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**PRACTICE EDUCATION IN ENGLAND:
A NATIONAL SCOPING REVIEW**

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September 2023

**research
in practice**

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Centre for Research
on Children & Families

Contents

Acknowledgements

Executive summary

Introduction

CHAPTER ONE: Practice learning and education in social work – existing evidence

1.1 Literature review search strategy

1.2 Overview of the evidence-base

1.3 The four themes

The practice education system

Working with students

Interpersonal and intrapersonal aspects of practice education

The wider context

CHAPTER TWO: The perspectives of practice educators across England

2.1 Consultation of practice educators across England - methods

2.2 Becoming a practice educator

2.3 Being a practice educator

2.4 The views of independent practice educators

2.5 The views of global majority practice educators

2.6 The views of practice educators with a disability or neurodiversity

CHAPTER THREE: The perspectives of course and placement providers

3.1 Desktop review of qualifying social work courses

3.2 The perspectives of providers of qualifying social work programmes

3.3 Survey of placement providers

3.4 The perspectives of placement providers

CHAPTER FOUR: The practice education system in England: recommendations for change and SWOT analysis

4.1 Practice educators' recommendations for change: greater recognition

4.2 Strengths

4.3 Weaknesses

4.4 Opportunities

4.5 Threats

Conclusion

References

Appendices

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the many practice educators who generously gave up their time to participate in this national scoping review. We would also like to thank our partners at Research in Practice for their advice, support and coordination of the consultation. Particular thanks to: Mairi-Anne Macdonald, Lorna Trend, Professor Danielle Turney, Ali Huntley and Dez Holmes.

Executive summary

This report outlines the findings from a national scoping review of practice learning and education in England. This review was carried out by the University of East Anglia (UEA) in partnership with Research in Practice.

Aims of the review

- To establish the existing evidence-base for the supervision and assessment of practice learning in social work
- To identify the current models of practice education in use in England across the range of providers and qualifying routes
- To provide a national, demographic picture of the practice educator workforce in England
- To capture the views, experiences and attitudes of practice educators and other key stakeholders in relation to practice learning
- To inform Social Work England's plans for future support and regulation of practice education

Methods

The review was carried out between late May and August 2023. It consisted of:

- A literature review of the existing evidence base relating to practice education
- A consultation of qualified practice educators across England (including four, large-scale focus groups attended by 127 practice educators, and 28 individual interviews)
- A desktop analysis of twenty-three placement handbooks ¹across the range of qualifying social work programmes
- A focus group consultation of course providers (Higher Education Institutions and fast-track providers) of qualifying social work programmes (attended by representatives from nine institutions)
- A survey of local authorities focusing on the number and demographics of practice educators in England

¹ Many course providers use a handbook format. Others present this information via online portals or web-based information pages. We asked course providers to make available their handbook *or* equivalent.

- A focus group consultation of student placement providers (including local authorities, Trusts and voluntary organisations) attended by representatives from thirteen organisations

Key findings

The evidence base for practice education

- There is no national overview of practice education; most research is highly localised, frequently small-scale, and often lacking methodological rigour
- The literature primarily focuses on views of practice educators and other key stakeholders (including students), however there was a notable lack of research on the views of practice educators from minoritised groups
- Practice education is a complex activity; alongside supporting students, practice educators manage a network of other relationships (with course providers, employers, on-site supervisors). These relationships are critical to the success or failure of placements
- Practice education involves emotional labour, especially when working with students at risk of not passing their placement
- Practice education is part of a wider professional landscape that is contested and changeable, adding to the complexity of the role

Consultation of practice educators across England

The consultation identified three key motivators for becoming a practice educator:

1. **Generative:** to support the next generation of social workers, to impact positively on the profession, and to act as a 'gatekeeper' in terms of maintaining standards
2. **Formative:** to develop oneself and grow as a practitioner, to learn about self through facilitating the learning of others, to progress professionally
3. **Reparative:** to address a personal, prior negative experience of practice education, to address an issue or 'right a wrong' in the profession

These motivators helped to sustain practice educators, with many emphasising the importance of the role for improving recruitment and retention and driving up standards in social work. The following 'push' factors were identified, motivating practice educators to discontinue their role as a practice educator:

- Having a difficult experience with a student placement, especially for new practice educators;
- Lack of team or management support, including insufficient workload relief;
- Lack of support to manage the emotional labour involved in the role, especially around borderline or failing students, and lack of debrief following an unsuccessful placement;
- Limited continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities and developmental feedback, and lack of recognition and support networks for practice educators.

When the challenges above were addressed, practice educators felt better supported and motivated to continue in their role. They particularly valued:

- Support from their manager and team, including shared practice education arrangements;
- Workload relief and protected time for student support and paperwork;
- Support and debriefing when working with borderline or failing students;
- Fair and sufficient remuneration;
- Course providers with effective processes for matching, accessible and intuitive paperwork, clarity and support in working with failing students, post-placement feedback, and involvement of practice educators in other aspects of qualifying programmes, such as teaching and assessment.

The perspectives of independent practice educators

The independent practice educators in this consultation were highly experienced social workers, often undertaking the on a self-employed basis after moving away from full-time social work practice.

- Independent practice educators found supporting students extremely rewarding and a way to 'give back' to the profession;
- Insufficient or inconsistent rates of payment were a significant barrier to continuing in the role;
- Independent practice educators were selective in the course providers they worked with, favouring those offering effective support, continuing professional development and feedback;
- As an independent practice educator, it was particularly challenging to access opportunities for continuing professional development;
- Staying up to date with systems and technology was an ongoing challenge for some independent practice educators.

The perspectives of global majority practice educators

Interviews with thirteen global majority² practice educators highlighted the following distinct issues and challenges:

- Underrepresentation of global majority social workers in the practice educator workforce
- Additional barriers to becoming a practice educator and more generally, fewer opportunities for progression, development and leadership;
- A determination to provide global majority students with better support than they themselves experienced when qualifying;
- Needing to challenge unconscious bias from students and their organisation, which involved considerable emotional labour;
- A need for greater emphasis on global majority perspectives within practice educator qualifying programmes.

The perspectives of neurodivergent practice educators and practice educators with a disability

Interviews with sixteen practice educators who identified as neurodivergent or having a disability highlighted the following:

- A determination to provide neurodivergent students and those with disabilities with better support than they received as a student;
- Use of own lived experience and expertise to provide effective support to students
- Lack of support at an organisational level which could lead practice educators to assume sole responsibility for their own reasonable adjustments and those of their students;
- A need for accessible placement paperwork;
- A need for greater emphasis on supporting neurodivergent and disabled students on practice educator qualifying programmes.

² This is a shortened version of the term 'people of the global majority'. The term is associated with the work of Rosemary Campbell-Stephens MBE and is used to describe people from Black, Asian, mixed, dual-heritage and other ethnic groups who make approximately eighty percent of the world's population.

Models of practice education

The desktop review identified significant similarities and some interesting differences between qualifying programmes:

- The breakdown of first and second placements was identical across providers and all providers used the Professional Capabilities Framework³ and Social Work England Professional Standards to assess practice learning;
- Most variability related to the use of Practice Educator Professional Standards 1 and 2 qualified⁴ practice educators and the frequency of days in from placement;
- There were some innovations – such as the use of unit or group-based approaches to practice education and tools to facilitate discussions about discrimination – that could address some of the challenges experienced by global majority practice educators and provide a model of practice education more resilient to fluctuations in sufficiency of practice educators.

The perspectives of course providers

The focus group discussion with placement leads from course providers highlighted the following:

- Challenges and opportunities in recruiting, retaining, and working with practice educators. A key challenge was the workload faced by practice educators in local authorities;
- The process of matching and supporting students. Issues of placement sufficiency meant that some providers have moved from ‘matching’ to ‘allocating’ placements;
- Challenges were highlighted in the support of students from minoritised backgrounds, those with a disability or neurodiversity, and those at risk of failing;
- Assessing and quality assuring practice learning. There was perceived variability in the quality of practice educators and placements, making it hard to ensure consistency for students. Some course providers felt relatively powerless to address practice educators not meeting students’ needs;
- Course providers shared practice educators’ wish for greater recognition of the practice educator role, including improved remuneration, workload relief, and improved CPD;

³ Launched in 2012, The Professional Capabilities Framework is an overarching framework for social work in England from pre-qualifying to strategic levels and is used to inform recruitment, workforce development, performance appraisal and career progression. The Professional Capabilities Framework is hosted by the British Association of Social Workers.

⁴ The Professional Practice Educator Professional Standards (PEPS) are hosted by the British Association for Social Workers and promote standards for practice educators. The Professional Practice Educator Professional Standards 1 and 2 refer to the level the practice educator has attained.

- Compared to practice educators, course providers were less in favour of standardisation of student assessment.

The practice educator workforce in England: who, how many, and where?

While all social workers must be registered with Social Work England, there is (currently) no compulsory registration of practice educators. The research aimed to capture the numbers and demographics of practice educators in England via a survey distributed to each of the local authorities in England (n=153). Key points:

- The response rate for the survey was low (fourteen responses were submitted and only ten respondents were able to complete the majority of the survey questions);
- 30% of respondents did not keep a record of their practice educator population;
- Only 55% of those who did keep records recorded any demographic information;
- The challenges in gaining information on the practice educator population can be explained by organisations often relying on informal arrangements for coordinating practice educators, with the coordination of practice educators often resting with one person with personal knowledge of available practice educators.

The perspectives of placement providers

Consultation with placement providers (including local authorities and third sector agencies) identified the following:

- Practice education provided a pipeline for the recruitment of social workers and students brought fresh knowledge and perspectives into teams;
- Arrangements for the support of practice educators varied between organisations, typically involving a range of workshops, peer-support and in-house training opportunities;
- Lack of resources within organisations coupled with limited workload relief for practice educators limited organisations' capacity to provide support for neurodivergent students and those with additional needs;
- Placement providers recommended registration and annotation of the practice educator role and a stronger steer from Social Work England around payment and workload relief for practice educators.

Practice educators' recommendations for change

There was consensus among practice educators (including independent practice educators) that the highly-skilled and valuable work of practice education requires greater recognition. To achieve this, practice educators advanced six key recommendations:

1. **Registration and regulation:** There was support for annotation of the practice educator role, in line with Approved Mental Health Professionals and Best Interests Assessors.
2. **Fair and consistent remuneration:** Practice educators welcomed the prospect of standardisation of payments to overcome existing inconsistency and perceived under-valuing of the role.
3. **Consistency of placement paperwork and student assessment:** Practice educators identified a need to simplify and standardise placement paperwork and frameworks for assessment.
4. **Changes to practice educator qualification, training and continuing professional development:** Practice educators expressed a desire for greater representation of diverse voices in practice educator training and for a wider range of practice education-specific training and career development.
5. **Progression opportunities:** Practice educators wanted clear, defined routes for career progression within the role including opportunities for 'experienced' status. Practice educators highlighted a need for more equitable routes into practice education, especially for global majority social workers who encountered barriers to becoming a practice educator.
6. **Workload relief and protected time:** There was agreement that protected time and mandated workload relief are needed to sustain practice educators in their role.

SWOT analysis of practice education in England

The combined findings of the literature review, desktop review, survey, and consultation informed the identification of the following:

- **Strengths:** Practice education in social work is underpinned by a passionate and motivated workforce. On the whole, practice educators feel positive about their role, viewing it as integral to social work profession.

- **Weaknesses:** The lack of national oversight and the localised nature of practice education systems creates significant variability in the provision of practice education and the support available to practice educators
- **Opportunities:** There is appetite for change, including regulation, oversight, and standardisation to ensure greater consistency in the practice education system
- **Threats:** The practice educator workforce risks precarity; there are several internal and external factors which pose risks to the retention of experienced practice educators

Introduction

Practice educators play a vital role in social work. They assess students' proficiency and suitability to progress through their initial pre-registration training and oversee the safety of their practice while on placement. In the absence of a regulatory framework for practice education, they adhere to the practice educator professional standards (PEPS), held by the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) which is an informal framework. To practice as a social worker in England and use the protected title of 'social worker', individuals must be registered with Social Work England. As the regulator, Social Work England recently identified the need to develop a closer relationship with practice educators (Social Work England, 2021), assuring their training, supporting their practice, and ensuring the ongoing suitability and competence of social workers who take on this role. The Independent Review of Children's Social Care (MacAlister, 2022) also recommended that Social Work England adopt a greater role in the oversight of practice educators and their work. Via a competitive tendering process, Social Work England therefore commissioned the University of East Anglia (UEA), working in partnership with Research in Practice (RiP), to provide a comprehensive overview of practice education and the assessment of practice learning in England. The review had the following aims:

- To establish the existing evidence-base for the supervision and assessment of practice learning in social work
- To identify the current models of practice education in use in England across the range of providers and qualifying routes
- To provide a national, demographic picture of the practice educator workforce in England
- To capture the views, experiences and attitudes of practice educators and other key stakeholders in relation to practice learning
- To inform Social Work England's plans for future support and regulation of practice education

This report consists of four chapters. Chapter one outlines the findings from a review of the existing literature on practice education. Chapter two reports findings from a national consultation of practice educators. Chapter three explores practice education from the perspective of course and placement providers. The final chapter outlines practice educators' recommendations for change and a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) analysis of the practice education system in England.

CHAPTER ONE: Practice learning and education in social work – existing evidence

This chapter provides an overview of the existing research on practice education in the United Kingdom (UK).

The literature review addresses the following questions:

1. What are the experiences of social workers who undertake practice learning and assessment?
2. What are the views of other relevant stakeholders (e.g. students, placement providers, course providers) of practice education?
3. What impact do professional, regulatory, and societal changes have on practice education?

To address these questions, literature that included primary empirical data – research data collected by the article authors – was sought. The overarching aim of the review was to establish what research exists in relation to practice education in the UK and what lessons can be learnt from it. The chapter begins by outlining the search strategy and providing an overview of the literature. The four themes identified by the literature review are then discussed, making reference to the studies identified through the review process, and, finally, a summary of the existing literature, including gaps in research, is provided.

1.1 Literature review search strategy

A preliminary search was undertaken using UEA's advanced library search tool; this search tool accesses over 300 databases and repositories for academic journal articles, including Scopus, EBSCO, and JSTOR. Search terms used Boolean operators to ensure thoroughness; the combined terms were 'Practice teaching OR practice learning OR practice education OR practice placement OR practice assessment' in the abstract, with the second term being 'Social work OR social work education OR social workers OR student social workers OR trainee social workers' within the subject. The initial search yielded 28,402 hits.

Further criteria were added to narrow the search: the search was limited to articles published post-2000, in English, and based in the UK and Ireland. This reduced the number of hits to 1,375. Duplicates were removed, and two members of the research team screened titles and abstracts for relevance, this reduced the number of articles to 112. After further detailed abstract screening, the number of articles was reduced to 27. Further

searches were carried out to ensure thoroughness; this included manually searching the *Journal of Practice Teaching and Learning* repository since this journal's publisher is not included within the databases searched, and screening reference lists from the identified articles. This increased the number of articles to fifty. Full text readings were undertaken by three members of the research team and, following this process, thirty-eight articles were included in the review. For articles to be included, they had to include empirical data collected within the UK. One exception to this, Zuchowski (2016), was included because, despite the data collection taking place in Australia, the article had an explicit focus on implications for practice education in England.

The included studies were summarised in a table (see appendix L), and key findings were analysed thematically. From this analysis, four themes were identified and the literature will be presented under these themes: working with students; relationships and emotional labour; the practice education system; and the wider context.

1.2 Overview of the evidence base

Of the articles included in the review, twenty-three were based on qualitative data, two used solely quantitative methods, and thirteen used mixed methods. Qualitative methods included a combination of semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and workshops. Quantitative methods involved questionnaires and textual analysis. Mixed-methods studies generally involved either questionnaires that included both quantitative and qualitative questions and responses, or a combination of questionnaires with focus groups or interviews. Most studies focused on the experiences of practice educators and others within the wider practice education system, though some were interested in the needs of students and the role of practice educators and others in ensuring those needs were met. Many studies included other stakeholders – such as university tutors, students, and placement providers – as well as practice educators; some included studies did not collect data from practice educators, but findings had clear implications for the practice educator role and so were deemed relevant for inclusion.

Most of the literature was relatively small-scale – only three studies contained more than fifty participants (Furness and Gilligan, 2004; Doel et al, 2007; Beesley and Taplin, 2022) – and localised, with many researchers drawing on their own local networks, such as practice educators training at their HEI, practice educators involved in practice education for their HEI, local organisations offering placements, or teaching partnerships

the HEI is part of. Eight of the studies involved evaluation of an approach to either support students or practice educators, six explicitly focused on failing students from a range of stakeholder perspectives, one involved a reflective account of using an innovative approach to supporting struggling students, and seven explored how changes to the wider profession influenced practice education. The remaining studies primarily focused on the views of practice educators and other stakeholders in relation to the role.

In some respects, the localised approach to research reflects the way that practice education is currently administered; local networks and individual contacts are the primary method through which the provision of practice learning and assessment is provided. Some articles drew on workshop discussions at regional or national conferences, and since these discussions were not recorded and transcribed, the data collection and analysis lacked rigour. A number of other studies lacked rigour as they lacked clear research questions or a transparent and thorough account of the process of data collection and analysis. The relative lack of well-funded, robust national or cross-national research on practice education may be suggestive of practice education not being given the recognition its importance warrants. This lack of recognition for practice education was a theme in a number of the studies included (Domakin, 2014; Haworth, 2019; Burton, 2020).

