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Post-Qualifying Social Work - Evaluation Project Stage II

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PQ EVALUATION PROJECT



Stage II:

To track the needs of qualified social workers working with children and families as they undertake the PQ

Consolidation Module, to identify the key elements of the module and in the workplace that contribute to on-going professional development, enhanced performance and service improvement

Skills for Care PQ Innovations Fund (Round 2)

Helen Donnellan & Gordon Jack
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Our grateful thanks must go first of all to the participants who completed questionnaires or interviews in the course of this study. Their honesty, openness and willingness to give of their time and to share their experiences has afforded the research team an opportunity to present what we hope is a compelling picture of the journey of those who were part of the first intake to the PQ Consolidation module or held responsibility for their supervision and support. It has been a privilege to be offered this small insight into their experiences.

We should like to thank the Peninsula Child Care Programme Partnership for allowing the research team access to their staff and for their continued support for Stage II of the PQ Evaluation Project.

Lastly, we would like to thank Skills for Care for providing the funding for Stage II.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Executive Summary provides a very condensed record of the principal aspects of the study, its findings and conclusions. The full text, which follows, provides more data and a wider, more comprehensive discussion of the issues that have emerged.

INTRODUCTION

The PQ Evaluation project has grown from the established collaborative relationships which already existed in the far south-west through the Peninsula Child Care Programme Partnership, in which local stakeholders – agencies as well as post-qualifying programme providers – have taken an active part, over a number of years. The stimulus for the over-arching project was provided by the convergence of important changes in 2006/07 to both qualifying and post-qualifying education and training in social work. At this time, the first graduates were emerging from new qualifying degree programmes, which have outcomes linked to national occupational standards, alongside which the General Social Care Council was implementing its revised PQ Framework, predicated on employer needs and workforce planning and which stipulates a first PQ ‘consolidation module’.

BACKGROUND

The PQ Evaluation project was designed in two stages, which have run consecutively. Stage I of the project, which was completed in December 2007, focussed on the experiences of those who were in the first twelve months since qualification. It was commissioned by the Peninsula Partnership, in Devon, Plymouth and Torbay, to investigate what newly-qualified social workers know and do on entering first employment, identifying the elements of induction that best support professional development in the workplace.

Stage II commenced in October 2007 and was funded by Skills for Care as part of the PQ Innovations Fund, Round 2 bids. In this second stage of the project, the first cohort of students was followed as they undertook the PQ Consolidation Module, to identify the key elements of consolidation which contribute to on-going development and service improvement. Stage II has been concerned with the three months from October to December 2007 during which the PQ Consolidation module was delivered to the first cohort of social workers from the three agencies participating in the study. The reflections of participants have therefore been more tightly focussed on issues of their own professional development and learning, rather than the broader caseload and employment-related concerns that were prominent in Stage I.

STUDY DESIGN & METHODS

A mix of methods has been used to obtain both quantitative and qualitative data, providing the opportunity to compare and contrast findings from a number of different perspectives, adding depth and validity to the findings. Quantitative data were collected from initial postal questionnaires completed at the time of module induction at the end of September 2007. Qualitative data were subsequently collected following completion of the module input in December 2007, from face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with social workers and line managers in February 2008. Full details of the study design, sample, processes and analysis are set out in the body of this report.

SUMMARY FINDINGS

All of the social workers expressed a keen interest in improving their practice, wanting to learn and continue to develop. All enjoyed training and valued the opportunities that were made available to them through their employing agencies. Indeed, most felt that in-house training was not only extremely relevant, but also of a high standard. Commitment at director level to the development of professionally accredited training within the PQ framework has been in place in the sub-region over a number of years, with PQ1, Child Care Award and 'early start' specialist level programmes all planned and developed in partnership with local universities.

However, the data collected and analysed in Stage II seem to suggest an apparent dissonance between the vision at senior management levels within the different organisations, which was positive and supportive of professional development, (evidenced not least by the level of financial commitment to training), with the experiences of first line managers and front line staff as they attempted to engage with the 'consolidation' element of the revised PQ framework. Three key themes have emerged from the study:

- **Lack of involvement and integration of policies for PQ** with the work of first line managers which has impacted on the delivery of open and transparent processes, the level and quality of support for students and the integration of their learning into agency systems

"Well, he took on the role in name but he didn't have any During that first module there was absolutely no involvement from him whatsoever. After I'd handed in my portfolio I gave him a copy and I did ask him 'Did you ever read that?' and he said 'No, I feel awful. I've got it in my drawer. I didn't have time'" [Social worker]

- **Lack of communication with the programme provider** (the university) which led to late notification of enrolment and difficulties in preparing for the additional demands of study and an appropriate work/life balance. Poor communication also led to limited information-sharing in which opportunities for better integration of theory into practice were missed and links to learning through supervision, appraisal and personal development planning were impoverished.

"I think everyone should have an understanding of what is involved in that first module you know because if we know what it was they needed to achieve, it would give us a clear idea in terms of identifying specific areas of work which might help them to meet that need and also greater liaison with the university" [Line manager]

- **Lack of recognition of the value of continuing professional development** and its achievement through PQ studies, which led students to feel that they were anonymous within the organisation; that PQ was largely irrelevant; and that with no 'tie up' or monitoring in the workplace, improvement in practice was never measured, leaving both employees and employers with a rather unresolved and unsatisfactory outcome from substantial effort and commitment, both personal and financial.

"No, it never gets fed into anything bigger. No, it just stops. You do the course... you get the certificate... it goes in the folder" [Social worker]

These key themes impact on the delivery of a satisfying learning experience across three inter-related dimensions in the workplace – organisational, personal and professional - and the findings have been considered in relation to these dimensions.

INTRODUCTION

The PQ Evaluation project has grown from the established collaborative relationships which already existed in the far south-west through the Peninsula Child Care Programme Partnership, in which local stakeholders – agencies as well as post-qualifying programme providers – have taken an active part, over a number of years. Its findings are just one of many influences which are part of the complex interactions implicit in such collaborations and although the final recommendations may not be immediately implemented by all partners, the broadest intention has been to stimulate debate, to trigger reflection and to seek to increase a more general, questioning and ‘evaluative’ way of thinking and working.

BACKGROUND

The stimulus for the over-arching project was provided by the convergence of important changes in 2006/07 to both qualifying and post-qualifying education and training in social work, with the first graduates emerging from new qualifying degree programmes, which have outcomes linked to national occupational standards, and the implementation by the General Social Care Council of its revised PQ Framework, predicated on employer needs and workforce planning and which stipulates a first PQ ‘consolidation module’.

Stage I of the project which was completed in December 2007, focussed on the experiences of those who were in the first twelve months since qualification. It was commissioned by the Peninsula Partnership, in Devon, Plymouth and Torbay, to investigate what newly-qualified social workers know and do on entering first employment, identifying the elements of induction that best support professional development in the workplace. (Appendix 1: Executive Summary Stage I Report).

Stage II commenced in October 2007 and was funded by Skills for Care as part of the PQ Innovations Fund, Round 2 bids. In this second stage of the project, the first cohort of students was followed as they undertook the PQ Consolidation Module, to identify the key elements of consolidation which contribute to on-going development and service improvement. It is the impact on service improvement, achieved through induction and consolidation together that will be the outcome of most interest and use to employers in supporting, developing and retaining a qualified workforce.

Outcomes from the Stage II evaluation should make a strong contribution to the evidence for ‘what works’ in developing and delivering the consolidation module, specified within the revised PQ framework as the first element of any specialist level programme in work with children and families. Findings will form the basis for key issues for discussion between all stakeholders in developing and improving existing provision and seeking new avenues for the future delivery of education and training to support the on-going professional development of qualified social workers. The revised PQ framework has a central part to play here and it has been timely to gather evidence to influence decisions about the style, content and delivery of consolidation training for those engaged in post-qualifying work with children and families, particularly in areas such as child protection, at an early stage in implementation of the framework.

A particular element of the specialist level programme in work with children and families validated at the University of Plymouth and developed in close collaboration with members of the Peninsula Child Care Programme Partnership, was the introduction of a 'child care mentor' role for the support of students undertaking the PQ Consolidation module. It was intended that 'child care mentors' should be those in the employing agencies with supervisory responsibility for those undertaking the PQ Consolidation module, identified by job titles which might include line manager, practice supervisor, senior practitioner etc. A stand alone short course at Master's level, entitled 'Managing Practice' was validated in tandem with the PQ Consolidation module programme, specifically designed to prepare line managers/supervisors for the child care mentor role in the specialist level programme for work in children and families.

STUDY DESIGN & METHODS

DESIGN

Stage II followed the protocols established in the Stage I study. A mix of methods has been employed to obtain both quantitative and qualitative data. Consideration from a number of different perspectives has provided the opportunity to compare and contrast the findings, and to corroborate and enhance their validity.

