

ESSS Outline

Social work student placements and employability

Dr Lauren Smith
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Introduction

This evidence summary seeks to address the following question: *Is there a difference in the employment prospects of students depending on whether they have completed statutory vs voluntary placement experience?*

About the evidence presented below

We were not able to identify studies that identify a causal relationship between placement type and employment prospects. This may be because there are too many variables that influence a social work student's employability and judgements for suitability in application processes do not hinge around placement experience alone.

We have identified studies that discuss students, educator and employer perceptions of similarities and differences between different sector placements and drawn out key findings where these are relevant. We have also identified some examples of good practice for placements and examples of transferable skills, because one main finding of the empirical and theoretical evidence we identified was that an important element of the placement is that it should prepare the student for practice, regardless of whether it is a voluntary or statutory placement.

Accessing resources

We have provided links to the materials referenced in the summary. Some of these materials are published in academic journals and are only available with a subscription through the [The Knowledge Network](#) with a NHSScotland OpenAthens username. The Knowledge Network offers accounts to everyone who helps provide health and social care in Scotland in conjunction with the NHS and Scottish Local Authorities, including many in the third and independent sectors. [You can register here.](#)

Background

To qualify as a social worker in Scotland from 2004 students must gain an honours degree or a post-graduate equivalent. All honours and postgraduate degree courses in Social Work in Scotland include an element of practice learning, where each student is assessed while working in placements. To meet the Standards in Social Work Education (SiSWE), regulatory requirements for practice-based learning within pre-registration/pre-qualification state that students must spend 200 days in practice-based learning, of which at least 160 must be in supervised direct practice in service delivery settings. The practice-based learning must be assessed and all students undergo assessed preparation for direct practice¹.

There is concern across the UK around recruitment and retention of social workers, including the difference between statutory placements (for example in local authorities and the NHS) and non-statutory placements (in the voluntary sector) with respect to employment opportunities. Threads on student forums indicate that prospective, current and past social work students have different opinions about whether not having completed a statutory placement limits their employability². Research indicates that students are resistant to the voluntary placements because they “believe their employment opportunities will be impacted upon negatively if they do not have a statutory local authority social services placement”³, with studies highlighting social work students’ concerns around the nature of placements: and their belief that they were disadvantaged by not having opportunity to develop their knowledge of the statutory field work social work role⁴.

¹ Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) Scotland (2011) [Key aspects of practice-based learning in teaching, nursing and social work in Scotland](#) (pdf)

² The Student Room (2014) [Social Work - What happens if you don't get a statutory placement?](#) (website)

³ Scholar, H et al. (2012) [“Why is this not social work?” The contribution of “non-traditional” placements in preparing social work students for practice](#). *Social Work Education*, 31(7), pp. 932– 50 (Available with NHSScotland OpenAthens username)

⁴ Wilson, G and Kelly, B (2010) [Enhancing social work students’ learning experience and readiness to undertake practice learning](#) (pdf)

It is unclear to what extent this is the case, with some reporting that “employers want graduates who have experience of working in a statutory agency, preferably a council”⁵, and that a lack of statutory experience may limit social work graduates’ chances of gaining employment⁶.

Reviews of social work education indicate that finding placements of consistently high quality for students is an increasing challenge, in part due to the “rapid expansion in the numbers of people studying social work”⁷.

Employer, educator and student perspectives

Community Care (2014) [Discussion thread: ‘Am I unemployable if I finish my social work degree without statutory experience?’](#)

In this discussion thread on the Community Care website, Joe Warner from Focus Adult Social Work Practice comments:

As an employer of social workers providing the statutory social work functions in North East Lincolnshire we are more interested in the potential of NQSWs and realise that we need to invest in them, particularly in their first year of practice. For those without statutory experience we would ensure they have the practice and development opportunities to develop the knowledge and skills they require. NQSWs may need to think about relocating in order to find a job/employer who will support them to develop their career.

⁵ Gillen, S (2009) [Lack of statutory practice placements for students leaves newly qualified social workers struggling for jobs](#) (website)

⁶ Thorley, C (2014) [How to fix the problem of work placements for social work students](#). *The Guardian*, 9 January (website)

⁷ Narey, M (2014) [Making the education of social workers consistently effective: report of Sir Martin Narey’s independent review of the education of children’s social workers](#), p.25 (pdf)

Grant, S, Sheridan, L and Grant, S.A (2017) [Newly qualified social workers' readiness for practice in Scotland](#). *British Journal of Social Work*, 47(2), pp.487–506 (Available with NHSScotland OpenAthens username)

This article reports on findings from a national online survey of 205 newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) during their first year of employment and explores the experiences of education, employment and training in Scotland. Results indicate that respondents felt that practice placements prepare NQSWs for practice by “helping to consolidate their report writing and assessment skills” (p.494). The authors argue that the data shows that both the theoretical and practical elements of social work training help prepare NQSWs for practice.