Summary: Overview of the evidence base

- There were thirty-eight studies on practice education which focused on working with students, relationships and emotional labour, the practice education system, and the wider context.
- Almost half of the studies were more than ten years old, pre-dating the Social Work England and the Health and Care Professions Council as regulators. As such, they may not reflect the current practice education system in England
- The research studies as a whole captured the views of a number of key stakeholders including: practice educators, students, placement providers, and university tutors
- Existing research is primarily focused on small geographic areas, rather than national-level studies
- Some of the research in the field lacks methodological and analytical rigour; many of the studies did not have explicit research questions and a large number of the studies lacked clarity in their methods of analysis
- Studies were relatively small-scale; all except three involved fifty or fewer participants

1.3 The four themes

There were four themes within the literature: working with students; relationships and emotional labour; the practice education system; and the wider context. This chapter will consider each theme in turn, and within each theme, further sub-themes will be identified. Some studies resonated with more than one theme and so, where relevant, will be included under different themes and sub-themes.

Theme one: working with students

A central aspect of practice education is the role that practice educators play in supporting students in their learning journey. The literature explores how practice educators are motivated by (Develin and Mathews, 2012) and play a vital role in supporting students (Gibson, 2012; Apeah-Kubi, 2021). Another major component of the practice educator role lies in identifying and developing social work students' skills (Lister and Crisp, 2007; Stone, 2016; Bates, 2018; Rawles, 2021), and in working with diversity and difference (Collins et al, 2000; Thomas et al 2010; Furness, 2012).

Supporting students

There are a number of studies that highlight the nature and value of the relationship between practice educators and students in contributing to the success of practice placements and these will be considered within the following section. This section will consider literature with a more explicit focus on the role of the practice educator in supporting students.

Wanting to support students is a key motivating factor for social workers to become practice educators (Develin and Mathews, 2012). Using a questionnaire and focus groups, Develin and Mathews (2012) found that trainee practice educators (n=50) displayed ambivalent feelings towards social work; on the one hand, there was a sense of disillusionment towards social work, on the other a strong commitment, with participants professing a desire to 'give back' to social work, and mould future social workers with the values they consider intrinsic to the profession (Develin and Mathews, 2021). Some participants were also motivated by the desire to be better than the practice educators they had when they were students (Develin and Mathews, 2012). Wanting to positively impact both students and social work as a whole was a significant driver to become a practice educator for the majority of the participants. Develin and Mathews (2012) also outlined that the intrinsic benefits of being a practice educator – such as developing teaching skills or enjoying working with

students – motivated around half the participants to become practice educators, while financial gain was a less salient motivator. The findings suggest that motivation for becoming a practice educator is far more about supporting students and the profession than individual gain.

Practice educators have an important role to play in supporting students to develop confidence and manage the demands of placement (Gibson, 2012; Apeah-Kubi, 2012). Gibson's (2012) research explored how narrative approaches can provide this kind of support when working with struggling students. Through ongoing exploration of the student's 'master narrative' – that they were not capable – the student was able to reflect on and challenge this narrative and developed greater confidence in their practice. Since Gibson's (2012) study was based on supporting just one student, further research is necessary to demonstrate the effectiveness of narrative approaches in supporting struggling students to develop confidence.

Meanwhile, Apeah-Kubi (2021) explored the experiences of fourteen trainee practice educators supporting students who were on placements as part of a fast-track scheme. Over a quarter of participants noted that the pace of the fast-track programme felt rushed, with one participant expressing concerns that this fast pace limited how well-prepared students were for frontline practice (Apeah-Kubi, 2021). Despite this, the majority of practice educators expressed that students were well-prepared for placement, though Apeah-Kubi (2021) cautions that the pace and intensity of fast-track schemes needs to be balanced with providing students with time and support to critically reflect on and embed their learning. Supporting students to be ready for practice and to manage the demands of the programme was a key challenge for practice educators (Apeah-Kubi, 2021). More research on practice educators' experiences of fast-track programmes would be beneficial; this was the only identified study exclusively exploring fast-track qualifying routes.

Skills development

Practice educators play an important role in supporting students to develop their skills. This entails being able to identify the skills and characteristics that social work students need and providing appropriate opportunities for them to develop and demonstrate those skills (Stone, 2016; Bates, 2018). Practice educators, however, face some challenges in ensuring students have the opportunities they need to evidence their skill development (Bates, 2018). Practice educators also perform an educative function in assisting social work students to develop core skills, such as professional judgement (Rawles, 2021). By drawing on the use of

effective learning tools, practice educators can also further enhance the development of social work students (Lister and Crisp, 2007).

Stone's (2016) research explored practice educators' (n=17) views of what skills were required for social work students at the end of their final placement and how practice educators assessed these skills. Practice educators reported that social work students needed to demonstrate a baseline of social work skills, including the ability to communicate effectively with service users, colleagues, and other professionals, and practice educators felt that it was important that qualifying social workers had an understanding of both what they are doing and why they are doing it (Stone, 2016). Practice educators also identified the importance of social work students displaying personal characteristics – such as motivation to learn, emotional intelligence, and resilience – congruent with the profession. Practice educators felt that these characteristics were crucial in helping students to acquire the skills needed at qualifying level, but also recognised the importance of providing students with a reflective space to embed their knowledge and skills (Stone, 2016).

The active role that practice educators play in supporting skill development is highlighted by Bates' (2018) small-scale study (n=6) of how practice educators determine learning opportunities for final placement students. Participants saw the practice educator as needing to be person-centred to understand the student's learning journey, their strengths and weaknesses, and structuring learning opportunities accordingly. This extended to practice educators providing direct learning through supervision, creatively using different tools and encouraging reflection, alongside ensuring that the placement offered the right opportunities to stretch the student (Bates, 2018). Practice educators did, however, recognise some challenges in providing students with the right opportunities; in particular, where practice educators were off-site, they felt they had less control over the day-to-day learning opportunities that students were exposed to (Bates, 2018). Sufficiency of quality placements and variation in the learning opportunities afforded to students were also highlighted as impacting on the student and practice educator experience (Bates, 2018).

The importance of practice educators in actively promoting skill development is highlighted by Rawles (2021), whose research involved interviewing social work students (n=14) about the development of their professional judgement. Rawles (2021) identified three areas that enable students to develop confidence in their professional judgement: professional responsibility, facilitating the professional voice, and learner agency.

Practice educators can enable students to develop by providing them with learning opportunities that encourage them to formulate and express their professional judgement, that give them a degree of responsibility and accountability for making recommendations, and by encouraging autonomous learning and offering a space to reflect on their work and their learning (Rawles, 2021). Though the study does not directly involve practice educators, it sheds light on the educative function of practice educators.

As discussed above, practice educators are able to use tools and creative approaches to support students' learning and skill-development (Bates, 2018). Lister and Crisp (2007) explored the use of a specific tool to deepen student learning: critical incident analysis. Through working with paired practice educators and students, Lister and Crisp (2007) found that critical incident analysis was a useful tool for supervision discussions, providing a structure for reflection and analysis. Furthermore, critical incident analysis aided the practice educator's assessment of the student, enabled exploration of values, and supported students in linking theory to practice (Lister and Crisp, 2007).

Working with diversity and difference

Social work students come from a range of backgrounds, and the research literature explores issues of gender (Furness, 2012), supporting students from minoritised backgrounds (Thomas et al, 2010), and how well social work students and practice educators consider issues of racism and anti-racism in their placement paperwork (Collins, 2000).

Men are significantly under-represented within the social work profession, with less than twenty percent of social workers identifying as male (Social Work England, 2022). Previous research suggests that male social work students may be more likely to fail their course than their female counterparts (Furness, 2012). The practice educators (n=6) in Furness' (2012) study suggested that men were not prepared to see themselves as learners or to prove their competence, nor able to admit anxieties or lack of knowledge to female practice educators due to patriarchal attitudes and cultural norms of masculinity that prohibited them from admitting weakness. This suggests that male social work students – and the practice educators who work with them – may require support to recognise and overcome inherited gender stereotypes.

Previous research identified that there are particular challenges in supporting students from minoritised backgrounds and issues of diversity may be overlooked in social work education (Collins, 2000; Thomas et al, 2010). Indeed, whilst Collins' (2000) research – based on an analysis of placement reports – pre-dates significant changes in social work education and practice learning, their key finding that racism and anti-racism are not given adequate attention by students and practice educators remains pertinent. This lack of openness about diversity and discrimination is also evident in Thomas et al's (2010) research. Thomas et al (2010) found that students from minoritised backgrounds faced experiences of discrimination and a lack of acknowledging and valuing diversity. Practice educators noted specific challenges in supporting students from minoritised backgrounds and felt that a whole organisation approach was required to celebrate diversity and create an inclusive culture. Thomas et al (2010) recommend that practice educators have open discussions with students about diversity and discrimination, and that early contact is made to begin building the relationship prior to placement to facilitate these conversations. However, given the age of these studies and lack of recent research it is difficult to determine the extent to which these issues are a feature of current practice.

Summary

The research on working with students highlights the varied nature of the practice educator role. Practice educators must ensure that students have adequate support, particularly where the pace and intensity of the course is demanding (Apeah-Kubi, 2021) or when students are struggling (Gibson, 2012). This desire to support students is one of the main motivators for social workers to become practice educators (Develin and Mathews, 2012). Practice educators play a key role in identifying the skills social work students need (Stone, 2016), providing learning opportunities to develop and evidence those skills (Bates, 2018), and proactively supporting students to develop particular skills (Lister and Crisp, 2007; Rawles, 2021). Practice educators also have to be mindful of issues of diversity and difference and the disparities in student experience that these can create (Furness, 2012; Thomas et al, 2010). Research suggests that there is still work to be done to ensure that students from minoritised backgrounds are adequately supported (Thomas et al, 2010) and to make sure that students and practice educators adequately take account of racism and anti-racism in their work (Collins, 2000).

Working with students: key messages from the literature

- The motivation to support students is a key driver for becoming a practice educator
- Practice educators provide a reflective, supportive space for students in their learning journey
- Practice educators are crucial for identifying the skills required by social work students and the learning opportunities needed to develop those skills
- There is work to be done to improve experiences of minoritised social work students, and research in this area is limited

Theme two: Relationships and emotional labour⁵

In supporting students and providing them with opportunities to develop their skills, practice educators have to build working relationships, both with the student themselves (Lefevre, 2005; Bailey-McHale et al, 2019; Roulston et al, 2023), and with other stakeholders (Henderson, 2010; Brodie and Coyle, 2015; Zuchowski, 2016). A range of other relationships are also crucial to students during the placement process (Mathews et al, 2009). These relationships require emotional engagement (Bailey-McHale et al, 2019) and as such, practice education involves a degree of emotional labour; this is particularly the case when working with struggling or failing students (Basnett and Sheffield, 2010; Finch and Taylor, 2013; Finch et al, 2014; Finch, 2017).

Relationships

The focus of much of the literature is the relationship between the practice educator and the student, with a positive relationship being identified as a key influence on the success of the placement (Lefevre, 2005; Bailey-McHale et al, 2019; Roulston et al, 2023). The literature also provides further insight into what constitutes a 'good' or 'bad' relationship between a student and practice educator, mainly from the perspective of students. Good communication, feedback, and mutual respect were all found to be indicators of a good, productive relationship between students and practice educators (Lefevre, 2005; Bailey-McHale et al, 2019). These were characterised as components of a 'professional' relationship, however research indicates that the relationship between a practice educator and their student extends further than this. The warmth exhibited by practice educators was also found to be important as a component of their relationship with students (Lefevre, 2005),

⁵ Emotional labour describes the process of managing, suppressing or modulating one's emotions to conform with workplace/professional expectations. The term originates from Arlie Hochschild's research. See Hochschild, A. (1983) *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

suggesting the need for an emotional connection alongside the more procedural aspects of the relationship. Further literature has indicated a need for balance in the more emotional components of the relationship between practice educator and student; for example, Roulston et al (2023), found that an overly friendly and too involved relationship can be as detrimental to the success of a placement as a distant and cold relationship.

While the working relationship between a student and practice educator is crucial, other relationships are also important in creating a successful placement. Mathews et al (2009) explored the perspectives of students (n=34) on other supportive relationships that influence their placement experience. Mathews et al (2009) found that the relationship with the wider team was important for the student to support them with specific learning opportunities. A good relationship with the university tutor was seen as important, especially in times of crisis (Mathews et al, 2009). Other relationships also provided additional support; for example, friends and family offered emotional and practical support, whilst service users provided opportunities for learning and feedback (Mathews et al, 2009).

There has been comparatively limited research on practice educators' experiences of their relationships with students, however research has explored practice educators' perceptions of other relationships within the practice education system (Henderson, 2010; Brodie and Coyle, 2015; Zuchowski, 2016). The relationship between the university and practice educator is the focus of Brodie and Coyle's (2015) research. Based on surveys with practice educators (n=35), they emphasise the importance of this relationship for successful placements and provide suggestions for areas of improvement; these mainly centre around better communication from the university in terms of expectations, preparation, and consistent documentation (Brodie and Coyle, 2015). Effective collaboration between practice educators and course providers is central to the success of student placements.

The findings from Henderson's (2010) research indicate the importance of the relationship between the off-site practice educator and on-site supervisor in the success of the placement. Communication was key, as well as cooperation and a balanced share of power, with the role and responsibilities of the on-site supervisor being recognised and valued. Many practice educators advocated for a matched approach to selecting the practice educator and supervisor to enhance cooperation. Zuchowski's (2016) research builds on these

findings, providing evidence of the importance of a good relationship between the practice educator, on-site supervisor, and student. Participants in Zuchowski's (2016) research highlighted that the off-site practice educator could feel disconnected from the placement where interpersonal relationships were not effective. While Zuchowski's (2016) research was conducted in Australia, they argue that the findings are relevant to the English practice education system.

Emotional labour

Practice education is an emotive activity, with much of the literature focusing on the emotional impact of working with failing students (Basnett and Sheffield, 2010; Finch and Taylor, 2013; Finch et al, 2014; Finch, 2017). Finch and Taylor (2013) found that practice educators (n=20) reported feeling angry at students for how the student had made them feel, and at the university for not hearing the practice educator and making it difficult to fail the student. The perception that it is hard to fail a student due to HEI processes is echoed by Furness (2012), who also found that practice educators experience the process of failing a student as being stressful and isolating. Finch and Taylor (2013) found that practice educators also experienced feelings of guilt, either from failing the student or not failing students that should have failed (Finch and Taylor, 2013). Finch (2017) found that these intense feelings meant that practice educators experienced a sense of personal failure in response to the student's failure, making it difficult for them to fail students. Finch et al (2014) similarly found that practice educators internalised students' failure as their own, creating powerful feelings of self-blame. Reflection is diminished when individuals are overwhelmed with such emotions, which subsequently impedes clear decision-making. It is therefore important that practice educators are provided with opportunities to process the complex feelings associated with failing a student, so that they can move past feelings of anger or guilt and engage in effective decision-making (Finch et al, 2014).

Factors that help to mitigate challenging feelings were explored by Basnett and Sheffield's (2010) research. They found that identity was an important mediator of negative emotions when failing a student; practice educators who saw themselves as 'gatekeepers' of the profession found it easier to justify their decision to fail the student, negating some of the feelings of guilt (Basnett and Sheffield, 2010). They found that support from peers was also a significant contributor to successfully managing feelings of self-blame (Basnett and Sheffield, 2010). This has implications for independent practice educators, who may not have such support in place.

Summary

Practice education involves a complex and interconnected web of interpersonal relationships, all of which play an important role in ensuring that students have a positive practice learning experience (Lefevre, 2005; Mathews et al, 2009; Henderson, 2010; Brodie and Coyle, 2015; Zuchowski, 2016; Bailey-McHale et al, 2019; Roulston et al, 2023). A number of studies emphasise the centrality of the practice educator/student relationship (Lefevre, 2005; Bailey-McHale et al, 2019; Roulston et al, 2023), however the closeness required in this relationship can lead to emotional challenges for practice educators, particularly when working with failing students. Interpersonal dynamics can result in practice educators experiencing strong feelings of anger, guilt, and self-blame (Finch and Taylor, 2013) which can then negatively impact their decision-making (Finch et al, 2014; Finch, 2017). The relationships that practice educators have with colleagues, alongside their intrinsic motivation to be a practice educator, play a central role in mitigating some of these emotional impacts (Basnett and Sheffield, 2010). Further research on more positive emotional aspects of practice education would be beneficial.

Relationships and emotional labour: key messages from the literature

- A network of supportive professional and personal relationships is vital to successful practice learning for both students and practice educators
- Practice education can evoke a range of negative emotional responses – such as anger, guilt, and self-blame – and these can be especially challenging when working with borderline or failing students
- Supportive relationships and a strong sense of professional identity help practice educators to manage the emotional labour of practice education

Theme three: the practice education system

The role of practice educators in supporting students to learn, and the myriad relationships that contribute to successful practice learning, take place within a complex system. Research into how practice educators experience the practice education system found that the challenges they faced were systemic and organisational (Torry et al, 2005; Waterhouse et al, 2011; Domakin, 2014, 2015; Jasper and Field, 2016; Haworth, 2019; Burton, 2020). Different challenges were encountered and expressed by experienced and new practice educators in one study (Waterhouse et al, 2011), and independent, off-site, and voluntary sector

practice educators reported different challenges to practice educators based in statutory organisations (Furness and Wilkinson, 2005; Waterhouse et al, 2011; Bates, 2018). Support for practice educators was provided locally, either by the placement organisation or student's course provider (Parker et al, 2010; Jasper and Field, 2016; Plenty et al; 2016).