Before commencement of any activity, a detailed project submission was made to and approved by the university's Faculty Ethics Committee. Agencies gave permission for their staff who were registered students for the first intake to the taught PQ Consolidation module to be contacted and possible participants who were qualified social workers (29), line managers (23), and training and staff development managers (8) were identified. All were invited to complete an initial postal questionnaire, which was distributed at the end of September 2007. Those who returned completed questionnaires, and indicated a willingness to be interviewed, were then followed up through a more in-depth face-to-face, semi-structured interview, of between 50 – 60 minutes duration, carried out during February 2008. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Themes were identified from the interview material which were then coded manually to build up categories which were sorted, compared and refined.

Study sample and participant response rates

Category	Total		Returned Questionnaires		Interviewed	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Qualified social workers	29	100%	11	38%	5	45%
Line Managers	23	100%	4	17%	3	75%
Training/Staff Development Officers	8	100%	1	12%	1	100%

The key findings presented in this report have emerged from analysis of the quantitative data gathered from the questionnaires in the first stage of the study in October 2007 and from the qualitative data from the interviews undertaken in February 2008, used to follow up line managers and social workers, following completion of the PQ Consolidation module in December 2007.

LIMITATIONS

The principal limitation of the study lies in the limited sample size which does mean that it is not possible to generalise the findings with any statistical validity or reliability, beyond the boundaries of this particular study. Nevertheless, as the themes which have emerged are consistent across our own sample and supported by our own experience and knowledge of both local and national contexts of social work education and training over many years, we are confident that the conclusions are robust and no appreciable conflict would be found should a larger sample have been interrogated.

In addition, there is a good deal of resonance with evidence from research on similar topics, undertaken by other groups to which reference is made throughout the report. It is acknowledged that particular elements of the far-south west – its geography, situation and certain demographic characteristics – may have a particular influence on the findings and it would be interesting to undertake a further comparative study utilising the same ‘tools’ and methodology in one or two contrasting areas to get some measure of these effects. It is worth noting that arrangements are in place to expand the data collections to two contrasting London boroughs, commencing in April 2008 and outcomes from this small comparative element, incorporating Stages I & II together, are expected by April 2009.

FINDINGS

The main findings of the study are reported under five headings as follows:

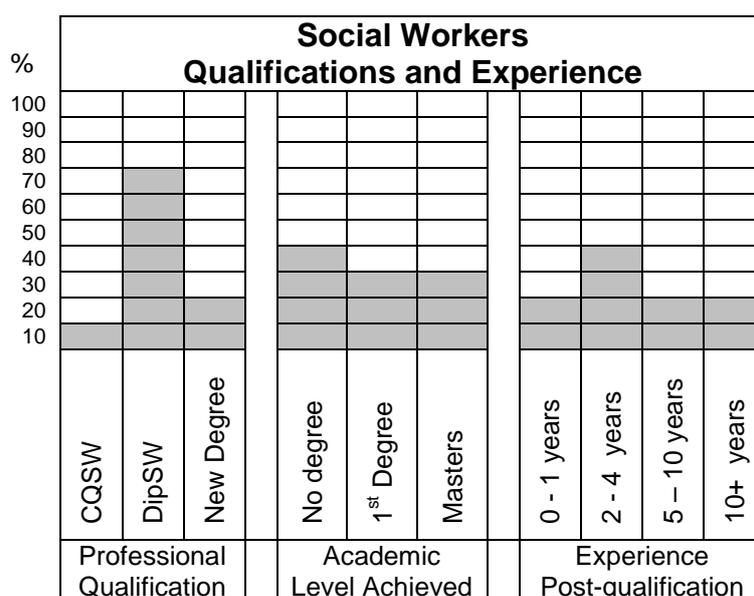
- Characteristics of participants
- Tasks, roles and confidence
- Understanding and communicating with the programme
- Agency processes
- Professional development

PARTICIPANTS

In the social worker group, 60% of respondents were men; 40% women. All identified themselves as white, European (UK/Other). One participant declared a disability. Half of the social work participants were over 45 years of age and none under 24. Of the managers, all were women aged 45 years or over. All identified themselves as white, European (UK/Other).

Qualifications and experience

Responses to this section of the initial questionnaire from social worker participants are summarised in the table below. In terms of professional qualification, the majority (70%) of social workers held a Diploma in Social Work (DipSW), with just one participant holding a Certificate of Qualification in Social Work (CQSW) and 2 having obtained the new Degree in Social Work. In terms of academic levels achieved, just under half (40%) of social workers had undertaken their qualifying training at diploma level only and held no degree and the remainder were equally divided between a first degree and a master's level qualification. When asked about the length of time since qualification, there was wide variation, ranging from 40% with 2 – 4 years experience and 20% having more than 10 years post-qualification experience.



All of the managers had been qualified for more than 10 years but two-thirds had two years or less experience as a manager. Each held responsibility for between 8 – 11 (average 9) qualified staff. The line managers interviewed held a variety of PQ qualification certificates but all held at least PQ1.

Current posts and contracts

All except one of the social workers were in local authority employment, with 50% having been in post for less than 6 months. All participants held full-time contracts and some managers did draw attention to potential difficulties in arranging appropriate access to the Consolidation module for those working on a part-time basis:

“I would say that I’ve got a worker who is part-time and she has been hanging on and hanging on to see how they would manage part-time workers. She wanted to go on it... she’s part-time she’s got child-care issues ... and really is hoping that she can get on it in the next round” [Line manager]

“I don’t know whether it would be an agency responsibility or the provider but I think we do have a real problem. We have staff that work part-time who haven’t been able to manage it. Those who work four days are not so difficult as those who work two and a half or three days but ... whether we can do something that takes a longer time, we need to think about it”. [Senior manager]

Two-thirds of managers were in long term teams as were the vast majority (90%) of social workers, drawn from a range of specialist settings, including fostering, children with disabilities and joint-agency teams. One recently qualified social worker commented directly on her experiences of the contrasting pressures of work in a long-term and a short-term team:

*“ Well, I think if I were in my old job (*short-term team*), I wouldn’t have done it because I didn’t actually have any mental space at all – evenings, weekends, waking up during the night, the stress was a lot higher.... but I seem to have more time to do that (*reflection*) in this job (*long-term, specialist setting*) because I’m not always fire-fighting. It’s not always crisis management. I get time to plan. I get time to prepare.” [Social worker]*

ROLES, TASKS & CONFIDENCE

Core tasks

Social workers were asked to consider a number of ‘core tasks’ which might be undertaken routinely and to indicate how much time was involved in each one. Responses, summarised in the following table, show that almost all (89%) of the social workers indicated that most time was spent in working with families and on administrative and clerical tasks. Other significant tasks, occupying equal amounts of time, were liaising with other professionals, writing reports, evaluating and analysing assessment information, and working with children. Not surprisingly in a wide geographical area, travel too was reported as occupying significant time for the majority of social workers. Only one social worker recorded working with communities and groups as occupying significant time. It is also worth noting here that activities that might collectively be grouped under a ‘personal development’ heading, including supervision, training and researching new information occupied significant time for only a very small minority of social workers.

Time spent by social workers on 'core tasks'

Significant time  Little time  No time 

Working with Families	Admin: Correspondence / e-mail	Liaising with other professionals	Preparing Reports for Boards, Panels, Court	Evaluating & Analysing Assessment Information	Working with Children	Travel	Data entry & Information Management Systems	Allocation Meetings/ Discussion	Liaising within team/agency	Training / CPD activities	Supervision	Referencing research; internet and intranet	Working with Groups and Communities
Significant	Significant	Significant	Significant	Significant	Significant	Significant	Significant	Significant	Significant	Significant	Significant	Significant	Significant
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National Occupational Standards – Key roles for social work

The vast majority (78%) of social workers had neither knowledge of the National Occupational Standards for social work (NOS) (DH, 2002) nor the requirements of the Common Core of Knowledge and Skills for the child care workforce (CWDC, 2004). Those who were familiar with these standards and requirements had informed themselves using the General Social Care Council’s website. By contrast, this particular group of managers - the majority of whom were new to post - were all familiar with the NOS, and most (67%) were familiar with the Common Core.

Initial questionnaires asked social workers and line managers about the level of confidence they felt across the range of key roles for social work. Social workers reported most confidence in preparing to assess needs & circumstances and planning, carrying out, reviewing & evaluating practice with individuals, groups & other professionals. The two areas in which social workers felt least confidence were in researching, analysing & evaluating current knowledge of best practice and in ensuring their own professional development.

There was a high level of agreement with line managers about the areas of most confidence. In relation to areas of least confidence, managers also identified managing risk and being accountable for their own work as areas of weakness. Managers also expressed concerns about levels of skill in analysis:

“ And you do get tired of keep sending things back and saying well actually, that doesn’t tell me what the need is. So I don’t know why but need – outcome – analysis is still quite a difficult concept for them” [Line manager]

“I think for me, analysis would be great some better analysis. Even a student who got first class honours just can’t analyse practice” [Line manager]

Requirements of the Common Core of Knowledge and Skills

The requirements of the Common Core underpin the assessment standards for the PQ Consolidation module. Asked about their confidence in the areas of expertise identified in the Common Core, social workers felt most confident in working to ensure children and young people are free from harm and in information sharing. They were least confident in using the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) (Every Child Matters, 2004) and in understanding and supporting transitions.

