 HEIs requested HEI partners express an interest in leading on the design of a practitioner-led teaching project. After a competitive tender was submitted to the TP, an HEI partner secured a small grant from the TP Programme Committee to fund the design and implementation of a pilot project. A small project team allied to the HEI consisting of a part-time senior lecturer and the head of social work subject was then established. It was agreed project team members needed to be HEI staff who had both an overview of the teaching programme and status within the organisation to authorise and/or undertake practical roles and arrangements including practitioner recruitment, interviewing, appointment, payroll enlistment, induction and other human resource requirements.

### ***Aims and objectives***

In April 2017 the team met to discuss a strategy for the design and development of a formal secondment project. Aims, objectives and design of an evidence-based approach to developing the project was subsequently presented to and agreed with the TP Programme Committee. The project aims included to scope and identify existing academic expertise and practitioner-led education arrangements across partner HEIs and LAs. The project objectives included utilising findings to support the TP Programme Committee in determining the nature of existing practitioner-led education and implementing a formal practitioner secondment arrangement. In the following sections, we describe key aspects of the strategy used to gather information to inform the secondment project.

## **Strategy and findings**

The project was designed using a six-stage strategy including: (1) consultation with the TP partner HEIs and LAs (2) consultation with members of the TP private, voluntary and independent (PVI) practitioner group (3) consultation with the TP funded service user and carer 'educators through experience' group (4) consultation with undergraduate social work students (5) analysis and dissemination of strategy findings and (6) recruitment of a seconded practitioner. Consultations at the first four stages took place across a 3-month period beginning June 2017. A presentation of findings was submitted to the TP Programme Committee in the form of an interim report, then dissemination of findings by the senior lecturer allied to the project was presented at a TP Development Day. The TP Development Day was a stakeholder conference organised by the TP and attended by representatives from regional HEIs, LAs and PVIs. Highlighting the secondment project design, the conference was utilised as an invitation for feedback and further consult with HEI, LA and PVI partners. In the following section examples of several key stages of the project development strategy are outlined.

### ***Consultation with HEIs and LAs***

Consultation with HEI partners was undertaken in the form of a questionnaire sent to all social work programme leads via the TP Programme Committee administrator. Questionnaires were designed to elicit qualitative responses from social work programme leads and lecturers responsible as module teaching leads. The questionnaires consisted of five questions including: (1) Do HEIs/SW programmes have existing (formal or informal) professional secondment arrangements? (2) How do HEIs identify and recruit capable professionals within the principles of quality assurance and equality of opportunities? (3) How are formal or informal professional contributions to teaching funded? (4) Do HEIs/partners without formal secondment arrangements want arrangements to be standardised? And: (5) What do/would formal secondment arrangements look like in terms of background of practitioners and time spent contributing to teaching in relation to hours or days across a teaching semester?

Consultation with LAs was undertaken in the form of a questionnaire sent to all principal social workers and/or learning and development leads via the TP Programme Committee administration team. Again, designed to elicit qualitative responses questionnaires consisted of seven key questions including: (1) Do LA partners currently have formal or informal secondment of practitioner-led teaching arrangements with HEIs? (2) How do any formal or informal secondments arrangements benefit HEIs, practitioners and their agencies? (3) What should be the short, medium and long-term goals for LAs and HEIs of formal practitioner secondment arrangements? (4) How might seconded

staff and their teams be supported (e.g. offered protected time to teach, staff backfill arrangements) and/or be supervised by the agency/HEI? (5) How best can HEI/SW programme leads liaise with partner agencies (e.g. via CPD learning and development leads, team managers etc) to secure and support ongoing secondment arrangements? (6) How can partner agencies contribute to recruitment of capable professionals/those with interest and potential within the principles of quality assurance and equal opportunities? And: (7) What should be the overall aims and objectives of secondment arrangements? Respondents were invited to offer additional comments to support an emergent evidence-base for the design of a formal secondment arrangement.

### ***Consultation with PVI practitioners***

Consultation with PVI practitioners was undertaken by the secondment development team in the form of a guided discussion. The consultation was attended by practitioners from a range of agencies including those working within specialist areas including palliative and end of life social work. The discussion was coordinated by the senior lecturer engaged as a team member responsible for the project development. The discussion was guided by a series of questions designed to elicit qualitative responses including: (1) What agencies are practitioners employed within? (2) What key areas of expertise do practitioners possess? (3) What experience do practitioners have of teaching on/contributing to social work education programmes? (4) What programmes/areas of teaching have/would practitioners wish to be involved with? (5) How has/are agency teaching arrangements administered/arranged in the past/currently? (6) What suggestions do you have for the development of a formal secondment arrangement within LAs? And: (7) What constraints and/or enablements to development of formal secondment of practitioner arrangements do you anticipate?

