Does Practice Learning Assist the Recruitment and the Retention of Staff?

Jonathan Parker, Institute of Health & Community Studies, Bournemouth University, Mark Doel, Centre for Health and Social Care Research, Sheffield Hallam University and John Whitfield, Faculty of Health and Social Care, University of Hull.

Abstract

This paper describes a study funded by the Practice Learning Taskforce to consider the links between practice learning and the recruitment and retention of social work staff within Councils with Social Services Responsibilities (CSSRs). The findings confirmed prior anecdotal evidence that practice learning increases the pool of potential employees and is linked to the recruitment of staff where CSSRs provide a supported approach to practice learning and teaching, especially where learning is seen as a reciprocal process engaged in by the team hosting the placement as well as by the student. When practice learning is conceptualised as a central and satisfying team activity opportunities for staff retention are increased. Data quality remains a serious issue, however, and lack of data hampers the development of evidence-based approaches to workforce planning.

Keywords

Practice learning, placements, workforce planning, labour market, social work, staff recruitment, staff retention, survey methods.

Introduction

Questions concerning the recruitment and the retention of staff within social work and social care have assumed central importance at government and service organisation levels given the changing demography of the UK, changing patterns of need and the continued turnover and vacancy rate of social workers in Councils with Social Services Responsibilities (CSSRs). A well-trained and adequately supported workforce is central to the Government's modernising agenda for social care agencies (Eborall & Garmeson, 2001) which compete to fill vacancies within the workforce from a limited pool shared with other sectors experiencing similar workforce issues.

This paper presents the findings from a study commissioned by the Practice Learning Taskforce designed to address the question: *does practice learning assist the recruitment and the retention of staff?* The paper focuses on CSSRs in England, although the findings may have resonance with other parts of the UK.

Workforce survey evidence

There is some evidence that recruitment is improving in the public sector (Hayes, 2005). From a figure of 90 per cent of public sector employers stating they had recruitment problems in 2004 this fell in 2005 to 83 per cent. This may be due to flexibility in working practice, building stimulating working environments and an increased emphasis on the value of social work, as well as overseas recruitment. Whilst it is claimed that the social work and social care recruitment campaigns have generated a substantial number of inquiries (Department of Health, 2006a; 2006b) it is unclear how

far interest is transformed into recruitment (see Revans, 2005).

The Department of Health's review of social services staff in England (Department of Health, 2006b) indicates that on the census date of 30th September 2005 42,800 social work staff were employed by CSSRs. The figure is 17 per cent higher than 1995, 10 per cent higher than 2000 and 2 per cent higher than 2004 (see Table 1).

The majority of social work staff work in children and families' teams (45 per cent), in health settings or specialist teams (28 per cent), or with adults and/or older people (22 per cent). Extrapolating from the 59,230 social workers who had applied to join the General Social Care Council (GSCC) register as of 25 February 2005, Eborall (2005) estimated that approximately 76,100 social workers in total were working in social work related positions with 75 per cent employed within CSSRs. These figures conflict with those provided by the Department of Health but the latter may not include those social workers employed in positions other than fieldwork (Eborall, 2005).

Whilst recruitment might be improving, approximately 20,000 social services staff were signed off work for a period of two months or more for the year 2004 alongside an average of 12.7 per cent staff turnover (one in every seven or eight posts) which suggests retention remains problematic (Revans, 2005), although it is recognised that this has been slowly improving since 2001-2002.

Within CSSRs, the vacancy rate for staff in 2005-2006 was 9.5 (one in ten posts) (Commission for Social Care Inspection, 2006). This represents a slight improvement but there is regional variation with the most difficulties being experienced in the South East and in London, and the lowest vacancy figures reported in the North East. Regional pay economic differentials may have an impact on recruitment and retention issues (see Eborall, 2005). Trend data shows a downward trend in turnover rates for social workers which suggests efforts are being made to retain staff (Eborall, 2005, see Table 2).

Table 1:   Social workers by areas of practice over time

Settings	Number of social workers (1,000s) by year										
	95	**96**	**97**	**98**	**99**	**00**	**01**	**02**	**03**	**04**	**05**
Children	14.7	14.5	15.6	15.9	16.1	16.3	16.7	17.3	18.2	18.7	19.3
Health settings & specialist teams	9.1	9.8	10.3	10.4	10.6	11.1	11.1	11.1	11.3	11.6	12.1
Adults and older people	7.7	7.7	7.8	8	8.2	8.9	9.6	9.4	9.6	9.5	9.4
Generic	2.8	2.9	1.9	1.9	1.8	1.5	1.3	1.5	1.4	1.3	1.3
Day centres	1.1	.8	1.1	1.1	.9	.8	.7	.6	.6	.7	6
Totals	**35.4**	**35.8**	**36.8**	**37.3**	**37.8**	**38.6**	**39.4**	**39.9**	**41.1**	**41.8**	**42.8**

Source: CSSR SSD001 Returns (Department of Health, 2005; 2006b)

Table 2:   Percentage turnover rates for local authorities

| | % Turnover by year | | | |
	2000	2001	2002	2003
Children's social workers	15.3	13.7	12.4	12
Other social workers	n/a	10.9	10.5	9.4

Source: Eborall (2005, p46)

Table 3:   Overall percentage of placements by sector

Sector	April 01-March 02	April 02-March 2003	April 03-March 04	April 04-March 05
Local authority	48%	50%	50%	47%
Voluntary	28%	29%	27%	21%

Source: adapted from GSCC Data Packs (General Social Care Council, 2002; 2003; 2004; 2005).