Managers held a range of opinions about these areas with 67% identifying information sharing as an area in which their staff were most confident but all went on to identify either communicating and engaging with children or involving children and families in the design and delivery of services and decisions which affect their lives, as areas from the Common Core in which they felt that social workers were least confident.

UNDERSTANDING & COMMUNICATING WITH THE PROGRAMME

Preparation and enrolment

Notice of attendance for registration on the PQ Consolidation Module did not exceed two weeks for any of the social worker participants, with some having no notice at all. None of the social workers had received any preparatory information from the agency or the programme prior to attending the induction day.

At induction, only 20% of social workers felt that their preparation for the programme had been satisfactory or better. Nearly half (40%) gave the lowest score and felt poorly prepared.

“Well, we just waited and some people got an e-mail, saying ...‘Congratulations! You can start’ about three days before the course, I think. It was very, very short notice” [Social worker]

“Our training department made a complete shambles with regards to dates and we all missed the first tutorial. We all received information very late and we weren’t prepared at all” [Social worker]

Social workers wanted more notice of enrolment to facilitate forward planning, both in the workplace and in arranging an appropriate work/life balance, taking into account the additional burdens of study. They also considered that the provision of information, eg. timetable with dates for attendance, module booklist, access to the university library, at an earlier stage would have made a helpful contribution to their individual pre-programme preparations.

Two-thirds of managers said they had been offered an agency briefing/information session and before the start of the module, all felt at least satisfactorily prepared to undertake their role. However, at the end of the module, communication and information were highlighted by all those interviewed as areas of concern:

“So I knocked on my manager’s door and said ‘Do you know you’re my mentor?’ and he said ‘No, no idea’. So they didn’t know that was happening and he said that he maybe wouldn’t

have been quite so supportive if he'd known he'd got to do some work as well 'cos he said that he'd got enough on his plate" [Social worker]

"I think it needs better communication with the university and also with our own department in terms of we get piecemeal information about it now ... and if you are actually managing someone on the course, you need to be involved" [Line manager]

"Well, I didn't have any information until after that introductory day because I think I was in court and so I wasn't able to go and the feeling was well if you'd come to that ... But you can't always do everything and so I haven't had anything". [Line manager]

Study skills

Before commencing study, social workers identified skills in essay writing and the ability to work to deadlines as key areas most important for success in PQ programmes and along with submitting for informal feedback, ones in which they felt most confident. Critical thinking and time management also scored highly on the list of skills important for success.

The areas in which social workers felt they were least confident in preparing for study included accessing on-line journals, using the library and referencing. There is a strong link here to responses reported above in relation to 'core tasks', and these are activities on which the majority of social workers already felt they spent little or no time.

"I haven't seen much evidence of individuals routinely researching, reading, using the internet. Unless they are doing it for a particular project with some training, then they don't. I think people just haven't got time to just go and think, well, I'll spend half an hour now just looking...(on the internet)" [Senior manager]

Expectations, motivations and benefits

Although 20% of participants could not identify its overall purpose at the start of the programme, the majority of social workers (60%) felt that the PQ Consolidation Module would provide new knowledge and serve to up-date and confirm their professional development. The majority of social workers (67%) referred to updating on current theory, research and the evidence-base for practice as their main motivation for undertaking the PQ Consolidation module and similarly felt that developing existing knowledge and skills would be the area of greatest benefit arising from the module.

"This would be a good idea for me It's been a long time since I qualified and I'm getting a bit complacent and I need to step back and just look at things. And PQ is perfect for that." [Social worker]

One social worker identified the primary motivation for seeking nomination to the programme as 'catching up' with less-experienced colleagues:

"(My motivation has been) catching up with others with less experience than me who have already been put forward for and completed PQ training" [Social worker]

In addition, social workers felt that benefits would include enhanced job prospects and a contribution to continuing professional development (CPD):

“ ... and it made perfect sense for me to upgrade my skills and underpinning knowledge in children and families work and also, like I say because on a cold and hard-nosed level really, if I am in an interview room and I’m up against a candidate who hasn’t got the child care award and I have it, maybe that would give me an edge” [Social worker]

In responding to the initial questionnaires, several social workers (30%) made reference to the need to meet GSCC requirements, although it was not entirely clear whether they were making a connection with the more general post-registration training and learning (PRTL) requirements, or the more formal, assessed standards for PQ Consolidation.

Despite these high expectations, all those interviewed at the end of the module had been disappointed by the experience:

“I did feel that the consolidation module was just a bit of something and nothing really. There was no new knowledge, not much meat on the bones ... and the other thing I found very different was that there didn’t seem to be much of a direct link between any content that there was and what was required for assessment” [Social worker]

“I struggle to remember anything about it. It was very bland, very basic, and completely uninspiring. I was really, really disappointed because I had been looking forward to it”. [Social worker]

“I certainly got the sense that the programme was a new programme, with a number of teething troubles” [Social worker]

“We were just going through the motions, we just fumbled through it and you know, at one point I thought ‘Why? Why am I doing this?’” [Social worker]

“Well, I’m not sure I learned anything from that module...” [Social worker]

After completing the module, the only benefit consistently identified by all participants was that it had been a useful reminder of academic requirements for what was to come later in the subsequent modules of the full specialist level programme:

“ It has been a refreshing, an up-dating ... it was limbering up ... it was like a warm up” [Social worker]

“(the benefit for me is)... Yeah, now I can do the Child Care Award. That’s the bottom line. It’s allowed me to do the Child Care Award, which for me is what I needed to do”. [Social worker]

“No, if I’m honest, I can’t actually say that ... just that one module hasn’t really done anything to improve my practice. What it has done is to pull me back into a style, you know, opened the door back into academic learning again” [Social worker]

All managers thought that the module would be useful or very useful in helping social workers to demonstrate their professional development.

“I would expect staff to develop their professional practice and to be able to go away and to have time for reflection and think about what they are doing and how that has impacts. I mean, I suppose what I would like to see is that they bring that back to the workplace, not only in their own individual practice but also in sharing stuff. So it

would be good if they did some task, it could be research or whatever, that could inform the service that they are in". [Senior manager]

All of the line managers expected the PQ module to provide relevant, structured opportunities to support on-going learning. The majority of managers (67%) felt that meeting employers' requirements was the primary motivation to staff to undertake the module while others (33%) felt that gaining an academic award, at degree level was an important motivator. In line with the views of social workers, managers considered that the greatest benefit of the programme would be the development of existing knowledge and skills.

"I think they should feel much more confident in their professionalism, that they are experts in their field that, you know, they should be able to be competent in producing the evidence... to courts or child protection.." [Line manager]

"That's what I hope.... It will improve their knowledge, skills and ability to analyse the information they've got" [Line manager]

By the end of the programme, managers too were expressing some disappointment:

"And you know, I expected to see some indication of a better understanding but if you ask them, - those completing the consolidation module - they say there was nothing new that they didn't know already and that's quite sad" [Line manager]

"I think they would very much like it to add something. They're really disappointed that it doesn't. I think they want it to be very much as though they're going on an external course and they're going to come back with something." [Line manager]

AGENCY PROCESSES

Selection

The majority (60%) of social workers had not undertaken any formal process for nomination to the programme and none was aware of any criteria for selection. Most of those interviewed (80%) felt that they had put themselves forward:

"We had a sort of 'round robin' e-mail, saying that they were going to be funding some people to do the post-qualifying...." [Social worker]

"I'm not sure really. They don't seem to have an actual policy on how it works. It's just some people seem to do post-qualifying training and others seem to get away with never doing it" [Social worker]

"I know I had four or five years ducking and diving avoiding our training officer who said you must get this PQ" [Social worker]

By contrast, all of the line managers thought that there was a formal agency selection process, which required a written application, although only one-third of managers was clear about any criteria or who was ultimately responsible. Other than individual nominations from their teams, none of the line managers had been included in the final selection processes:

“Well, I haven’t come across an actual written process. What I was told when I asked was that it (the selection criteria) was senior practitioners and length of service.” [Line manager]

“It used to work differently but now, the assistant director does have the overall say and I would make nominations from this service and I would do that in discussion with my team managers” [Senior manager]

“I’m not clear about whether there’s a policy. I haven’t seen anything on the learning and development website that says this is the policy about PQ but we do nominate, I think all managers nominate their staff to be put forward but we don’t have any involvement as such as practice managers” [Line manager]

Workplace preparation

The majority of line managers (67%) held responsibility for preparation of the workplace and for the support of social workers undertaking the PQ Consolidation module. None of the managers held a specific, delegated budget for release and most acknowledged that backfill would be difficult to achieve, other than through expensive temporary agency appointments, because of shortages of qualified social workers. As a result, most managers (67%) felt that it would be possible to release only one member of staff at a time and acknowledged the need to encourage involvement of the wider team to support nominees:

“So I think it is about teams being committed to it and I made sure that that happened because you need the team to support the candidate as well .. [Senior manager]

The importance placed on team support was later confirmed by all of the social workers as they worked through the module:

“I think in the office, you could probably speak to anyone and in most offices, there’s lots of informal supervision amongst peers and colleagues, where you have the opportunity to reflect on your own practice...” [Social worker]

“That was the key for me - the support of one another. We discussed all our issues. We had a lot of discussion areas, about what we think you know, it was very, very supportive. ... people getting different books out and photocopying different bits for each other. Really good support. It’s such a close team in there..” [Social worker]

The range of supports in place and confirmed by social workers at the point of programme induction, summarised in the table below, was very variable. Just over half (60%) had the support of their line managers. Half had agreed the timetable for release to attend the programme but less than half (40%) had been able to negotiate study days. None had any backfill or other arrangements in place to cover their absence.

