quality factors in social work practice learning
the north west experience
acknowledgements

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Social work is in the midst of exciting and challenging times. The transformation of social work and service delivery, reviews of the role and purpose of social work which span international borders and the increasing media focus on social work all lead to exciting opportunities as well as major challenges.

The recent Laming recommendations and the work of the social work taskforce have highlighted the vital importance of the quality of practice learning provision. Particular importance has been made of statutory services involvement in practice learning. Bridget Robb, chair of the social work partnership board and member of the social work taskforce, recently said:

“social work delivery cannot be addressed without also addressing social worker’s training, including the support and leadership students get in their practice placements to prepare them for the demands of the front line. The availability and quality of student placements in statutory services is particularly important for preparing to work in local authority safeguarding roles”

Over the last six months Skills for Care North West have been looking into quality factors in practice learning across the region. This booklet brings together the key learning from this project, showcasing a number of high quality practice learning sites and projects across the region.

The purpose of this booklet aims to:

- identify what contributes to making a placement a good quality learning experience
- promote awareness of these factors in order to contribute to attempts to increase the quality of practice learning across the region.

Coming at a time where there is a significant focus on the vital importance of statutory practice learning experiences, the contents of the booklet also have much to offer to debates about statutory practice learning provision.
best practice in social work practice learning: messages from research and literature

A review of the recent and current literature around social work practice learning highlights that much is known about what makes a good quality practice learning experience for students:

- Excellent placement
- Good planning and preparation for the student’s arrival
- Thorough induction, well planned by the placement agency
- The agency is committed to the General Social Care Council code of practice for employers and workers
- A supportive and skilled practice assessor
- A wide range of learning opportunities preparing students for statutory roles
- Regular good quality supervision
- Effective partnership working
- A team which is supportive of the student
Whilst the evidence overall indicates that the degree is improving standards within social work education generally, concerns have been expressed about the quality of practice learning experiences for students. Blewitt and Tunstill (2008) found that placements vary in terms of quality, diversity and availability. Given that practice learning is the cornerstone of the degree this is significant.

“… a lack of good quality placements undermines the quality of the degree.”
(Blewitt and Tunstill 2008:2)

What has been clear from this project is that there are some excellent examples of good practice in social work practice learning across the North West region. The case studies contained within this booklet illustrate some of these examples. Some of the key messages from research are highlighted within the case studies.

In carrying out a review of the literature it was striking how little voice students have had so far in clarifying aspects of best practice in practice learning. We have tried to address this in this project and have spoken to students throughout the process. Students’ thoughts are integrated throughout this booklet, with much to be learnt from their comments.

messages from research:

- good quality practice learning “requires a shift in perception from individual assessors of individual students to a workplace where every social care worker sees practice learning as their business” (Kearney 2003:4)

- “building a skilled and competent workforce is reliant upon a range of factors. Strong partnerships between employers and education providers are key …” to best quality practice learning (Blewitt and Tunstill 2008:3)

- “the data supports that all social work degree students should undertake one substantive placement embedded in the statutory sector …. A statutory placement allows the development of essential skills and understanding that other learning opportunities cannot readily provide” (Brown et al 2007:4)

- “voluntary organisations can offer a particularly rich experience of inter-agency working – they can help students put into practice the task of meeting a range of stakeholders…”and prepare them for statutory practice (Blewitt and Tunstill 2008:38)

- “high quality practice learning for social work students delivered in a range of relevant settings is essential to providing our communities with the competent, confident and valued workforce capable of delivering excellent social services in the future” (Scottish Practice Learning Project 2006:1).
practice learning: the benefits

Whilst the benefits of high quality practice learning experiences for students may well be obvious, what is clear from research and particularly from this project is the major benefits for social work service providers and for the people who use services:

**benefits to practice assessors**
- continual professional development
- development of skill base
- keeping practice fresh and up to date
- opportunities to develop relationships with other practice assessors, academic staff etc – widening perspectives and experiences.

**benefits to teams**
- students bring with them energy, enthusiasm and fresh perspectives
- working to support students through a ‘whole team approach’ assists in team building
- students can assist in a practical way by focussing their energy and work on a project or piece of work which the team does not currently have resources for.