### ***Consultation findings***

Information gathered through consultations led to several key findings. These included how academic staff across HEIs taught a wide range of subjects, however, gaps in the specialisms of academic staff did exist. To address some of these gaps, it was found a wide range of practitioners employed within LAs and PVIs contributed to social work education across HEIs. Although, no formal or standardised secondment arrangements were identified. Consequently, practitioners were identified as recruited on an informal basis, via existing contacts with academic staff. Because of informal recruitment arrangements, no equality of access, teaching skills assessment, knowledge and/or expertise appraisal, formal approval to teach from line managers, fitness to practice or quality assurances were evidenced. As Williams et al. (2009) found, while those recruited on an informal basis were viewed by respondents as knowledgeable about specific practice areas, issues highlighted included: (1)

evidence of some practitioners offering late cancellations of arranged sessions due to agency-based priorities (2) potential concerns about practitioners' lack of ability to manage larger student cohorts and (3) staff reference to student dissatisfaction with 'one off' and/or limited access to practitioner-led teaching opportunities.

Further findings included how a formal recruitment process would need to be facilitated by appointed secondment leads within LAs and HEIs. This would ensure equity of access for practitioners applying to participate in formal arrangements while assisting in identifying skills and competences. Another key finding across HEI and LA respondents highlighted how information about formal secondments arrangements should be made available to all practitioners in LAs. Although, in some cases HEIs hosting secondments may identify the need for a practitioner with a specific area of expertise. Several LA respondents suggested opportunities to engage in practitioner-led education could be made available through existing work force and learning and development processes and linked to appraisals. An additional finding was the need for practitioners to be formally released from substantive posts and supported by host LAs to commit to secondment arrangements. Several respondents noted how for some practitioners a full-time secondment would be more feasible than a short-term commitment. This was due to the nature of their existing role and responsibilities. It was noted however that short-term secondments may be more applicable, for example, where long-term release from statutory duties was not considered feasible by line managers. Highlighted was how advance notice for secondments would be required, as would funding from HEIs to ensure back-fill staff and financial arrangements were in place prior to secondments.

In terms of the overall aims and objectives of practitioner secondments, it was identified how arrangements should be utilised to integrate the practical application of social work into teaching programmes at HEIs in a more robust and formalised way. A formal approach would ensure equality of access to practitioner-led education opportunities within HEIs for students, and the longer-term retention of seconded social workers to teaching across the life of programme modules. Quality assurance, assessment and development of practitioners' skills and competency to teach as well as the student learning experience would be enhanced. While primarily wishing to invest in the professional development of seconded practitioners, benefits interpreted for LAs included how social workers would be afforded opportunities for renewed exposure to contemporary theories, models of practice, research and increased opportunity for critical reflection and analysis of practice.

### **Practitioner secondment**

On presenting the findings to the TP Programme Committee it was agreed the secondment



recruitment process needed to be equitable while attracting the most knowledgeable, experienced and skilled practitioners. To move the project onto the final stage it was agreed with the TP Programme Committee the host HEI and LA partner would pilot a secondment arrangement. A formal recruitment process was designed consisting of several key stages. Discussed in the next section, these included an expression of interest exercise within the LA and an interview and selection process.

### ***Expressions of interest, interview and selection process***

The expression of interest information was circulated by the LA principal social worker (PSW) to all staff with line management responsibilities for practitioners situated across adult social care teams. Dedicated funds would be made available via the HEI to cover backfill of employee's posts while on secondment, and line managers were advised to disseminate information about the secondment opportunity to all social worker staff up to service manager grade. The expression of interest briefing informed practitioners of the opportunity arising for a qualified and registered social worker to undertake a varied role within the HEI as a seconded practitioner-lecturer. The expression of interest outlined a job description based on the standard work-load principles for the recruitment of academic staff to the HEI and an outline of essential and desirable criteria was presented. Essential criteria included: (1) a recognised social work qualification (2) evidence of HCPC registration and (3) an up-to-date CPD plan. Desirable criteria included: (1) a 20-credit module in academic delivery (2) presentation skills (3) practice education qualification (4) mentoring and project development work and (5) research experience.