Training

Data from the four United Kingdom Care Councils (General Social Care Council, 2005) indicate that between 1 April 2004 and 31 March 2005 there were 4,770 registrations for the qualifying social work award in England. Those gaining the DipSW in the same time period number 4,050. Placement data indicates that both short and long DipSW placements were predominantly undertaken in CSSRs. These placements were mainly fieldwork in children and families' teams, with older people and mental health client groups being the next largest. The placement data collected indicates that there was a small rise in the period of CSSR placements and a broad consistency in the numbers of voluntary placements provided, until the introduction of the extended practice learning requirements in the new award coming into effect between 1 April 2004 and 31 March 2005 (see Table 3).

These figures are encouraging for workforce planning as they imply an increasing pool of potential recruits but the dip suggests some recruits may be lost to other sectors.

Social care workforce issues: recruitment and practice learning

Research concerning the career pathways of practice teachers has indicated that the decision to enter practice teaching was, primarily, an individual one (Lindsay & Tompsett, 1998). Whilst 75 per cent of respondents acted as a practice teacher since gaining the award, only 27 per cent reported undertaking the role on a regular basis. The main reasons given for not continuing were changes in work role, inadequate workload relief and organisational changes.

Lindsay and Walton (2000) reported that strategic planning was at different stages in different agencies and operational plans for practice learning varied. Only 25 per cent of agencies included practice teaching as a staff development option at appraisal.   There   was   significant variation in the costs of training practice teachers,   covering   workload   relief, paying   course   fees,   expenses   and

assessment fees. Agencies did report the perceived benefits of increased professionalism within the agency and potential benefits for service users. Retention strategies for practice teachers included exerting moral pressure, persuasion, and financial incentives but there were no real sanctions available when agencies relied on 'singleton' practice teachers. In each agency, there appeared to be a core of practice teachers who continued in the job but retention was improved where there was agency support, a stable workforce and financial incentives. The employment of specialist and semi-specialist practice teachers and practice learning co-ordinators also helped.

In a project to boost the numbers of Bangladeshi and Somali social workers, increasing and supporting practice learning opportunities were crucial (Doel, 2005). The scheme attracted 45 trainees in six years. The value accorded practice teachers was increased by raising the fee paid for practice teaching and the progression bar was removed for staff with the practice teacher award. Support was offered to new practice teachers by teaming them with a more experienced mentor, developing a support group and providing a range of information. The result was to increase practice learning opportunities from 10 to 50 in three years. The practice learning environment is reported to have improved and retention rates are reported at 89 per cent. Another CSSR offered 16 places to final year social work students with a grant of £10,000, suggesting that practice learning opportunities are fertile grounds for recruitment (News Item, 2005).

Horner and colleagues (2002) explored the experiences of students who, subsequent to placement, took up practitioner posts within their placement

authority. The research recognised there was anecdotal evidence to indicate a correlation between a satisfactory placement experience and working for that authority suggesting that a strategic approach to managing practice learning could reduce human resource expenditure. Practice learning experiences and practice teachers were highly rated by respondents, but it was the support of colleagues and the work environment which rated highest in encouraging respondents to work for that authority followed by training and career opportunities. Dinn (2003) found the two most significant contributory factors to a satisfactory practice learning experience to be the support of the practice teacher and the student feeling valued, supported and included by other members of the team.

The Association of Directors of Social Services (ADSS) Cymru (2005) report on recruitment and retention issues in social work in Wales recognises that there are potential recruits as student numbers increase but developing these into practitioners is difficult because of a lack of capacity within local authorities (see Doel, 2005). They have developed proposals, therefore, to ensure that education and training of social workers should become a central activity for all employers, echoing earlier research (Audit Commission, 2002; School of Human and Health Sciences: University of Huddersfield, 2003). Practice teachers are identified as central to creating innovative practice learning experiences and additional rewards are proposed for the role.

Torry and colleagues (2005) stress that agency culture and support and preparation and matching of students to placement need greater attention if the Government's agenda to increase and improve the quality of practice learning opportunities and practice teachers is to

be achieved. Important aspects of agency culture include the contractual relationship between agencies and universities, the agency's approach to practice teaching and the involvement of management in the process.

Evidence from workforce surveys indicates that data collection and quality warrants attention if it is to contribute to workforce planning. It is also clear that a range of recruitment and retention initiatives are being attempted in the light of demands across social care. Social work vacancies, especially in the area of children and families' teams remain an issue, although the numbers of students registering for and qualifying from social work programmes is rising, with an increasing number of final practice learning opportunities being provided within CSSRs. Practice learning receives serious attention within the literature and within agencies recognising the potential for recruitment of the future workforce.