**benefits to employers**
- opportunity to contribute to the future of the social work profession
- students can make for good quality potential recruits
- promoting the agency and increasing links with other relevant services.

What has been clearly stated by everyone involved in this project is that whilst becoming involved in practice learning does require significant “investment” the benefits are so wide ranging that the investment “pays off” in many ways.

“investment in practice learning pays dividends. Students remain an ‘untapped resource’.”
best practice in the north west region: illustrative examples

case study one

The Physical and Sensory Disabilities Team in St Helens is a busy, well-established team. They provide an excellent example of a positive learning culture and demonstrate how this contributes to providing a high-quality learning experience for students. Gill Craig (senior practitioner) and Sandra Maj (team manager) were interviewed along with a student currently on placement. Previous students were also contacted and their views sought.

The team is experienced in taking students and welcomes them. They take up to four social work students per annum from various universities. The whole team are involved in supporting students from the outset. They are informed prior to a student starting on placement of the plans and invited to contribute to the experience. The student sits away from the practice teacher avoiding a feeling of constant observation, but also creating the opportunity for them to learn from team banter and peer group supervision. The approach is one of joint responsibility for the student with all team members suggesting cases and undertaking direct observations.

Both Sandra and Gill were positive about the impact that having students on placement has on the team. They recognise that it not only encourages qualified workers to reflect upon their own practice, challenges their values and keeps them up to date, but that it also helps recruit staff; for the most recent post advertised in the team all three interviewees were ex-students.

“I was encouraged to think ‘outside the box’ …the team contributed a great deal to my learning experience.”
Student 2008-9

“Students have got as much to teach us as we have them.”
Gill Craig, senior practitioner

The placement is well planned and all the students (current and past) commented on this. Much of this has developed over several years demonstrating how regular placements can make it easier and improve the experience for all parties. A range of resources has been built up including case studies, current films and media, exercises and links with other teams. The aim is to provide a broad and diverse learning experience.

Students join in all aspects of the team attending relevant training, team meetings and participate in St Helens’ student support group. This is a forum for all social work students based in St Helens run by the local
The Community Mental Health Team in Warrington also has an experienced and committed practice assessor, Helen Jones. Helen and a current student nearing the end of her placement were interviewed. It is suggested in the literature reviewed that the skills and experience of the practice assessor are a crucial element in providing high quality placements (eg: see Doel et al 2004).

“Having someone who knows the job inside out instils confidence in the student on placement.”
Student 2003 -2004

The placement has been very well planned. My practice teacher is very organised and much is pre-prepared; but she is flexible and encourages my own interests.”
Student 2009

Gill has undertaken the practice teacher award and given social work presentations at local educational institutions. She feels she is able to undertake her practice teacher role due to the support of her team, her manager and the support of her employer. Gill points out that St Helens provides valuable resources to support practice assessors. They provide regular practice teacher meetings, coordinators who are readily available and have a social work education panel chaired by the Assistant Director. This all contributes to a culture which encourages learning and develops high quality student placements.

“The culture encourages learning and develops high quality student placements”

The commitment and enthusiasm of the senior practitioner and practice teacher, Gill Craig, is apparent upon meeting her and student comments reflect this. Again this is an important factor in providing high quality student placements.

“Gill Craig was an experienced and motivated practice teacher. This provided the support required to learn and develop.”
Student 2005

Helen has been a qualified social worker for 10 years. She is also an approved mental health practitioner, best interest assessor and practice teacher. Helen is also responsible for delivering risk assessment training and mental health awareness training within Warrington Borough.

case study two

The Community Mental Health Team in Warrington also has an experienced and committed practice assessor, Helen Jones. Helen and a current student nearing the end of her placement were interviewed. It is suggested in the literature reviewed that the skills and experience of the practice assessor are a crucial element in providing high quality placements (eg: see Doel et al 2004).
Part of what makes a good placement is definitely team work...we are an integrated team and value each others skills and knowledge. Students learn from this.”
Helen Jones, practice teacher

Helen is knowledgeable and up-to-date with current developments in adult mental health and this is of benefit to the students she works with. When talking with Helen it is clear that she plans placements carefully. Helen looks for students who have expressed an interest in mental health. She always holds informal meetings before arranging a placement; as well as obtaining information about the student. This ensures potential students are aware of the opportunities available and issues within the team, thereby enabling both parties to make an informed decision about the placement.

