

A Reflection on Partnership Working to Address Social Work Student Placement Assessment and Completion during COVID-19

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Reflection

This reflection tracks the creativity and collaboration of the Developing Together Teaching Partnership (DTTP), comprising one Higher Education Institution (HEI) and eleven employer agencies. It contemplates the way that guidance, procedures, processes and resources were devised and implemented to enable students to continue to learn and be assessed in practice settings. These thoughts result from the perspective of two academic staff, whose roles are to lead practice education activities from within the university, and another academic staff member who was, at that time, seconded to the DTTP to support practice education activities.

When the COVID-19 pandemic triggered 'lockdown' in March 2020 (Gov.uk, 2020a), Master in Social Work (MSW) students at our university were midway through their final placements, and another MSW cohort was due to start their first placements in May. BA Social Work Students had mostly completed their placements, with some having submitted paper-based portfolio documents and others almost ready to submit.

Our first concerns were for the health and well-being of students who were on placement (Social Work England [SWE], 2020). These raised several issues about whether students could, or should, continue in their placement settings. The concerns of students themselves, oscillated between worries about their own health and safety if they continued with the placement; new pressures of having to care for and home-school children, since schools were predominantly closed; and the knowledge that they needed to successfully complete the placement to graduate and meet the requirements of the regulator, Social Work England (SWE). Students, understandably, wanted answers which, in this unprecedented situation, we did not have immediately to hand.

Significant changes in the work arrangements for social workers and their ability to continue face-to-face work with people (Department of Health and Social Care [DHSC], 2020; Gov.uk, 2020b), also raised concerns about the viability of many existing placements. Placement providers varied considerably in

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their initial response to student placements, with some immediately suspending all placements and others wanting to continue. Trainee practice educators (PEs) were also concerned about the impact on their programmes. We realised that we needed to develop guidance for both students and placement staff to inform decision-making.

By the end of March 2020 we had circulated *Social Work Placements and Covid-19 - Guidance for Students and Practice Educators/Supervisors*. This document reinforced the government guidance at that time, that any students experiencing symptoms should self-isolate ([National Health Service \[NHS\], 2020](#)) and that those in an 'at risk' group should be 'social distancing' ([Public Health England \[PHE\], 2020](#)). We asked that where possible, placements should continue and where feasible, would include tasks that could be completed from home. This was in line with guidance at that time advising social work education providers to work with local partners, including placement providers, to make adjustments for students to study remotely ([Social Work England \[SWE\], 2020](#)). There was a range of individual circumstances for both students and placement providers that needed to be considered. We were aware that we could not insist students attend placement when there were compelling reasons for them to stay at home. Neither could we stipulate that placement providers continue to host students where local arrangements made this unviable either for individual PEs or supervisors, or at team or higher organisational levels. To assess the situation from both perspectives, tutors were asked to meet remotely with each student and PE and to complete a risk assessment designed to assess whether each placement could continue. The main determinant was to identify if a safe and effective working environment ([Field et al., 2016](#)) was possible. If either the student or the placement stakeholder had concerns which could not be satisfactorily addressed, then the placement was either temporarily suspended, or ended as non-viable. Having consulted the SWE COVID-19 guidance ([SWE, 2020](#)) we reduced the number of placement days from 100 to 70 for MSW students who had achieved satisfactory progress at the 50-day midpoint stage, the majority of which had been achieved prior to the March 2020 lockdown. For most students, the process worked well, and they were supported to continue their placement enabling them to demonstrate capability to meet the SWE Standards for registration as a qualified social worker and the Professional Capability Framework (PCF) at End of Last Placement/Completion level ([British Association of Social Workers \[BASW\] England, 2018](#)).

We had anticipated that some placements might be reluctant to continue because of uncertainty about how to support and assess students when most of the team's work might be undertaken from home. We worked together with PEs to identify tasks that students might be able to complete, including liaising with colleagues, other agencies and people who use services, by telephone or video technology; completing reflective accounts of the impact of COVID-19 on people and practice; and researching and disseminating relevant information to colleagues. We later found that this was not dissimilar to adaptations made in other countries ([Tedam, 2020](#)).

The DTTP developed online workshops for PEs to support alternative methods of robust provision of learning opportunities and student assessment, as well as considering the PE's own emotional responses ([Finch, 2017](#)). These provided PEs, many of whom were trainees, with a setting to share newly-developed good practice with their peers and to collaboratively find solutions to new challenges. Out of this forum came a document highlighting good practice, such as the recommendation that the PE or on-site supervisor make contact with the student at the beginning and end of each day to reduce isolation, help the student feel part of the team and ensure that they had sufficient meaningful placement tasks to enable them to provide evidence for assessment at the required standard.

A small group of students were not able to continue in their placement setting and so were facilitated to continue with individually negotiated, simulated practice learning activities delivered and assessed by qualified practice education consultants employed by the DTTP. We decided to offer the reduction in days and the simulated activities, only to students who had completed their first 50 days achieving satisfactory progress. It was felt that it would be unsafe, in terms of their future registration as qualified social workers, plus unfair on placement agencies and PEs, for students who did not meet these requirements, to be assessed without the day-to-day support, guidance and assessment expected in a face-to-face placement setting. This resulted in additional delays for students who had either begun isolating earlier because of underlying health conditions or where there were difficulties on placement, such that there were concerns expressed about their progress at the midway point.

Programme assessment decisions, learning opportunities and the quality of supervision and support for students from PEs and supervisors (if applicable) are recorded in midway and final reports that are completed by the student, PE, supervisor, and the student's tutor. These are reviewed by a Practice

Assessment Panel (PAP), which is common in social work programmes (Finch, 2017; Walker et al., 2008). Our programmes' PAPs are generally comprised of tutors, qualified PEs, DTTP employer representatives and people with lived experience of social work (PLE). Submission and assessment panel processes designed for paper-based portfolios were reconfigured to be managed virtually. Online portfolio submission was developed, and academic, administrative, and teaching partnership colleagues together ensured that rigorous Practice Assessment Panels took place by secure document sharing and video discussion.

Using SWE guidance (SWE, 2020) and focusing on *capability* rather than number of days completed, we were able to support students to complete placements safely and successfully and enabled the majority to graduate on time. PEs and supervisors were supported to ensure availability of appropriate learning opportunities and robust assessment. Additionally, trainee PEs were also able to conclude their programme of study as planned.

In our experience, our existing partnership enabled a co-ordinated and swift response to the crisis, which took account of all stakeholders' views and the university's underlying principle of 'no student being disadvantaged' through the restrictions imposed on placements by COVID-19. It enabled adaptation of processes to ensure robust support and assessment. It also facilitated significant creativity and the development of simulated learning and assessment activities for use where insufficient or inadequate learning opportunities existed, or safe working arrangements meant students could not remain in placement.

Increased collaboration in designing, planning and delivering programmes was a key finding of the Department for Education's (2020) evaluation of Teaching Partnerships. In DTTP, students have been able to access a range of additional support to enrich their learning (Figgett & Teicke, 2020). We continue to use reflection and reflexivity to adapt and build on our learning that placements can flexibly mirror current blended working practices and that PEs can be supported to provide robust assessment of learning under pandemic conditions. Future practice education activities are likely to remain enhanced by maintaining some of these new processes and resources. Student feedback about their practice learning during the pandemic will be key to ensuring we understand and address their needs creatively.

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