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Final report from the project: Sustainable Professional Practice

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Executive summary

The project aims were to examine the ways in which the two distance learning social work programmes (The Open University (OU) and Charles Sturt University (CSU)) operate - looking at pedagogies and in particular how learning and teaching works in the practicum. Exchange visits were organised with Associate Professor Bowles spending 10 days at The Open University in June 2009, and Mick McCormick spending time at CSU in August/September 2009.

Our aim was to investigate the different and similar ways in which we approached the teaching of practitioners in social work.

We gained many benefits from our contacts and had opportunity to meet and work with social work academics and input to teaching and learning within respective academic institutions.

Many of our findings are reflected in recently published work, or work in publication. Findings also have an ongoing impact on the production, delivery and review of our respective practice learning social work programmes.

Aims and scope

The project linked two social work academics and academic institution engaged in the provision of distance learning social work programmes. Our aim was to investigate the different approaches to the teaching of practitioners in social work practice with the following objectives:

- To compare how our respective distance learning courses in social work operate and the sorts of practice curriculum issues which we both encounter and fit within the overall programme.
- To interrogate cross cultural social work practice settings. How do practice settings influence practice?
- To consider situated practice and interrogate respective arrangements for social work practice.
- To report on the concept and construction of practice/practicum in our respective social work qualifications.
- To compare social work distance learning programmes – what we can learn from each other in relation to the practice based elements of each programme?
- To capture up-to-date experiences and reflections to improve our understanding of the practice learning needs of social work students
- To develop further understanding of our role in delivering practice learning.
- To create a number of reports for specific audiences and to disseminate the experience and findings of the project through publication in journals; PBPL website; conference papers; seminars external and internal to our respective academic institutions.
- To consider any other lessons for practice-based education for the profession which might arise out of these comparisons

Activities

We arranged access to our respective programme teaching materials and based our visits on our interrogation of these materials. Our planned activities centred around our respective visits to The Open University and Chalmers Sturt University.

Detailed programmes were arranged to ensure that best use of time was made on each visit.

On her visit to The Open University, Associate Professor Bowles carried out scoping visits to:

- Patrick Kelly – Assistant Director – Learner Development
- Steve Gray – Learning and Teaching Librarian
- Gill Marshall – Media Project Manager, Learning & Teaching Solutions/HSC Media Team
- Jenny Bull – Head of Examinations & Assessment
- Brenda Kenney – Staff Tutor – a one-day visit to Cintra House, Cambridge – East of England Regional Centre
- Social work team meeting and social work research group
- FHSC Teaching & Learning Group – project presentation
- Learning in the landscape of practice – 2 day residential workshop
- Informal meetings with social work academic and support staff

A huge thanks is due to all who gave so generously of their time to meet and work with Professor Bowles during her visit to the The Open University. This was much appreciated, offered invaluable insight into the production and delivery of distance learning courses by The Open University and was instrumental in ensuring successful project outcomes in terms of partnership and international research.

On his visit to Charles Sturt University Mr Mick McCormick carried out scoping visits to:

- Simon Thomson, Director, Student Support Services
- Professor Anthony Cahalan, Dean, Faculty Arts
- Professor Carmen Moran, Head of School of Humanities and Social Sciences
- Jan Murphy, Distance Education Services, CSU Library
- Cynthia Lawler, Field Education Officer, Social Work and Human Services
- Jennifer McKinnon, Practicum Coordinator
- Tim Klapdor, Team Leader, Technology Department Learning and Teaching
- Peter Bell, Manager, Residential Operations, Student Services
- Lisa Griffin, Team Leader, Information and Liaison Services Library
- Assoc Prof Marian Tulloch – Executive Director Division Learning and Teaching Services (by videoconference as Assoc Prof Tulloch is located at another CSU campus)
- Deb Murdoch, Educational Designer, Department Learning and Teaching
- Contribution to creating an e-simulation of a practicum student supervision interview with a social work supervisor, (part of development on online materials for a postgraduate course for practice teachers/field educators)
- Interview with CSU Media
- Delivered a lecture to distance education social work students during a residential school
- Observed residential school lectures on social work and mental health and indigenous issues
- Presentation to CSU social work staff about the distance education social work programmes at OU

Again, the time and support offered by CSU staff to Mr McCormick during his visit is most appreciated. The conversations with so many different people involved in the various aspects of distance education at CSU enabled us to compare systems and programs and to reflect with senior members of staff on our strengths and those areas we could improve in distance education.

Findings

Having time out and the opportunity to talk to others involved in the delivery of social work teaching by distance learning was invaluable and has given additional perspective to work being undertaken at both academic institutions.

We were struck by the manner in which differences in political, academic, geographic and social environments affect the delivery of our social work programmes. Examples include the ways in which legislation, policy and care council guidelines both shape and constrain the curriculum delivery.

Comparison of respective practice learning courses and distance learning programmes:

We discovered a great deal of similarity in the ways in which both institutions delivered their respective distance learning programmes, for example:

- Students have practice learning opportunities in their own workplace.
- Support structures are very similar for student in practice learning opportunities/practicum.
- The range of practice learning opportunities is markedly similar – with opportunities in statutory, non-statutory and third sector placements.
- Care councils / professional associations require contrast in practice learning opportunities/practicum.
- Age range and student experience.
- Learning and teaching of professional ethics in practice learning settings and distance education programs
- Need for choice in technology of delivery of course materials

At the same time, there were marked differences in the delivery of our distance learning programmes, examples include:

- The ways in which central academics were involved in the delivery of the programmes.
- OU – all students sponsored by employer. CSU no sponsorship arrangements.
- CSU – residential schools. OU – monthly workshops.