Challenges

In research into the experiences of practice educators, the studies (Waterhouse, 2011; Domakin, 2014, 2015; Haworth, 2019; Burton, 2020) identified an absence of workload relief from the practice educators' organisation as a major challenge, increasing work pressures: 'It is about the workload unfortunately which has increased beyond recognition' (Domakin, 2015: 403). Burton's (2020) and Jasper and Field's (2016) studies highlighted the increase to the practice educator workload created by the introduction of the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) which practice educators found more time-consuming and required greater practice educator input on student assessments.

A central theme from the research was a lack of recognition for the role of practice educator as a defined career pathway with little support from the organisation or managers. Practice educators felt that the importance of the role to the profession was not acknowledged, with training being largely informal and inconsistent investment in resources (Domakin, 2014; Haworth, 2019). Practice educators in Haworth's (2019) study stated that there was little organisational incentive to either train or remain as a practice educator, and if there were greater appreciation for the practice educator role and a defined career path, they would be more likely to remain in the role. In terms of remuneration, there was also a noticeable inconsistency between agencies (Domakin, 2015; Waterhouse et al, 2011); the research revealed that practice educators in the independent sector were more concerned about pay than those in statutory organisations, although practice educators in both sectors described it as a challenge (Waterhouse et al, 2011).

One hundred percent (n=48) of the practice educators in Domakin's (2014) research believed it was crucial to link theory to practice, yet they perceived a lack of cohesion between course providers and organisations that was also highlighted within other studies (Torry et al, 2005). Practice educators also felt disconnected from the course providers who had placed students with them, which led to them feeling 'isolated and marginalised' (Domakin, 2015: 404), a finding echoed in other studies (Waterhouse et al, 2011; Furness, 2012; Bates, 2018).

A number of studies revealed that practice educators would appreciate greater partnership with course providers in order to provide students with a more holistic experience and consolidate learning (Domakin, 2014; Domakin, 2015; Lane, 2023).

There appeared to be consensus among practice educators interviewed that the paperwork provided by course providers to complete student assessments was confusing and inconsistent (Jasper and Field, 2016; Burton, 2020). This meant that practice educators wasted valuable time learning how each provider needed student assessments completed, particularly if practice educators were working with students from several different providers (Waterhouse et al, 2011; Haanwinckel et al, 2018). Furthermore, practice educators stated that they would value standardisation of practice educator training across the country in order to raise the profile of the role (Haworth, 2019; Burton, 2020), although practice educators still wanted to maintain the level of flexibility that working within the Professional Capabilities Framework allows (Jasper and Field, 2016). Responses from participants in Bates (2018) reflected Jasper and Field's (2016) findings, as practice educators in this study stated that their capacity to use creativity in their role was central to their ability to support student learning.

Most practice educators reported that, when working with borderline or failing students, they received little or no support from course providers (Furness, 2012; Finch and Taylor, 2013). Practice educators reported that this made them feel reluctant to fail students, believing that 'It is so much easier to pass a student' who they considered to be 'borderline' (Domakin, 2015: 407). This absence of support caused practice educators to feel underprepared to deal with the problematic situation of a failing student (Waterhouse et al, 2011), and angry with course providers because they felt unheard (Finch and Taylor, 2013). Participants in Burton (2020) stated that supporting a struggling student depleted practice educator's energy, increased professional and personal stress, and caused them to question their own abilities.

Support

The research also revealed that practice educators experienced valuable supports in their role, though these were notably less well-represented than the challenges practice educators experienced. Plenty et al's (2016) study, which used a questionnaire of practice educators in their Practice Education Network for Social Work (PENSW), identified that participants valued resources for supervision and the training workshops the network

provided. Practice educators, especially independent practice educators, appreciated the online elements of the network which enabled them easy access to materials (Plenty et al, 2016). However, practice educators did identify an omission of a discussion forum as a limitation of PENSW, and despite finding PENSW a valuable resource, it was still underused, with only thirty percent of practice educators in the network responding to the questionnaire.

In Parker et al's (2010) evaluation of a pilot practice education programme, consisting of project reports from higher education institutions and employers and feedback forms from practice education students, most practice educators reported positive experiences of practice education. Participants valued the support in terms of their skills and knowledge development and their ability to supervise and assess students and believed that the programme provided by the HEI and employer partnership had enabled them to achieve this (Parker et al, 2010). Parker et al's (2010) study highlights the value of a strong partnership between HEIs and employers and provides examples of good practice, though as with other research into practice education, the findings are localised and based on a relatively small sample.

Jasper and Field's (2016) study of practice educators' experiences of assessing against the Professional Capabilities Framework reported that it was a good fit for assessing professional practice, capturing the values of social work as well as competencies social workers require (Jasper and Field, 2016). Practice educators found the Professional Capabilities Framework supported holistic learning, and that it endowed them with the freedom to be creative about students' learning, while aiding them to identify areas of strength or weakness (Jasper and Field, 2016). The Professional Capabilities Framework was regarded by practice educators as a valuable tool to support student learning not only during placement, but through into practice and helped practice educators to develop the student's social work identity (Jasper and Field, 2016).

Summary

The research identifies the main challenges for practice educators as lack of support from employers in terms of workload (Domakin, 2014, 2015; Haworth, 2019), recognition (Domakin, 2014; Haworth, 2019), remuneration (Waterhouse et al, 2011; Domakin, 2015) and training (Domakin, 2014, 2015; Bates, 2018; Haworth, 2019). Practice educators in general felt isolated (Waterhouse et al, 2011; Furness, 2012; Domakin, 2015; Bates, 2018), especially when working with failing students (Waterhouse et al, 2011; Furness, 2012;

Finch and Taylor, 2013), believing it easier to pass borderline students than going through the process of failing them (Domakin, 2015), which they reported caused them both personal and professional strain (Burton, 2020). Meanwhile, key supports for practice educators were the provision of resources and close partnership working with course providers (Parker et al, 2010; Plenty et al, 2016), and the use of frameworks for assessment that felt holistic, were well-matched to professional practice, and could be used creatively (Jasper and Field, 2016).

Although practice educators reported greater challenges than supports in the literature, it does not necessarily follow that they view the role in negative terms. Practice educators feel that they deserve greater recognition and are encumbered with less favourable workloads and remuneration than other categories of social workers (Domakin, 2014, 2015; Haworth, 2019; Burton, 2020), therefore they may be utilising their participation in research to voice their discontent. Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that practice educators feel under-supported in their role and while there are some valued supports, there are also many challenges which need to be addressed.

The practice education system: key messages from the literature

- Practice educators experience a range of challenges and supports in their role
- Challenges include workload pressures, lack of support from their employer and course providers, poor remuneration, and burdensome paperwork
- Supports include training, professional support networks, resources provided by course providers, and intuitive frameworks for assessment

Theme four: the wider context of practice education

Practice education, like social work itself, is subject to a professional and regulatory landscape that has shifted significantly over the past twenty years. This section will discuss research focusing on how changes in social work have impacted practice education (Furness and Gilligan, 2004; Doel et al, 2007; Plenty and Gower, 2013; Jasper and Field, 2016; Burton, 2020; Beesley and Taplin, 2022) and how practice education has to navigate and mediate competing conceptions of social work (Higgins (2014; Higgins et al, 2016; Lane, 2023).

The changing landscape of practice education

Practice education does not take place in a vacuum; it is impacted by changes within the profession and by events within wider society. Over the last 20 years, there have been significant changes to the regulatory landscape. For instance, over this period the profession of social work has been subject to three different regulatory bodies: the General Social Care Council, the Health and Care Professions Council and Social Work England. Alongside this, there have also been changes to the social work qualification (such as the introduction of the social work degree in 2003), qualifying routes – most recently fast-track and apprenticeship qualifications – and the professional standards for social work, including the move from using the National Occupational Standards as the means of assessing social work students on placement to the Professional Capabilities Framework in 2013 (Jasper and Field, 2016). More recently, the Knowledge and Skills Statements and Social Work England’s professional standards have also played an important role in the assessment of social work students.

This section will discuss the impact on practice education of the introduction of the new social work degree in 2003 (Furness and Gilligan, 2004; Doel et al, 2007), the implementation of the Professional Capabilities Framework (Plenty and Gower, 2013; Jasper and Field, 2016), and changes in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Beesley and Taplin, 2022). There is relatively little research exploring the impact of recent changes (such as the introduction of social work apprenticeships and fast-track qualifications) on practice educators, representing a significant gap in the evidence base.

The introduction of the new social work degree in 2003 brought about significant changes to practice learning and assessment, including practice placements increasing to 200 days of the new qualifying programmes (Furness and Gilligan, 2004; Doel et al, 2007). Furness and Gilligan (2004) identify some key challenges arising from the implementation of the new social work degree for practice educators, in particular concerns about: sufficiency of placements, the usefulness of competency frameworks – such as the National Occupational Standards – to assess social work students, adequately supporting students facing personal difficulties, and how connected off-site practice educators will be to placement sites. This study is almost 20 years old. As such, it may not accurately reflect current issues within the practice education system. However, some of the issues it raises may still be pertinent as these include: ‘pressures of work resulting from staff sickness, staff shortages, lack of office space, effects of restructuring/reconfiguration, little or no workload relief, the

multiple demands placed on some individuals such as experienced Black staff to undertake extra responsibilities, lack of commitment by managers, low morale and unhappy experiences of practice teaching' (Furness and Gilligan, 2004: 467). Doel et al (2007) similarly argue that, despite significant changes to practice education brought about by the introduction of the social work degree, the context of practice learning – in particular, pressures of workload and retention within the wider profession – has not really changed.

A further key change for the assessment of practice learning was the implementation of the Professional Capabilities Framework as the primary framework for assessing students on placement (Plenty and Gower, 2013; Jasper and Field, 2016). Plenty and Gower (2013) found that experiences of implementing the Professional Capabilities Framework were largely positive. It was seen as a useful framework for assessment, and practice educators valued being provided with written guidance and workshops to support them with implementing the Professional Capabilities Framework. As discussed earlier in the review, Jasper and Field (2016) similarly found that experiences of using the Professional Capabilities Framework were generally positive. Participants appreciated the creative and holistic approach encouraged by using the Professional Capabilities Framework but noted that variation between course providers and the volume of paperwork posed challenges (Jasper and Field, 2016).

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on social work practice, requiring an instant shift to remote working for most practitioners; this in turn impacted on the provision of social work placements and the work of practice educators (Beesley and Taplin, 2022). Changes wrought by the pandemic had both negative and positive consequences for practice education; practice educators reported a sense of loss, in terms of relationships with students and colleagues, and in vicarious loss for students who were missing out on learning opportunities (Beesley and Taplin, 2022). Practice educators felt, however, that the use of technology mitigated many impacts and, in some cases, opened up new possibilities for student learning and assessment (Beesley and Taplin, 2022). Practice educators found that regular contact between students and course providers was helpful, as were more frequent check-ins between practice educators and students, particularly since remote working created challenges for the whole team 'adopting' students on placement (Beesley and Taplin, 2022).

Competing conceptions of social work

Social work is often characterised as balancing competing elements, such as care and control, theory and practice, and social work as an academic discipline and as a technical-bureaucratic practice. Practice educators often act at the intersection of these competing aspects of social work, in particular competing conceptions of social work as a theory-driven, academic discipline and as a task-based, practical profession (Higgins, 2014; Lane, 2023). Indeed, Higgins et al (2016) suggest that practice education helpfully sheds light on some of the underlying tensions within and competing conceptions of social work as a profession.

Drawing on the same empirical research, Higgins (2014) and Higgins et al (2016) explore the relationship between social work in the academy and social work in practice. Interviews with a range of stakeholders (n=48) – including students, service users, academics, practice learning leads, and practice educators (n=8) – highlighted a fundamental tension between social work as taught in higher education institutions and social work as practiced in the field (Higgins, 2014; Higgins et al, 2016). Higgins (2014) found that practice educators struggled to bridge the gap between theory and practice, and between an idealised view of social work and the more bureaucratic and task-focused nature of local authority social work. Practice educators, who were often employed within local authorities, tended to align more with the ‘practice’ conception of social work and felt that the more idealised conception of social work taught within universities sat somewhat apart from their daily reality (Higgins, 2014).

Higgins et al (2016) similarly found a gap between the university and practice, with practice educators not always valuing the knowledge, skills, and values taught within the university, instead favouring more practical skills such as report-writing and diary management. Higgins et al (2016) describe the tension as being between aspirational social work – as a theory- and value-based profession that centres relationships and the promotion of social justice – and statutory social work, which narrowly focuses on completion of statutory tasks. This leaves little room for use of theory, relationship-building, creative approaches to supporting individuals and families, and critical reflection on practice (Higgins et al, 2016). Whereas Higgins (2014) suggests that the development of critical pedagogies can help practice educators to bridge the gap between these competing conceptions of social work, Higgins et al (2016) found, more pessimistically, a great deal of ambivalence about proposed reforms to social work practice, with many feeling there was little prospect of meaningful change.

The need to better bridge the gap between academia and practice is also a theme in Lane's (2023) research. Lane (2023) found that, whilst relationships between course providers and employers were positive, they focused more on the provision of placements and the practical arrangements this involved than on creating a shared view of what constitutes good social work practice. One tension highlighted within Lane's (2023) study was the need for supportive, developmental supervision within organisational contexts where blame culture was pervasive. This inhibited the potential to learn from mistakes and meant that both practice educators and students required a high degree of emotional resilience to cope with the realities of practice (Lane, 2023). Lane (2023) also found that the complex array of skills needed by social workers was not always reflected in university curricula; in particular, participants felt that practical work-related skills such as report-writing and assessment needed to be better represented in social work education. The author noted that students needed support to apply theory and knowledge to the increasingly complex circumstances of individual's lives, and ultimately that greater collaboration and cooperation would help to close the gap between academia and practice (Lane, 2023).

Summary

The literature in this section has highlighted that practice educators operate within wider systems that impact on practice education. Practice educators have witnessed significant changes in social work education, including the institution of the social work degree (Furness and Gilligan, 2004; Doel et al, 2007) and the introduction of the Professional Capabilities Framework as a primary framework for assessing students (Plenty and Gower, 2013; Jasper and Field, 2016). The implementation of the Professional Capabilities Framework has been seen largely as a positive (Plenty and Gower, 2013; Jasper and Field, 2016), whilst greater ambivalence has been expressed about the value of other changes (Furness and Gilligan, 2004; Higgins et al, 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic offered both challenges and opportunities for practice education, with a sense of loss and difficulties in integrating students into placements being counterbalanced by the prospect for creativity and flexibility in practice learning (Beesley and Taplin, 2022). Practice education takes place at the interface of academia and practice, and as a result acts as a magnifying glass for some of the tensions inherent within the profession (Higgins et al, 2016). These tensions, however, are challenging to resolve when the realities of the profession – including high workloads, large volumes of paperwork, and limited time for reflection and relationship-building – do not sit comfortably alongside the more aspirational conception of social work that students are exposed to on their qualifying programme (Higgins, 2014; Higgins et al, 2016). Closer

collaboration and greater integration of practice and academia – including through greater involvement of practice educators in qualifying programmes (Lane, 2023) – is one means to bridge this gap.

The wider context of practice education: key messages from the literature

- Practice education takes place within complex and changeable professional and societal systems
- Changes to practice education over the past twenty years have had a mixed impact on practice educators, with many challenges – particularly high staff turnover and lack of workload relief – remaining unchanged over time
- Practice education highlights tensions between competing conceptions of social work and practice educators have to find ways to manage these tensions

1.4 Summary

The literature paints a picture of practice education as a highly complex practice. Practice educators have to manage a range of relationships with the students they support, the higher education institutions and fast-track providers they work with, and the organisations in which their students are placed. These relationships take place in a wider system where practice educators face a number of challenges, including high workloads, lack of protected time to support students, and a lack of support from course and placement providers.

Beyond the immediate practice education system, changes in regulation and professional standards, broader debates about the nature of social work in England, and wider societal issues all impact on practice educators undertaking their role. Despite this, practice educators express a lot of positivity about their role and are motivated by a desire to support students and to give back to the profession. Despite some of the included studies lacking rigour individually, taking the findings collectively, the key themes outlined here are relatively robust as they are supported by multiple studies undertaken across different parts of the country.

There are some clear gaps in the existing research. There is no national picture of the number and demographics of practice educators; all but three studies (Furness and Gilligan, 2004; Doel et al, 2007; Beesley and Taplin, 2022) involved fifty or fewer participants, with several studies including fewer than ten. Both Furness and Gilligan (2004) and Beesley and Taplin (2022) were based on conference workshops with approximately seventy participants; as noted previously, these were not recorded or transcribed and so the data collection and analysis lacked rigour. This means it is difficult to get a high level overview of practice

education in England from the existing literature. As noted in the review, much of the research on working with students – and particularly, the emotional aspect of working with students – focused on failing students. This means that the findings on practice educator’s emotional experiences are skewed towards the negative, with research on the positives of supporting students and the satisfaction gained from a successful placement being under-explored. The experiences of minoritised groups are also largely absent from the literature, with only Thomas et al (2010) explicitly exploring the needs of students from global majority backgrounds. The experiences of practice educators from global majority backgrounds, and practice educators with characteristics such as disability and neurodivergence, are largely absent within the literature. The role of the practice educator in supporting students who have diverse and intersecting needs is also under-researched.

