

Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

Prepared for Practice? Exploring and Evaluating the First Six Months of Post-qualified Practice in Social Work

Other

How to cite:

Nix, Ingrid; Cooper, Barry; Davis, Roger and McCormick, Michael (2009). Prepared for Practice? Exploring and Evaluating the First Six Months of Post-qualified Practice in Social Work. The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2009 The Authors

Version: Version of Record

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk



Prepared for practice? Exploring and evaluating the first six months of post-qualified practice in social work

Written by: Ingrid Nix, Barry Cooper, Roger Davis and Mick McCormick

Report Submission Date: 30 October 2009

Names of any key staff associated with the project:

Ingrid Nix, Barry Cooper, Roger Davis, Mick McCormick

Contact:

Ingrid Nix i.nix@open.ac.uk

Barry Cooper b.cooper@open.ac.uk

Roger Davis r.b.davis@open.ac.uk

Mick McCormick m.g.v.mccormick@open.ac.uk

Executive summary

This project explores how effective the Social work degree has been in enabling graduates to feel prepared for the practice of social work. Quantitative and qualitative data from online questionnaires and interviews with twelve graduates revealed that graduates perceived they were more confident, despite coming from a background where they were already practicing. They identified ways that this confidence (including in ICT and IL skills) has contributed to their preparedness for practice and their willingness to shape and challenge practices.

Areas of practice where graduates felt least prepared included working with hostile service users. In terms of ICT skills development, variations in systems and technology-related practices resulted in tensions between the degree providing supportive guidance which fit particular software or social work settings compared with less supportive generic guidance which might be more widely applicable. IL skills were perceived to have more generic applicability.

Key findings:

1. **Confidence.** Great changes in confidence were reported and linked to growth in knowledge, skills and values.

2. **Learning.** The confidence to continue learning having successfully undertaken a degree.
3. **Capabilities.** This combination of 'confidence to learn' led to an overall improvement in individuals' sense of professional capability in working with managers, multi-professional colleagues and service users.
4. **Identity.** This improvement in confidence and capabilities led to a much clearer sense of identity as a qualified and registered practitioner.
5. **Knowledge and power** – degree studies had led to a greater confidence, assertiveness and articulacy that are used to challenge and advocate on behalf of service users.
6. **Workloads** – workloads were greater and the work was more complex, risky and demanding than expected.
7. **Bureaucracy** – procedures were more ICT-driven than expected and there were significantly more recording processes than anticipated.
8. **Supervision** – experiences of supervision were variable, but many felt that the balance of management accountability and professional development was tilted significantly towards the former.
9. **Future in social work** – identity as a social worker was important to all participants and all saw their future in social work. Some had clear ideas about continued studies and all looked back on their degree studies with positive memories.

Possible areas for future research/development:

- **Grow your own** – the interviewees were all sponsored by and had returned to their agency. It is possible that the high levels of confidence and practice preparedness found by the study could be linked to the OU system of employer sponsorship. It would therefore be worthwhile undertaking further research to compare experiences across a range of providers and investigate this possible link. As the OU provides 11% of all social work graduates in the UK, the social work programme is strategically placed to influence policy in the future.
- Regarding confidence levels in ICT and IL skills it would be worth investigating (at another institution) the confidence levels and attitudes to technology enhanced practice of students who had undertaken skills development as a

separate stand-alone module (rather than integrated as part of their degree studies and through technology enhanced learning).

Report of activities and outcomes

Prepared for practice? Exploring and evaluating the first six months of post-qualified practice in social work	1
Executive summary.....	1
Key findings:.....	1
Possible areas for future research/development:.....	2
Report of activities and outcomes.....	3
Aims and scope of the project.....	3
Activities.....	5
Findings and evidence:	6
<i>Preparedness for social work practice</i>	7
<i>ICT-related perceptions</i>	8
<i>Information literacy related perceptions</i>	11
Impact	11
Appendices.....	15
References.....	16

Aims and scope of the project

- What were the main aims of the project?

The project aimed to research the effectiveness of the social work degree in preparing students for practice, building on research undertaken in 1996 (Marsh & Tresiliotis). We piloted an approach with a select number of students, with a view to this leading to a larger scale study in future, possibly with external partners.

The social work programme had tracked two students through the three practice learning courses on the degree, inviting their perceptions on their learning experiences. We built upon this foundation and interviewed twelve volunteer graduates.