Mac Dermott, D and Campbell, A (2015) [An examination of student and provider perceptions of voluntary sector social work placements in Northern Ireland](#). *Social Work Education*, 35(1), pp.31-49 (Available with NHSScotland OpenAthens username)

This article presents evidence about the perceptions of practice learning from voluntary sector/non-government organisation (NGO) placement providers and 189 final year social work students on social work degree programmes in Northern Ireland in 2011. Significant themes from the findings include induction, support and guidance, practice educator/ student relationship, professional identity and confidence in risk assessment and decision-making.

The majority of participants (74%) reported they thought there was an emphasis on statutory social work throughout their professional training. 83% of respondents reported that they agreed to the statement that it was necessary for NQSWs to have voluntary sector practice knowledge. Respondents were also asked to respond to the statement that ‘voluntary sector PLOs are NOT beneficial to their professional training’. 65% of respondents strongly disagreed or disagreed and 8% strongly agreed or

agreed. The authors suggest that responses to questions around the influence of statutory vs non-statutory roles indicate that “there is still a high level of student apprehension about the influence of the voluntary sector social worker role in practice” (p.40).

McLaughlin, H et al (2015) [Are non-traditional social work placements second-best learning opportunities for social work qualifying students?](#) *The British Journal of Social Work*, 45(5), pp.1469–1488 (Available with NHSScotland OpenAthens username)

This paper presents the findings of an evaluation of practice learning opportunities in ‘non-traditional’ placements in a children’s charity across England, Scotland and Wales from 2010-2012. It uses electronic surveys, focus groups (22 student social workers and 46 young people) and telephone interviews (9 student social workers, 10 project leaders, 13 young people and five HEI staff) to draw on experiences

The literature review provides an insight into the evidence around the differences between statutory and voluntary placements, including evidence to suggest that voluntary settings provide valuable learning opportunities for a range of reasons, including more direct client contact and learning about the profession’s value-base.

Limitations of this study include that it is unknown to what extent the research participants are reflective of the wider social work placement context, and the response rate is relatively low.

The authors argue in the discussion that their findings suggest non-traditional placements can be highly successful:

Non-traditional placements, if properly planned with suitable materials, supervisors, practice educators and supported by HEIs, do offer a quality practice learning experience that can be viewed as different from a statutory agency. To thus claim that these are second best is to miss the point that because something is different does not necessarily make it less valuable or worthwhile. (p.1486)

The paper concludes that the strengths of non-traditional placements should be communicated as much as their limitations, in order to help the social work profession more generally to develop a more creative and less proceduralised approach to practice.

Narey, M (2014) [Making the education of social workers consistently effective: report of Sir Martin Narey's independent review of the education of children's social workers \(pdf\)](#)

Section three of this report includes observations about the inconsistency of social work placement quality (p.25). Narey's argument about the relatively poor experience of students on voluntary placement in comparison to statutory placements is justified by his own experiences and those of another social worker:

I am quite sure that the student experience which might be obtained there [the voluntary sector] falls far short of that which is likely to be experienced, and needs to be experienced, in a local authority setting...One social worker of forty years experience told me:

The shortage of local authority placements means that many [graduates] obtain the social work degree without ever having undertaken the social work role in children's services. It seems crazy that people who want to be children's social workers can qualify without any experience of doing the job. (pp.25-26)

Welch, V, Lerpiniere, J and Young, E (2014) [Scottish first-line managers' views of newly qualified social workers' preparedness for practice: findings from an online Delphi study](#). Glasgow: Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children in Scotland (CELCIS) (pdf)

In the findings from this Delphi study of 26 first-line managers with current or recent responsibility for NQSWs in different areas of social services across Scotland, practice learning was seen as very important. Participants reported

viewing the relevance and quality of placements as important and said they believed it was “critical for NQSWs to have experience which was directly relevant to their chosen career path” (p.17). With respect to statutory roles, participants reported that those without statutory placement experience “may find it difficult to gain work in this area” (p.17).

Good practice for practice-based learning

Scholar et al (2014) argue that while it can be challenging for students to identify the space for social work in non-traditional settings, there is a growing body of evidence that these placements can make a “significant and relevant contribution” to the development of the social work profession⁸. Similarly, Finch suggests that although it is often assumed that voluntary sector placements are inferior to statutory placements, these placements can provide varied and interesting learning opportunities. Furthermore, there is often a “statutory” element within voluntary agencies⁹.