It is notable that, whilst the skills that students need to develop are well-covered in the practice education literature (Stone, 2016; Bates, 2018), the knowledge, skills, and values that practice educators require to be a success in their role are less well-explored. It is also apparent that the proliferation of fast-track routes into social work in recent years is not reflected in the research, with only one study (Apeah-Kubi, 2021) explicitly considering practice’s experiences of working with fast-track students.

Chapter one: Summary

- Practice learning and assessment is a complex and underappreciated practice that is underpinned by a network of relationships
- The existing literature does not provide a national picture of practice education – both in terms of numbers and demographics of practice educators and their experiences
- However, the localised research does cohere around some key themes, such as relationships being central to practice education, the challenges of workload and lack of support for practice educators, the strong desire to support students and the emotional labour this generates, and how competing conceptions of social work play out in practice learning and assessment
- Further research is needed to explore the experiences of practice educators and students from global majority backgrounds and those with a disability, to understand the skills practice educators need and what sustains them in practice

CHAPTER TWO: The perspectives of practice educators across England

This chapter outlines the findings from a qualitative consultation with practice educators across England. It begins with a description of the methods and participant sample for the consultation. The findings from the qualitative consultation are then outlined. As well as outlining the views of practice educators in general, the chapter explores the experiences of the following groups: independent practice educators, global majority practice educators, neurodivergent practice educators, and practice educators with a disability.

2.1 Consultation of practice educators across England - methods

The qualitative consultation was carried out between late May and August 2023. It aimed to answer the following questions:

- How do practice educators perceive their role and what motivates them to become practice educators?
- What influences and impacts whether a practice educator is successful in their role?
- What do practice educators consider to be the enablers and barriers when supervising and assessing pre-registration students?
- What factors influence practice educators' decisions to continue (or discontinue) the role?
- What are practice educators' views of the existing practice educator professional standards (PEPS), held by the British Association of Social Workers (BASW)?
- What are practice educators' hopes and ambitions in terms of their future relationship with Social Work England?

As the literature review (chapter one) identified, there is a lack of research capturing the perspectives of practice educators from minoritised groups. There is also evidence to suggest that social workers from specific groups face additional barriers to progression to leadership and supervisory roles (Gurau and Bacchoo, 2022). It was therefore important to adopt a proactive approach towards including a range of voices in the consultation. With this in mind, the interviews aimed to answer the following additional questions:

- What are the experiences of practice educators with protected characteristics?
- How can practice educators from underrepresented or minoritised backgrounds be recognised and supported in their role?

To answer the first set of questions, we conducted four national consultation focus groups. To answer the additional questions (directly above) we conducted individual interviews with practice educators which provided a safer space for participants to consider sensitive issues related to their experiences as professionals from an underrepresented group. The methods used for the focus group and interviews are outlined in the next section. Ethical approval for the research was secured from the University Research Ethics Committee. Approval to approach participants from more than the four local authorities was granted by the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS).

Focus groups

Recruitment and sample

Four large-scale focus groups were undertaken to capture the views and experiences of practice educators across England. The focus groups were carried out in partnership with Research in Practice (RiP) who recruited participants through their website and via promotion across their professional networks and social media platforms. This enabled us to reach practice educators from a range of backgrounds (including adult and children's services, mental health services, the voluntary sector, and independent practitioners). When registering for the focus groups, participants were provided with an information sheet with details of the research project and completed a consent form (the terms of which were revisited at the start of each focus group). During registration, demographic information was collected from participants (including their organisation, date and type of practice educator qualification, and ethnicity). Participants were also asked to identify whether they had a protected characteristic under the definition of the Equality Act 2010 (which includes age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation) and if so, whether they would be willing to participate in an individual interview focusing on this aspect of their identity as a practice educator. These participants were later approached for interview. In total, 243 participants registered to attend the focus groups and 127 attended across the four focus groups.

Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2	Focus Group 3	Focus Group 4	Total
35	28	34*	30	127

*Focus Group 3 consisted of independent practice educators only.

(Figure 1 – Focus Group attendees)

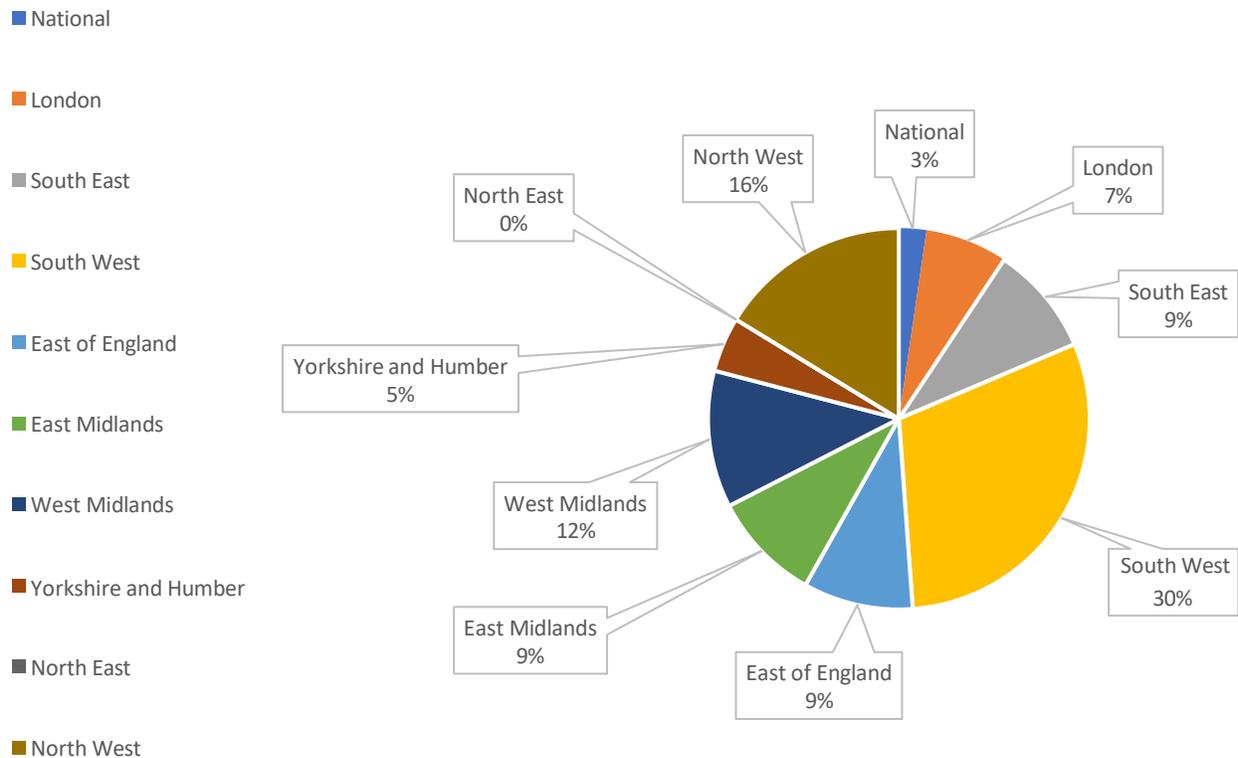
The four focus groups featured a diverse range of participants. Of the 127 participants, thirty-seven were independent practice educators or undertook some independent practice education work (featured mostly in Focus Group 3). Below is a breakdown of the independent practice educators who took part in Focus Group 3.

	Total
Number of attendees	34
Mean years qualified as a PE	14.5
Range years qualified as a PE (1-48)	47

(Figure 2 – Independent practice educator focus group sample)

The average length of time independent practice educators had worked as practice educators was double that of practice educators who were employed within organisations, suggesting that this group consisted of more experienced practice educators. Of those practice educators who were employees, twelve worked in the voluntary sector and seventy-four worked in local authorities or similar organisations, whilst seven worked primarily within universities. The focus groups also featured participants with varied protected characteristics, different qualifications, and a range of experience. The participants practiced in association with forty-one different organisations such as local authorities, NHS trusts, charities, and universities. These organisations were spread across England:

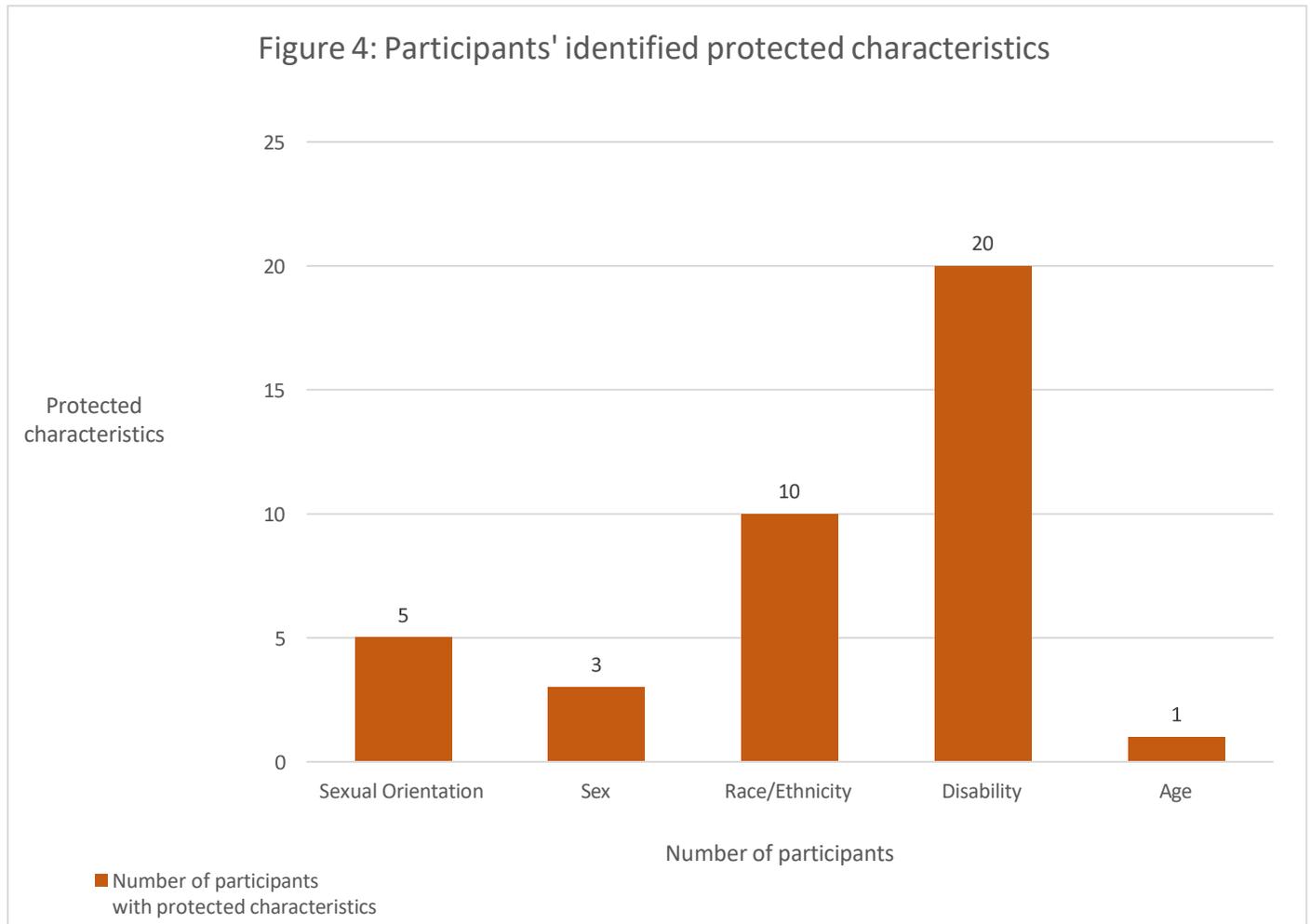
Figure 3 – Regional breakdown of participants’ organisations



(Figure 3 – Regional breakdown of participants’ organisations)

As shown in Figure 3, organisations from across the country were represented in the focus groups, with the exception of the North East. There was greatest representation from the South West. All areas of the country were targeted in Research in Practice’s recruitment drive. The North East had no representation, however by population the North East is significantly smaller than the other regions. The South West was somewhat overrepresented in relation to its population size, while London and the South East were comparatively underrepresented. The reasons for these regional variations are unclear. One participant – a practice educator who worked primarily for The Open University online – was categorised as ‘national’ given the national rather than regional operating model of The Open University.

As stated above, participants were asked whether they identified as having any of the nine protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010. Of these nine, five were represented within the focus groups, with thirty-four participants identifying with at least one of the protected characteristics, summarised in Figure 4, below).



(Figure 4 – Participants’ identified protected characteristics)

Of the thirty-four participants who identified themselves as having a protected characteristic, thirty-one indicated they would be willing to participate in an interview.

The focus groups consisted of practice educators with different qualifications and experience. Of the participants most (n=97) were PEPS 1 and 2 qualified. An additional eleven were PEPS 1 qualified or were in the process of completing their PEPS 2 qualification. The final eighteen stated they had other practice

education qualifications outside the currently recognised PEPS 1 and 2 framework. These qualifications included: Enabling Work based Learning Assessment, CCETSW Practice Teaching Award, and PQ 6 Practice Educator Award. Participants varied significantly in their years of experience, ranging from forty-eight years to under a year, with a mean average experience across the focus groups of 7.8 years.

Focus group schedule

Each of the four focus groups were hosted online by RiP via Microsoft Teams and facilitated by Professor Danielle Turney. Each focus group lasted 90 minutes and consisted of three separate interactive sessions. The three sessions focused on the following questions:

- *Session one:* What motivated me to become and remain a practice educator? (Sub-questions included: Has your motivation to be a practice educator changed over time? What keeps you engaged when there are challenges?)
- *Session two:* What makes an effective practice educator? (Sub-questions included: How do you become an effective practice educator? What gets in the way when supervising and assessing students and what helps? What are the challenges and opportunities in supervising and assessing students across different qualifying routes?)
- *Session three:* What do you hope for practice education going forward? (Sub-questions: What ideas do you have about how practice educator training and support could be improved? How could more social workers be encouraged to become practice educators? What ideas do you have about changing the practice education system? What are your key messages for Social Work England?)

Each of the sessions involved a combination of whole group discussion, small breakout group discussion, live 'chat' text entries, and Jamboard activities. A Jamboard is a digital whiteboard that allows participants to collaborate in real-time using virtual sticky notes. This creates an interactive experience for participants and is also an effective way to gather data from a large group of participants simultaneously. The full schedule for the focus groups can be found in Appendix B and Jamboards from one of the focus groups are provided in Appendix C. Within each of the three sessions, the whole group was split into six smaller breakout groups (each consisting of 4-6 participants). The whole focus group sessions were recorded and transcribed, including all of the breakout room discussions. This meant that there was a total of approximately nineteen recorded

group discussions per focus group (with a total of seventy-six across the four focus groups) as well as Jamboard and live chat text entries which were then analysed by the research team.

Interviews

Recruitment

In addition to the focus group, twenty-eight semi-structured interviews were conducted to capture the voices of practice educators from underrepresented and minoritised groups. Participants were recruited via the signup for focus groups and a small number through directly approaching local authorities in order to conduct pilot interviews prior to the focus group consultation taking place.

All interviews were conducted, recorded, and transcribed using Microsoft Teams. Participants were invited to explore their experiences as a practice educator through the lens of their identified protected characteristic. The interview schedule went through a process of iterative revision throughout the period of data collection. The final interview schedule can be found in Appendix E. The interviews varied significantly in duration, with a mean length of 33 minutes and 49 seconds.

Interview sample

The interviews involved practice educators with a diverse range of experience – in terms of years in practice, years as a practice educator, and the number of students supported during this time – summarised below.

	Average	Range
Years as Social Worker	12.82	43 (45-2)
Years as Practice Educator	8.01	43 (43-0)
Total Students	33.64	499 (500-1)

(Figure 5 – Interview Sample Summary Information)

Ethnicity	Totals
White European	1
White British	15
Black British	3
Black African	3
British Pakistani	1
British Muslim	1
British Indian	1
British Asian	1
Black Portuguese	1
British Bangladeshi	1
Total	28

(Figure 6 – Interview Sample by ethnicity⁶)

Consistent with the aims of the project, the interview sample included participants from a range of ethnic backgrounds (Figure 6). The interviews included participants with differing protected characteristics; these are presented within Figure 7. It is important to note that some overlap occurred in that some participants from a global majority background also had additional protected characteristics, and some participants had multiple protected characteristics.

Other Characteristics	Totals
Neurodivergence	8
Physical Disability	10
Religion	1
Sexual Orientation	1

(Figure 7 – Interview sample - other characteristics (excluding ethnicity))

⁶ Rather than using pre-existing categories, we asked participants to self-identify their ethnicity using their preferred terms.

Data analysis

Data from the interviews were analysed in tandem with the focus group data using reflexive thematic analysis, which allowed a significant amount of flexibility in the process of analysis, while still ensuring sufficient rigour (Braun and Clarke, 2019). During the duration of the project, all researchers were encouraged to continuously make notes as well as update a reflexive journal to both develop reflections and keep an audit trail of the analytical process (Trainor and Bundon, 2021).

The interview and focus group transcripts were read by multiple researchers, ensuring rigour and quality in the thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021; Stenfors et al, 2020). To efficiently manage the large amount of data, case summaries were used to identify key codes within each interview or focus group. These codes were then used to begin construction of preliminary themes. Each case summary included a reflexive account that identified the content of the interview/focus group as well as the researchers' reflections about where this collection of data fitted within the wider context of the analysis. The codes established within the case summaries were iteratively sorted into the initial candidate themes. The three researchers responsible for the analysis met regularly to compare candidate themes.