The original investigative themes included:

- To what extent did the degree prepare practitioners with assessment and intervention skills?
- To what extent are graduates able to maintain an awareness of ethics in practice?
- What are the personal and practice-based factors that impact upon professional identity formation?
- Reflection in practice – how does it happen? / does it happen? What helps? What hinders?
- How well has the degree prepared practitioners for the use of ICT skills in technology-enhanced practice?
- How important are Information literacy skills in practice settings?

After a recent team meeting on 2 November 2009, the following research themes were expressed, to be used on our posters/leaflets:

Learner transitions into qualified social work practice

- Investigating work-based learning on the social work programme
- Exploring professional confidence
- Developing professional identity

Learner perceptions of the relevance and value of ICT and IL in social work practice

- Capturing transitions in technology-enhanced social work practice
- Changes in attitudes and preparedness to challenge ICT practices
- Developing professional identity – emerging engagement with ICT

- What were the more specific goals?

To capture perceptions relating to preparedness for practice for social work tasks and roles, including use of ICT and Information literacy in practice.

Our overall research questions included:

1. How well-prepared do students perceive they are in relation to the above themes in the social work workplace?
2. What is their line manager's perspective? (This question was removed due to ethical considerations – see Appendix 1)
3. How well do they think they have been prepared for practice by their learning on the degree?
4. Six months after graduating, what immediate and future learning needs are identified?
5. What kinds of CPD would help meet current and future practice learning needs?

Our current research questions (which were modified in June) are:

- How well-prepared for practice do newly-qualified workers feel they are in their workplaces?
- How well do they think they have been prepared for practice by their learning on the degree?
- What immediate and future Continuing Professional Development learning needs are identified?
- What view is emerging of reflexivity and criticality in practice?
- What are the experiences of supervision in their workplaces compared to their practice learning opportunities?

This included a new question relating to the theme of criticality which emerged from our early findings.

The objectives were (and still are) to:

- capture up-to-date experiences and reflections to improve our understanding of the practice learning needs of recent graduates
- develop understanding of the educationalist's role in delivering practice learning
- create activities informed by graduate experiences for use in practice learning courses and published materials
- identify possibilities for future courses and thus enable the University to respond to emerging market needs
- identify a methodology for capturing snapshots of practitioners' (and possibly their managers') perceptions which, if successful, can be repeated in future years with larger samples, and for longitudinal studies
- create a number of reports for specific audiences (e.g. Library, social work)
- disseminate the experience and findings of the project through publication in journals within this field; via the PBPL website, papers at one or more conferences, one or more seminars for colleagues (external and internal to the OU) within the CETL community
- help establish the foundation for a culture of continuing educational research into practice as part of the operation of the social work presentation teams.

Activities

What was the overall methodology adopted?

We gathered quantitative data using an online questionnaire with students who had volunteered in their final year to participate. This data was analysed and volunteers identified for a follow-up interview. The interviews produced qualitative data to be analysed using a grounded theory approach.

The research team of four interviewers worked in paired combinations to create an approach that encouraged and facilitated collaboration and sharing of perspectives through subsequent analysis and dissemination. The audio-recording transcripts and notes taken, as well as data from the questionnaires, enabled us to cross-check interpretations and any conclusions drawn.

- What were the planned activities of the project?

Planning - To design a questionnaire and questions for a semi-structured interview. To arrange approval (SRPP and ethics) and set-up of the questionnaire online.

Stage 1 - to use an initial online questionnaire to survey a sample of 33 graduates (approximately 10% of the cohort) for their perceptions on how effective the degree had been in preparing them for social work practice; to invite respondents to participate in a follow-up interview (we achieved our target of 12 volunteers).

Stage 2 - to hold follow-up semi-structured interviews with twelve individuals for more detailed qualitative data (to be audio recorded). These were transcribed by freelance transcribers, for later analysis to identify emerging themes and issues).

Stage 3 – to check the transcripts for accuracy and start the data analysis to identify emerging themes.

Begin dissemination at HSC faculty events and JSWEC conference.

Undertake fuller data analysis, dividing up themes for individual team members to investigate.

- What changes did you have to make to these plan (aims, project activities, etc.) and why (e.g. technical problems, difficulties in involving users/stakeholders, etc)?

We adapted our methodology to simplify the ethical considerations which emerged. The original plan was to involve tutors as interviewers but issues around remuneration and logistics made it more effective within our budget to limit it to academic staff used as interviewers.