Methodology

Sampling issues and ethics

Training managers responsible for practice learning in each local authority in England were invited to participate in completion of a questionnaire, to take part in a telephone interview and/or to facilitate access to practice teachers and new recruits to that CSSR.

Ethical approval was gained through the University ethics procedure and approval from the ADSS was given. Individuals responding were asked to give informed consent and were notified that participation was voluntary and could be withdrawn at any time.

Procedure

The questionnaire was developed by the research team and piloted with CSSRs in

the area before revision and acceptance by the Practice Learning Taskforce steering group for the research project. The questionnaire was disseminated via e-mail. Authorities were sent further e-mail reminders generating a higher return. Responding authorities tended to agree to a follow-up telephone interview. A sample of respondents agreed to in-depth face-to-face interviews with practice teachers and new recruits (those staff who have been appointed within the last twelve months) to clarify and explore their perceptions of links between practice learning and the recruitment and retention of staff. Telephone and e-mail interviews were held with a number of new recruits and student social workers following an open-call by the Practice Learning Taskforce.

The data collected were analysed descriptively and qualitative data coded and analysed, with the findings being broadly arranged according to the five core areas of the questionnaire. Respondents are referred to by a letter and number indicating the type of CSSR, thus preserving anonymity.

Findings

The responses received reflect the different types of CSSR and the nine English regions (see table 4). The return rate of 39 (26 per cent) affects the power of the analysis and its representativeness, although the number of responses exceeded the original target of 30. However, findings from the questionnaires were triangulated with those of the interviews held subsequently which adds to their validity and reliability

.

Table 4: Response rate by region and type of CSSR

Type of CSSR	Government Office Region									
	NW	NE	SE	YH	EM	WM	SW	E	Totals (n)	Totals (%)
Unitary authority	1	2	2	1		1	2	1	10	*(27)*
Shire	2	1	4	1	3	2	3		16	*(41)*
Metropolitan	4	1		1					6	*(15)*
% Subtotal above	*(18)*	*(10)*	*(15)*	*(8)*	*(8)*	*(8)*	*(13)*	*(3)*		*(82)*
N subtotal	7	4	6	3	3	3	5	1	32	
Inner London									*4*	*(10)*
Outer London									*3*	*(8)*
% Total above										*(100)*
Total responses (% overall response rate)									**39**	**(26)**

Recruitment and retention

Data issues and newly qualified staff

Seventeen respondents had no data concerning practice teachers leaving the CSSR in the year studied. The paucity of data highlights a difficulty with the information systems being used. Information was even less available in relation to newly qualified staff taking employment within the authorities with 67 per cent having no data about them. There was more data available in respect of those newly qualified staff who took a practice learning opportunity within that CSSR (54 per cent of respondents). Indeed, 49 per cent (85) of all new starters in the year to March 2005 had undertaken practice learning within their employing authority. Data deficiency suggests this may be under-reported. There was a growing recognition that practice learning and recruitment were associated, as demonstrated by the following quotations from M2 and UA4:

I am aware that we do recruit from our students, but we do not keep these figures, our student evenings are seen by management as recruitment opportunities.

(M2)

We have employed about six in total. Our managers view the placement of 'unattached students' very positively, holding the view that a good placement will lead to possible employment.

(UA4)

Interviews with practice teachers and newly qualified staff confirmed this view. The reasons given relate to both the CSSR and the student having an opportunity to test out each other and to provide a kind of extended practical interview process. It was thought that authorities would be able to 'cherry pick' the better students (SE1) but respondents also considered practice learning as a learning experience and not simply as a way of attracting new recruits (NE2) with students being '*socialised*' into an agency, team or authority during practice learning which

was important when applying for posts. Another respondent believed students taking practice learning performed better at interview because of their knowledge of the authority:

> *Students who have completed placements within the social work teams are better at interview than outsiders as they have a better idea of key areas to discuss as they have worked in them.*
>
> (YH2)

There was, however, a need for supportive and challenging practice learning experiences to attract students (SE3) which was further confirmed by the recognition that students are themselves able to choose an organisation, as indicated by the comments below:

> *A student will get some indication of what an organisation is about, and think, I want to work within this. It's not about, I've had three years hard study and I need a job, students are getting quite choosy now as to where they ply their trade…A considerable number of students graduating from courses go to areas that do not require the qualification, so to places like SureStart or Early Years Initiatives, which don't necessarily ask for the qualification. A number of students go into the independent sector, where again, the qualification is in some cases not necessary. In the past, they'd get their qualification and use it in a local authority. We have to compete with not only neighbouring local authorities but now with the independent sector, so now we try to ensure that the experience that they had gives them the opportunity to say, 'I want to work there!'*
>
> (NE2)

Students were also recruited because of local and regional connections and care-giving responsibilities that kept them in the area. This suggests that local factors will be important in workforce planning.