“Every single member of staff I have communicated with has been supportive. Everyone has asked me if I want to do this or that so that I can learn.”
Student 2009

As an experienced practice teacher Helen recognises the need to develop the skills and knowledge of students gradually. A planned two week induction allows for shadowing and visits, and a knowledge of policies is gained. Students are then provided with work at an appropriate level such as team reviews; building up to taking their own cases and following a person who uses the service through the whole case management process.

The student interviewed stated this was an important element in the placement giving her confidence and stretching her when she was ready. She also appreciated that supervision was “regular, on time and took place without fail”. This ensures that the placement is well managed and practice is firmly linked with
It becomes apparent when talking with Diane that a student placed within this team would benefit from a supportive team, well planned placement, ample learning opportunities, good partnerships with relevant organisations as well as the supervision of an experienced practice assessor - all of which are significant factors in providing a high quality learning experience.

Diane plans a placement carefully and meets the student informally first. Diane feels it is important that the student is interested in this area of practice and keen to take the opportunities a placement there will provide. Diane arranges a thorough induction and receives support from her team throughout the placement. Diane explains that the team is very accepting of students and has always been willing to be flexible and get involved. This is another team that at times has nursing students on placement with them and they are clearly committed to developing students.

theory; academic as well as placement work is discussed in supervision and guidance is provided. Supervision has been a supportive experience for the student who explained that if she has done a good piece of work she gets positive feedback and if it has not been so good her assessor suggests ways to improve it – “it is not about blame”.

The value in having experienced and skilled practice assessors and supervisors was demonstrated in all the placements included in this booklet. Students’ comments and feedback emphasised the difference this had made to them. However it should also be acknowledged that all the practice assessors/supervisors we interviewed identified clear benefits to themselves and their teams in taking social work students on placement.

“supervision was regular, on time and took place without fail”

case study three

Diane Morgan is a practice assessor within the Team for Older People, Chester. Diane, like the other social workers in this booklet, has much experience. Diane Morgan has been qualified for fifteen years, trained as an Approved Social Worker (ASW), has the full PQ award and practice teacher award.

“(It) makes me fresh. It makes me stop and think about my practice.”
Diane Morgan, practice assessor
Diane believes it is important that social work students get high quality statutory work experience in their training and therefore seeks to provide this. She believes that students need to know how to apply law, not just what the law says and that this can be learned in statutory settings. Diane also thinks it is valuable for students to experience how they will be treated when working in a statutory role compared to a voluntary role and how to manage this.

Diane has developed a range of partnerships in order to offer students a wide range of learning opportunities. Students link in with other team members as they have different skills and areas of interest and students are encouraged to access training opportunities. Through these they can learn about and experience developments in social work including working within deprivation of liberty safeguards (under the Mental Capacity Act 2005) and the personalisation agenda. Diane is conscious of the need for students to experience group work and develop communication skills and has developed partnerships with other organisations which students can also access. Students have been linked in with allied voluntary organisations and have undertaken work within a local day centre. Diane notes that people who use services often welcome student social workers working with them as they tend to have more time than qualified staff and she ensures that feedback is obtained from them.

Diane also has good links with the universities and will try and attend reading days, training and build up her networks. This helps support her and keep her up-to-date. She feels well supported by the universities who provide practice teacher events and has been involved in the recruitment of social work students as well as the practice teacher support group run by Cheshire County Council.

There are many strong and valuable partnerships surrounding Diane and this placement and these partnership will help contribute to the provision of a high quality learning experience for social work students.

**case study four**

**Preston Women’s Refuge** is another organisation that provides high quality social work placements. The two practice assessors, Salma Ali and Heather Oakley, were interviewed along with a current and a past student.