To facilitate the interview and selection process a panel was established consisting of the HEI social work programme lead, LA PSW and the TP Project Manager. Following 6 expressions of interests, all candidates were interviewed. Interviews followed standard criteria which included pre-interview review and rating of quality of candidate response to expression of interest and a series of 6 questions. Interview questions included: (1) Why are you interested in this secondment? (2) What skills, experience and areas of knowledge do you think you can bring to the secondment? (3) What experience do you have in engaging with students and higher education? (4) What challenges do you think occur in higher education, particularly on the social work programme? (5) Tell us about any research interests you may have? (6) How would you manage a last-minute request to cover a teaching session for a colleague? With each question and additional criteria being represented by a scale of 1-5 total quantitative scores were combined with the panel's qualitative discussion on the overall performance and eligibility of each candidate. While there were similarities in terms of the recruitment of academics to teaching in the HEIs, eligibility criteria to apply for the seconded post

differed as, for example, practitioners were not required to hold a post-graduate degree or, as required by academics, hold or be required to obtain a teaching qualification.

### ***Induction and mentoring***

Following interviews, the panel selected a clear first choice candidate with another applicant identified as appointable. The LA PSW assumed responsibility for informing all candidates of the outcome of interviews. An agreement in principle had been agreed with the successful candidate's line manager. Therefore, assuming the practitioner would accept the offer, a start date for the secondment was agreed by the panel. A mentor from the HEI was assigned to support induction and workload development of the practitioner. The induction process followed a standard format for newly appointed staff within the HEI and was concerned primarily with engagement with existing organisational systems. These included overseeing the allocation of an office desk, work station and introduction to the electronic learning portal where all social work programme module material for students was located.

The use of lecture hall and seminar classroom equipment, electronic and physical access to library resources through the allocation of a smart card was also overseen by the mentor. An ongoing allocation of the mentoring role allowed for the practitioner to consult where necessary on organisational and wider practical issues while developing independence as a team member. The mentor was a senior lecturer in social work with module lead, head of year and personal tutor responsibilities. Within this role the mentor had a clear overview of the social work teaching schedule and direct links to module leads teaching across the under-graduate and post-graduate curriculum. This position within the social work programme team allowed for the facilitated development of an appropriate workload.

### ***Workload, teaching and skills development***

A workload was developed by utilising the staff team meeting to make the social work programme lecturers aware of the knowledge and experience of the seconded practitioner. The mentor approached module team leaders asking for suggestions as to where the practitioner's knowledge and experience could best be cultivated. Several lecturers expressed an opinion case studies used for teaching could be reviewed and/or updated by the practitioner. Adult safeguarding, social work interventions and specialist roles were identified as topic areas where the practitioner could deliver teaching. Although, teaching opportunities were limited by modules being co-ordinated during the secondment period. Nevertheless, many opportunities including practitioner-led teaching, seminar

work, module content updates and marking were identified. To identify where their knowledge and expertise might best fit, the seconded practitioner was able to access an overview of modules across undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Skills days, where students 'try out' some of the skills and interventions they have learned on the programme presented another rich opportunity for the practitioner to contribute to 'real world' knowledge and experience.

Throughout their work at the HEI, the practitioner strived to make the relevance of theory clearer to students preparing to utilise academic learning in practice. To help students explore how theory was or could be applied, the seconded practitioner often discussed anonymised 'real life' examples undertaken in practice. To assist in developing teaching skills, the practitioner undertook a Postgraduate Certificate of Achievement in 'preparing to teach on social work programmes'. This was a newly developed module designed and hosted by another HEI within the TP. The preparing to teaching programme was attended towards the end of the secondment. However, the practitioner acknowledged valuable knowledge about learning and teaching theories enhanced their capacity to teach.

### ***Review and evaluation***

As part of established processes within the HEI, and through discussion with the TP Programme Committee, several mediums allowed for review and evaluation of the project. These included: (1) peer review (2) a TP programme Committee periodic evaluation and (3) secondment partner mid and final point appraisals. As a standard requirement within the HEI, peer observation as used for all academic staff allowed the practitioner an opportunity to review performance and develop teaching skills. The peer observation process involved a member of the HEI team attending a lecture designed and delivered by the practitioner. Following observation, a report was written up by the staff member. The report included commentary on: (1) classroom practice (2) development and use of online and distance learning materials (3) use of new technologies and (4) student education innovation. Exemplars of good practice were identified, and constructive feedback included where the practitioner could seek opportunities to enhance knowledge and skills through, for example, team teaching and/or mentoring. To support the project evaluation and teaching appraisal process the mid and final point review was held between the host HEI programme lead, the partner LA PSW and the seconded practitioner.