Little quality assurance of practice learning experiences was undertaken with new recruits, 28 per cent sought information by questionnaire and 13 per cent interviewed newly recruited staff. Interviewees recognised a need to formalise and embed evaluation processes internally, with students to plan better experiences and externally with universities. One informant expressed this well:

> *…[we are] increasingly dissatisfied with the process. It's very one-dimensional and [we] want to implement feedback from service users. practice teachers and practice supervisors.*
>
> (SW1)

Recruitment and retention initiatives

It is not only practice learning and quality issues that impact on the recruitment of staff. Key problems experienced in recruitment included the reputation of the CSSR, which often resulted from word of mouth and has connections with student experiences on practice learning. A good experience - planned, supported and encouraged - can go a long way to promoting a team or CSSR. The converse is also true and authorities could usefully develop a strategic approach to embed high quality practice learning within their remit. A further issue resulted from the often complex and prolonged recruitment process and necessary checks which appeared longer in some authorities than others.

Respondents were asked about recruitment initiatives and initial retention strategies supported within their CSSR (see Table 5). Retention issues were uppermost and this is reflected in the higher percentage engaged in initial retention strategies than in those concerned with recruitment.

Practice teachers interviewed identified links between their role and the retention of staff. Practice teaching, and especially taking the award, were seen as developmental activities, but

185

respondents also championed moves towards developing learning cultures and team approaches, partly because of the 'revitalising' aspect of taking a student into a team:

> *Teams tend to find having a student in the team very energising and this adds interest to the daily tasks. Lots can be learned from students who have recently been in uni and have the latest thinking and ways of doing things.*
>
> (SE1)

Table 5:   Recruitment and retention strategies

Strategy	% Using
Bursary scheme	39
Trainee scheme	64
Secondment scheme	72
Special incentives offered	39
Induction package	85
Guaranteed post-qualifying training	77
Guaranteed levels of supervision	87

Practice teachers also gained developmentally from taking students by up-dating their knowledge and keeping abreast of innovations:

> *I think (practice teaching is) important because it keeps us on our toes, it keeps us up-to-date with what the university is doing, with new legislation, new information and I can only see that strengthening... now the (Learning Resources Network) is in place and is moving, I feel that practice teaching will be given a higher profile, whereas before, it was just something you did.*
>
> (YH1)

Personal commitment and enjoyment of practice teaching was also important. One informant summarised the personal

learning, commitment and engagement in contributing to the development of the future workforce which offers wider benefits than individual financial gains:

> *Obviously, I'll get the financial incentive at the end of the year but that's not why I'm in it. It's keeping up with the practice and knowing what people are coming here for - I get masses out of it. I know the students enjoy the placement. It keeps me up-to-date with where people are at and what their thinking is.*
>
> (NW1)

The support necessary to enhancing practice learning was also acknowledged, as was the centrality of the practice teacher award to career progression. Individual support seemed to be moving from the payment of honoraria to team support.

Practice learning activities to increase recruitment and retention

<u>Numbers of practice learning opportunities</u>

Most respondents were able to specify the numbers of practice learning opportunities available and the areas of practice in which these may be taken. These varied considerably according to the size of the CSSR. Some authorities could not, however, be certain of the numbers available, found that there was a blurring with mentoring or practice learning in other areas, or could not disentangle practice learning opportunities from practice teachers. Thirty-two respondents (82 per cent) kept a database of practice learning opportunities. Those who did not had it in mind to create one, kept a database of practice teachers/assessors instead, or awaited the development of a database by their local LRN. Databases were revised and up-dated on a regular basis, either on-going, each academic year or within the last few months. Thirty-five respondents (90 per cent) indicated that they keep and maintain a database of

practice teachers, up-dated continuously or within the calendar year. The authorities not keeping a database were implementing a new system, considering developing a database or have only a few practice teachers.

Seventy two per cent indicated that the number of practice learning days offered by their CSSR had increased. Data relating to how much of an increase there had been were less reliable and varied according to size of authority. The qualitative reports indicated that prior research into workforce planning and the importance of a strategic response to practice learning is being taken on board. The increase was equated with:

- the introduction of the new degree and extended practice learning;

- support for seconded staff;

- the support provided by senior managers for practice learning;

- the work of the Practice Learning Taskforce;

- Learning Resource Networks (LRNs);

- support for voluntary agency practice learning; and

- the development of and commitment to initiatives designed to increase numbers.

The creation of designated posts to manage and support practice learning was also recognised as an important factor in increasing the number of days offered (M1; S1). One participating authority (S4) has developed a sophisticated written strategy to increase the numbers of diverse and quality practice learning experiences, allocating practice learning targets to teams and areas and integrating this with a sub-regional approach assisted by the LRN and working closely with Universities

providing social work education. Another (UA2) not only identified the benefits to the agency and practice teachers but clearly indicated that the authority recognised that providing practice learning opportunities leads to increased recruitment.