Workplace preparation arrangements in place at programme induction

	Percentage of social workers with workplace arrangements confirmed at induction									
	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100
Team support negotiated										
Line manager support										
Child care mentor agreed										
Release for attendance										
Timetable for study days										
Backfill and cover in place										

After completing the programme, all of the social workers reported that they had been able to attend the teaching days at university and to take their study days. However, none had had a reduced caseload to assist in providing time during the normal working week for study:

“I don’t have a little caseload. In fact my caseload has been added to since I started this course when really it should have been reduced. I’m on four days a week and I’ve got extra ...” [Social worker]

“I had no reduction in my caseload. In fact, it increased from the start to the finish of the course, so I was holding 16 cases on top of doing the course, so I found it quite overwhelming and very difficult to manage both...”
[Social worker]

Line manager involvement and the child care mentor role

Social workers felt that their line managers were generally supportive but were subject to a range of other pressures which needed to be balanced with their involvement in PQ activities, so that individual experiences could be very variable:

“He is a very good manager ...but he struggles to do this as a mentor because there are pressures on him and I know ... there are other people I know ... other managers who are not as supportive and I think well, you know, they are going to find it very difficult really’ [Social worker]

“And I think a lot of managers see it as just another hurdle They see it as another thing that is impinging on their workers’ time...” [Social worker]

The majority of line managers (67%) were about to take on the role of child care mentor within the programme and considered that their involvement was an essential element of the workplace support for those undertaking the module:

“Most definitely. I think it’s a line manager responsibility. Well, I suppose having seen the effect of PQ1 at first hand, having seen the devastation to people, managing to cope and the impact on them as people and therefore for me, the impact on them as social workers, and the impact on their caseload, I mean I would want to be very much involved” [Line manager]

“Well, I think they should be part of it because I think they see the work on a day to day basis and they’ve got a good idea of where the strengths and weaknesses are” [Senior manager]

A number (60%) of social workers who were interviewed reflected a variety of rather different experiences at the end of the module:

“Useless! The only thing my mentor did was to sign that practice learning agreement or whatever it was, right at the beginning and then absolutely no communication whatsoever.”
[Social worker]

“My manger at the time was saying ‘No, I haven’t got the time to do that. I’m not going to support you. I’m not going to give you the time I’m not going to donate my time to be your mentor” [Social worker]

There appeared to be a lack of communication and information both within agencies and between the programme and employers, which led managers and social workers

to feel rather confused about the programme requirements in general and more particularly about the specific role of the child care mentor. Managers suggested the production of a guidance manual for the child care mentor role and an agreement about the specific amount of time for mentoring and learning that was needed to enable them to carry out their role appropriately:

“Poor communication, all sorts of issues really and perhaps if you had agency links in to the university, that might resolve some of those issues” [Line manager]

“I’m not entirely sure what that role is, if I’m honest. My manager’s great, she’s supportive and she went to the first induction day ... but neither of us were terribly sure what she needed to do” [Social worker]

“She (line manager) didn’t feel very supported from her side of it as a mentor, the clarity of her role and the expectations of her. Well there doesn’t appear to be a clear process or clear procedure for it.... so it’s a bit ‘luck of the draw’ and it depends on your manager....” [Social worker]

Integrating learning into the workplace

Social workers and line managers readily identified gaps and potential conflicts which they felt existed between university learning and the day to day requirements of the workplace

“ I think there are huge conflicts really in terms of the academic stuff and the university training and what we do as practitioners” [Social worker]

“ No. No integration of our learning. No sense of it belonging ... just two completely separate things.” [Social worker]

“Yes, I think you can be very academic but if you can’t actually I think academic is great and having some understanding of theory and how theory impacts on practice, well everyone needs to do that, but if you’re not able to put that into practice, you know, identifying needs” [Line manager]

One social worker summarised the accumulated pressures of the first year in post, following qualification, as follows:

“You really quickly get drowned by law, by policies, by procedures, by ensuring that you’re doing things by the right deadlines. It’s all very much driven by that rather than by reflective practice...” [Social worker]

Several had considered ways in which learning might be more closely integrated into the workplace and team activities. One agency had just begun to implement regular learning set meetings, in which with the help of a facilitator from the staff development unit, it was proposed to cover a range of topics directly linked to the PQ Consolidation Module outcomes.

“I feel very strongly about it because on the one hand you’ve got pilot learning sets over 12 – 18 months, offering peer support but also with definite structures around reflective practice, managing caseloads, all really useful stuff and then on the other hand, you have this little block Well what appears to me to be a little block of tick box PQ stuff, run by the university. Well, if the lecturers went out and maybe integrated that from the framework into the agency arrangements, that could all knit together really well.” [Social worker]

Where formal learning sets had not been available, staff from another agency had organised themselves into a study group which had met regularly and worked through the module together:

“We just thought in our team ... we’ll book our own study days. We’ll have group study days and we’ll just get cracking on with this and we managed it ourselves” [Social worker]

Another suggestion had been to establish group supervision as a regular feature of monthly team meetings or as part of the PQ Consolidation Module itself:

“It’s floundering a bit at the moment, we haven’t quite managed to get it going yet but it has been suggested that in our team meetings, our monthly meetings, we bring a case and discuss it as a group, in a more formal setting” [Social worker]

“You could say as part of the BSc you should have a case study so that they can try to analyse it, to try and help them develop the skills to do that. Here is a real life scenario ... like a group supervision. I used to do that. It would be ideal wouldn’t it?”
[Line manager]

Those with long distances to travel did not see any great benefit in attending at the university itself. They felt that more could have been done to deliver tutorials locally without any loss of quality and value to the sessions. Several felt that the module could have been delivered equally well by distance learning:

“It was useful for the reminder. Definitely it was useful but it could have been done by distance learning really” [Social worker]

However, all referred to opportunities for social networking and getting to know colleagues from other settings or agencies as a major, positive aspect of the programme.

“It was really nice to meet up with some of my ex-colleagues again who were on the course. That’s nice and also meeting ... meeting some of the other agency people and having a chat.. that’s good. I liked that.” [Social worker]

“... if I can take anything away from training the one thing I can take away normally you know is getting to know other professions, other colleagues.” [Social worker]

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Personal and professional motivations

When asked to consider their personal and professional motivations, comments relating to the positive aspects of being a social worker divided very clearly into three categories: the largest proportion of comments (48%) referred to opportunities to give back; make a difference and achieve better outcomes for vulnerable people; nearly one-third (28%) of comments referred to personal growth, challenge and development; closely followed by 20% reflecting the value placed on a worthwhile occupation with a recognised professional status offering opportunities for career development and progression. Asked what they hoped to avoid in becoming a social worker, 60% of comments focussed on unfulfilling, meaningless work that was routine, monotonous, tedious or boring, in which they would feel complacent, tied down by bureaucracy or limited resources.

Career aspirations & links to probationary year

A number (20%) of the social workers interviewed were intending to move out of statutory work in the long term, with a focus on involvement in some sort of therapeutic work. Turning to career aspirations in more detail, only 20% of respondents had any career aspirations beyond team manager level although over half (60%) indicated an interest in a 'senior practitioner' role, linked to achievement of a specialist level PQ award and sitting between a social worker and team manager, as a sort of 'half way' house, which was already available in two agencies and under consideration in the third.

"I would encourage staff to think about developing themselves. I think the senior practitioner role and the idea of secondment, looking around to another area to broaden their understanding of the organisation or to another level to get an understanding of other roles."
[Line manager]

Social workers and line managers considered that the first year in post could be considerably enhanced for newly-qualified social workers by the construction of a specific learning and development pathway, with clear expectations about completion of specific in-house training and making use over 12 – 18 months of a variety of shadowing and co-working opportunities.

"A fluid process, where you start off newly qualified and these are the sort of courses that you do in your first year to build up your skills. And why don't they build reflection into that, something to show that you learned something from each course, applied to your practice. It's so straightforward to me this..." [Line manager]

Social workers did recognise the agency investment and wanted to see better support alongside the financial commitment

"Yes, most definitely. The agency are committed to it, yes, they can do the financial bit but in terms of all the other things, it's not there" [Social worker]

"I've worked for private companies and I cannot think of one company I've worked for who've invested the same kind of money that this local authority have invested in me ... they've invested a huge amount and then just to say, well there's your job, just get on with it, doesn't make any sense at all. There is no sort of structure in place at all to support newly-qualified people and it is just crazy! They need to do it and build it in from Day 1"
[Social worker]

CPD & PRTL

The vast majority (80%) of social workers said that they were offered opportunities to discuss their continuing professional development (CPD), and in most cases (80%), this took place within formal supervision sessions. For some, informal supervision (30%) and mentoring (10%) also provided opportunities for some consideration of professional development. However, only one-third of managers were aware of a formal policy to support CPD in the agency.