- CSU – academic involvement in placements (face-to-face reviews). OU – this is managed regionally – no central academic involvement.
- Language used to describe the same experience.
- Library services to distance education students – CSU has borrowing rights for students, OU only offers borrowing for students who can physically access the library, due to their much greater student numbers.
- Role of service users: OU in curriculum development, teaching and assessment. CSU - no formal role.

Arising from these discussions, issues such as service user and student involvement in curriculum development, arrangements for social work practice and professional ethics and accountability are all areas which will be examined in more detail in our individual and collective publications.

Delivery of practice learning:

A recurring theme was one of boundaries and the way in which they enable or disable effective learning in the practicum. ‘Boundaries’ in this project refers to Wenger’s (2009) understanding of the term, which includes the notion that people require multiple identities and roles as part of their work/life. Wenger contends that reflection occurs at the boundaries between different identities, for example, when a worker becomes a student in their workplace and has to juggle identities as student and worker, or when a practitioner takes on an educator/supervision role with a colleague who is also a student. This theme will be developed in our co-authored chapter outlined below (see under ‘Book Chapters’).

Impact

Student experience

Our findings will inform updates to our respective social work practice learning courses, particularly the practice elements of these courses, and will ensure they are fit for purpose and meet students’ and employers’ needs.

Our findings will feed into academic reviews of our practice learning courses and influence course development and design for the benefit of students, employers, course teams and ultimately, service users. We will, of course, share our findings with colleagues and thereby make a difference on other practice learning courses.

Strategic change and learning design

We are planning involvement in a HSC faculty research group seminar and outcomes may result from this and are making links with other OU projects and research generated in similar areas of enquiry. These include:

- Prepared for practice?: Exploring and evaluating the first six months of postqualified practice in social work
<http://www.open.ac.uk/pbpl/activities/details/detail.php?itemId=499c305d56f6d&themeId=49887a1373845>
- Mental health secondment
<http://www.open.ac.uk/pbpl/activities/details/detail.php?itemId=49c0e5bb7280f&themeId=49887a1373845>
- PIVOT: Professional Identity and Values Organisation Tools
<http://www.open.ac.uk/pbpl/activities/details/detail.php?itemId=4832deec92f3e&themeId=47c44030bc99f>

From CSU perspective, Mr Mick McCormick's visit contributed to

- Choice in subject delivery between online and paper-based materials, for social work students
- Discussions and plans to include service users in course reviews, curriculum development and assessment of student practice
- Encouraging ideas for seminars and learning opportunities for staff and students on-site in practicum locations
- Development of theoretical framework for online student supervision project, an educational program for social work practitioners becoming field educators (practice teachers)
- Development of e-simulation interview questions for an interactive simulated supervision session between student and practice teacher.

National or sectoral impact

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.

We have advertised our project and have/are planning to disseminate our findings through:

- PBPL CETL (website and conferences)
- Social work research team
- HSC research group
- Library Academic and Student Services team

Conferences:

- OPEN CETL conference (Dec 09 – poster display)
- Activity Theory and Practice Learning Conference (March 2010)
- Social Work Education Conference (JSWEC 2010)

Conference papers

We plan to write journal submissions for acceptance in 2010:

- British Journal of Social work;
- Journal of Social Work Education – UK and international

Book chapters

Mick McCormick is engaged in editing a social work reader, as well as writing three chapters for this reader – chapters will feature aspects of the project findings. It is anticipated that this book will be published in September 2010.

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

Titles for the chapters are:

- Reflections on values and ethics in social work practice (Mick McCormick & Sandy Fraser)
- Caring for yourself, being managed and professional development (Janet Seden & Mick McCormick)
- Policies and practice with ‘vulnerable’ adults (Mick McCormick)

Wendy Bowles has co-written a chapter on fieldwork education in Australia, UK and USA for a book, to be published in late 2010:

Bithnell, C., Bowles, W., Christensen, N. ‘Issues in Design and Management of Fieldwork Education’, in L. McAlister, M. Paterson, J. Higgs, C. Bithnell (eds.) (in press), **Innovations in Allied Health Fieldwork Education: A Critical Appraisal**. Netherlands, Sense Publishers.

She is also engaged in current research projects into how ethics is taught by different disciplines at CSU, with a focus on interdisciplinary implications. Another project is examining good practice in rural clinical placements in regional, rural and remote practice locations in Australia. A presentation at the IFSW conference in Hong Kong 2010, as well as several journal articles, will follow from this research. Both these research projects have been influenced by the OU/CSU project and will result in publications nationally and internationally.

The OU/CSU project has also had direct impact on the curriculum and pedagogy underpinning a national Australian project developing an online student supervision postgraduate subject for practitioners supervising students. All social work programs in Australia are involved in this project at some level, as well as key industry partners and the Australian Association of Social Workers. There has been interest from Pacific social work groups in this program as well.

We are also planning to co-author a chapter for the proposed 'Learning in landscapes of practice' which will explore the implications of recent developments in social learning theory understanding professional practice, and as a consequence, for new approaches to professional learning. We anticipate that our chapter will be on ways in which the idea of boundaries helped us think about field education for social work students, in particular boundary issues for students doing practicum/field education in their workplaces, as well as for the practitioners who are workers and teachers simultaneously while supervising their students/colleagues.

References

Murphy, D., Carr, R., Taylor, J., and Wong, Tat-meng. (2004) *Distance Education and Technology: Issues and Practice*, The Open University of Hong Kong

Project on PBPL CETL website:

<http://www.open.ac.uk/pbpl/activities/details/detail.php?itemId=499bf86ecaa4a&themeId=49887a1373845>