From the combined interview and focus group data, themes were distilled which were common to practice educators in general. These themes are reported in sections 2.2 and 2.3: becoming and being a practice educator. Within this, key sub-themes included the experience of working with students, working within organisations, and working with higher education institutions. Themes unique to practice educators from specific groups are reported in section 2.4 (independent practice educators) section 2.5 (global majority social workers), and 2.6 (neurodivergent practice educators and practice educators with a disability).

2.2 Becoming a practice educator

Understanding why practitioners become practice educators is important for considering how to increase recruitment and promote retention within the practice educator workforce. The findings from the consultation suggest that practitioners' motivations to become a practice educator fall into three key types: generative, reparative, and formative. Using illustrative quotations from participants, this section defines and

describes these motivations before moving on to identify barriers faced by practitioners in their journey to become a practice educator.

Motivation for becoming a practice educator: Generative

Many participants were strongly motivated to become practice educators due to their passion for the profession and their desire to shape it by supporting the next generation of social workers. Participants' motivations for becoming a practice educator had much in common with the seventh stage of Erikson's (1959) theory of psychosocial development, *generativity vs stagnation*, which takes place in middle-age. During this life stage, Erikson describes the individual moving away from individualistic pursuits in favour of making a mark on the world through the nurture of things that will outlast them. The motivations expressed by practice educators were similarly generative:

I'm very invested in the future generation of social workers ... making sure that they get the right education (Interview participant)

Participants spoke of 'supporting', 'nurturing', and 'bringing up' the next generation of social workers, having a direct 'input into the social workers of the future' and the 'future workforce' to 'create workers who will be passionate about the work' and 'reach their full potential'. Passing on their practice wisdom to the 'social workers of the future' was a way to maximise their impact on a profession they were proud to be a part of. Echoing the findings of Develin and Mathews (2021), many practice educators identified a motivation to 'give back' to the profession which had played a part in their own development:

My practice educator *raised* me... with high trust, high autonomy (Breakout room, Focus group 2)

As well as supporting and nurturing the next generation of social workers, practice educators described part of their motivation as safeguarding the future of the profession itself. This was achieved in two ways: through acting as a gatekeeper to the profession and using the practice educator role to promote recruitment and retention of social workers. Within the focus groups and interviews, the concept of practice educators as gatekeepers appeared frequently:

You're the gatekeepers to the profession, you and the other people who are involved in that [assessment] process (Breakout room, Focus group 1)

Social work was viewed by participants as 'a really important job, it's the gateway to our vulnerable people'. Practice educators described being proud of their profession and wanting to uphold high standards of practice with vulnerable people.

Participants also described becoming practice educators to safeguard the future of the profession through doing their bit to address recruitment and retention challenges:

I'm aware of the recruitment and retention difficulties that we have and that starts at the bottom of the ring in terms of making sure we've got good quality placements for students. Good placements lead to good social workers and good retention (Breakout room, Focus group 2)

Another participant commented that nurturing social work students within their local authority was an important way to secure high quality, permanent workers within a team struggling to fill vacancies. Becoming a practice educator therefore offered practitioners a means to 'grow your own'; as one worker described 'I am building a team that will work with me in the future'.

Motivations for becoming a practice educator: Formative

For many participants, becoming a practice educator was a powerful formative experience; a way to develop themselves personally and professionally. Participants made frequent reference to practice education as a reciprocal process involving 'mutual learning between student and supervisor':

I think it's [being a practice educator] is an opportunity to not just learn from them, but also learn things about yourself as well (Interview participant)

Practice educators described practice education as an important route to self-knowledge; as one participant termed it, a 'process of learning more about yourself'. One participant commented that having a student 'gave me a better understanding of the sort of social worker I am' while another commented that it had made them

revisit, and ultimately reinforce, 'why I became a social worker'. Many participants identified that being a practice educator kept their practice up to date and prompted them to reflect on how they worked:

You fall into a routine, and I really feel having a student can be very refreshing. You really have to go back to your own values ... 'We've always done it like this' is never a good answer ... [Students] question things, "Why are you doing things like this?" and [I think] yeah why *am* I doing things like this? (Breakout room, Focus group 4)

Participants also saw practice education as promoting their career development:

I wanted to progress into a more training and development role. So, the motivation to get PE2⁷ was so that I could do more around that (Breakout room, Focus group 2)

For the authority I worked with, it was part of the requirement if you wanted to become an advanced practitioner, you had to have your practice educator qualification (Breakout room, Focus group 3)

There was some debate among practice educators about making qualifying as a practice educator a criterion for career progression. Participants highlighted the dangers of linking practice educator to promotion pathways or making it compulsory, arguing that this would 'attract the wrong people' which could result in students having a poor experience. While participants recognised that career development was a legitimate motivator to become a practice educator, there was a feeling that it should not be the only motivation.

Motivations for becoming a practice educator: Reparative

For some practitioners, the decision to become a practice educator was motivated by a prior negative experience:

⁷ The Professional Practice Educator Professional Standards are hosted by the British Association for Social Workers and promote standards for practice educators. The Professional Practice Educator Professional Standards 1 and 2 (mentioned here) refer to the level the practice educator has attained.

I initially went into practice education because ... when I was a student, I nearly dropped out because I had a very, very poor experience in my placement (Breakout room, Focus group 1)

Some participants identified that having a difficult relationship with their own practice educator had impacted their learning and confidence, and in some cases, participants described their experiences of practice education as providing a model of how *not* to approach the practice educator role:

I will be honest as a final year student, I had the most chaotic nightmare practice educator. It was just such an awful experience. I remember thinking, 'I don't want anybody else to *ever* have that same experience' (Interview participant)

For some practice educators, these difficult experiences created a resolve to provide better support for students than they had received themselves and becoming the practice educator they wished they had experienced was a reparative experience, acting as a powerful motivator to do the role justice:

I always knew that I wanted to be a part of social work education, partly due to my own experiences with a practice educator that I did not feel had done the role justice (Jamboard comment, Focus group 2)

Other participants were motivated to become a practice educator to address detrimental working practices within the profession. One social worker described how she was motivated to become a practice educator due to the 'toxic culture' within her organisation which prompted a desire to create a better environment for workers. Other participants saw the practice educator role as a way to address poor social work practice:

When you have seen bad practice, you've got to try and do something about it really ... And that's why I continue to do [practice education] (Breakout room, Focus group 4)

Several practice educators also identified that becoming a practice educator was a means to address the issue of underrepresentation within the social work workforce. The motivations and experiences of practice educators from underrepresented groups are considered in detail in section 2.5.

Summary: Motivations to become a practice educator

Practitioners' motivations to become a practice educator consisted of three main types:

- **Generative:** to support the next generation of social workers, to maximise personal impact on the profession and to act as a 'gatekeeper' in terms of maintaining standards
- **Formative:** to develop oneself and grow as a practitioner, to learn about self through facilitating the learning of others, to progress professionally
- **Reparative:** to address a personal, prior bad experience of practice education, to address an issue or 'right a wrong' in the profession

These reasons for becoming a practice educator also acted as an important ongoing source of motivation, sustaining practice educators in their role over the long-term.

Barriers to becoming a practice educator

Practice educators identified barriers that they or their colleagues had encountered in the journey to becoming a practice educator. Mostly, these related to issues of workload or the availability of training in their area. Some specific issues relating to accessibility of practice educator training for global majority social workers and those with a disability or neurodiversity will be explored in section 2.5.

Workload and time

Many participants identified that the process of qualifying as a practice educator was time-consuming and burdensome, particularly in the current climate of high workloads and lack of resources within organisations:

As a social worker, when your caseloads are so high and your team is so pressured, it does make you feel like you don't have the space. When you know you're not going to be given the kind of caseload relief or to give it the attention you want to give it ... I think that's when my motivation dipped for a little bit (Breakout room, Focus group 2)

The impact of workload pressures is highlighted elsewhere as being a significant challenge for practice educators (Domakin, 2015). Where organisations were experiencing pressures, this created an unspoken

expectation that casework would be prioritised and that practice education would be undertaken outside of working hours. This could understandably deter social workers from wanting to become a practice educator.

Lengthy waiting lists for places on practice educator qualifying courses could act as a barrier to qualifying:

It's highly sought after in our authority. There's a huge waiting list to get on the course (Breakout room, Focus group 4)

Whilst it is positive to see that, in some areas, there is high demand to become a practice educator, for individual practitioners the prospect of having to wait to undertake the training was a potential barrier.

2.3 Being a practice educator

Practice educators described their role as rewarding, complex, and challenging. Practice educators found themselves positioned at the intersection of three main parties: their organisation, the course provider, and the student themselves. This section outlines participants' experiences of being a practice educator in relation to the three areas: working with students, working with course providers, and working within local authorities.

Working with students

Rewards

For the majority of participants, being a practice educator was richly rewarding. Practice educators repeatedly identified that having a student kept them on their toes, motivated them, and, in some cases, was a strong motivator for staying within the profession:

I've realised that [practice education] does actually help me to stay (Breakout room, Focus group 2)

Some social workers described a tendency towards becoming 'detached' as a result of cumulative experiences of stress, witnessing difficult events, and the emotive nature of working with vulnerable people. For some practice educators, having a student helped them to emotionally re-engage with their work, as they came to view practice through the fresh eyes of their student; the practice educator role could be an 'antidote to becoming emotionally disconnected from practice'.

For some participants, who were at a point in their career when they had stepped away from frontline practice, working with students as a practice educator allowed them to 'stay in touch' with the work. Conversely, for practice educators who were in frontline practice, working with students provided some 'personal respite' and an opportunity to reconnect with the theoretical foundations of the work.

Social workers who had been encouraged into practice education by their manager were often surprised by the satisfaction they found in the role. As one practitioner commented, over time the 'love just grew' for practice education. Others who had been motivated to become a practice educator to support the profession and the next generation of social workers found that the role offered opportunities for generativity (see section 2.2):

I really enjoy teaching students how to build compassionate, effective relationships with people. That's what keeps me going, and I just really enjoy that student interaction and watching them develop their confidence, their skills, and knowing that you're sending out another solid social worker (Breakout room, Focus group 4)

Supporting students and watching them develop helped social workers to avoid becoming stagnant in the role. As one participant commented, having a student 'helps to keep me young!'. Over the years, practice educators had the satisfaction of seeing their students go on to have students of their own:

I've also seen one of my students become a practice educator and have students of her own ... we joked and called her my grandstudent! (Breakout room, Focus group1)

Practice education therefore helped social workers to feel that they were making a meaningful contribution to the profession that would endure over time.

Challenges

Responsibility

Participants were acutely aware that as practice educators, they were needed to provide a 'good model of social work'. The practice educator role brought with it a sense of responsibility which, at times, weighed heavily:

Being a practice educator is a huge responsibility because you're making a decision about somebody's career, but you're also safeguarding the people we work with. So, it's a huge, huge responsibility
(Interview participant)

Relationships with students were a source of great satisfaction to practice educators, but the intensity of these relationships could be difficult. As research suggests, the relationship between a practice educator and their student often extends further than the professional or procedural (Lefevre, 2005); one participant captured the complexity of the relationship by saying of her student that 'I am her mother figure'.

Practice educators spoke of the need to be honest with students and identify areas for development while supporting their confidence as a developing professional. As such, the practice educator role involved significant 'emotional labour' which was not always recognised or appreciated within the practice educator's local authority. Managing the tension between support, assessment and skills development required practice educators to be 'supportive' and 'nurturing', but also 'open', 'transparent', and 'constructively challenging'. This came with a sense of accountability, which one practice educator described as 'holding that student's future in your hands'. Consistent with the existing research (Basnett and Sheffield, 2010; Finch and Taylor, 2013; Finch et al, 2014; Finch, 2017), the sense of responsibility and accountability inherent in the practice educator role was intensified when working with students who were at risk of failing their placement.

Working with borderline or failing students

Across the focus groups and interviews, participants made frequent reference to the emotional labour involved in working with students who were at risk of failing their placement. One practice educator vividly recalled a supervision where the student told her that failing 'is going to ruin my life' and spoke of the 'weight of the damage, the emotional weight...' that this placed upon her. Participants spoke of the 'emotional work'

involved in supporting a failing student. They described ruminating over how to raise difficult issues with students. Terms like 'concerns meeting' or putting in place an 'action plan' for a student could be unhelpful 'triggering a wobble' on the part of the student. For that reason, some practice educators preferred to use terms such as 'support meeting' when addressing concerns arising on placement. Paralleling the tensions between support and challenge in working with people with lived experience of social work, there was a delicate balance between addressing concerns while also 'keeping the student's confidence up' enabling them to make the required changes to their practice.

In line with previous studies on working with failing students (Furness, 2012), some practice educators described feeling isolated and alone when working with students who were struggling. Following such experiences, practice educators often felt reluctant to take on another student:

That was really uncomfortable, and I feel for me, although I want to take another student, it took a lot of time, so it's been a year since I've had a student (Breakout room, Focus group 2)

Some practice educators also spoke of the need for a 'period of recovery' after a difficult experience and the need to resist having 'back-to-back' student placements. Supporting a student who failed their placement could have a profound and lasting impact on the practice educator's confidence and wellbeing:

It made me feel really quite low and at the time ... I couldn't help but feel really ashamed ... But even though people knew me and they were saying, 'We've known you for years. We've seen you with students. We know this isn't you', but I couldn't help but think 'Well, what if you didn't know me? What if I was new here, how would somebody in that position feel?' ... I was really, really down. I was questioning, 'Am I in the right line of work?' (Interview participant)

This echoes research by Finch et al (2014) which found that practice educators internalised students' failure as their own, creating powerful feelings of self-blame and guilt. Where participants were able to process and resolve the difficult feelings associated with the experience, it offered the possibility for professional growth:

My second student was the student I had to fail ... I'm not the most assertive person in the world, but it actually made me much more assertive ... I had real strong boundaries and [to say] this is not acceptable practice, these values are not acceptable in our profession ... It actually gave me a little bit more confidence in some ways (Breakout room, Focus group 2)

The need for support, debrief, and feedback was emphasised by participants across the interviews and focus groups:

I had my first ever having to terminate a placement which affected my motivation ... Although you know it's not rational, you'll always blame yourself and think, 'Is there something else I could have done differently?' But I think I've learned a lot from that experience and the thing that kept me going through that was the support that I had around and having debriefed with our training team and the university (Breakout room, Focus group 3)

This shows that, whilst the emotional labour of working with failing students created challenges and risks for practice educators – particularly in sustaining them in their role – the right support being in place could significantly mitigate these risks.

Key message

Practice educators need support, debriefing and feedback on their work. This is particularly important when working with a borderline or failing students. Without this support, there is a risk that they will step away from the role. Practice educators value opportunities to reflect with their team and supervisor as well as the student's higher education institution both during and after a challenging student placement.

Working with students with additional needs

There was a consensus among practice educators that they were increasingly required to work with students with ever more complex needs. These included mental health conditions, as well as neurodivergent students. Practice educators described being proactive and passionate about supporting these students, emphasising the importance of:

knowing your student's learning needs and being able to provide opportunity within the placement to ensure that those learning needs are going to be met (Breakout room, Focus group 2)

In a number of cases, practice educators described feeling insufficiently equipped to work with complex needs. Several spoke of being 'on their own' in terms of supporting these students and undertaking considerable independent research outside of working hours to identify appropriate support strategies for the students.

Key message

Practice educators identified a need for greater training on working with students with diverse learning needs, including specific input on work with neurodivergent students.

Practice educators identified an increase in the number of students (and practitioners) with a late diagnosis of dyslexia, ASD, ADHD or other forms of neurodivergence. In some cases, it was the practice educator themselves who identified an issue:

[The student] said I can't believe I've been here a few weeks and you've noticed ... I've been somewhere five years and no one's ever broached the subject with me. But it's tricky ... if she was ever borderline, it was around her not being able to process things maybe as quickly as somebody who didn't have dyslexia. But when we realised what was going on, we put the support in and we managed to get her through (Interview participant)

Practice educators worked hard to tailor their approach to meet the student's needs and facilitate their development. However, this could also create challenges for practice educators, who increasingly needed to balance the student's support needs, reasonable adjustment, and the standards required for qualification as a social worker. Across the consultation as a whole, participants identified a need for greater training on working with students with diverse needs.

Participants also drew attention to the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on the students they support. A number of practice educators described the challenges of working with students who needed to undertake a significant amount of paid work alongside their placements due to the rising cost of living:

... before ethically I would always try and advise people not to work two jobs on top of placement and I don't think that we're in a position at the moment ... where we can do that (Main room, Focus group 2)

Similarly, practice educators noted that due to the costs of learning to drive, students may not be driving immediately upon commencing their qualifying programme. This created significant issues in terms of providing sufficient learning opportunities.

Summary: Being a practice educator – rewards and challenges of working with students

Rewards

- Enjoyment in watching students' achievements
- Updating professional knowledge and practice
- Keeping in touch with frontline practice or having 'respite' from the demands of casework
- Motivation to stay in the profession and reconnect with core values

Challenges

- Sense of responsibility
- Hidden 'emotional labour', especially in working with borderline and failing students
- Lack of training on supporting students with complex or additional needs, especially neurodiversity
- Supporting students who need to take on additional paid work

Working with course providers

Practice educators described mixed and variable experiences in their work with course providers. This section outlines the enablers and barriers to effective working between practice educators and course providers. First and foremost, positive working relationships were seen as central to effective collaboration, however there were specific areas where practice educators felt close working was especially important.