Preston Women’s Refuge is a voluntary rather than statutory organisation. It was apparent upon meeting with them that they provide many of the factors known to promote high quality placements. Preston Women’s Refuge provides an excellent example of how a high quality placement in the voluntary sector can play an important part in social work education.

The Women’s Refuge has been taking social work students on placement for about four years and there is a genuine commitment to student learning, excellent planning of
placements, a good range of learning opportunities and knowledgeable practice assessors. Working within an organisation that is about empowerment is a positive experience for students and this approach is applied to their own learning. One of the striking elements of the placement was the culture and atmosphere. All the staff, including the manager and volunteers, appreciate having students on placement and they involve students fully in the team – the attitude is one of seeing students as an asset rather than a drain.

“The way of working is to identify a challenge and offer the opportunity to a student, but not ‘this is a job for the student.’”
Student 2009

The placement is well planned with files of policies and relevant social work theories being provided on day one, and time being put aside for students to read them. Students access training along with other staff and can work throughout the many parts of the organisation including the refuge, outreach service, advocacy, drop-in centre and the 24 hour helpline. Each student is also given a slot on the radio programme the organisation runs! One of the students interviewed had just done a show on ‘Inspirational Women’. This student said that her placement was letting her ‘think outside the box’. She felt strongly that this experience would assist her in her future social work role.

Neither Salma nor Heather is a qualified social worker but chose to train as practice assessors and take seriously the need to help students link theory and practice on the placement. They have over the years gathered and studied significant information on social work theories. They are keen to learn about new ideas and encourage students to share their knowledge with the wider team. Supervision is prioritised and a safe environment is provided. Students participate in the monthly team supervisions as well as having one to one supervision weekly. Salma and Heather demand high standards of evidence from students but offer the opportunities and support for them to provide this. The local university has noted that students get involved in complex work whilst on this placement but are well supported and therefore not overwhelmed.

“Supervision allows you to empty out your problems and start afresh. You are given feedback and helped to use reflection. You feel like you are learning.”
Student 2007
Both the students and the practice assessors identified advantages of having two assessors within the one placement. Salma and Heather support one another and cover each others absences whilst the students appreciate getting two different perspectives.

Salma, Heather and the students all felt it was important for social work students to experience voluntary and statutory placements. The refuge does not take final year students but plays an important role in preparing students for statutory work. They deliver the opportunity to ‘think outside the box’ and gain knowledge and skills in working in complex and challenging situations within a supportive environment. It is also an opportunity for students to gain experience in an area that social workers traditionally have limited knowledge and experience of.

“they deliver the opportunity to think outside the box”

**case study five**

Another area that research suggests students need greater experience in is substance misuse and the practice supervisor at the Drugs and Alcohol Service, Crewe, is passionate about providing this. Harrie Harrison is a social worker within this multi-disciplinary team and believes his team offers a huge range of learning opportunities not only around substance misuse but also of multi-disciplinary and inter-agency working.

Harrie is an experienced and well qualified social worker. He is an approved mental health practitioner, has the full PQ award and the practice teacher award. His skills and experience play a significant part in providing a high quality learning opportunity. Harrie has been qualified for 23 years and has worked in several teams and addiction services. He has a close partnership with a local university, providing substance training to their undergraduates. He has a strong commitment both to the particular group and to social work education.

“My job supervisor Harrie is very passionate about his job and is always looking for new opportunities to meet any learning needs that I may have.”

_Student_

Harrie, who joined this team in 2007, chooses to undertake the role of practice supervisor with students and an off-site assessor is appointed to work alongside him. Harrie feels that this model works well for him and the students, and in fact it is this that enables him to work with students. Harrie could not offer placements without the support of an off-site assessor and believes that statutory placements could be increased if more teams adopted this model.
As well as benefiting from an experienced supervisor, students undertaking this placement benefit from a supportive team and excellent learning opportunities. The team consists of a range of professionals who between them have a rich and diverse wealth of experience. They involve students in their work and students shadow and experience a wide range of interventions including health assessments, script management, family work and street based interventions. They are able to learn and reflect upon how different professionals work and their value base. Students also gain significant experience in inter agency working; links are made with street agencies, probation services, mental health service and youth workers.