Employer involvement – see Appendix 1.

- What data and evidence did you gather and how did you gather it (e.g. survey, interviews, focus groups etc.).

We emailed students who had volunteered during K315 individually, to invite them to engage in an online survey questionnaire or decline.

We used an online questionnaire drafted by the project team and then implemented with further text refinements by IET. This was emailed to 33 K315 volunteers (from England and Scotland) and run from 19 Feb to 9 March 2009. The response rate was 19, 58% of the sample of 33. This represented approximately 6% of the K315 cohort.

Within the questionnaire we asked for volunteers to participate in a follow-up interview. Twelve out of 19 volunteered (63% success rate). This was exactly our target number of interviewees.

We arranged meeting dates and locations to suit each interviewee. Two took place at Walton Hall, the rest at the interviewees' work places, in England and Scotland. Interviews consisted of a two hour slot, with two interviewers and one interviewee. While one interviewer asked questions from one section, the other took notes, and vice versa. We arranged different pairings of interviewers working together so that we each worked with each other in turn, to create a more consistent approach to how the questions were asked and how the interviews were conducted. By having two interviewers we were also able to improve the accuracy of interpretation of the data.

We were able to draw on data from:

- The K315 course quiz activity
- The online questionnaire
- The interviewers' notes
- The audios and their transcriptions.

Findings and evidence:

Please provide sufficient detail for readers who are interested in learning from this project and adapting it for their own teaching.

Preparedness for social work practice

The 12 interviews covered the same semi-structured areas of enquiry. The interview schedule is attached at Appendix 3:

- **section 1** are introductory questions that explored the type of sponsoring agency that the graduates had returned to; the pattern of 'home v away' Practice Learning Opportunities during their degree studies; and the length of time from beginning degree studies to completion and graduation
- **section 2** questions are similar to the questionnaire under the rubric of 'what's it been like in the first six months of qualified practice?' and 'how did the social work degree studies help?'
- **section 3** focused upon IL & ICT questions from the questionnaire

Twelve individual interviews led to 12 specific perspectives, the meanings of which are located within the personal and professional histories, current circumstances and future aspirations of the interviewees. However, within these rich accounts a number of common themes have begun to emerge:

Personal / professional growth

1. **Confidence.** Great changes in confidence were reported and linked to growth in knowledge, skills and values.
2. **Learning.** The confidence to continue learning having successfully undertaken a degree.
3. **Capabilities.** This combination of 'confidence to learn' led to an overall improvement in individuals' sense of professional capability in working with managers, multi-professional colleagues and service users.
4. **Identity.** This improvement in confidence and capabilities led to a much clearer sense of identity as a qualified and registered practitioner.

'I've got so much out of this course- the reason I wanted to go on this was because I was missing so much – I was doing a job but I didn't know why I was doing it – and I didn't have words and meanings for things, [...] its given me a better vocabulary in terms of what I'm doing and why I'm doing it –that in itself makes me feel a lot more professional in terms of confidence.'

Practice preparedness

5. **Grow your own.** The interviewees were all sponsored by and so returned to their agency. These are OU-model 'grow your own' sponsored students. This is in marked contrast to the Marsh & Tresiliotis study where participants would have been 'traditional' full-time students and therefore more likely to have sought employment in agencies for which they would not necessarily have been prepared.
6. **Knowledge and power.** A common theme was that the knowledge of degree studies had led to a greater confidence, assertiveness and articulacy that could be used to challenge and advocate on behalf of service users as part of an enhanced social work perspective.

'I've grown in confidence through information, knowledge, skills and knowing that I have some learning to backup some of my arguments. But from the learning I've also learnt that's

its OK to challenge. If you don't challenge nobody else will and you can miss an opportunity to support something that would benefit a client.'

7. **Workloads.** For most interviewees the workloads and 'bombardment rate' were greater than expected. The work was more complex, risky and demanding.
8. **Bureaucracy.** All respondents were in a variety of specialised practice posts where the requirements were largely specific to the service being provided. The largely ICT-driven nature of procedures and recording processes was significantly more than expected.
9. **Supervision.** A variety of perspectives were offered comparing current work-based supervisory practices with those experienced during the degree. These experiences covered a wide range of both positive and negative experiences of supervision that were either supportive or undermining of practice well-being. The balance between management accountability and professional development was frequently tilted significantly towards the former.