When completing the initial questionnaires in October, nearly two-thirds (60%) of social workers reported active support for post-registration training and learning (PRTL) in their agency with line managers holding responsibility for tracking requirements in 70% of cases. The findings from managers in this area were similar, with two-thirds identifying a clear agency policy for PRTL with mechanisms in supervision, team meetings and formal appraisal to monitor requirements. Prior to

commencing the module, training/staff development units had a recognised role in PRTL for only a small proportion (20%) of social workers, which was also reflected in line manager responses. At this initial stage, one third of social workers had been provided with a portfolio or folder by their agency in which to maintain a PRTL record. Less than half (40%) were provided with access to, and/or a contribution to courses, leaving a similar proportion (40%) who received nothing at all. However, the situation had changed considerably by the time the interviews were undertaken some five months later in February 2008. With the deadline for first re-registrations as a clear external driver, social workers and managers reported increased activity from their training units in which PRTL requirements were being prioritised, with web-based materials and workshops for individual guidance and advice being made available to all staff. These sessions appear to have had a mixed reception:

“Yes, that’s just started this post-registration because obviously, people are just coming up to it now and we had a two-hour session here at the beginning of last week ... if you’d like to take part just book your name on it and go. And that was brilliant” [Social worker]

“Yes, yes. They’ve rolled out a full day training for people coming up to re-registration this year. It’s my impression that ‘We’d better get this in at the last minute!’ And that appears to be the mentality and culture of the organisation....” [Social worker]

“Yes, that’s new and they also do workshops ... I’m not really sure that to have workshops was particularly helpful ... they could have just come and talked to the team about how to do PRTL. For myself, I didn’t find that difficult because I am in that reflective mode..” [Line manager]

Personal Development Plans

Turning to Personal Development Plans (PDPs), again a small proportion (20%) of social workers reported having them and using them in their appraisal processes, with up-dating and monitoring of progress by a line manager in place for only one social worker. A very similar lack of involvement with PDPs was reflected in responses from line managers. None made any links to formal professional standards or requirements eg. national occupational standards or common core of knowledge and skills or to links with monitoring or appraisal processes:

“Well, yes! I do have one now! But I’ve only got it now because of this course and I needed to put one together for this course otherwise it wouldn’t have been done. It’s not something that’s ever approached ...” [Social worker]

“Well, will appraisal do that? There again, I’ve been here nearly two years now and haven’t had an appraisal yet but it has all been booked in now so whether that will link it all up” [Social worker]

“No, no links to occupational standards or the common core. We don’t have personal development plans. We did them for the Managing Practice module because we had to but I use the staff appraisal to get them to identify where their learning needs are[Line manager]

“Not that I know of. No, no. There isn’t a discussion in appraisal about a personal development plan ... there is an appraisal process ... but with reference to encouraging their own personal development plan, well you know, it’s more people just rushing to do it if and when they have to...” [Line manager]

Training and resources for learning and development

Social workers and line managers were asked about the resources for learning and development available on a day to day basis in their office bases. The majority (70%) of social workers referred primarily to the availability of procedures and policy manuals leaving nearly one third (30%) of participants apparently without clear and direct access to written guidance documents. Regular, planned up-dating sessions, e.g. guidance on new legislation, policy etc., were not recorded by any social workers although one-third of line managers felt the agency did make opportunities available. Less than one third of social workers (28%) said they had access to texts, journals or library facilities, team development events or study days other than those associated with specific courses

Half of the social workers found support to attend conferences, although only 20% reported giving or receiving feedback, presentations or other dissemination from attendance at such events. A rather different picture emerged from line managers, of whom all felt that conferences and feedback from peer presentations was actively supported and incorporated into team activity:

“I think this is something that needs developing but we have a system whereby if people go off on a training course, then they book into a team meeting to feed back. Yes, we book them in for a couple of months time after the training to share it. There is something different about sharing, to going on the course. It’s another step forward. You have to be able to acknowledge it and understand it, in order to share it, so we do that on a regular basis” [Line manager]

All of the study participants said that they enjoyed and valued training and that a wide variety of courses was generally available. One social worker even commented that in her experience, no request to attend training had ever been denied.

“Personally, I like going on courses. I want to learn, I don’t want to get rusty so I will put myself on courses” [Social worker]

“And I really value training. I’ve always done a lot of training in my time in social care, because there’s a lot more that I don’t know that I do know and any bit that I can find out is useful to me” [Social worker]

A majority (70%) of social workers had undertaken significant training courses in the previous six months, which covered a wide variety of information, knowledge and skills, eg. child protection, court skills, record keeping, emotional abuse, family assessment. Of the ten courses cited, 3 were of 12 days duration and the remainder were between 1 – 4 days long. The average number of days for which each social worker had been released over the previous six months was 8.5 days. The majority (80%) felt that what was offered in-house was extremely relevant and of a high standard.

“Oh yes. I would say that what our internal training department provides is excellent. So very different. And this is the frustrating thing. In terms of the college work (consolidation module) it is disappointing but in terms of agency training, it’s excellent. I’ve been on some really good training courses” [Social worker]

However, none was able to identify a clear process for applying or gaining access to in-house training. All said that they generally obtained information through informal

networks and 'word of mouth' and then had to take a self-motivated approach to put themselves forward to their own line manager.

"Another crazy thing we have some great training out there. Some really good training that's provided in house ... and I'm not talking about special ... this is child protection training, absolutely spot on for the job we do and it's so hit and miss as to how you get on it, who goes or hears about it It's shocking!" [Social worker]

Monitoring progress, achievements and rewards

None of the social workers reported any mechanism for monitoring their progress through the PQ Consolidation Module:

"No, the only way we discussed it at all, in supervision was for my line manager to say 'Are you coping all right? Are you managing to take your days off? And you're not getting too stressed?' [Social worker]

Only one social worker referred to any direct reward (pay or progression) through their employer for completion of the PQ Consolidation module. More commonly, social workers felt there was little tangible reward from the agency, although they recognised the personal gains and appreciated the investment made in them:

"Well apparently ... when other people passed their PQ they got a one-off cash payment. Do we then become senior practitioners after the child care award? No! Is there any reflection in the pay scales? No! Does it mean that I might stand more chance of moving up the ladder? I would hope so!" [Social worker]

"No absolutely no reward. You've got to do this because you feel that it's you know, going to give you a personal challenge, a personal satisfaction, whatever, but in terms of the agency saying well actually when you get this you get a cash payment or an enhancement in your salary or you get more options for promotion? No! There's nothing!" [Social worker]

Despite a senior manager highlighting the importance of recognising what people have done and what they have achieved, agencies appeared to offer very little in recognition of what most felt had required a substantial personal commitment:

"Yes, I did get my study days but there's an awful lot of work that needs to be done outside of that day. I don't think one day per fortnight is enough..." [Social worker]

"And that's what it comes down to... missing a good few weekends. Definitely, the days are just not enough by a long way." [Social worker]

"You have to ... you have to do it in some of your own time..... I spent two complete weekends in addition to my study days, you know where I was saying to my family, 'Leave me alone! I need to get this assignment finished'." [Social worker]

DISCUSSION

This stage of the PQ Evaluation project has been concerned with the three months from October to December 2007 during which the PQ Consolidation module was delivered to the first cohort of social workers from the three agencies participating in the study. The reflections of participants have therefore been more tightly focussed on issues of their own professional development and learning, rather than the broader caseload and employment-related concerns that were prominent in Stage I.

All of the social workers expressed a keen interest in improving their practice, wanting to learn and continue to develop. All enjoyed training and valued the opportunities that were made available to them through their employing agencies. Indeed, most felt that in-house training was not only extremely relevant, but also of a high standard. Commitment at director level to the development of professionally accredited training within the PQ framework has been in place in the sub-region over a number of years, with PQ1(GSCC, 1997), Child Care Award (GSCC, 2000) and 'early start' specialist level programmes (GSCC, 2005, 2005a) all planned and developed in partnership with local universities.

However, the data seem to suggest an apparent dissonance between the vision at senior management levels within the different organisations, which was positive and supportive of professional development, (evidenced not least by the level of financial commitment to training), with the experiences of first line managers and front line staff as they attempted to engage with the 'consolidation' element of the revised PQ framework.

Three key themes have emerged from the study:

- **Lack of involvement and integration of policies for PQ** with the work of first line managers which has impacted on the delivery of open and transparent processes, the level and quality of support for students and the integration of their learning into agency systems
- **Lack of communication with the programme provider** (the university) which led to late notification of enrolment and difficulties in preparing for the additional demands of study and an appropriate work/life balance. Poor communication also led to limited information-sharing in which opportunities for better integration of theory into practice were missed and links to learning through supervision, appraisal and personal development planning were impoverished.
- **Lack of recognition of the value of continuing professional development** and its achievement through PQ studies, which led students to feel that they were anonymous within the organisation; that PQ was largely irrelevant; and that with no 'tie up' or monitoring in the workplace, improvement in practice was never measured, leaving both employees and employers with a rather unresolved and unsatisfactory outcome from substantial effort and commitment, both personal and financial.