Effective matching processes

Practice educators emphasised the need for course providers to consider the fit between the student and practice educator when setting up placements. A key aspect of effective matching was consideration of the experience, personalities, and skills of both student and practice educator:

I'm just thinking about personality of the supervisor, educator, and the student. So, for example, we've just had a super confident student, really experienced, and a new practice supervisor... That created some very difficult dynamics, particularly for the practice supervisor who just felt overwhelmed, you know, and not able to challenge very much. And so, I think that's a consideration, *really matching* students and practice supervisors, educators (Breakout room, Focus group 1)

A poor match, leading to a challenging placement created stress and workload issues for practice educators. It could also prevent practice educators from wishing to continue in the role. An important component of the matching process was the availability of comprehensive information about the student at the point of allocation; practice educators reported that the quality of this information was variable:

Some universities are better than others in terms of the pre information that's sent out to people
(Interview participant)

Practice educators understood that students who had encountered difficulties in a previous placement might need a 'fresh start' and therefore understood the rationale for omitting details of these challenges in the student's placement profile. However, they also felt that information about the student's learning needs would enable them to prepare effectively and ensure that they were able to address these needs from the outset of the placement. Practice educators described placements where students had failed or where

concerns had arisen and felt their response was hampered by having insufficient information about the 'student's needs' and prior history.

Support from course providers around borderline and failing students

As discussed, supporting borderline or failing students involves considerable emotional labour for practice educators. The support offered by course providers was central to helping the practice educator navigate this process:

The university was very supportive. She [HEI placement coordinator] had a meeting, a one-to-one meeting with me, and then we did a three-way meeting. She provided me with enough support, and then she signposted the student to university support for more personal issues... I must say... I got very good support from the university. (Breakout room, Focus group 2)

As the practice educator above identifies, effective support consisted of support for both the student and the practice educator together and separately. It also involved making use of the university's support services so that practice educators were not left to manage all of the student's personal and professional needs. While practice educators described receiving excellent support from higher education institutions, a significant number described a poor experience:

I had quite a few challenges with my last student and the university ... delivered her feedback on her interim review very poorly and insensitively ... then almost put the onus on myself as practice educator and the supervisor and our organisation to improve upon that and the only offer that they provided was referencing support – which was such a minor issue in you know, a whole plethora of issues. They were really quite unsupportive (Breakout room, Focus group 2)

Practice educators were clear that support from the course provider was effective when it involved more than academic support (e.g. academic referencing) and addressed the students' personal, practice and academic needs holistically.

Some practice educators felt that course providers should 'get better at listening to us who are here with the student every day'. Some practice educators, echoing findings from existing studies (Furness, 2012), described being overruled when it came to students who they felt did not meet the requirements. Some practice educators attributed this to the pressure on higher education institutions to retain students:

I think sometimes [there is] pressure from universities to pass students. I had a student from an ethnic minority group and they [the HEI] actually said to me, oh no this is going to look really bad on our stats because we don't have a good pass rate from that particular group of students (Breakout room, Focus group 1)

Practice educators were keen to emphasise, however, that a positive and ongoing relationship with course providers was beneficial. They particularly valued opportunities to become familiar and involved with higher education institutions' qualifying social work programmes; several practice educators spoke positively of their involvement within practice learning assessment panels, teaching on the qualifying programmes, and consultation around the development of placement paperwork.

Placement paperwork

Practice educators expressed concerns about the volume of paperwork and the time involved producing final reports and portfolios:

It's not about necessarily repeating yourself, but about the labour involved in producing the evidence, because it's so detailed and time consuming (Breakout room, Focus group 4)

Some practice educators felt that the extensive placement portfolios required by some higher education institutions were not reviewed, making the time spent to produce them appear redundant, with one participant commenting that 'you'd put all this effort in, and then it was just there as a tick box to sit in this student's portfolio'. Where practice educators were involved with practice learning assessment panels, they felt reassured about how course providers made use of their work.

A recurrent theme among practice educator was a frustration with inconsistency among course providers' placement paperwork:

One of my challenges I think is when you're working with different universities, there are different expectations of the practice educator. Paperwork seems to vary immensely, as is the expectations of the requirements of each of the students that you have (Breakout room, Focus group 3)

Practice educators reported that this created additional work, in turn impacting on their existing workload and their ability to provide day-to-day support for student. There was consensus among practice educators that course providers should move towards standardisation of placement documentation, though course providers had a different perspective on this (see section 3.2).

Key message

There was consensus among practice educators that course providers should move towards consistency and standardisation of placement documentation.

Feedback on performance

Participants viewed feedback on the support they had provided to students, as well as their reports, as a key aspect of their development. Practice educators spoke favourably of course providers who offered structured, constructive feedback:

Some universities are very good. You'll get written feedback from the panel and that's really useful because that helps you develop (Breakout room, Focus group 1)

Some participants, however, expressed concerns that feedback was either non-specific or not received:

I don't get any feedback and I've asked for feedback. I've not had it... I may be producing alright students, but actually who is coming in and saying 'Oh, you could do this, you could do that better?' (Breakout room, Focus group 1)

Many participants expressed that becoming an effective practice educator was about ‘practice’ and ‘trial and error’ following qualification, and that they would prefer to receive more structured development opportunities, including ongoing feedback on their work with students.

Summary: Being a practice educator – Enablers and barriers in work with course providers

Enablers

- Involvement of practice educators in the wider process of the course providers’ qualifying programmes (e.g. in teaching, practice learning assessment panels)
- Careful matching of students with practice educators, especially important for new practice educators
- Robust and timely support for practice educators and students around placement difficulties

Barriers

- Inconsistency between course providers in terms of systems, type and volume of placement paperwork
- Lack of information on students’ needs and history at the matching stage
- Poor support around borderline or failing students
- Lack of formative feedback on practice educators’ performance at the end of placement

Working within an organisation

The practice educator’s organisation was key to their experience and success as a practice educator. Organisational support, especially from their manager and team, sustained practice educators in their work with students. High caseloads and a lack of recognition of the practice educator role within the organisation could discourage practice educators from continuing. Other organisational factors impacting the role included the availability of CPD opportunities and increasingly hybrid working conditions.

Organisational support

Participants identified support from their team and manager as enabling their success and continuation as a practice educator:

I was very fortunate that the team I was in at the time ... we knew that this student had additional needs before we started the placement. We already worked out that I was going to need extra help with that. And my ... immediate manager was very supportive (Interview participant)

Participants emphasised that effective practice education consisted of a team endeavour. Mathews et al (2009) found that the relationship with the wider team was important for the student to support them with specific learning opportunities. Similarly, practice educators identified that each member of the team had a role to play in supporting the student which included allowing them to shadow home visits and reflecting with them about their work. In this way, the student had access to a range of perspectives and approaches towards practice which enriched their learning. Practice educators reported asking themselves 'is the team also prepared and able to give some time for the student as well?' when deciding whether to accept a placement.

Practice educators working in organisations viewed 'creating a team around the student' as a fundamental part of the practice educator role. Working within a teaching partnership could aid this – practice educators could put students in touch with other students and practice educators within the organisation, enabling them to gain a range of perspectives as part of their learning. Practice educators also described setting up 'shared practice education arrangements' within their team where two members of staff shared responsibility for the student. These shared practice education arrangements gave development opportunities to social workers considering becoming practice educators and provided informal opportunities for them to discuss their work with colleagues. This was particularly important to help them manage the emotional labour involved in the role; one participant suggested that 'the team kept me going' as a practice educator.

Where teams were unable to offer this kind of support, practice educators drew on support networks outside the team, such as workforce and learning development teams, their local teaching partnership, wider practice education networks within the practice educator's local authority, or informal arrangements with colleagues. Such arrangements tended to be localised and varied between organisations:

Me and a colleague set up a social workers network and we meet quarterly (Breakout room, Focus group 2)

We have reflective huddles within our practice development team (Breakout room, Focus group 4)

Other participants identified that they would welcome greater access to such support networks to sustain them in their role:

Practice educators just sit as single people all by themselves doing their thing, unless there is an effective join up across the local authority or across a few local authorities. So that's the bit where I think it could definitely be improved (Breakout room, Focus group 2)

Within the focus groups, participants expressed a desire to network with other practice educators to create communities of practice. In addition, the research team were contacted by several practice educator requesting links to networks for practice educators, suggesting a need for greater support. Similarly, practice educators reported variability in the practice educator-specific CPD opportunities available to them within their employing organisation.

Key message

Support for practice educators was variable across organisations. Some practice educators had access to coordinated supported networks and CPD opportunities, while others felt isolated in their role. During the consultation, practice educators expressed a wish for greater opportunities to network with other practice educators, receive peer support and access practice educator-specific CPD.

Managing caseloads alongside the practice educator role

As discussed previously, the practice educator role takes place against a backdrop of high workloads and limited workload relief. In addition to creating a barrier to becoming a practice educator, workload demands impacted the retention of practice educators:

It's just down to workload again ... It's just that additional kind of mountain to climb. It's having an impact on retention which is exactly what we don't want. We want experienced people to be continuing to be practice educators (Breakout room, Focus group 2)

Many practice educators reported that when they agreed to take on a student 'they don't get a caseload reduction', meaning that agreeing to a placement was 'in addition' to their already high workload. This meant that practice educators were often working on placement paperwork outside of working hours. The challenges of maintaining a practice educator role alongside a full caseload were particularly acute where practice educators were supporting a borderline or failing student:

So particularly if you've got a failing student, and the amount of time that that takes with the extra support that you have to put in place, obviously to try and help support them ... but then you've got your caseload as well. That's really hard to manage (Breakout room, Focus group 1)

In some cases, having a student meant that the practice educator was given an increase in their caseload as it was assumed that they could use their student as 'just somebody to do a piece of work'. Where practice educators did receive some workload relief to support students, this tended to be an individual ad hoc arrangement dependent on the support or goodwill of their manager:

I think it's very much down to ... that relationship with your manager, if you've got a supportive manager then you know things would go nice and smooth and you know you were supported (Interview participant)

During the focus groups, several participants described an intention to discontinue the practice educator role, often due to workload issues:

I love practice education. I want to be able to do it and I just don't feel like I can because the workload relief isn't there (Breakout room, Focus group 4)

Most practice educators felt this lack of workload relief reflected a lack of status for the practice educator role, in contrast to perceived higher status specialisms such as Best Interests Assessors (BIA) and Approved Mental Health Practitioners (AMHP). This feeling of a lack of recognition was exacerbated by concerns about poor and inconsistent remuneration for the role, with some practice educators reporting they received no financial reward for having a student on placement.

Hybrid working arrangements

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, participants reported that most organisations used a hybrid model of work involving a mix of in-office and home working. Practice educators described challenges navigating student placements within hybrid arrangements:

Hybrid working makes placement challenging in terms of expectations of students, expectations of employers and universities. A lot of local authorities have downsized their office spaces, so we can't guarantee that a student would have access to an office five days a week (Main room, Focus group 2)

Participants highlighted an important distinction between 'working from home and learning from home' identifying that the latter is very hard to achieve in practice. They noted that increased working from home curtailed students' opportunities for vicarious learning within social work teams, such as hearing experienced social workers making a difficult phone call or discussing a challenging case. Similarly, practice educators felt hybrid working could stifle them in assessing students' practice:

This hybrid model of working ... is quite difficult ... and I'm 'Well, you're on placement now and I need to see you in practice, and I need to be hearing your conversations and regular contact'. That's been a bit more difficult to manage in the last couple of years (Breakout room, Focus group 2)

For these reasons, many practice educators described that their organisations had decided to 'limit the days of working from home to our students ... working from home might be okay if you're in the manager's role or an advanced practitioner, but not for a learner'.

Summary: Being a practice educator in an organisation – enablers and barriers

Enablers

- Team support – the student as belonging to the team, not just the practice educator
- A good team manager who provides support to the practice educator in their role
- Workload relief for practice educators enabling them to complete placement paperwork
- Availability of CPD opportunities related to practice education

Barriers

- Managing high caseloads alongside supporting students
- Insufficient and inconsistent remuneration
- Lack of recognition of the importance of practice education within the local authority
- Supporting students in increasingly hybrid working environments

The retention of practice educators: motivations for staying or leaving the role

Pull factors (*reasons stay within practice education*)

- Direct work with students
- Intrinsic rewards of the role: generative, formative, reparative
- Support from manager
- Support from team, including 'shared practice education arrangements'
- Workload relief and protected time for student support and paperwork
- Support to process and manage the emotional labour of the role, especially when working with borderline or failing students
- Developmental feedback on the practice educator's performance
- Accessibility of CPD opportunities specifically related to the role
- Adequate remuneration
- Intuitive, manageable placement paperwork and assessment frameworks
- Accessibility of wider networks for the support of practice education
- Recognition of the practice educator role within their employing organisation

Push factors (*reasons to leave practice education*)

- Having a difficult experience with a student placement, especially where this is the practice educator's first experience of practice education
- Practice educator's team or manager unable or unwilling to support students within the team
- Insufficient workload relief for practice educator activities or an increase in caseload as a result of having a student as a 'spare pair of hands'
- Lack of support with the emotional labour involved in the role, especially around borderline or failing students
- No opportunity for debrief following a failed placement
- Few opportunities for developmental feedback on the practice educator's performance
- Lack of CPD opportunities related to practice education
- Absent or insufficient remuneration
- Complicated and time-consuming placement paperwork
- Inconsistency of placement paperwork between course providers
- Lack of recognition for the role, including coordinated networks for the support of practice education

2.4 The views of independent practice educators

This section outlines the views of independent practice educators⁸. While independent practice educators shared many of the views of practice educators working within organisations, there were several important differences. This section outlines independent practice educators' perspectives organised under four key headings: motivations and rewards, support vs isolation, remuneration, and continuing professional development (CPD). Most of the views of independent practice educators were gained in Focus Group 3, however a small number of independent practice educators attended other focus groups and, where relevant, their views have been included here.

Motivations and rewards

Similar to practice educators employed within organisations (see section 2.2 and 2.3, above), independent practice educators were motivated by the desire to support the next generation of social workers and the wider profession of social work. The theme of generativity (see 2.2 for a definition) was particularly strong within this group of practice educators, since they tended to be highly experienced practitioners keen to pass on their practice wisdom:

I got to the stage where I wanted to be able to pass my knowledge and skills and experience to others that are wanting to join the profession (Breakout room, Focus group 3)

Another key motivation for independent practice educators was *flexibility*. They were attracted to the flexibility of being able to work with organisations and course providers with whom they had the best working relationships:

I ... pick my universities. I also now do a lot more in private sector – I actually choose not to have social workers in local authorities because it's so depressing, and that's a choice I make now (Breakout room, Focus group 3)

⁸ In this report, independent practice educators are defined as any practice educator who supervises students outside of their employing organisation, usually on a self-employed basis (i.e. they have a contract directly with the course provider rather than offering student placements within their organisational role).

Section 2.2. identified that, for many practice educators, practice education was a formative experience, offering continued opportunities for personal and professional growth. This was also the case for independent practice educators, for whom practice education offered the promise of new and interesting experiences, even if they had been doing it for many decades:

There's always something new that takes you by surprise. And I think that's why a lot of us remain doing practice education in some form or another over the decades (Breakout room, Focus group 3)

There was much overlap between the motivations of independent practice educators and practice educators working in organisations, though for the former, flexibility and maintaining links to the profession were distinct rewards that helped sustain their motivation for practice education.

Support vs isolation

Though independent practice educators reported finding great enjoyment in their role, they also encountered challenges, particularly the sense of isolation they experienced:

There is a real theme of it being quite an isolating role with varying degrees of support from different universities and organisations (Main room, Focus group 3)

Since they were not employed by an organisation, independent practice educators did not always have prior relationships with their student's placement team. This disconnection from the day-to-day life of placement organisations made it hard for them to:

... create a community of practice for students to learn rather than as a spare pair of hands – this is very difficult as an independent practice educator (Breakout room, Focus group 3)

Echoing the findings of Bates (2018), independent practice educator reported that, since they were not on site daily, it could be difficult to ensure their students' learning needs were prioritised within increasingly busy and resource-poor organisations.

Aside from support for students, an additional challenge for independent practice educators was accessing support for themselves. They described the need to be proactive in seeking out opportunities for support and cultivating relationships with course providers and placement organisations:

I think it's about having encouragement in such an isolated role ... if you're fortunate enough to develop relationships with the particular provider or university, then I think I always asked for feedback. And trying to attend recall days if they have them for practice educators and supervisors ... it's an encouragement when you've got those relationships and that support (Breakout room, Focus group 3)

Many described receiving good support from course providers; one participant described how support from a university had 'kept her going'. Others described support for and communication with independent practice educators as key determinants of the course and placement providers they chose to work with. They also described developing their own networks to connect with other independent practice educators to further counter the sense of isolation they otherwise experienced.