'Here all the experience that I'm having now is very different. It's not about thinking so much, it's about your practice, it's what I would say more about ticking the boxes that things are getting done. It's more about the kind of accountability side of things I think. It's not about really making me think about what's going on . . .'

10. Future in social work.

- a. The identity as a social worker was important to all participants.
- b. The immediate future, as seen by respondents, was in social work but there were indications that changes would be needed.
- c. Some had clear CPD aspirations but for many it was too soon to be thinking about further studies.
- d. All looked back with positive memories of their degree studies.

These initial themes will be developed through more fine-grained 'discourse analysis' and further nuanced through linkage to literature and dissemination.

ICT-related perceptions

Value - The majority of interviewees perceive that ICT brings value to their practice. Some related this to improved outcomes for their service users (researching information to inform decisions), others to their work practices (recording, sharing information).

'I see the value of it now and there is a degree of power in what you do because unless I produce my documentation and send it up to the top for him to check and say that he's happy with, it doesn't happen. And if it doesn't happen then it doesn't affect the change for those individuals, so you know, you're part of the system in that respect.'

Graduates reported spending between 50-70% of their time at a computer. Many thought this time was acceptable, reporting that they recognised the importance of allocating sufficient time to inputting/recording data accurately. Some noted that a reduction of this time might result in inaccurate recording and potentially lead to errors (see Motivated by fear below).

Improved confidence - The majority improved in their confidence in ICT skills on the degree, whatever their original starting point, including those starting very confident in ICT.

Importance of relevance - Due to pressures of work competing with study, learners had high expectations in terms of any skills activities being a good fit to their own practice and study needs. The majority felt it was appropriate for the degree to teach/develop basic ICT skills as long as these could be skipped by learners already confident in those skills.

Should degree teach specific systems? – This poses challenges. Due to the differences in ICT systems and practices within work settings, there were differing views about how useful it was to teach specific systems, since these might not be relevant to some practitioners. Those who were low in confidence, and valued step by step guidance, perceived they benefited from regular practice opportunities with supportive guidance. One or two with high confidence were able to devise their own workarounds to the specific system guidance, and develop an equivalent, which in and of itself was identified as useful. One (confident in ICT) interviewee commented that having lost skills in a previous job role the degree enabled her to retrieve those skills and add to them. Others commented that the degree should only cover basic skills and leave the rest to in-house training within agencies.

Commenting whether skills have developed since qualifying:

'They've had to, they've had to, but only as a result of the spring board of the Degree, it has sort of, shot me off, into outer space sort of thing, to try and cope with it all and take on board these skills.'

Emerging 'criticality' in relation to ICT – in a context of some negativity towards ICT, an unanticipated outcome was that some graduates appear to be taking on roles as 'champions', actively engaging in supporting colleagues in their use of ICT, identifying loopholes in the systems, working with IT staff to ensure they have a holistic view and feed back improvements.

'I wouldn't mind being seconded to be honest to our IT department to work with and to develop things that are more relevant for front-line staff. You know the amount of typing we've got to do is ridiculous because information is all on a form format, but it doesn't copy through from an assessment to a care plan.'

Also:

'I want to get slicker at the system ..and I have sat in on a forum session where we were talking about improving the forms that we have with the company that's written the ICS system ...So I would continue to do that because .. a lot of people complain about it .. so anything that helps that to improve so that everybody's going to use it I would.. happily spend more time on doing.'

This finding is interesting in relation to the literature (Rafferty and Steyaert 2009: 589-91) concerning practitioners needing to engage and become stakeholders in using and improving systems so that they do enhance practice, rather than constrain or obstruct it. This appears to suggest a shift in some practitioners from viewing technologies in a managerialist context used to monitor and record accountability). *Research is needed (or follow up) to check if this was the position of these individuals before they even started the degree or whether the degree contributed in anyway to this change in stance.*

Motivated by fear of consequences - Strength of feeling about the risks of making mistakes in the system and the possible consequences, came across with some individuals, some in this context mentioning the cases of Baby P and Victoria Climbié.

'Given everything else that's going on, Baby P or Victoria Climbié, .. there are things within there that said information is missing, and then here I am looking for something and information is missing. That just unnerves me completely. I just would love it if they would say "you stop using this and you have to use this".'