For any placement type to be valuable, it needs to be of a good standard with opportunities for experience and development. The resources below provide suggestions for good practice in this context.

Bogo, M (2015) [Field education for clinical social work practice: best practices and contemporary challenges](#). *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 43(3), pp.317–324 (Available with NHSScotland OpenAthens username)

This paper discusses the background to the knowledge base in social work and explores the potential for developing an evidence base for identifying best practice for quality placement experiences. Drawing on the available literature the author identifies a wide range of characteristics to identify what best practice in social work placements may look like.

⁸ Scholar, H et al (2014) [Learning to be a social worker in a non-traditional placement: critical reflections on social work, professional identity and social work education in England](#). *Social Work Education*, 33(8), pp.998-1016 (Available with NHSScotland OpenAthens username)

⁹ Finch, J (2010) [How can I gain a statutory placement?](#) (website)

Gordon, J and Davis, R (2016) [Review of Social Work Education in Scotland, Phase 2 Area of Enquiry 9: Characteristics of Effective Employer/ University Partnerships in Social Work Education](#) (pdf)

This literature review and a small qualitative research study was commissioned by the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) to explore how employing agencies and universities can best work together to facilitate an integrated approach to learning for practice.

With regard to mutual benefits of placements, the authors report:

On the whole it was easier to identify reciprocity in relation to practice learning, with employers citing a range of benefits accruing from offering practice placements, including the recruitment of high calibre employees and the contribution of students to organisational learning cultures. The identified benefits varied from one employer to another. Variation in how the practice learning fee for each student placement was used by the employer, differing perceptions of the level of HEI support for practice learning and the extent to which employers had a need to recruit new staff all contributed to these differing perceptions. (p. 16)

McLaughlin, H, et al. (2015) [Are non-traditional social work placements second best learning opportunities for qualifying social work students?](#) *British Journal of Social Work*, 45(5), pp.1469-1489 (Open Access)

This article reports on the evaluation of practice learning opportunities for student social workers within 'non-traditional' placements provided by a major children's charity in England, Scotland and Wales between 2010 and 2012. Using a mixed-methods approach of electronic surveys, focus groups and telephone interviews gathering quantitative and qualitative data, the study explored the effectiveness of the implementation of the initiative, young people's experiences of the initiative and what benefit these social worker placements had on the young people receiving support, and areas for improvement. Although limited by a relatively small response rate and

sample size, and inconsistency of placement lengths, the findings indicate that the students had positive experiences of their placements and that these placements “met the practice learning criteria” and “provide an alternative version of social work that is beyond statutory work and in particular child protection” (p.1484). The authors conclude that placements in the voluntary sector are “not second-best, but different”.

Scholar, H et al. (2012) [Learning to be a social worker in a non-traditional placement: critical reflections on social work, professional identity and social work education in England](#). *Social Work Education*, 33(8), pp.998-1016

This paper draws upon one aspect of the findings of three evaluation studies that evaluated the development of ‘nontraditional’ social work practice learning opportunities. The authors conclude that practice learning in non-statutory and non-traditional settings has an important role to play in developing a concept of social work and professional identities within the field that extend beyond “that required by statutory sector employers” (p.998).

Scottish Learning Practice Project (2015) [Standards and audit for practice learning opportunities \(pdf\)](#)

The Standards for Practice Learning and the accompanying audit tool promote a collaborative approach to planning, managing and reviewing practice learning opportunities and offer a common approach to establishing and maintaining quality in practice learning.

The standards can be used by established or new providers and with traditional or innovative approaches to practice learning provision. There is no differentiation between statutory or voluntary placements.

SSSC (no date) [Examples from Practice: Supervision A group model for student social work supervision at Cornerstone](#) (pdf)

Cornerstone is a charity providing services for adults and children with learning disabilities across Scotland. This document provides information about the group model of social work student supervision that the organisation has developed with the aim of providing a “valued and meaningful” teaching and learning resource.

Other useful resources

- [Mike Docherty](#) at SSSC is able to provide data on who employs individual Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSW) (but data on placement locations does not identify individual student locations)
- Scottish Organisation for Practice Teaching (2017) [Ten things you can do to make your social work practice placement a success](#) (website)

Suggestion for further investigation

Using data from university departments about student placements and data from SSSC and/or universities about NQSW destinations, it may be possible to identify trends and correlations between student work placements and employment. This would not give insight into whether the effects were causal, which would require more in-depth qualitative research, but would be indicative of any potential statistical patterns.

If you found this resource useful and would like to use the Evidence Search and Summary Service (ESSS), please get in touch to discuss your needs:

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