Remuneration

Across the consultation, there was widespread agreement that remuneration for practice educators was poor and inconsistent; however, this issue was felt most acutely by independent practice educators. Several worked semi-independently and wished to become full-time independent practice educators, however this was not financially viable as it would amount to:

... less than minimum wage. I would have to have forty-six apprentices to match my full-time wage (Breakout room, Focus group 1)

Independent practice educators report that 'we do it for love, not for the money', since 'trying to make a living out of it [is] not really viable'. Several observed that when travel costs to placements and other expenses were factored in, their wage generally amounted to 'a pittance' and there was a sense of incredulity that this was tolerated:

There's no other profession that trains their next generation of the profession for free. Nobody else does that! (Breakout room, Focus group 3)

Participants acknowledged that, like social work itself, practice education tended to be viewed as a moral endeavour involving a sense of vocation. This made conversations about payment feel uncomfortable. Some suggested that, as a result, they were 'being exploited' because of their 'love of the job'. Participants identified a link between remuneration and retention of independent practice educators:

I'm doing less and less practice education and now just sort of dip in and out to do bits here and there just because the pay is so low. I can't justify doing that anymore (Breakout room, Focus group 3)

The issue of remuneration was further complicated by independent practice educator having to do their own administration, often needing to chase up payments from course providers that could 'take weeks or months to come through into your bank':

There will come a time ... where we do see people saying enough is enough now because we've got the wider implications of the cost of living ... this is not a viable financial income, then we're going to see less and less independents doing this work and that's going to cause huge problems for us as a sector (Breakout room, Focus group 3)

For many participants, the issue of remuneration was an emotive one because it exemplified a more general sense that the independent practice educator role was not sufficiently valued.

Key message

Independent practice educators play a significant role in the qualification of new social workers. However, they identified that the independent practice educator workforce was in a precarious position. Many participants were planning to retire from the role and given that remuneration had not kept pace with the cost of living, participants observed that it was becoming less financially viable to take the role.

Continuing professional development (CPD)

The issue of CPD and reliable feedback loops with course providers was an issue identified in the main consultation. For practice educators working in organisations, colleagues could compensate for a lack of feedback and support from course providers, however for independent practice educators, this was not an option. As mentioned previously, this meant that independents often prioritised working with organisations that they felt would support them in their role:

...universities that offer workshops to practice educators ... I'll say, what's your support for practice education and if they haven't got any - not interested! (Breakout room, Focus group 3)

Independent practice educators noted that while they worked hard to maintain their professional development, there was little external accountability for this, aside from the CPD requirements related to their continued registration as social workers:

I try and attend some webinars and keep reading. I mean, I feel quite accountable for what I do in that way. But... I could choose not to do any of that (Breakout room, Focus group 3)

There was a consensus among participants that the current CPD provision for independent practice educators was inconsistent and inadequate. Not being embedded in day-to-day practice meant that some were not always aware of free resources available to them. They felt that there needed to be a 'national body that provides [CPD] and everyone can access it regardless'. This could involve 'a nominal bursary every year and they can spend it on whatever areas they feel is necessary'. Independent practice educators felt that this would help to maintain quality and overcome the ineffective 'patchwork' approach to CPD currently in operation.

Key message

Independent practice educators found it particularly challenging to access opportunities for training and developmental feedback in relation to their role. They emphasised the need to increase the availability of funded CPD opportunities.

Technology

Independent practice educators discussed the challenges of staying on top of changing systems and technology, particularly since they lacked the organisational support to upskill them in the use of things like video conferencing, which emerged as a new aspect of social work practice in response to the COVID-19 pandemic:

I've got really, really good management skills, but I didn't know about Teams. I didn't know about Zoom and it's all that you know, having supervision with students. And so to continue to be effective, you've got to keep on top of all that because we are isolated as well. So, it is the e-mail, the lot. So, to continue it's not just knowing about social work and the policies, procedures and it's keeping abreast of technology (Main room, Focus group 3)

Independent practice educators lacked access to the kind of IT support available to individuals working in organisations. They also emphasised the challenges of supporting students in an increasingly hybrid working environment. While these challenges were similar to those experienced by practice educators working in organisations (see section 2.3), these issues were compounded for independent practice educators who were also isolated from their student's placement team. On the other hand, some participants identified that the independent role was made easier through increased digital communication which afforded greater opportunities to stay connected with students.

Summary: The independent practice educator workforce

- The independent practice educators in this consultation were mostly highly-experienced social workers, often undertaking the role after stepping away from full-time social work practice
- They found supporting students extremely rewarding and a way to 'give back' to the profession
- Insufficient or inconsistent rates of payment were a significant barrier to continuing in the role
- They were highly selective in the course providers they worked with, favouring those offering effective support, CPD and feedback
- As an independent practice educator, it was particularly challenging to access CPD opportunities. They wanted greater support and signposting to CPD opportunities
- Staying up to date with systems and technology was a challenge for some independent practice educators

2.5 The views of global majority practice educators

This section explores the views of practice educators from global majority backgrounds through thirteen in-depth interviews undertaken as part of the wider consultation (see 2.1 for further information on sample and methods). Of the thirteen participants, one was employed by a HEI, eleven by local authorities or NHS trusts, and one was an independent practice educator. Eleven participants were female, and two were male. The findings from the interviews are distilled into four key themes: motivations for becoming a practice educator, organisational support and barriers, working with students, and practice educator training. These themes largely cohere with findings from the wider practice educator consultation, however the interviews revealed a number of interesting differences in the experiences of practice educators from global majority backgrounds and these will be the focus of this section.

Motivations for becoming and remaining a practice educator

In most respects, global majority practice educators' motivations echoed those from the wider consultation (see section 2.2. of this chapter). However, where practice educators from global majority backgrounds reported *reparative* motivations, often their negative experiences were directly related to being from a global majority background:

One of the things that motivated me is that, when I was at uni, some of my ethnic minority colleagues ... used to speak about their struggles and when they would get to placement and some of the comments that would be made about, maybe some of them had an accent, and things like that ... I felt that that was quite disheartening and disgusting for them to go through that. And I wanted to ... be someone that could support students that may be similar to those, and so that's what motivates me
(Interview participant)

Participants described strongly identifying with students from similar backgrounds to themselves. However, because of the strong resonances for practice educators working with students from similar backgrounds, when the student struggled this was particularly difficult:

I thought I am going to support this student, and they're going to be a great social worker. We'll have one more person, because there's not enough of us there ... The disappointment that I'm faced with

feels like a personal failure to me and there's so many things that are similar between me and her
(Interview participant)

For many practice educators, motivation to become a practice educator was rooted in wanting greater representation of global majority social workers within practice education. While motivations were still broadly generative, formative, or reparative, practice educators from global majority backgrounds also experienced strong resonances and identifications with students, a drive to promote positive change, and a desire for greater representation for students and social workers from global majority backgrounds.

Organisational enablers and barriers

A key theme for global majority social workers was the issue of organisational support for the role. Having a 'good manager' could ameliorate, although not resolve, difficulties faced by practice educators from global majority backgrounds, which included barriers to progression and accessing training.

The 'good' manager – support to become and continue as a practice educator

Practice educators from global majority backgrounds identified that opportunities for training and progression – including becoming a practice educator – often came from their immediate supervisors or managers:

I became a practice educator after two years of my practice, and I think it was mainly my manager that picked it up. At that time, she said that she wanted me to progress further in terms of my role. She was seeing that I was quite an active member of supporting other workers, apprentices, support workers on the team, and so she put me forward (Interview participant)

Although this was also discussed in the wider consultation, the support and intervention of one 'good manager' was particularly crucial for practice educators from global majority backgrounds because opportunities to progress were not always made available:

What I would say has been a barrier is that lack of information ... a lot of the people in the office who are Black, there's not a lot of people in like a practice educator role or an advanced practitioner role
(Interview participant)

The drop-off in representation of global majority social workers in more senior roles in social work is well-documented (Bernard, 2020), and one by-product of this is the risk that global majority social workers feel that progression opportunities, including practice education, are not open to them.

Barriers to progression and training

Global majority practice educators reported that their organisations did not provide them with the same opportunities for training as their white British counterparts:

As a woman of colour, I would say I have faced more barriers in training full stop. I wouldn't say it's just related to practice education, I would say in terms of my personal development, career development, and I've known colleagues to not be where I am, to not have done as much as I've done for my own development and have got further than me, and I struggle to think why that is apart from the fact that I am of colour (Interview participant)

Participants reported that the lack of opportunities for training and progression was part of a wider pattern of underrepresentation in leadership roles:

However, I think it's no secret that I think the upper management and especially very senior management is it's just there's not anyone of Black or minority group, anybody who isn't white ... I don't think that's because there's not any talented people who aren't white, I just think that either they're put off or they don't want to go for these roles because they think they're not going to get them or they're just not getting the roles (Interview participant)

Global majority practice educators expressed a sense of great injustice but also resignation in relation to experiences of discrimination within their organisation. Some participants had, over time, accepted that they would undergo greater hardship at work and had to 'basically swim upstream'. Others suggested that their experiences of racism in the workplace had led them to avoid putting themselves forward for additional opportunities, such as practice education. As one social worker explained:

I think I've held myself back from pursuing personal progression opportunities because of how I have experienced [racism] in the workplace unfortunately. I don't think it's always very conscious. However, I do think that you know, some of that might be internalised, always been more institutional, and it's hard to ask those questions (Interview participant)

The overriding theme in the interviews was the experience of institutional racism – both overt and implicit – and all but one of the global majority practice educators reported that they had encountered challenges arising from issues of race or culture in their organisation. Practitioners spoke about how ‘there’s a lot of challenges mentally’ when you are perceived and treated differently within the workplace, suggesting that racism ultimately created internal as well as external barriers for global majority social workers.

Participants felt that, in order to tackle the unconscious bias they faced in the workplace, evidence should be provided by practitioners to demonstrate anti-discriminatory practice as part of their registration:

[There should be] a reflection to say how you've been anti-discriminatory, how you've been anti-oppressive and how you have been anti-racist. If that is part of the registration every year, then every frontline social worker will be forced to confront those three aspects (Interview participant)

The review of the existing evidence-base identified that an absence of meaningful consideration of racism and anti-racism in practice education has been an issue for over twenty years (Collins, 2000) and it appears that insufficient progress has been made in addressing these issues in the intervening years.

Working with students

In common with practice educators in the wider consultation, global majority practice educators reported great satisfaction and enjoyment in their work with students. However, they identified instances of racism and unconscious bias towards them within the practice education relationship. This often started during the matching process; several spoke of being exclusively matched with students from a similar background to themselves, which they felt may inhibit their professional development.

Some global majority practice educators reported experiencing racially-motivated animosity from students. They described the need to continually respond to unconscious bias in ways that avoided blame and focused on learning:

Just because somebody has said something discriminative or racist or ageist ... don't see ... that person as just this statement. You know, there's this person with so much going on ... Why? Why did they make that statement? What's their understanding of me? What were they thinking behind it? That's how you get learning. But if you go in ... like judging and pointing and blaming then you're not going to get any learning from it (Interview participant)

However, continually correcting and challenging discriminatory attitudes involved considerable emotional labour and took time. Global majority practice educators reported investing a great deal of energy in helping students unpick and reflect on their values and biases. While this was ultimately helpful for the student's learning, confronting students' discriminatory views was a painful, additional burden to global majority practice educators. This was further exacerbated when practice educators raised concerns around students' discriminatory attitudes and they experienced a dismissive or inadequate response:

I said 'Look, I feel there are certain remarks that you make, and I find them very discriminative'. So, the student then went back to the uni, and they were really upset. He was really emotional, because I called him a racist. I didn't. I said that he was discriminative, so then they got him another practice educator. So, for me, what that told me at that time was that he was in the right and I was in the wrong (Interview participant)

Several other practice educators described similar experiences when they raised concerns around discrimination with their managers or the student's course provider. These experiences led to a sense of resignation, and a reluctance to voice further concerns about racism.

Practice educator training

Participants identified that greater training on diversity and inclusion was needed on practice educator programmes. Some argued that resources for engaging with global majority students were outdated and that practice educators needed access to more up to date resources:

The whole practice educator's programme, there's nothing there about Black practice educators' experience, Black models. There's one, the MANDELA model of practice education, which is so outdated, and it doesn't bring in the complexity and the diversity ... I just think it doesn't pick any of that up at all (Interview participant)

Several participants identified that they needed to take the initiative to train themselves and identify relevant evidence-based approaches to practice education. For instance, one practice educator described 'training myself on embodied race dialogue'.

Summary: The experiences of global majority practice educators

Global majority practice educators identified:

- Underrepresentation of global majority social workers in the practice educator workforce
- Additional barriers to becoming a practice educator and, more generally, fewer opportunities for progression, development, and leadership
- A determination to provide global majority students with better support than they themselves experienced when qualifying
- Needing to challenge unconscious bias from students and their organisation
- Continually challenging discriminatory attitudes involved considerable emotional labour
- A need for greater emphasis on global majority perspectives within the practice educator qualifying programmes

2.6 The views of practice educators with a disability or neurodivergence

This section draws on sixteen in-depth interviews with neurodivergent practice educators and practice educators with a disability, undertaken as part of the wider consultation of practice educators (see 2.1 for further information on sample and methods). Of the sixteen participants, three were male and thirteen were female. Nine participants identified as neurodivergent; of these, seven identified themselves as having a specific form of neurodivergence such as ADHD or dyslexia and two had a mental health condition, such as depression or PTSD. Ten participants identified themselves as having a physical disability, which included deafness, mobility issues, and other long-standing health conditions. It is important to note that some participants had multiple neurodiverse traits and disabilities, placing them within multiple categories. Most of the participants (fourteen) worked within local authorities. One was an independent practice educator, and one was based within a university. The majority (fifteen) of the participants were white British, with one Black British participant. This section outlines the findings from the interviews under three key headings: becoming a practice educator, organisational support and its impact, and adaptive strategies.

Becoming a practice educator

In common with the wider consultation, interviewees described generative, formative, and reparative motivations, such as a desire to support social workers of the future, to ensure that the right people come into social work, and the enjoyment of seeing students' progress. In common with global majority practice educators (see section 2.5), a key motivation for neurodivergent practice educators and practice educators with a disability was to ensure students received the support they themselves would like to have received:

When I did my placement no equipment was put in place for me to do my work ... that could have ... helped me really going forward ... If that practice educator was more supportive, they could have had a conversation on the importance of having these bits of equipment and all that stuff in place where that was never pursued ... as a practice educator, when I support people, especially if they've got some kind of learning need, I emphasise the importance of that (Interview participant)

In this sense, *reparative* motivations were especially prevalent; practice educators expressed a desire to improve the experiences of neurodivergent students and those with a disability.

Organisational support and its impact

The extent and quality of organisational support was a key feature in the experiences of neurodivergent practice educators and practice educators with a disability. Their experiences of support were mixed; some described receiving effective support from their organisation while others experienced a lack of support or ineffective support which had implications for their wellbeing and professional practice.

Effective support

Some practice educators described feeling well supported within their role, with allowances and equipment which allowed them to practice effectively as a practice educator:

Yeah, there's been a few challenges, but the local authority has been very helpful and very supportive giving access to work. I have all the kit that I need and no, it's not a problem to me (Interview participant)

Practice educators generally attributed the provision of effective, individualised support to a specific individual – usually their manager – rather than the organisation itself. The importance of having a good manager has been a recurring theme, especially for those from global majority backgrounds and those with neurodivergence or a disability. The suggestion was that without the intervention of their manager, interviewees would not have received effective support:

Now in this team I'll be staying long term; it's just because of one person – the manager – because they know all about my needs ... To the organisation, I've said there's a lot of improvements needed, but my manager yes, we have a great relationship, my manager understands everything (Interview participant)

Good managers offered reasonable adjustments flexibly and as needed. In some cases, this meant taking over supervision of students when the practice educator needed time off:

I might say I'm poorly and need to have some time off ... my manager is aware of that ... I had to take some time off for a couple of weeks and I just got someone to fill my spot. So, one of my colleagues basically took over the supervision, and luckily it was at the time where, you know, I was able to return

to work and complete her portfolio. It didn't have a detrimental impact on her ... it's just the case of awareness, you know, like people are aware of it and how it impacts me. So I've got that support in place should I need it (Interview participant)

The support of a good manager was crucial, enabling practice educators with neurodiversity or disability to not only feel supported in their role, but to feel confident that the students they supervised would also be well-supported if needed.

Ineffective support

Ineffective support was often the result of frequent changes of manager or managers and others within the organisation being unsupportive and making them feel unsafe:

Just constantly feeling like your practice is unsafe because I was unable to do what I needed to do ... I was always looking over my shoulder. Feeling like if anything earth-shattering – like if something happens if something catastrophic happens – you won't have the support that you need (Interview participant)

Another frustration for practice educators with neurodivergence or disabilities was how long it took organisations to make reasonable adjustments:

I've been here for years ... It was really difficult. I'm going to be honest. It's not 100% at the moment. I mean at that time we didn't even have flashing lights and smoke alarm ... now we have flashing lights, smoke alarms here. So that's better but this is *slow* improvement (Interview participant)

Participants similarly expressed frustration at a lack of support and understanding from course providers, particularly if practice educators needed to take leave because of their health. One participant described that 'I got back to find that the tutor had really not spoken to [the student] much at all' in her absence, and as a result the end of placement felt rushed and somewhat disrupted. Others commented that the processes and procedures of course providers did not always take account of needs associated with neurodiversity and disability, describing the paperwork as 'academic and difficult to understand'. Participants suggested that felt

that this issue was not unique to those with neurodiversity or a disability; one participant reported that in her area there 'are lots of other practice educators that had the same issue ... without disabilities'. More accessible paperwork would have benefits for practice educators and students across the board.