The increased pressures from the degree, however, were seen as indicating that demand is outstripping availability, despite LRN initiatives in the private and voluntary sectors:

> *As the number of placements increases it is impossible for the social services department to service the needs of student numbers needing placements due to the longer degree course.*
>
> (S3)

Another saw this pressure as a challenge and time to continue to expand the numbers of practice learning opportunities:

> *This (the new degree) will create new expectations and enormous pressure on the limited range of learning opportunities which we had been using. It is clearly only possible to meet the need by developing new practice learning opportunities.*
>
> (S6)

Supporting new practice learning opportunities

Fifteen (46 per cent) respondents from a total of 33 indicated that they did offer networked opportunities. Increasingly, CSSRs are supporting initiatives within other care sectors. However, there is disparity in knowledge relating to PLOs supported outside of the CSSRs responding to this survey, some having no data and others reporting on either opportunities or days supported. Overall, however, 23 of 33 respondents (72 per cent) reported that they supported practice learning in the private, independent or voluntary sectors which may indicate success in requiring CSSRs to report on such initiatives.

Practice teacher support

There are a significant number of practice teachers as defined by these CSSRs who did not support practice learning, which suggests, at one level, that retention of practice teachers warrants attention or that the role needs to be further embedded within job descriptions. The figures do not say, however, how many of those practice teachers who did not have primary responsibility for a practice learning opportunity contributed to that experience with support, as was pointed out:

> *Many of these (practice teachers not having primary responsibility for a student during the period) have helped to support a placement by observing visits, assisting with supervision and contributing to the final student report, as once a student has been offered a placement with a team. They then provide a back-up PT [practice teacher] with the student.*
>
> (M2)

The questionnaire sought information about support for practice teachers in terms of specialist roles, workload relief, financial and other incentives; and training and incentives for teams providing practice learning opportunities (see Table 6).

Table 6: Support for practice teachers/assessors

Type of support	% Using
Workload relief	62
Honorarium	80
Team incentives	49
In-house training	87
External training	87

Twenty-two respondents (56 per cent) had developed practice learning and teaching posts or designated practice

learning co-ordinators within their CSSR. One respondent (L1) astutely commented on the wider focus of specialist roles to include a social care remit which may detract from concentration on the education of social workers but reflects the organisational changes occurring within social work and social care.

Interviewees were clear that the support from practice learning co-ordinators was central to their role and enhanced its delivery, with one stating the link with staff recruitment clearly:

> *Managers see the students on placement currently as the workforce of the future.*
>
> (YH1)

Where workload relief could be quantified, practice teachers were offered between three hours per week and five days per practice learning opportunity. How reductions in caseload were worked out, however, was not specified by respondents. It appears that, to a large extent, the principle of workload relief is accepted but clear criteria for determining what this comprises are not. The difference between ideal and reality is expressed by OL1:

> *[Workload relief] varies across the authority depending on staffing levels and service delivery demands at any given time. We do make clear to Managers that Practice Teachers should receive such relief but the feedback we receive indicates that this is not always possible.*
>
> (OL1)

Thirty-one of the 39 respondents (80 per cent) reported paying an honorarium to practice teachers; the amount varying in each authority. Honoraria are usually paid in respect of each student or practice learning experience rather than annually. One authority stated that the decision not to offer such was based on an understanding that practice learning

was a team affair and remuneration should go to that team:

> The social workers and managers were sent questionnaires and the result was for payment to teams rather than individuals.
>
> (S2)

A large minority of respondents (n=19, 49 per cent) understood practice learning to be a team affair, demonstrating the development of learning cultures within some authorities. S15 demonstrate this clearly:

> The team from which the practice teacher comes also receives £450 in recognition of time away from team work. For a 30 day (PLO) the team alone gets £300.
>
> (S15)

Other forms of remuneration offered included training, such as the practice teacher award, other post-qualification awards (L1), attendance at workshops and conferences (S4, S11) or providing team development sessions (UA1, UA2, UA4). S2 had a certain amount of responsibility devolved to teams as they received the payment which could be spent on training and resources chosen by that team. Offering team incentives may be one way of encouraging the development and embedding of a learning culture.

Thirty-four respondents (87 per cent) supported both in-house and external training for practice teachers. The encouragement for training can be considered to be a shift towards inculcating a learning culture and promoting continued development within post. Fees were paid in 88 per cent of cases, and work release was negotiated in 82 per cent of cases. Thirty-one respondents (80 per cent) directly supported staff taking the existing Practice Teacher Award. There was, however, less inclusion of training needs and plans within appraisal (64 per

cent), which suggests a need for further embedding.

For most respondents the education and training for practice teachers and assessors was quality assured (87 per cent). Evaluation may be undertaken in-house, but was more likely to be based on university quality assurance processes. This again may be construed as reflecting a continuing sense of 'partnership' between higher education and practice agency.