“This is a well established team which aids the personal development of students as it is well organised and structured.”

Student

Harrie points out that whilst students get the opportunity to experience a specialist service they are importantly gaining experience in the whole care management process. Students work alongside Harrie, taking increasing responsibility for people who use services. Students undertake assessments, provide support, develop care plans and apply for funding for services/rehabilitation. As well as learning about the processes this placement also helps students learn about their professional boundaries, risk assessment/management and personal safety. In contrast to the Women’s Refuge, only final year students are taken on placement at the Drug and Alcohol service, so preparing them for imminent practice as newly qualified workers is an important part of the placement.

“What was so great about the placement was how innovative and exciting it was. The team encouraged me to try out new ideas. They gave me the space to use my own initiative with the approach of ‘try it out if it doesn’t work that’s fine’ ….. They really allowed me to be a student.”

Student

Jacqueline McMillan, the LITES co-ordinator, takes the role of practice assessor for social work students. The team have been providing practice learning opportunities for students for more than three years and work with first and second year social work students. The team also provides placements for nursing students and Jacqueline feels that this promotes inter-disciplinary learning.

Jacqueline’s commitment to working in extremely innovative ways with her team is
obvious from first meeting her. She sees the team’s involvement in practice learning as a key part of looking at innovative ways of working with people how use services within the personalisation agenda.

“I was really anxious at the start of the placement as I’d never worked with people with learning disabilities before. It was a real eye opener and eradicated lots of my assumptions with a really supportive safety net.”
Student

Jacqueline perceives practice learning to benefit herself as the practice assessor and the people using the services who make up the team as well as students. Jacqueline explained that initially people who use services, although welcoming, were not sure about involving students in the team. As students have become more involved the team have become increasingly confident in working with students. They have enjoyed being actively involved in social work education and their confidence generally has increased as they have become aware that they can get to know new people, contribute to their learning and involve them in the team’s activities.

The team has excellent links with other organisations and local statutory services. Jacqueline ensures that students visit some of these services in their induction and that they build on these links during their placement.

Jacqueline finds the support offered by Sefton Council to practice assessors very helpful in enabling her to be involved in social work practice learning. She regularly attends the practice assessor support groups run within the department. In terms of her own organisation, which is now separate to the council, Jacqueline needed to develop a "business case" for working with students, which she found straightforward in that students bring so much to the team. Once she established this her managers have been supportive of practice learning in the team.

The team clearly prepares thoroughly for student placements, and have developed a host of information and resources to share with students. A detailed and thorough induction process also forms a key part of the placement.

“I had an excellent induction which I haven’t had in other placements. I can see now, on reflection, how an induction really shapes your whole placement.”
Student
Jacqueline encourages students to shadow the work of the team for the initial stages of the placement. As they develop confidence and are able to work more independently she encourages them to look at areas of the team’s work which could be improved and developed and supports the students to undertake project work.

One of the main strengths to this placement is clearly the fact that it is a project led by people who use services, wholly based on personalisation. Students are able to learn about the changes in adult service provision and the future direction of services.
Two projects were identified within the region which highlight innovation in practice learning

**project one**

**Multi-Professional Learning in Practice Placements** is a partnership model for practice learning involving Edge Hill University in partnership with Sefton Social Services and Liverpool Community College. Jan Sorsby, practice learning co-ordinator in Sefton Council, was interviewed.

Recognising the advancing inter-professional agenda and the need to prepare students who are “fit for the future” in keeping with constantly evolving health and social work professions, the partnership group have developed a model where:

- social work students experience some of their practice learning in health settings (generally one week per placement – making 10 days in total)

- nursing students experience some of their practice learning in social work settings.

The project initially ran as a pilot with a small number of students but has now expanded to involve more students and another local authority is looking at joining the project.

Students are placed with experienced ‘mentors’ who are either qualified as practice assessors (social work) or student mentors (nursing). Initially the project took a significant amount of work to set up and establish, but as teams and mentors have become more familiar with the project Jan has found there is an ease in arranging the practice learning days as there are clear benefits to all involved. Occupational therapy students have recently become involved in the scheme and it is likely that in the future the project will be extended to cover other health professionals such as junior doctors.