These key themes impact on the delivery of a satisfying learning experience across three inter-related dimensions in the workplace – organisational, personal and professional - and the findings will be considered in relation to each dimension.

The organisational dimension

The huge financial commitment to training already made by agencies is clearly visible in the sheer range and number of in-house courses available within training departments and the level of corporate investment in the commissioning of programmes is therefore not in doubt. However, some of the organisational structures to support the delivery of programmes within the new PQ framework appear to be either absent or at an early stage of development.

A key feature of the revised framework is the integration of professional development with that of the workforce, through links with supervision, appraisal and performance management (GSCC, 2005). First line managers in the study readily identified for themselves the important role that they had to play in translating these over-arching objectives into the reality of daily practice for their staff. However, they reported little involvement in agency arrangements for PQ beyond nominations for selection and no-one interviewed could identify a written agency policy so that far from being central, line managers appeared to be on the margins. As noted by Adams (1996) when the PQ framework was at its very inception, the culture within organisations is still one in which operational needs, as opposed to professional development needs take priority and 'managing the business' is seen as the principal focus for training, rather than the enhancement of the professional competence of qualified staff. In these circumstances, processes are unlikely to be developed and implemented which would build confidence in those staff sufficiently motivate to contemplate PQ training. Indeed, social workers did feel that there were conflicting messages in the selection processes whereby on the one hand there was an expectation from senior management that all should participate but on the other, selection seemed to be an individually competitive process, with very short deadlines and ill-defined criteria. Managers appeared to take a piecemeal approach and staff quickly became disillusioned. They felt the processes were 'hit and miss', that there were unequal opportunities across teams and settings, and that some social workers were 'allowed to escape entirely' without ever undertaking assessed training.

Line managers in this peripheral position are not best-placed to offer the level and quality of support and guidance rightly expected by staff undertaking a new module and nearly all of the social workers considered that mentoring by their line managers had been inadequate. As noted in the introduction, the child care mentor role had been created specifically for the programme to enable line managers, not only to support those undertaking the specialist level programme but as a mechanism through which managers might also provide evidence of their competence as part of the PQ requirements at higher specialist level, to meet their own development needs. Again, although this idea was supported at senior levels in agencies throughout the validation processes, by the time of this first delivery, problems in implementation were emerging. Arrangements to incorporate these tasks into managers' workloads were not fully in place. It is worth noting here that concurrent with the introduction of these changes to PQ training, agencies were also undergoing much internal re-organisation, including individual job evaluation which may have been a significant barrier to the immediate addition of further roles and tasks to the job descriptions of line managers. Given the short timescale – three months – over which the module was delivered, it is not surprising then that the majority of managers did not or could not embrace this important supporting role in the way that had been envisaged and social workers clearly felt let down

A compounding factor, which had serious implications for participants, was the lack of any clear process, at the university, for direct communication with agency partners. Little information in general was produced and no guidance about the child care mentor role in particular had been supplied. Late enrolment meant that those selected to attend had insufficient time to make appropriate adjustments both in the workplace and in their personal lives, to incorporate the 'space' necessary for study. It is significant that none had specific arrangements for backfill or cover in place at induction and only a small proportion (20%) had agreed arrangements for mentoring. Managers generally accepted responsibility for preparation of the workplace but with little programme information, it had proved difficult for the majority to implement the support arrangements with sufficient notice to be of help to social workers in their pre-programme preparation and planning.

In the absence of promotion of the programme and its requirements by the university, many opportunities for linking theory to practice have been missed. The value of the integration of learning into day to day practice and the systems for professional development is prominent in the increasing literature about learning organisations and some of the tensions experienced by those undertaking PQ studies in organisations where the necessary 'learning culture' is under-developed, have been previously explored, amongst others, by Mitchell (2001) and Postle et al (2002). At this stage of development of the PQ Consolidation module, few of the advantages of a positive learning culture have yet been drawn into agency processes, which still tend to emphasise the separation of learning, as an academic activity, from practice in the workplace.

The personal dimension

All of the social workers interviewed enjoyed and valued training and felt that, as qualified professionals, they made a personal commitment to up-dating and improving practice, which they identified as their principal motivation for undertaking the PQ Consolidation module. In Stage I of the study, training often appeared to provide a welcome respite from heavy caseloads and the pressures of the workplace and again, without clear procedures, this may well play its part in the number and types of courses which social workers had sought out for themselves. It is important to note that much of the in-house training is of short duration, often only one or two days long; does not carry automatic professional or academic credit and is not assessed. By contrast, the PQ Consolidation module – provided externally, in an academic institution, with formal assessment - therefore occupied a rather different place in the organisation and appeared to be approached in a very different way. Social workers clearly felt that their performance in accredited programmes would have important implications for their practice and progression and looked for an agency structure to reflect the aspirations and expectations they held for their continuing professional development. They recognised, as identified by Postle et al (2002), that this was increasingly, a symbiotic process, in which employing organisations have a duty to provide access to learning and development opportunities, but in which staff must also take individual responsibility to undertake and make the best use of the opportunities available to them. Engagement with the framework had been most successful for those staff who had made what one social worker referred to as a 'mind shift' away from PQ being something compulsory, imposed by government and managed at agency level by a set of organisational targets, to a process which is individually-led, through personal development

planning, to deliver improvements in practice which are of equal benefit to each member of staff, to their employing organisation, as well as to those who use services. The lack of use of personal development plans by the majority of social workers and their line managers is significant, as the wider use of these, with links made to national occupational standards and PQ requirements, has the potential to greatly enhance the integration of personal and organisational objectives. However, many social workers felt they were undertaking the PQ Consolidation module almost in spite of the organisation, to meet personally identified goals and aspirations, with little 'tie in' to the workplace.

The professional dimension

Recognition of the value of professional development and its achievement through accredited PQ studies does not yet appear to be part of workforce planning. No-one could identify a direct reward for successful completion of the PQ Consolidation module, although in the minds of both social workers and line managers, it remained linked to PQ1 for which historically, there had been some financial reward either as a one-off payment or an incremental salary point and this uncertain position did lead social workers to feel some level of resentment. The lack of financial reward was mirrored by the omission of PQ qualifications from current person specifications for posts at higher levels within the organisation, reflecting the low value currently attached to CPD, at the personal, professional and organisational levels as reported by both Galpin (2006) and McLenachan (2006). Several of those who were undertaking the module were doing it 'in the hope that I will be in a better position' when applying for a more senior post but without any references to PQ in corporate policies, they felt unsure and rather 'cut adrift'.

All those interviewed indicated that they had had to devote substantial amounts of their own time to programme activities, in addition to the agency study days, and whilst most had been willing to do this, they did want their additional commitment to be noted. The subsequent lack of recognition and reward for this substantial personal effort left social workers feeling unhappy and dissatisfied in three ways already documented in management literature (Lencioni, 2007) as the main causes of workplace misery:

- **Irrelevance**
All those interviewed were disappointed with the content of the PQ Consolidation module. They felt that it offered no new learning and was not directly relevant to their day-to-day work, in sharp contrast to their opinions of in-house courses. Further, they considered that the PQ Consolidation module had been a fairly 'pointless exercise' other than to refresh their understanding of the general requirements for academic assignments. Coupled with the lack of reward, or acknowledgement of achievement, they questioned whether their engagement with the module really mattered at all. These issues should be of serious concern to the programme and a review of content, style and delivery of the PQ Consolidation module, in collaboration with agency partners, to identify improvements before a second intake, would be timely.
- **Anonymity**
With no acknowledgement of achievement, staff felt anonymous within the organisation, which had a deleterious effect on their motivation to see this module through to the end or to go on to further studies.

- Immeasurability
With no 'tie up' in the workplace, through involvement of line managers and links to supervision, appraisal etc., the hoped-for improvements to practice, which social workers have identified as a key motivation for undertaking training, were in fact never measured and without this evidence, social workers were unclear about whether they had met their employers' expectations or not.

Although the PQ Consolidation module had not offered anything new, social workers did feel that it had provided a useful reminder of academic requirements and had renewed their engagement with issues around reflective practice which many felt were overshadowed or lost altogether in the competing pressures of reporting deadlines, agency targets and performance indicators. The consequences of these pressures on the ability of agencies to sustain a competent and stable workforce have been well documented by Gupta & Blewett (2007). It was also acknowledged that a 'foundation' element of this type did have a useful part to play in ensuring that a particular group of learners were familiar with each other and had established a common level and standard from which participants would be better prepared to launch into the subsequent, more focussed modules of the specialist level programme. The disparate backgrounds, qualifications and professional experience of those enrolling on the PQ Consolidation module have been reported in the findings section and this wide range of participants will continue to be the case for a number of years, while established staff 'catch up' and those new to the profession move through the 'seamless continuum' of training envisaged by the introduction of the PQ framework. A more developed process in some agencies for dealing with the nomination of staff, perhaps taking account not only of length of service but also the number of years post-qualification, would help to move more established social workers through the initial stages of PQ training in a more coherent way. Programme providers might also develop and promote at an early stage in the application processes, more creative approaches to the accreditation of prior learning as part of their pre-registration procedures for the PQ Consolidation module. It has been widely acknowledged (Mitchell, 2001, Adams, 1996) that constraints in the workplace, including the volume of work, the lack of resources to provide backfill, and time to provide appropriate mentoring and support, continue to limit participation in PQ training and in this study nominations were often restricted to one member of staff from each team. In these circumstances, even greater emphasis rests on clear and transparent processes for the establishment of 'an orderly queue', which then attracts the mutual support of all those involved.