The benefits of training for practice teachers focused on the opportunities for sharing, networking and being valued, as the following quotation shows:

> A chance to update their knowledge and skills, to meet with other practice teachers from across (the region), to compare how different agencies work, ability to form support networks, contacts for themselves and future students. A chance to have their skills and expertise recognised.
>
> (M2)

Management of practice learning and external relationships

Use of specific funds and grants

The provision and development of practice learning is not a cost-neutral activity. Changes to the practice learning fund (PLF) have meant that universities are required to pass on the whole fee to agencies providing practice learning opportunities in full unless a core element of the opportunity cannot be provided by the provider agency. 87 per cent of respondents said they received the full amount of the fee. The PLF appears to be used creatively to support practice teaching and learning, paying honoraria, staff costs and training fees but rarely used to backfill posts. The survey also asked how specific grants might assist in developing practice learning and a learning culture, the use of which is detailed in Table 7.

189

The monies were used also to fund teams to support practice learning help to fund voluntary and independent sector staff undertaking practice learning, whilst respondents emphasised the wider social care training remit from the grants.

Embedding practice learning

There was wide variation across authorities many highlighting the practice teacher award or at least working towards it as important in assessing final practice, but some also recognising practitioner experience or for a first practice learning opportunity (54 per cent). For a limited number, attendance on the two-day assessor programme is recognised (26 per cent) and for others the five-day preliminary course before the practice teacher award programme is accepted (59 per cent).

A large minority of respondents (46 per cent) indicated that the practice teacher role was embedded within job descriptions reflecting an acknowledgement of the importance of the role, but often included within specific posts. Inclusion of practice learning within job descriptions may be associated with the Performance Indicator and the importance of star ratings for authorities, the development of the degree, striving for quality and the recognition that recruitment may be assisted by quality practice learning experiences.

This importance and embedding of practice learning is further reflected in the 90 per cent positive response to the inclusion of practice learning within CSSR training plans and 69 per cent response stating that practice learning is part of the operational plans, which, when analysed statistically for association, are strongly associated with increasing practice learning opportunities ($Q = +0.82$).

Table 7: **The use of practice learning funds and specific grant monies to support practice learning**

Type of financial support	%			
	Specialist staff costs	Training fees for practice learning	Backfill for posts	Honoraria
Practice Learning Fund	54	54	15	77
Training Support Programme grant	39	56	15	28
National Training Strategy grant	33	51	15	18
Human Resources Development Strategy grant	13	31	5	8

Percentages add up to more than 100 per cent due to multiple responses

Discussion

We should recognise some limitations to the study. The 26 per cent response was low, largely owing to the timing of the survey in the summer months. Respondents may be those who particularly value practice learning regardless of its place within a recruitment and retention strategy. They may have a wish to promote their views more strongly than others and this should be borne in mind when considering the data.

E-mailing the questionnaire allowed for swift contact. Whilst a new approach within social research (Punch, 2005), the use of e-mail offered many advantages for this kind of targeted survey research. One relates to the ability to collect data concerning whether recipients have opened or read e-mail and thus being able to target more effectively those needing follow-up. It also allowed us to collect data relating to the responses received. For instance, a number of 'out-of-office' replies were received indicating that many respondents were on leave. This also has ethical implications concerning choice and anonymity that need to be considered.

Practice learning increases the available pool of social workers wherever they work within the social work and social care sector. This is clear from the Care Council figures for awards referred to earlier. We also know from the Department of Health staffing returns (SSDS001) that numbers of full time equivalent field social workers in England have risen over 74 per cent from 23,702 in 1989 to 41,256 in 2004, although vacancy and turnover rates have remained fairly constant at around 10 per cent. The introduction of the performance indicator (PI) for practice learning has focused attention on its centrality within CSSRs (Doel, 2006).

In the sample of 39 CSSRs in this research, 77 per cent increased their PI between 2003-2004 and 2004-2005, and 69 per cent increased staff numbers during this period. Analysing the figures further, a moderate association was found between increasing the performance indicator on practice learning and increasing staff numbers ($Q = +0.5$). This suggests that increasing a focus on practice learning has a positive effect on the recruitment of staff. It may also be conjectured that this attention is likely to increase efforts to retain those involved in practice teaching and learning.

Practice learning, whilst associated with the recruitment of social work staff, can also assist in the retention of existing staff. A managed approach to the provision of practice learning opportunities is taking hold but there is still a need for a systematic approach to data collection that can be used in workforce planning. The paucity of data limits research. For instance, data concerning practice learning days and opportunities, can be important in developing a coherent human resources strategy but there are gaps and incongruities that prevent its effective use. Data relating to the recruitment of newly qualified staff and links with their practice learning experiences, or indeed with their reasons for seeking employment with that authority are fragmented and lacking, although undertaking a final practice learning experience did lead, in many cases, to employment in that CSSR. Despite an increased recognition that data is essential for workforce planning and an increased impetus on its collection, which the development of the National Minimum Data Set for Social Care by Skills for Care (NMDS-SC) will assist, gaps, fragmentation and quality issues remain (Parker *et al.*, 2006).