“We spending time with district nurses has increased my knowledge and understanding of their role and responsibilities and the legislation that underpins their practice.”

**Student**

“It highlighted the importance of liaison. Effective joined up working can help cut down on repeated paperwork and making use of different professionals’ skills and expertise should prevent needs slipping through the net.”

**Student**
So far social work students have undertaken time in health teams in the second week of their placement, but based on feedback from all involved this will now be changed to the first week. The time spent in the different teams is more than simply an observational experience. Students are provided with a common framework for inter-professional practice learning booklet where they are encouraged to detail what evidence of their practice they have generated during the experience. This is signed by their mentor but not assessed at that point. The document is taken back by the student into their “substantive placement” and discussed and assessed in supervision with their assessor.

This innovative project has been well developed by a partnership between various organisations which clearly models effective partnership for students. The major benefit for students is clearly their learning about multi-agency working. Feedback from students demonstrates that the learning is much more effective than traditional models of inter-professional learning based in university lectures and workshops. The integration of inter-professional learning in practice learning truly brings it to life.

**project two**

The second example of innovation in practice learning also focuses on inter-professional learning. In 2006 several social work students, seconded by Manchester City Council, requested practice learning opportunities within Greater Manchester Police child protection and domestic violence teams. Manchester Metropolitan University took this forward placing several students over recent years, with the police now also opening up opportunities in their vulnerable adults divisions.

The practice learning opportunities have been a success, particularly in promoting interprofessional learning and an understanding of each others roles.

> “The experience has given both police and social workers an insight into each agency and we now understand why social workers and police do certain things. What your thought process is and what processes you have to go through in order to make things happen. The whole experience has been worthwhile.”
> Detective Chief Inspector

Geraldine Stanford-Beale of Manchester Metropolitan University explained that establishing high quality practice learning opportunities within the police force took a great deal of time and commitment from the practice learning team and Kath Fitzgibbon took a lead role in this.

“Inter-professional learning is very useful. All future training should encourage this.”
Student
Every student requesting police based practice learning is formally interviewed prior to the start of the placement and a great deal of planning goes into the placements to ensure that students’ learning needs are met. Students need to be well motivated and proactive to maximise the opportunities available within the settings.

The police teams provide an on-site supervisor for students, whilst the university makes arrangements for an off-site practice assessor for each student. The university runs practice learning support groups and the on-site supervisors from the police force attended these sessions and reported finding them very useful.

“Italy there was concern around the ability of the placement to meet my learning needs. However, I think once my supervisor was confident in giving me more responsibility I could become more involved. It was difficult though to conduct direct observations due to the confidentiality restrictions surrounding the placement.”

Student

It is clear from student feedback that these placements provide effective groundwork for future statutory safeguarding roles, but there are some limitations to the opportunities available which everyone involved acknowledges.

Some of the work undertaken by the team simply can’t be carried out by student social workers because of rules around evidence and court proceedings. There have also been some difficulties in organising direct observations of students practice because of confidentiality issues. However initial concerns about how much work students could be involved in because of confidentiality, insurance and student safety issues, have been effectively worked through so that proactive students who seek out and extend appropriate learning opportunities can address all of the necessary key roles.

“My supervisor considered my needs and planned a programme of work for me initially … as the placement continued my supervisor considered new learning opportunities for me and asked me to do things which she thought would be interesting for me.”

Student

“I thoroughly enjoyed this placement and for me it was fantastic. However …. I believe someone who is not actively looking for opportunities or who is not confident in stepping out of their comfort zone would find it extremely difficult to meet their learning needs.”

Student
Manchester Metropolitan University separate out the key roles of the National Occupational Standards such that key roles 1, 2 and 3 are assessed at intermediate level and key roles 4, 5 and 6 are assessed in the final year. Everyone involved agrees that these placements are best suited to key roles 4, 5 and 6 and so only final year students undertake these placements.