Frustration at lack of reward - Some individuals expressed strongly negative views about the role of ICT and effect on their practice (unworkable systems, time away from other tasks), also the role within the degree and frustration caused by the time the activities took in relation to very low marks to be gained, and the OU degree not awarding the ECDL certificate as incentive. These individuals were also sometimes slow to admit they had made any progress. However, despite starting out by reporting no progress had been made, the majority (sometimes grudgingly) did admit to it.

Enhancements to practice - Examples were provided of ICT in practice, including working with service users.

'I've been speaking to [our life story workers] about working with particularly young people .. that we maybe do their life story works on a PowerPoint presentation, so that they can choose the wallpapers . pictures .. sounds and all the whizzy things that go with it because they're very IT orientated .. and they actually appreciate that and it can be part of personalising it for them.'

The following example of sensitive practice refers to using a small computer to record assessments while with service users:

'I could not see the benefit of that because I thought that was very rude to be there in an assessment with somebody and not be concentrating on them I really couldn't see the benefit of that. I didn't think it was fair on service users at all.'

These examples give a flavour of the context of emerging technologies and how they are perceived (Facebook, Smartphones, computing systems such as Vysio, ICS, CAF) – these were very helpful in terms of assessing:

- the speed at which the degree programme needs to move to keep abreast of developments in work settings
- issues around course design and how to future proof activities and tasks
- issues around how closely technology-enhanced learning at the OU reflects the uses of generic applications (used to develop and maintain 'basic' skills) i.e. what does our VLE offering need to look like?

Reflections (Ingrid Nix): Question approaches for dealing with polarised views

As ever, it is only after you have your data that you realise what questions may have been missing. On reflection probably next time I would include questions to try and tease out what peoples' starting and ending points were on the degree. Also having now had more time to read the literature (and analyse the data we gathered), I can see that there are

issues which are emerging and different attitudes to ICT (technology enhanced practices) which would be interesting to explore and compare over time.

Because attitudes to ICT can sometimes draw polarised and emotional responses due to the pressures often associated with studying or working with it, I noted that at the start of the interviews some participants might tend to give a negative statement about not having improved their confidence during the degree i.e. not having developed their skills, whereas as the interview proceeded and more discussion developed, they sometimes ('grudgingly?') revealed that actually they had made progress. This is important to note and shows that it is crucial when gathering data to ask questions in various ways, perhaps especially where you can anticipate there is likely to be a 'polarised take' on something. In this case it sometimes enabled a more subtle or complex articulation to emerge.

Information literacy related perceptions

Improved access to information - Information literacy skills are valued especially in relation to knowing where to look for information and the speed at which it can be accessed. Some referred to more advanced search skills developed on the degree, which aided them to find specific information. There were many comments about what resources they had found or been introduced to (during and after the degree) which they valued because they provided faster access to information. Some more sophisticated resources and skills they appear to have rejected for pragmatic reasons, to save time. For instance they may use Google to search rather than use subject databases to retrieve journals. One graduate reported that since journal titles can be so deceptive, it is often quicker to Google than browse databases.

Evidence-supported authority - Graduates referred to the newly acquired authority which they brought to different practice situations, some of which came through having had time to prepare and come armed with information, including research evidence, to inform discussions and support particular decisions. Some examples were given of how such preparation had therefore brought benefit to service user outcomes.

Graduates referred to the importance of employers supporting them by recognising that sometimes dedicated time needed to be set aside specifically for 'research' work. By contrast, quantitative data revealed that most respondents perceived they do not need technical or skills-related support in their work place to use their IL skills.

(Library colleagues are due to contribute further to data analysis and further findings will then become available. They will be using this to update course activities and inform further activity development.)

Impact

a) Student experience

- In what ways has/will your project impacted on student learning?

Our research is informing updates to the practice learning courses on the social work degree listed below, to ensure they are fit for purpose and meet students' and employers' needs. Especially in areas of evolving practice (such as working with ICT) it

is essential to be perceived by employers and students to be responsive to and up-to-date with current practice and issues and debates.

The following courses form part of the suite of courses which will be enhanced by the findings of the project:

K113/KZW113/KYJ113

These courses were influenced during presentation - for 2010 and following years
Approximate number of students annually (predicted approx 400 students)

K216/KZW216

These courses were influenced during presentation - for 2010 and following years
Approximate number of students annually (predicted approx 350)

K315/KZW315

These courses were influenced during presentation - for 2010 and following years
Approximate number of students annually (predicted approx 350)

- How is your project contributing to increasing student success (i.e. retention, employability, etc.)?

