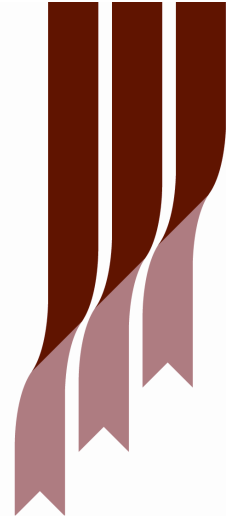


SCOTTISH INSTITUTE  
FOR EXCELLENCE IN  
SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION



**LEARNING FOR EFFECTIVE AND  
ETHICAL PRACTICE**

*Agency-based Practice Learning Opportunities*

LEEP Project 1.3 Demonstration Model

Evaluation Report (Executive Summary)

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- I. The Scottish Institute for Excellence in Social Work Education (the Institute) is promoting the Learning for Effective and Ethical Practice (LEEP) Project, the overall purpose of which is to improve radically the quality, quantity, range, relevance, inter-professionality and management of practice learning opportunities for the new social work degree. Three Higher Education Institutions are involved in the development of the LEEP Project: the University of Edinburgh, the University of Dundee and the Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen.
- II. The main objective of the Robert Gordon University in the Project is to work in partnership with social work agencies to identify possible solutions to problems associated with or arising from the supply of agency-based practice learning opportunities. In order to achieve such objective, the Robert Gordon University, in partnership with Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire Councils Social Work Departments, developed the LEEP Project 1.3 Demonstration Model between August and December 2004.
- III. The LEEP Project 1.3 Demonstration Model has explored an integrated approach to agency-based practice learning based on the following principles: creation of opportunities for interchangeable roles between university and agency; development of the role of practice learning facilitator; development of service specific and cross sector packages of learning opportunities; development of a team approach to student learning and assessment; implementation of a group and individual pattern of student supervision; and involvement of service users and carers in the assessment process.
- IV. The aim of the present study is to evaluate the LEEP Project 1.3 Demonstration Model. Using a post-test only design, all students and personnel involved in the programme were invited to provide their

feedback in relation to fourteen areas of the Demonstration Model. A summary of findings follows.

- V. A majority of respondents report that the project has been useful in allowing the student to integrate theory and practice and mention this outcome as one of the main advantages of interchanging academic and agency staff roles. It is suggested that more involvement in agency work of academic tutors who have experience as practitioners could enhance the model.
- VI. Placement preparation in RGU is generally regarded as useful in familiarising students with the structure and content of the placement. However, a considerable proportion of students consider it only moderately useful, which suggests that some improvements could be done in this area. High levels of satisfaction are reported in relation to other areas of placement preparation, with gradual incorporation of the student to the duties of the agency and availability of staff members being mentioned among the most useful elements of agency induction. On the other hand, providing students with too much information is commonly reported as one of the less useful aspects of agency induction.
- VII. Overall, the role of practice learning facilitator in the LEEP Project 1.3 Demonstration Model receives positive feedback, especially in relation to providing students with packages of service-specific as well as cross-sector learning opportunities. This function, along with the practice learning facilitator not being under the pressure of case-based work with services users, is seen as one of the main advantages of the role. Nevertheless, it is suggested that particular attention needs to be paid to establishing clear boundaries between the roles of practice learning facilitator and members of the staff involved in the agency-based practice learning process such as link supervisors.
- VIII. Most respondents indicate that the practice learning facilitator provided students with learning opportunities across a range of agencies within the social work sector linked to the placement. Access to different agencies, interconnected or linked to each other, helped students gain a wider

perspective of services available when working with a specific service user group. The most frequent suggestion in this area refers to the need to achieve a balance between service-specific and cross-sector learning opportunities in order to benefit from the advantages of both approaches.

- IX. Regarding a team approach to agency-based practice learning, team members generally shared responsibility for the student's learning, development and assessment during the placement. However, in some cases a team approach to practice learning was accomplished only to a moderate extent. Established networks, information sharing and a strong team commitment to work together are cited as factors that enabled team members to share responsibility in this area, whereas dispersed teams in rural areas are mentioned as the main obstacle to a team approach to practice learning.
- X. Although one of the principles of the model is to engage a number of staff members –link supervisors- in the student's learning and assessment process, almost half of the students report having just one link supervisor during their placement. Link supervisors were responsible for all aspects of case-based work, providing the student with day-to-day information and support as well as formal supervision/assessment through feedback. Establishing clear lines of responsibilities between practice learning facilitator and link supervisors was the most frequently mentioned enabling factor and staff shortages the main obstacle to supervision and assessment being shared by link supervisors. Access to different styles of work is an important advantage of having a number of link supervisors involved in agency-based practice learning whereas risk of the learning process being too fragmented is the most frequently reported disadvantage of the approach. It is suggested that a balance in the number of links should be achieved.
- XI. Individual supervision -with link supervisor and practice learning facilitator- and group supervision are generally viewed as useful by a majority of respondents. Also frequency of individual supervision with link supervisor is commonly rated as adequate. Enhanced support,

guidance and advice from both link supervisor and practice learning facilitator, the ability to share learning experiences and peer support are cited as the most useful elements of the integrated approach to supervision. On the other hand, time pressures is the factor most frequently mentioned as less useful. It is suggested that a better balance should be achieved in this area, with more individual supervision with the practice learning facilitator and less group supervision. Respondents also mention that in those weeks (3 in total) in which there was supervision with link supervisors, group supervision, and one-to-one supervision with the practice learning facilitator, the student felt over-supervised.

- XII. In relation to other agency members such as senior managers, team managers and team seniors, respondents have highlighted the importance of such roles in supporting staff members involved in practice learning as link supervisors. Nonetheless, more evidence in this area is needed before any generalisable conclusion can be drawn.
- XIII. Access to Information Technology facilitated the student learning process. However, some students did not have instant access to a computer or access to Internet, issues which –as reported by participants- need to be addressed in future agency-based practice learning.
- XIV. Service user involvement in the student learning and assessment process was, generally speaking, moderate. Nevertheless, a majority of respondents report that such level of service user involvement is adequate. Getting a holistic assessment and alternative perspectives as well as empowering services users by giving them the opportunity to feedback are mentioned as the main advantages of service user involvement in the student learning and assessment process. The possibility that some service users may have their own agenda, different to the student's one is cited as one of the main disadvantages of this approach. Regarding carer involvement, a large majority of respondents provide a “not applicable/do not know” response, which indicates that further investigation is needed in this area. Finally, it is suggested that, for student development purposes,

feedback from service users and carers are collected at mid-placement and later in the placement, not just at the end.

- XV. Participants report that the integrated assessment process used in the project is positive in order to have different sources of information and evidence as well as make students more accountable in their work with service users. On the downside, some participants report that students felt over-supervised and watched.
- XVI. Student contribution to the service provided by the agency and to the agency's learning culture (knowledge, values, etc.) receive very positive feedback and a very large majority of participants think that the students are, at least, sufficiently prepared to enter the profession of social work after the placement.
- XVII. When participants were given the opportunity to provide further comments or suggestions, financial issues and difficulties caused by travelling long distances in rural placements were the themes most often raised.
- XVIII. In conclusion, while a majority of participants in the study report positive results, a number of suggestions are also provided as to how to enhance future agency-based practice learning.

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