191

An increase in practice learning days is associated with the greater embedding of practice learning within CSSRs. There appears to be a growing strategic and managed approach to practice learning, despite knowledge and data being patchy. The social work degree and Learning Resource Network initiatives, alongside a need to enhance Performance Assessment data appear to be leading to acknowledgement of the importance of practice learning in providing a highly skilled workforce. Even where students undertaking successful practice learning opportunities do not end up working within CSSRs, it must be remembered that they are contributing to the wider social work and social care workforce, thus enhancing recruitment.

Whilst practice learning increases the potential for recruiting newly qualified practitioners, the need to ensure that due process in recruitment, selection and employment procedures remains. Horner and colleagues (2002) suggested that 'Grow your Own' strategies might potentially restrict practice learning to those who will work for that authority and limit the workforce in terms of its diversity. These schemes are popular, but carry some dangers, but it may be increasingly important to market positive aspects of 'difficult to recruit to' regions and CSSRs to ensure recruitment numbers and a diverse workforce (Parker & Whitfield, 2006).

As a result of the perceived links between practice learning and recruitment and the need to provide a quality experience respondents discussed the move towards inculcating learning cultures and learning organisations where the team takes on a student because of the reciprocal learning that takes place. There is a degree of tension within team approaches at a localised or service user group level that needs

comment and debate. The social work degree remains a generic qualification but increasingly social work practice is specialised, particularly into broad parameters of children and families' and adult social work teams (see Torry *et al.*, 2005). This creates a tension in which practice teachers and teams are less willing to expend energy supporting students who do not want to work in their disciplinary area, whilst students must undertake practice learning in two different areas with two distinct service user groups and universities must arrange such experiences. This conundrum needs addressing.

The emphasis on retention issues begins at the point of recruitment with consideration of conditions of service, offers of support and continued developmental training. One respondent spoke about retention bonuses being offered which may offer potential for the future and may offset any problems arising from perceptions of privileging new recruits above existing staff. Retaining and growing the supply of practice teachers is important in the new arena in which demand has increased substantially. Individual practice teachers appear committed to the role, recognise the developmental benefits and re-vitalising aspects associated with it. It appears that the wider promotion of practice learning as a team responsibility will pay dividends in the future and the shift or sharing of remuneration warrants consideration.

A range of measures have been implemented to support practice teachers and practice learning including workload relief, honoraria and commitment to training which have increased the numbers of practice learning opportunities offered and may have a positive impact on recruitment and, indeed, retention. However, whilst the use of honoraria has been an attractive

one in seeking to retain and value practice teachers, the potential dangers raised by Lindsay and Tompsett (1998) must be rehearsed. It is important that payment is not seen as a means of gaining more from over-stretched staff without attending to the wider question of working conditions. Further evidence of the centrality of practice learning is the use of grant monies to offset costs incurred from training staff to engage in practice learning and the inclusion of practice learning activities in training plans and operational plans. However, Doel (2005; 2006) recognised that there was more to do in embedding the role of practice teacher into job descriptions and career frameworks.

Conclusion

There is increasing evidence that practice learning is linked with the recruitment of staff and the retention of existing staff. Evidence is patchy and unsystematised about how potentially valuable it is as a means of planning for the future workforce. CSSRs and teams would be advised to develop systematic and strategic approaches to practice learning and the development of learning cultures in which the education of others is the responsibility of everyone.

References

Association of Directors of Social Services Cymru (2005). *Social Work in Wales - a Profession to Value* http://www.allwalesunit.gov.uk/media/pdf/3/b/Final_English_text.pdf.

Audit Commission (2002). *Recruitment and Retention: A Public Service Workforce for the Twenty-First Century*. London: Audit Commission. http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/Products/NATIONAL-REPORT/8C72A180-D241-11d6-B1BB-0060085F8572/nrrecruitment_retention.pdf.

Commission for Social Care Inspection (2006). *Adult Social Care Performance: Councils' Assessment of Progress in 2005-06*. London: Commision for Social Care Inspection. http://www.csci.org.uk/PDF/adults_social_care_performance_2005_2006.pdf.

Department of Health (2005). *Bulletin 2005/09: Personal Social Services staff of Social Services Departments at 30 September 2004 England*. London: Department of Health. http://www.dh.gov.uk/assetRoot/04/10/70/53/04107053.pdf.

Department of Health (2006a). *National Social Care Recruitment Campaign 2007: Bulletin No 1*. London: Department of Health. http://www.dh.gov.uk/assetRoot/04/14/17/43/04141743.pdf.

Department of Health (2006b). *Personal Social Services staff of Social Services Departments at 30 September 2005 England*. London: Information Centre for Health and Social Care (The IC). http://www.ic.nhs.uk/pubs/persocservstaff300905eng/finalreport.pdf/file.

Dinn, G.A. (2003). *Students' Experience of Practice Learning in Social Work Training*. MA dissertation (Unpublished), Luton: University of Luton.

Doel, M. (2005). *New Approaches to Practice Learning*. Leeds: Skills for Care. http://www.practicelearning.org.uk/index.php?id=95.

Eborall, C. (2005). *The State of the Social Care Workforce 2004. The Second Skills Research & Intelligence Annual Report*. Leeds: Skills for Care. http://www.skillsforcare.org.uk/files/2004%20Annual%20Report%20VFamended%2017%2004%2006%20final.pdf.