By engaging in evaluation of the degree we are demonstrating our interest and commitment to assuring the quality and effectiveness of the degree. Data which relates to the successes as well as the shortcomings in preparing student for practice will be of benefit to educators, course designers, and others who may have a part to play, including employers.

Since we are all members of the course teams of the practice learning courses, we are in a strong position, during the course mid-life reviews to take into consideration any findings which relate to course design and can be accommodated within the resourcing available for such updates.

- Have there been or will there be any benefits to students not directly involved in your project?

Yes, since our research will influence existing courses as well as future courses to be designed, it will benefit many other students.

Furthermore, we are in a position to disseminate these findings among our colleagues and thereby make a difference on other courses. This topic is of key interest to those engaged in practice learning courses (for example, there are strong links between this project and an equivalent investigation on the Nursing Programme), so hereby we plan to strengthen our understanding and make more positive gains to students, tutors and employers.

b) Teaching

- How have you affected the practice of both yourself and others within the OU? If you have changed course/ activity/ programme designs, please include examples if possible.

There will be changes which we are negotiating, based on the requirements for the three nations delivering the degrees (Scotland, Wales and England).

- 1) The focus upon supervision experiences has provided data that will be of great relevance for the forthcoming government sponsored Social Work Task Force recommendations for the degree and post-qualification award routes.
- 2) The sustainability and preparedness for practice of the OU GYO (Grow your own) sponsored route is a particular strength and is likely to be further enhanced as a positive and successful model of employer engagement to address recruitment and retention problems in the profession.
- 3) It is anticipated that relating to ICT there will be adjustments to the number and nature of ICT skills activities within the Programme, subject to changes in the Care Council requirements and the challenges of three nations having three different sets of requirements for the social work degrees they offer.

• What has been the impact of your project outside the OU?

At JSWEC there was interest in our initial findings and we now plan to contribute to debates in the sector.

To this end we presented our findings at the 4th Open CETL conference (Dec 09) including to external academics.

Furthermore, the issue of ICT in practice learning will be the topic for an external-facing seminar funded by HEA in the Evidence-based Practice Seminar Series, in March 2010. Attendees will comprise educators from the FE and HE sectors. Led by Prof. Mary Thorpe, Ingrid Nix will present evidence from the *Prepared for practice?* project, alongside project members from two OUBS/CPLD projects, exploring the themes of employability skills and employer engagement.

c) Strategic change and learning design

• What impact has your work had on your Unit's or the University's policies and practices?

We are planning involvement in a HSC faculty research group seminar and outcomes may result from this.

We are making links with other OU projects and research generated in similar areas of enquiry. These include:

- [JISC PB-LXP project](#) – Mary Thorpe and Rob Edmunds
- [Sustaining professional practice](#) - Mick McCormick and Wendy Bowles (PBPL CETL)
- [Crossing the threshold: students' experiences of the transition from student to staff nurse](#) – Jan Draper (PBPL CETL)
- Practice and Professional Learning Environment (PePLE) project – Barry Cooper, Maggie Pickering and Mary Thorpe
- [Knowing Practice](#) – Jean Gordon, Barry Cooper and Sue Dumbleton.
- Theory to Practice – Barry Cooper and Jean Gordon

The university has a strong interest in practice learning through its interconnectedness with Strategic Objective 3 - *Create market responsive and innovative offerings*. This includes Employer engagement:

'to improve the University's ability to work with employers and third parties in developing the capabilities of the UK workforce. At the same time, the University will ensure that employee aspirations for their own personal work-related development are also met.' (see <http://intranet.open.ac.uk/strategy-unit/projects/employer-engagement/index.shtml>)

Within this it also relates to priority:

2 - Make the decisive shift to programme level curriculum and service planning

a. embed programme level (award or cluster of related awards) approaches to curriculum design;

d) National or sectoral impact

• Has your project had wider impact on the sector or on policy? What impact has it had?

In 2009 the OU had 1400 students registered on the Diploma and BA Social work degree. This represents 10% of all social work students being trained in the UK (the OU is the largest UK provider of social work education).

In the National Students Survey in 2007 the OU was rated top out of 51 HEIs teaching social work, and 3rd in 2008 in terms of student satisfaction across a range of criteria, testifying to the quality of the curriculum and the support they experience on its delivery.