Social workers and line managers who were interviewed all agreed that overall, the PQ Consolidation module would be of most use to newly-qualified staff and might ideally be employed as the end marker for any new probationary year, proposed for newly-qualified social workers and due to be piloted for three years from 2008. (Community Care, October 2007; Lords Hansard, October 2007). Going further, there was a clear preference for the PQ Consolidation module to be re-configured, to incorporate a number of the current in-house training programmes, which social workers considered to be particularly relevant to their current work, and through which they felt they duplicated some of the same learning outcomes which were associated in a more formal way with the PQ Consolidation module. The advantages in terms of information, understanding and sharing of knowledge and skills of a closer collaboration in programme delivery between agencies and universities in this

way are self-evident. Given the wide geographical area, there was also keen interest in developing a distance learning route with suggestions for links to the agency-based learning sets in order to maintain some of the face-to-face contact and opportunities for social networking which were so highly valued. It has been reported by Smith et al (2002) and Sobiechowska et al (2006) that flexible, distance methods of training delivery require well developed skills of self-direction in participants, alongside workplaces that have been suitably prepared to support learning and some consideration should be given to these elements when contemplating any change to the current arrangements for the PQ Consolidation module. Another contra-indication for a more in-house approach would be the loss of current opportunities for bringing staff together across agency boundaries, away from the workplace, in a university setting. Consideration would also need to be given to arrangements for the inclusion of individuals from private, voluntary and independent sector organisations. Nevertheless, some changes in delivery arrangements are clearly indicated and will merit further discussion between partners.

CONCLUSIONS

The study has revealed a 'scattergun approach' to PQ studies, rather than the coherence, integration and progression which might have been expected as key elements of a professional learning and development pathway. Bamford (1990) has identified the rise of organisational structures, in response to a host of government imperatives that have reduced social workers' sense of personal obligation and responsibility and have led to a world far removed from that of a self-regulating, confident profession. In an uncertain world where professionalism is continually under threat and professionals often feel undermined, social workers, their employers and the programme provider seem each to have grasped, unilaterally, some of the advantages offered by a nationally recognised framework for professional development, but have taken ideas forward in different, sometimes beneficial, sometimes conflicting ways, so that the overall experience of the PQ Consolidation module has been a rather unsatisfying one from the perspective of each partner.

The most important gap in agencies has been the lack of a number of coherent policies and procedures for nomination and selection to the PQ Consolidation module so that there is clarity about who will go, when and what the expectations are both of the employee and of the employer. Policy documents would also help to clarify enrolment timetables to ensure that appropriate notice is available to those selected to attend. PQ should not be seen, as some managers did, as an additional burden but something that is a natural part of everyday work within a culture of learning.

Implemented in a coherent way, the PQ framework has the potential to provide the impetus for integration of national occupational standards, together with the PQ requirements and standards, into the workplace, to counter the criticism of some newly-qualified social workers that reflective practice does not take place and is 'squeezed out' by other agency demands such as reporting deadlines, targets and form-filling. Policies are needed which will integrate PQ into the work of first line managers so that they are clear about their role in mentoring, supporting and

assessing staff. These are important areas of competence which could also be developed for managers as part of the higher specialist level requirements of the PQ framework, as proposed, for instance in the child care mentor role. Given appropriate support to develop their own competence, line managers are ideally located to take the lead in better integration of theory into practice through opportunities for discussion in supervision, as part of appraisals and performance management.

Through personal development planning, progression within the organisation has an important part to play in the retention of qualified staff. A reward system for successful completion of accredited and assessed programmes would go some way to assuaging the feelings of anonymity and irrelevance that social workers have described. The creation of career pathways will be a vital part of any workforce plan, which should be used to recognize the achievement of PQ qualifications through transparent links to senior posts through formal inclusion in person specifications.

Much of the discussion has focussed on the wider PQ framework as a whole but social workers and line managers who were interviewed were also asked to identify up to three areas for improvement of the current PQ Consolidation module.

Suggestions from managers included

- the production of a guidance manual for the child care mentor role
- an agreement about the specific amount of time for mentoring and learning that was needed to enable managers to carry out the role appropriately
- written information about the programme's requirements, evidence and assessment schedule
- better communication and more involvement of managers with the programme processes, to facilitate the support of participants in the workplace
- involvement of managers in group supervision sessions, based around case material, which could be incorporated into the programme, to provide a safe place for practitioners to practice and improve skills in analysis
- specific arrangements to facilitate the participation of those who work part-time

Social workers emerging from the module made the following recommendations for improvements:

- more notice of enrolment to facilitate forward planning – both in the workplace and in arranging home/life balance
- the provision of information, eg. timetable, book list, access to the university library, at an earlier stage to aid pre-programme preparation
- more regionally dispersed inputs, to include local workshops or distance learning materials
- opportunities for informal feedback at an earlier stage
- sharing of example assignments/portfolios
- more formal links between programme tutors and in-house training courses, local learning sets and study groups to avoid duplication and make best use of resources

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EXTRACT FROM FINAL REPORT TO THE PARTNERSHIP BOARD **PQ EVALUATION PROJECT - STAGE I**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Executive Summary provides a very condensed record of the principal aspects of the study, its findings, conclusions and recommendations. The full text which follows the summary provides more data and a wider, more comprehensive discussion of the issues which have emerged, set within contemporary research evidence.

SUMMARY INTRODUCTION

Our evaluation project has grown from the established collaborative relationships which already existed in the far south-west, through the Peninsula Child Care Programme Partnership, in which local stakeholders – agencies as well as post-qualifying programme providers – have taken part, over a number of years. The stimulus for the study was provided by the convergence of important changes in 2006/07 to both qualifying and post-qualifying education and training in social work, with the first graduates emerging from new qualifying degree programmes, which have outcomes linked to national occupational standards, and the implementation by the General Social Care Council of its revised PQ Framework predicated on employer needs and workforce planning, and which stipulates a first PQ ‘consolidation module’.

The project has been designed to focus on the experiences of those who are in the first twelve months since qualification and is in two stages, which will run consecutively. The first stage (Stage I) has been commissioned by the Peninsula Partnership, to investigate what newly-qualified social workers (NQSWs) know and do on entering first employment, identifying the elements of induction that best support professional development in the workplace and the ways in which staff are prepared for the consolidation module of the revised PQ framework. Stage II, which commenced in October 2007 has been funded separately by Skills for Care, and will follow a cohort as they complete the PQ Consolidation Module, to identify the key elements of consolidation that contribute to on-going development and service improvement.

It is intended that the outcomes from the Stage I evaluation, presented here, should make a strong contribution to the evidence for ‘what works’ in making the transition from qualification, into employment, through induction to produce a confident and competent practitioner in work with children and families.

SUMMARY STUDY DESIGN & METHODS

A mix of methods has been used to obtain both quantitative and qualitative data. Consideration from a number of different perspectives has provided the opportunity to compare and contrast findings, and to add validity, depth and understanding to the personal and professional development of the newly-qualified social workers. A number of findings emerged from the quantitative data gathered from questionnaires in the first stage of the study (see Appendix 1), which formed the basis for the Interim Report (June 2007). Qualitative data were subsequently collected from two sets of face-to-face, semi-structured

interviews with line managers and newly-qualified social workers, at 6 months and 12 months into first employment. Fuller details of the study design, sample, processes and analysis are set out in the body of this report.

SUMMARY CONCLUSIONS

The conclusions have been drawn from a synthesis of both the early questionnaire data and the subsequent qualitative data which emerged from both sets of interviews. Four key themes for the development of newly-qualified social workers have been identified as follows:

- **Developing confidence and job satisfaction**

All of the newly-qualified social workers felt that they had grown in confidence, that they enjoyed at least some aspects of their current posts and that they wanted to stay in the profession. However, worryingly, none saw their long-term future in local authority employment, citing the level of bureaucracy and the limited amounts of 'hands on' direct work with service users as their principal reasons for looking elsewhere.