### **Challenges and limitations**

Development of the secondment project has presented a range of challenges and limitations. Among

these has been constraints to gathering evidence across the TP partner agencies. The strategy design outlined was selected as the most pragmatic means of gathering evidence given the time constraints involved. However, it is acknowledged consultees, while purposeful, remained small-scale and a wider number of participants from cohorts across the development stages may have produced different results. Questionnaires were limited in terms of qualitative data captured and where themes outside of those most dominant were present. Resultantly, there was no scope to seek elaboration on points identified through further participant engagement. Noted with the TP Programme Committee during the process of formulating an evidence-base to inform the project was a tentativeness among some partners to provide robust information on existing secondment arrangements. One explanation for this shared by partners was, in some cases, an initial lack of knowledge of those practitioners employed by LAs currently teaching on social work programmes. This knowledge gap was addressed through a list of practitioners compiled independently by the project team through direct contact with HEI and LA leads on behalf of the TP Programme Committee. Interpretation of the potential formalisation of secondment of practitioner arrangements to undermine existing informal working relationships across LAs and HEIs by the TP partners presented as a challenge. Holt & Kelly (2018) suggest the positive aspects of TPs include providing healthy and transparent appraisal of existing arrangements and facilitating dialogue between partners, and this was supported by the information gathering stages of the project.

However, logistical limitations have included the need for more time to address recruitment and human resource arrangements, especially where, for example, seconded practitioners must address issues of transferring cases to colleagues in a busy team. Shorter secondment periods do not allow practitioners to work across module teaching schedules which tend to stretch across 6-month semester periods. Further, time can be limited to fully engage in and contribute to research-based activity, especially where practitioner research interests may develop within a shorter secondment period. It is important however to consider how the practitioner might retain currency as a social worker 'in practice' as this may be lost if the secondment is too long. It is therefore recommended those considering development of secondment arrangements consider a designated period which covers at least one semester and no more than a complete academic year. While it is argued there is a need to develop social work pedagogy grounded in empirical evidence, understanding of how students process and apply academically acquired knowledge, skills and expertise remains limited (Wilson & Kelly, 2010). Therefore, to help evaluate the quality of teaching across an agreed secondment period, any future practice-led teaching arrangement should adopt a consultation and evaluation strategy which includes targeted feedback from students.

Towards the end of the secondment the practitioner reflected on how it had been difficult to feel connected to the LA during the secondment. However, this may have been because the practitioner's line manager was not available across the whole seconded period. There were no agreed arrangements for reflective supervision which in terms of practice was a significant cultural transformation for the practitioner. The different working practices of the HEI took time for the practitioner to adjust to and it will most likely take time to adjust back to the LA culture. The practitioner reflected that their professional identity as an educator had begun to develop, but this identity was different (although complimentary) to their professional identity as a social worker. At the end of the secondment the practitioner was keen to use skills and knowledge gained within the HEI. It remains to be evaluated how these skills and knowledge can be best utilised in the LA setting. Although, with a further developed critical and reflexive approach the practitioner hopes to be able to contribute to the development of colleagues, particularly students on placement and social workers in their Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE).

### **Summary and conclusions**

This paper offers an illustration of a strategy used to design and implement a formal practitioner secondment project between an HEI and LA situated as partners within a regional TP. The strategy evidenced how informal arrangements were established between several TP partners, and across the region practitioners were contributing to social work education across LAs and HEIs. While the benefits and drawbacks of unsanctioned and/or informal arrangements were evidenced, to ensure equitable and quality-controlled contributions, the need for a formal secondment arrangement was highlighted. However, the authors identified some challenges and limitations in the development of formal arrangements which need to be addressed. To implement a secondment arrangement between HEIs and LAs a robust recruitment process is required. LAs must be financially compensated so seconded practitioners' substantive posts can be funded and back-filled. Consideration should be given to timing and duration of the secondment to enable a balance between maximising practitioners' contribution to student education while maintaining currency as a social worker. The use of a mentor from within the school of social work was identified as crucial in supporting the seconded practitioner to orientate to the HEI, developing a work-load and profile among the programme team as an educator.

In contrast to fast-track routes, there is evidence to suggest enhancement of practitioner-led education presents an opportunity to develop HEI learning and support students to make clear links between theory and practice while maintaining a broader focus on the nature and practice of social work. Although potential gains to the LA in relation to staff retention need to be assessed, benefits

translating to the LA include where the seconded practitioner is required to support students on placement and NQSWs to put their HEI learning into practice. However, while advocated as required in any future development, in this case due to the short-term nature of the project outside of the contributions to developing the learning culture within the LA described, evaluation of the long-term impact remains outstanding. Also outstanding is an evaluation of any potential loss HEIs where formal secondment arrangements become secondary or replace practitioners' informal contribution to social work education programmes.

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