“As all the students will become social workers working in Manchester it has made great working relationships that will last and build trust within agencies … we have had requests for other social workers to be seconded to the police for a short period of time. All in all it has been a great investment for the police and obviously one which more divisions are now prepared to get involved in”

Student

The majority of the students placed in police settings so far have been seconded and so the importance of making links will also have more of an impact on long term relationships and practice.
the student voice

This project began with a literature review and as explained at the start of this booklet it was striking how little voice students had within the available literature.

Whilst visiting the placements nominated for this booklet we took the opportunity to speak with students currently on placement or who had previously been on placement in these teams. This is clearly not scientific in any way – but it would be great to hear more students saying as these did:

“ my placement was a very valuable experience and one that I was grateful to have had prior to qualifying”

“I had a fantastic placement”

“I feel very lucky to have been a student in this team. I believe the placement enabled my further development in social work”

So what did these students say had created a valuable practice learning experience? The students we contacted consistently identified the following:

- **a well planned placement**
  All of the students referred to the importance of planning – stating that it ensured that opportunities for relevant work and learning were available to them. They greatly appreciated the time and effort that was invested in planning their placements.

- **a supportive and cohesive team**
  Feeling that the whole team was supportive and encouraging was clearly of value to the student. One student referred to the fact that students in their first placement were excluded from team meetings. Being included in all aspects of the team gave students a message that they were welcomed and supported. This, they said, helped them relax and learn. “Shared ownership provides students with positive learning experiences” was the message.

- **induction provision**
  All students commented on the importance of a good induction, both in terms of the information provided (through an induction pack) and the activities undertaken (in an induction programme). It is clear that well planned, thorough induction sets the tone for the placement and helps the student to feel valued.
- diverse learning opportunities both in terms of caseloads and range of professionals to work with
  Opportunities to experience multi-disciplinary and inter-agency working were valued. The students
  recognised that they needed these skills for their future roles and that they could learn a great deal
  from other professionals and students from other disciplines. For many this was a new experience.

  Students also appreciated opportunities to work independently but with support and supervision so
  that they felt “safe” but stretched. They felt strongly that practice learning should “push” students and
  give them the opportunity to experience some of the pressures of being a social worker.

- a committed practice assessor
  The students described their practice assessor as playing a key role – this was not diminished by the
  presence of a supportive team. The students emphasised not just the experience and knowledge of
  the practice assessor but the importance of them being committed to their task. In fact commitment
  was singled out by several students as the most crucial element.

- links with their university
  Some students said that they felt isolated from their university during practice learning although they
  all knew how to contact them if needed. Those who had regular study days during the placement
  found this beneficial in terms of maintaining contact and accessing university support. They also
  noted that it helped with their learning and gave them opportunities to share experiences with other
  students.
We also sought students’ views on the value of statutory practice learning. All of the students felt that statutory placements were an important element in their learning but they also recognised the value of non-statutory practice opportunities.

In fact one student who had not experienced a voluntary setting said that if he could have another placement he would like to have one in the voluntary sector in order to evaluate the differences.

Typically students felt that placements within voluntary settings had supported them to build up their skills and knowledge and that this prepared them for a final statutory placement. Given that increasing numbers of students are undertaking social work degrees with limited work experience and at a younger age this could be a vital role for non-statutory settings.

Some of the students felt strongly that the view often expressed about voluntary placements being inferior to statutory ones needs challenging. It was suggested that universities should take responsibility for doing this. For some it was opportunities in the voluntary sector that had let them do what they perceived as “real social work”.

Most of the students however felt it was important to work in a statutory setting to gain knowledge about the associated procedures and pressures. As it was put by more than one respondent, statutory teams are “a different world”. Students particularly felt that statutory placements put them in a better position when competing for jobs. Most had requested statutory placements in their final year for these reasons and appreciated this experience.

One of the interesting elements of the student feedback and comments is how their thoughts about what makes a good quality placement reflect the factors identified in both the literature review and the North West case studies. What is clear is that there is a body of robust evidence about quality factors in practice learning. All that remains is for more people to take up the challenge of providing quality practice learning so that they can reap the benefits.