- **Working within the organisational structures**

Importantly, the NQSWs were faced with a considerable amount of organisational turbulence, with agencies in the midst of a vast workforce re-modelling agenda, which was compounded by high volumes and rapid turnover of their workloads, in teams which were often not at full strength. There was what was experienced as a rising tide of bureaucracy, which continually threatened to overwhelm them, in what most described as a 'tick box' culture. Systems took the NQSWs away from direct work with service users from which they derived most job satisfaction. Agency processes and procedures were often experienced as bureaucratic, hierarchical and 'managerialist'. At times, roles and responsibilities within the organisation were opaque and communication within and between levels appeared confused or was absent. . Meanwhile, line managers had concerns about the level of analysis that the NQSWs brought to their assessment and reporting activities

- **Finding support and in-house training**

The NQSWs very quickly discovered a tension between 'ideal' and 'real' practice, and many wrestled with the dual aspects of care and control. The ease with which they were able to move through this transitional phase was variable, depending on their individual skills and abilities to develop a range of coping mechanisms and the extent to which their needs were met by what the organisation had to offer by way of support. In times of emotional exhaustion, NQSWs looked for more support from the organisation, particularly through formal supervision, which they considered could be improved in many respects. NQSWs undertook a wide variety of training, very often as a reward or welcome respite from their normal workload. They were generally satisfied with what was available to them, although there did not appear to be any clear process for access to a co-ordinated programme of events.

- **Progression and career pathways**

Disappointingly, there appeared to be little interest in promotion. NQSWs and first line managers held a number of negative perceptions of the kind of people who take on the

more senior roles within their organisations. First line managers understood their role as one in which they were isolated and marginalised within the organisation, with little provided to support them in developing the staff for whom they held supervisory responsibility or to meet their own needs for professional advancement, whilst still being held accountable for meeting front line agency performance targets. There was much confusion and uncertainty about how the revised post-qualifying (PQ) framework was being implemented and most particularly about who should undertake the consolidation module and when. These negative perceptions of the organisation were some of the most worrying findings to emerge from the study

SUMMARY RECOMMENDATIONS

Six principal recommendations are made: some are practical recommendations to improve existing processes and procedures or suggestions to meet gaps which have been identified. The final recommendation is concerned with the way in which agencies are organised in a more strategic way.

Recommendation 1

Securing a base for confident practice

Initial confidence on entering the workplace was noted to be higher where the social workers' prior work experience and final placement had taken place in a setting similar to that of their first employment. If there was continuity of local authority throughout this period as well, workers had the advantage of already being familiar with the people, the patch and the paperwork with they would be expected to work. With these preliminary experiences gained, NQSWs could 'hit the ground running'.

Recommendation 2

Using personal development plans to integrate qualification and first employment.

Personal development plans are produced at the end of qualifying training for each new graduate and exist as a ready tool to make an immediate link between the national occupational standards assessed on qualification and the workplace and should be used by managers and training departments as the 'benchmark' from which to track individual progress and professional development.

Recommendation 3

Co-ordinating and standardising the agency induction package

Three important elements have been highlighted by the research data:

- (a) Better co-ordination of corporate induction with that specific for NQSWs
- (b) Standardisation of an agency-wide induction package to cover the initial year in post, so that individual experiences are not so variable and do not depend so heavily on the specific skills and knowledge of particular managers. Some specific suggestions for inclusion in the package were indicated in the Interim Report and are itemised in the full recommendations. (*See p. 47*)
- (c) An improved focus on continuing professional development through the use of personal development plans on entry to first employment and greater attention to written materials and guidance around registration and post-registration training and learning opportunities, to develop a culture of on-going learning at both the individual and organisational level.

Recommendation 4

Developing analysis skills

The need to enhance skills in analysis, not only for NQSWs but across the workforce, has been clearly identified. Opportunities should be taken by line managers to model good practice as part of supervision discussions. Action learning sets could also be used as a forum in which to draw on case study examples to hone skills. It might also be beneficial to encourage some linking back to staff from local qualifying programmes who could make appropriate contributions in this area.

Recommendation 5

Improving and up-dating the skills and knowledge of line managers

Line managers have identified for themselves a range of gaps in their knowledge and skills.

Areas for specific attention have included:

- Up-dating on requirements and occupational standards for the new degree;
- Familiarisation with graduates' personal development plans;
- Re-fresher training to up-date knowledge to encourage and improve the use of evidence and value base of social work in supervision discussions.
- Further training opportunities in supervision skills; management of a child care team; and in skills to support NQSWs through transitional development, including for instance, time management, managing change, managing stress and team leadership.

Recommendation 6

Improving the organisational climate

Newly-qualified social workers have reported feeling 'right at the bottom' and 'powerless individuals' within their organisations. Line managers have referred to being 'very much in the middle of the sandwich' and 'stuck in a rut'. With poor perceptions of those in senior positions and little interest in moving away from direct involvement with service users, promotion does not seem to be providing attractive opportunities to move on up through the organisation. A good deal of stagnation therefore seems to pervade the organisational culture. Where there is a lack of movement within and between organisational levels, understanding and appreciation of different roles and responsibilities may be adversely affected undermining the confidence of staff and increasing feelings of division.

The ability to retain qualified staff is particularly important for organisations that invest heavily in preparing people to undertake particular roles and which might then reasonably be expecting to benefit from that investment over a period of time. The lack of interest of all those interviewed in remaining long-term in local authority employment must therefore be of deep concern and ways in which these negative perceptions can be reversed clearly need to be found.

The research findings have suggested a number of positive steps that could be taken to improve the organisational climate into which the newly-qualified social workers become socialised and established in their first year.

(a) Clarifying the expectations of newly-qualified social workers about the intended roles and tasks in local authority employment

New graduates do not appear to have a sufficiently clear understanding of the role of a qualified social worker in local authority settings. Dissatisfaction arises from access to less 'hands on' direct work with service users than had been expected and resentment at those tasks reporting and administrative tasks, which take them away from this contact. Helpful strategies to clarify expectations might include:

- a clearer agency marketing and recruitment strategy which focuses on the application of professional social work skills to assessment, analysis, monitoring and managing, rather than involvement in practical tasks with service users
- consideration of how the various forms and reporting requirements could be integrated more closely into everyday work, so that they become a useful tool, rather than perceived as an extraneous burden. Specifically, are there ways in which more use can be made of additional business resources to assist social workers with some of the administrative tasks which could perhaps be delegated to other types of worker, as is the case for qualified teachers?
- Workloads are strongly skewed towards the assessment and case management of 'safeguarding children' cases which means that caseloads are predominantly 'heavy end', with few opportunities to directly engage in rehabilitative or therapeutic work. There may be some merit in re-assessing the way in which caseloads are managed but even if this bias cannot be adjusted, it is important that it receives appropriate recognition.

(b) Supporting the emotional needs of newly-qualified social workers

The study has revealed quite clearly some of the anxieties and stresses experienced by newly-qualified social workers, at different times and in different ways, throughout the first year in post. The need for a range of mechanisms and sources of support to meet their emotional needs in the early stages of post-qualification development has been identified. Specific suggestions have included:

- Identifying a named 'buddy' or mentor to be part of the initial welcome and share the support load with the line manager during the first six months;
- Using supervision for reflection, discussion of practice experiences and to establish an appropriate work/life balance, particularly for those with other caring responsibilities
- Recognising transitional change and its additional stresses and support needs
- Developing engaged coping mechanisms to maintain a sense of personal accomplishment and job satisfaction;
- Using action learning sets as an extended, safe environment for appropriate release of anxiety and anger as an alternative strategy to sickness absence in managing stress.

Line managers have a key role to play in ensuring that the emotional needs of newly-qualified social workers are met and training that will enable them to carry out that role is a necessary precursor to each element of this recommendation.

(c) Improving communication, cohesion and retention of newly-qualified social workers

Ways need to be found to re-engage practitioners and managers in developing a commitment to the agency. The creation of pathways through which they can see opportunities for progression and advancement have a positive contribution to make.

Using learning as a tool with which to bind what are currently disparate parts of the organisational together is an idea, drawn from those associated with the 'learning organisation', and could be employed to advantage. Structures within which upwards movement is actively promoted will improve cohesion between different organisational levels and enhance the knowledge and understanding that different workers have about roles and responsibilities, Confused and conflicting messages should be minimised and the early confidence of NQSWs promoted and developed.

From the research data, specific suggestions for improving communication and cohesion have included:

- Ensuring that the training/staff development unit personnel are more visible to assist with induction processes and offer support to line managers;
- Developing agency-wide discussion forums to support and develop best practice amongst first line managers;
- Developing action learning sets, based either within teams or bringing together those with specific common interests from different teams, organisations and professions;
- Providing frequent opportunities for shadowing or co-working with either a more experienced member of staff or someone in the 'tier' above, to gain insight into different roles and responsibilities. More formal secondments for agreed periods of time to a different role, team, or district may also have beneficial effects.

(d) Making use of the PQ framework to develop career pathways

A clear framework for professional development, linked to national standards, has long been available in other professions such as nursing and teaching but social work has been slow to take up the challenge of life-long learning. Career pathways, linked to job descriptions and specifications could now be implemented through the revised PQ framework. If they are to fulfil their potential for newly-qualified social workers, entry level 'specialist' PQ programmes, especially the first (consolidation) modules, need to be integrated into agency policies and procedures, with clear specifications in terms of selection criteria, processes and timetables, together with the resources available to assist teams to release nominated staff and cover their absences. Where these arrangements can be clearly articulated and promoted to all staff, on-going development becomes a routine part of everyday practice within the organisation. PQ outcomes can be used as part of supervision and performance management at the individual level and more strategically, as part of the framework for addressing the recruitment and retention needs of the agency, across all levels within the organisation.

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