In this context, the project findings which inform changes to the curriculum and to the nature of support provided to students therefore have a large impact – by definition. This is not only in terms of the numbers of OU students who benefit from such changes but also in terms of the impact of OU practices and research on the sector through dissemination, modelling best practices.

The project team has advertised the project and disseminated the research findings through:

- PBPL CETL (website, posters and conference listed below)
- Social work research team
- HSC research group
- Library Academic and Student Services team

Via OU conferences:

- OU Making Connections Conference (June 09)
- OPEN CETL conference (Dec 09)

Via an external conference:

- Social Work Education Conference (JSWEC July 09 and due to do in 2010)

Conference papers

We are due to disseminate further via one or more journal submissions, hoping for acceptance during 2010-11:

- British Journal of Social work;

- library or ICT related journal
- Journal of Social Work Education
- Social Work Education The International Journal
(<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713447070~db=all>)

Book chapters

All four project team members are engaged in writing separate chapters for a Social Work Reader which will feature aspects of the project findings.

J Seden, M McCormick, S Matthews, and A Morgan (eds.)(2010), **Professional Development in Social Work: Complex issues in practice**, Routledge.

Titles for the chapters are:

- Technology-enhanced learning for social work education and practice (Ingrid Nix)
- Social work: strong on values, weak on ethics? (Sandy Fraser & Mick McCormick)
- Policies and Practice with Vulnerable Adults (Mick McCormick)
- Caring for yourself, being managed and professional development (Janet Seden & Mick McCormick)
- Learning in Practice: some reflections on the student journey (Roger Davis)
- Criticality and reflexivity: Best practice in uncertain environments (Barry Cooper)
- Careering through social work: Metaphors of CPD (Barry Cooper)
- Youth Justice: Children in need or children in trouble? (Barry Cooper & Richard Hester)

Also, Ingrid Nix was invited by OU Library colleague Clarissa Gosling to work together on a chapter for international publication, drawing on the Information literacy related findings. The chapter, which features the experience of collaborating to develop integrated Information Literacy skills within a programme (Social work), will draw on the *P4P?* findings to discuss the impact of this work on student learning. (Due for publication in 2010.)

‘Collaborating to develop an integrated information literacy skills strategy for distance learning students’ in T.P. Mackey and T.E. Jacobson (eds) (2010), *Teaching Information Literacy Online*, Neal-Schumann Publishers, pp.tbc, ISBN tbc.

Appendices

Appendix 1
Ethics procedure

1.. Regarding Research governance (permissions needed from employers whose staff were engaged in the interviews), we were advised to change our approach from ‘research’ to ‘evaluation’ due to the sensitivity around involving work-based participants. We sent a

notification to employers of the intentions of our project, along with our plans to contribute a training allowance to the agency, to potentially be used towards the interviewees training and development, by way of recognizing their contribution of time to this project.

2. We had intended to involve line managers in a three way discussion with the interviewed graduate and us, so that it could be presenting a range of perspectives (triangle). We were advised by the CETL that this complicated the research proposal and ethical dimension (would the graduate feel free to speak and vice versa?).

After further discussion, in order to overcome logistical and ethical considerations, and in the interests of speeding up approval, we decided to simplify and modify our aims and focus on the graduates' (and not the employers') perspectives. We therefore decided not to involve the line manager in the interviews, so that this would not compromise the interviewee feeling able to speak freely.

However, the principle we wanted to address has therefore not been furthered – namely that we should as researchers explore ways to enable such three way discussions to take place and that developmentally we might be able to arrive at a technique (in future) of doing so successfully. It is our intention that this avenue be explored in a future project since we feel the data will be strengthened, particularly in the area of learner and employer needs regarding supervision, which is a theme emerging from this project.

The team feel slightly disappointed about this, and given that the research findings have drawn attention to different experiences of supervision in placements than in practice, it might have been interesting for this to emerge in discussions and to consider what impact it might have had on all parties. This no doubt indicates a future pathway for research.

Appendix 2 – Online questionnaire:

(See resources on the project webpage)

Appendix 3 – Interview questions

(See resources on the project webpage)

References

Marsh, P. & Tresliotis, J. (1996) Ready to practise? Social workers and probation officers: Their training and first year in work, Avebury, Aldershot

Rafferty, J. and Steyaert, J. (2009) Social work and the digital age, *British Journal of Social Work*, 39, pp. 589-598.