Eborall, C. & Garmeson, K. (2001). *Desk Research on Recruitment and Retention In Social Care and Social Work*. London: Business and Industrial

Market Research. http://www.dh.gov.uk/assetRoot/04/07/43/20/04074320.pdf.

General Social Care Council (2002). *Ninth Report: Applications to Diploma in Social Work Programmes via the Social Work Admissions System 2002 Entry*. London: Care Council for Wales, General Social Care Council, Northern Ireland Social Care Council, Scottish Social Services Council.

General Social Care Council (2003). *Data Pack 2002-2003: Social Work Education and Training Statistics*. London: Care Council for Wales, General Social Care Council, Northern Ireland Social Care Council, Scottish Social Services Council.

General Social Care Council (2004). *Data Pack 2003-2004: Social Work Education and Training Statistics*. London: Care Council for Wales, General Social Care Council, Northern Ireland Social Care Council, Scottish Social Services Council.

General Social Care Council (2005). *Data Pack 2004-2005: Social Work Education and Training Statistics*. London: Care Council for Wales, General Social Care Council, Northern Ireland Social Care Council, Scottish Social Services Council. http://www.gscc.org.uk/NR/rdonlyres/E5748479-C431-471D-B8D3-C098DF29465D/0/2005_Data_Pack.pdf.

Hayes, D. (2005). Flexible measures help reduce staffing problems at councils. *Community Care, Issue number 1581,* 14-20 July: 14.

Horner, N., Conant, N., Byrne, J. & Salisbury, E. (2002). *Social Work Practice Learning: Do 'Good' Placements Produce 'Willing' Employees? An Exploration of the Experiences of Students who have Subsequently Taken up Practitioner Posts in the Authorities where they Undertook an Assessed Practice Placement*. Nottingham: Nottingham Trent University Social Work Programme Partnership.

Lindsay, J. & Tompsett, H. (1998). *Careers of Practice Teachers in the London and South East Region*. London: Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work. http://www.swap.ac.uk/docs/ac/Careers.rtf.

Lindsay, J. & Walton, A. (2000). *Workforce Planning and the Strategic Development of Practice Teachers in Approved Agencies in the CCETSW England Regulation*. London: Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work/Kingson University. http://www.swap.ac.uk/docs/ac/Practiceteachers.rtf.

News Item (2005). Newham to lure students with £10k. *Community Care, Issue number 1588,* 1-7 September: 9.

Parker, J. & Whitfield, J. (2006). Learning the way to work. *Community Care, Issue number 1619,* 20-26 April: 32-33.

Parker, J., Whitfield, J. & Doel, M. (2006). *Effective Practice Learning in Local Authorities 2: Workforce Development, Recruitment and Retention*. Leeds: Skills for Care. http://www.practicelearning.org.uk/index.php?id=95.

Punch, K.F. (2005). *Introduction to Social Research: Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches*, (Second edition). London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Revans, L. (2005). Poll reveals high level of long term sickness among social services staff. *Community Care, Issue number 1568,* 14-20 April: 6.

School of Human and Health Sciences: University of Huddersfield (2003). *Report on the Social Work Workforce for Topss England*. Leeds: Topss.

Torry, B., Furness, S. & Wilkinson, P. (2005). The importance of agency culture and support in recruiting and retaining social workers to supervise

students on placement. *Practice*, 17 (1): 29-38.

Notes on contributors

Jonathan Parker is Professor of Social Work, Bournemouth University, a post he assumed in 2006 after 11 years at the University of Hull where he was one of the founders and previous director of the Family Assessment and Support Unit, a placement unit attached to the University, and latterly head of department. Jonathan has practised in a wide variety of social work posts, with people with learning disabilities, as a hospital social worker, in a generic field work team before specialising with people with dementia and as an Approved Social Worker (mental health). He has published widely and is co-editor of the series of social work textbooks *Transforming Social Work Practice*. Mark Doel is Research Professor of Social Work at Sheffield Hallam University. He has almost twenty years' experience as a social work practitioner and researcher in Suffolk, Wigan, Philadelphia (Pennsylvania), Sheffield and Portland (Oregon). He is an experienced practice teacher and a long-standing member of the National Organisation for Practice Teaching (NOPT). His research focuses on improving the quality of professional practice in order to improve the quality of services. In particular, he has an international reputation in the field of practice learning and teaching, and the use of groupwork and task-centred practice as empowering methods of practice. John Whitfield was a lecturer in social work at the University of Hull until his untimely death in 2006. Alongside his role as a researcher on the project described in this paper he taught youth justice, a subject about which he was passionate. Before entering academia he worked for many years as a practitioner and manager in youth justice. This paper is dedicated to his memory.

Address for correspondence

Professor Jonathan Parker
Institute of Health & Community Studies
Bournemouth University
4th Floor, Royal London House
Christchurch Road
Bournemouth
BH1 3LT
Email: parkerj@bournemouth.ac.uk