Adaptive strategies

In response to inadequate support, practice educators adapted to meet their own needs, often by taking on what should be organisational responsibilities themselves:

I was quite gutted that the local authority don't have the right training ... I've been fighting for that for quite a long time ... They have started some, but it's not appropriate ... I have provided it myself, but obviously I don't have the time and I don't always feel it's my responsibility to be offering that when it should lie at the feet of the council (Interview participant)

Practice educator saw themselves as needing to champion their own needs as well as the needs of neurodivergent colleagues, students and those with disabilities, seeing the practice educator role as enabling them to 'advocate for neurodiversity group and disabilities groups and keep waving the flag'. They described proactively ensuring that support was in place for students who may have additional needs as a result of disability or neurodiversity:

The person in charge of disabled students at the university ... I met with her and also had meetings with her and the student too about his additional needs and how we could support them (Interview participant)

For practice educators, the lived experience of neurodivergence or disability motivated them to support others with similar challenges. Participants' own experiences of poor organisational support meant that they felt the need to take responsibility for their own needs and those of their students. However, for some this created a feeling of pressure to 'adjust' to inaccessible environments using 'self-taught coping strategies'. This could prove exhausting and placed additional demands on them as busy practitioners.

Summary: The experiences of neurodivergent practice educators and those with a disability

Practice educators identified:

- A determination to provide neurodivergent students and those with disabilities with better support than they received as a student
- Use of own lived experience and expertise which helped them provide effective support to their students
- Lack of support at an organisational level which could lead practice educators to assume sole responsibility for their own reasonable adjustments and those of their students
- A tendency for practice educators to become responsible for championing disability and neurodiversity within their organisation
- A need for more accessible placement paperwork
- A need for greater emphasis on supporting neurodivergent and disabled students on practice educator qualifying programmes

CHAPTER THREE: The perspectives of course and placement providers

This chapter examines practice education and learning from the perspective of course providers (e.g. higher education institutions and fast-track programmes) and placement providers (e.g. local authorities, teaching partnerships, and third sector organisations). It answers the following research questions:

- What are the current models of supervision, assessment of practice learning in use by qualifying social work course providers across England?
- What are course providers perspectives on practice education and their recommendations for change?
- Who, where and how many practice educators are there in England, and how do placement providers coordinate and collate information on practice educators within their organisation?
- What are the views of placement providers on practice education and their recommendations for change?

To answer these questions, this chapter draws on the following data:

- A desktop review of twenty-three course handbooks
- A qualitative consultation (focus group) with course providers
- A survey of placement providers
- A qualitative consultation (focus group) with placement providers

The chapter outlines the findings from each of these data sources in turn, highlighting recommendations for change.

3.1 Desktop review of qualifying social work courses

A desktop review was undertaken to look at existing models of practice learning and assessment across the different qualifying programmes in England. The desktop review sought to address the following research questions:

- What are the current models of practice education and the supervision and assessment of practice learning in social work across England?
- What are the current models of assessment of social work students on placement across England, and what is the practice educator's normal role as assessor in terms of decision making?

This section will begin by briefly outlining the process of the desktop review, before offering an overview of the findings from the review. A summary will then be offered, including identified gaps.

Desktop review strategy

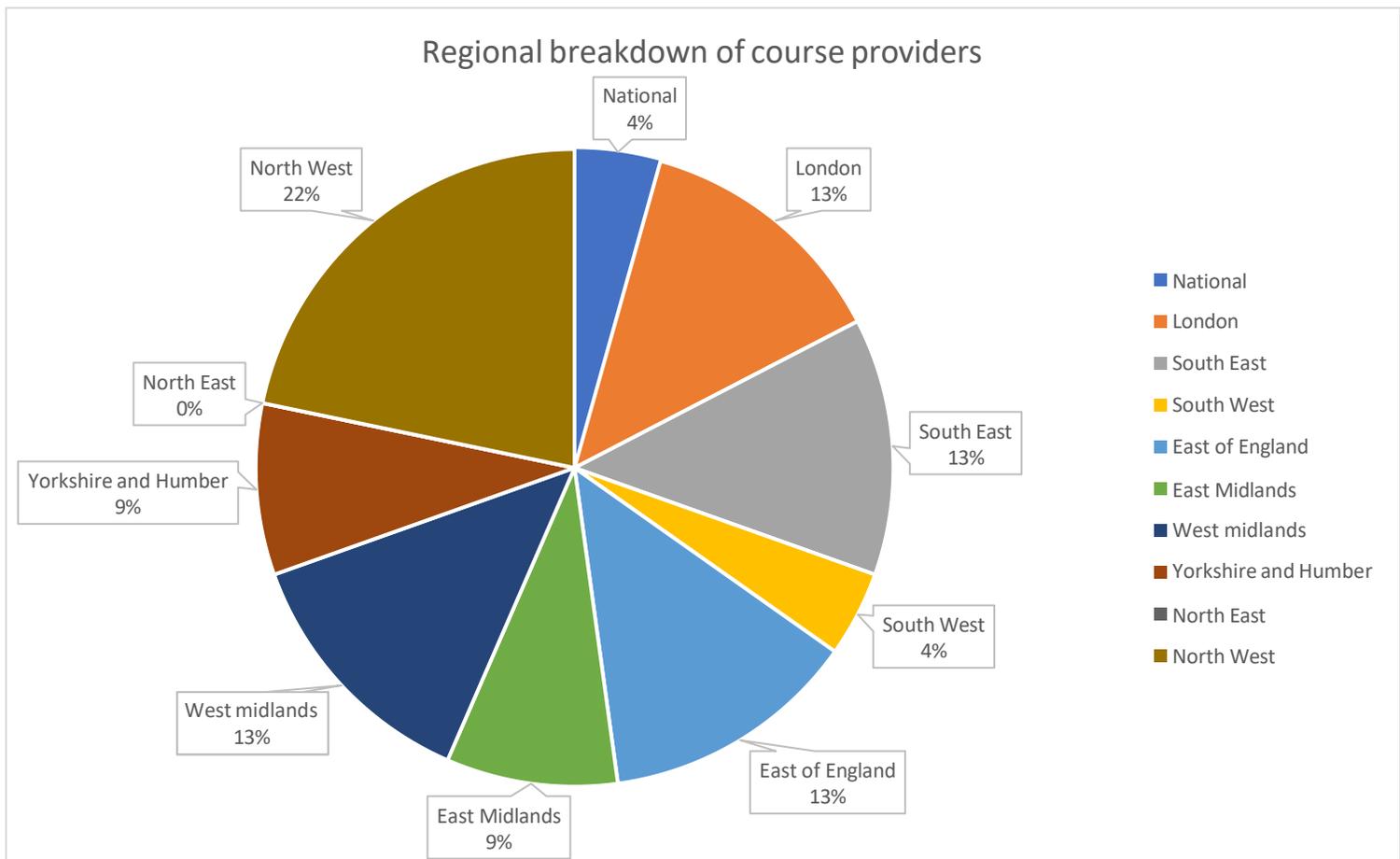
A list of the eighty-three social work education providers in England was taken from the Social Work England website and a spreadsheet was created with a list of providers. Email addresses for each of the providers were sought using the HEI and fast-track provider websites. Where possible, a named contact – usually the placement director or placement coordinator – was sought, however, in almost all cases this information was not available on the public website and so generic email addresses for social work departments in universities and fast-track providers were harvested.

Emails were sent out by two members of the research team to the email addresses requesting copies of placement handbooks and any other materials related to the provision of practice placements. As handbooks were received, responses were recorded in the spreadsheet, and where responses were not received, follow up emails were sent. Using handbooks received from early responders, a spreadsheet was devised to collate the following information from the received handbooks:

- Length of each placement
- Use of PEPS1 and PEPS 2 or PEPS 2 only
- Whether placement portfolios are given a mark or awarded a pass/fail

- Assessment framework/criteria used
- Whether portfolio evidence was primarily produced by the practice educator or the student
- Number and frequency of days in at university
- Any innovative or novel approaches

In total, responses from twenty-three providers were received, including two fast-track qualifying routes. This represents approximately twenty-eight percent of the providers in England, though it should be noted that – as with the focus groups – there was no representation from the North East of England. Caution should be exercised in generalising from a comparatively small sample, particularly with one of the nine regions of England not being represented. A regional breakdown of the providers is provided below:



(Figure 8 – Regional breakdown of course providers)

Not all handbooks contained all of the information identified as being of interest, with the level of detail and guidance included within the handbook differing significantly from provider to provider.

Findings from the desktop review

All placement providers who responded to the research had the same basic structure for placements: level one placement lasted for seventy days, level two placement for one hundred days, with thirty skills days being provided across the remainder of the programme. This was the case for fast-track qualifying routes as well as HEI routes, though fast-track placements were condensed over a shorter time period (approximately fourteen months as opposed to two years). This shows that changes to guidance on the provision of practice placements have been useful in ensuring a degree of standardisation; Doel et al (2007) had noted that immediately following the institution of the new social work degree, there was considerable variance in how practice learning was provided across the three years of the programme, but this now appears to have been resolved.

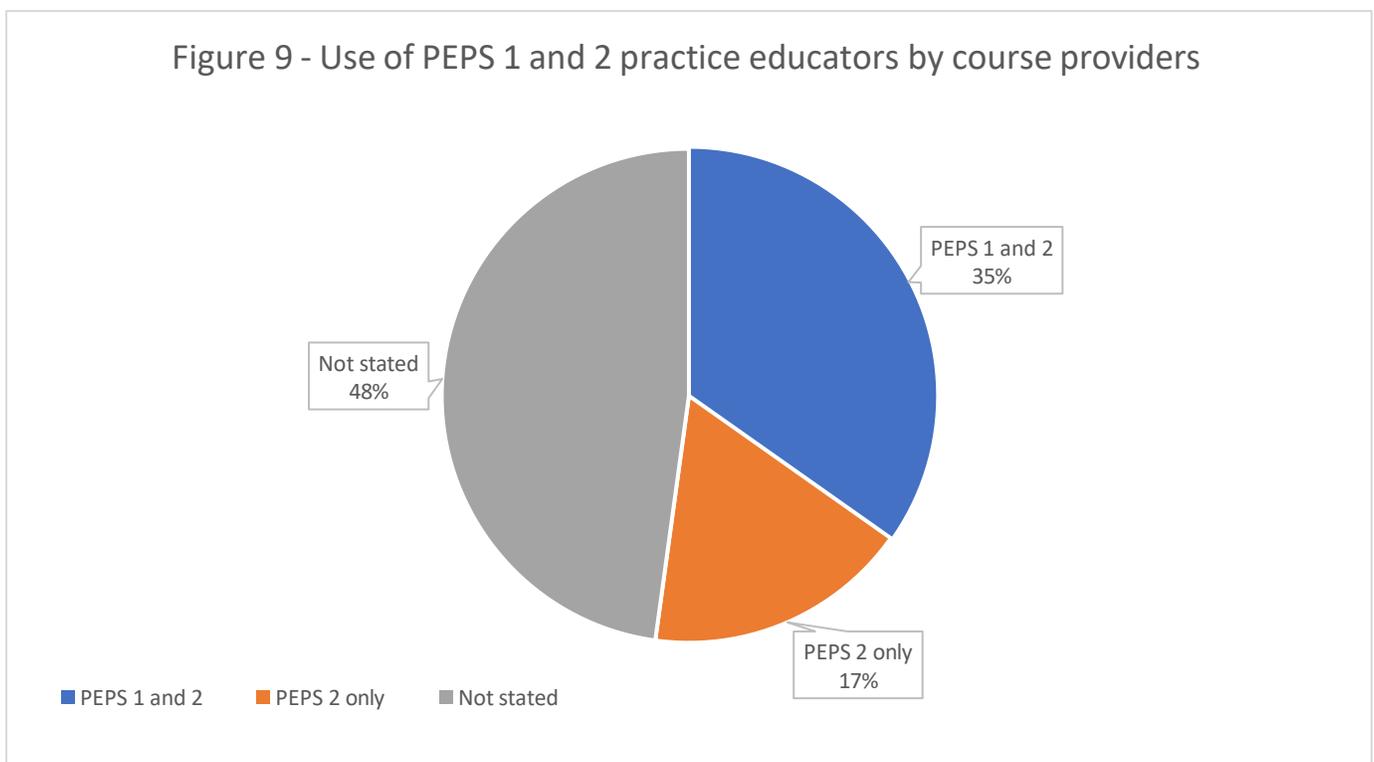
A typical model of placement learning and assessment

Social Work England has standards for the provision of practice placements that are adhered to by all course providers in England. The structure of a typical qualifying programme involves a seventy-day first placement in the second year of the BA/BSc and the first year of the MA/MSc, followed by a one-hundred day second placement the following year. Within the 200 placement days, students must have a contrasting experience; ordinarily this entails students experiencing working in more than one area of social work practice. These placements are reviewed at the midway point, with the handbook stipulating the process for this, including the need for a clear action plan to address any areas of concern or lack of progress. Providers also offer thirty skills days which take place across the duration of the qualifying programme.

Students complete a minimum of three direct observations and practice educators are expected to conduct at least one of these in the first placement and two in the second. The placement handbook provides templates for direct observations, learning agreements, and placement reports, and guidance for practice educators with which to complete their sections of the student portfolio. The typical portfolio will involve students significantly contributing to providing evidence to inform the practice educator's

assessment of their learning. This assessment is a pass/fail decision and draws on and makes explicit reference to the Professional Capabilities Framework and Social Work England Professional Standards. The handbook provides clear guidance for working with failing students, including the process for raising and addressing concerns. Students on their level one placement may be supervised by a practice educator who is qualified to either PEPS 1 or PEPS 2 level, whilst students on their level two placement must be supervised by a practice educator who has met PEPS 2 requirements.

There was greater variation as to whether providers used practice educators who had trained to either PEPS 1 or PEPS 2 level or those who had completed PEPS 2 level training only. This staged approach to training means that practice educators are only able to independently supervise and assess students on their level one placement if they have completed a training course to PEPS 1 level. Ordinarily, practice educators can then 'top up' their training to PEPS 2 level to supervise and assess students on level two placements also, however some providers do not use the staged approach and only use practice educators who have completed a training course to PEPS 2 level.

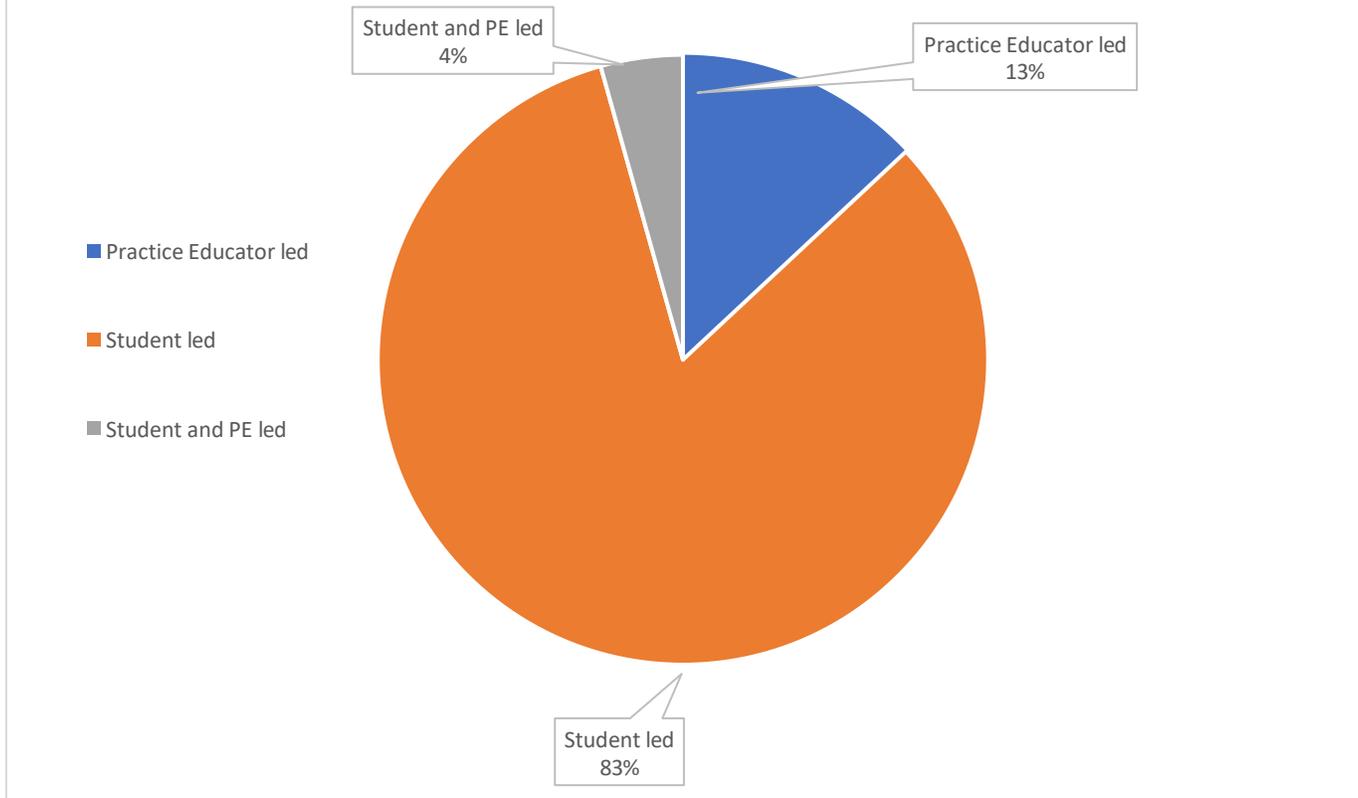


(Figure 9 – Use of PEPS 1 and PEPS 2 practice educators by course providers)

All respondents operated a pass/fail assessment for the placement itself, though for many course providers the module the placement was attached to include a piece of coursework related to the placement that did carry a mark. There was a similar degree of uniformity in how placements were assessed; twenty-two of the twenty-three respondents used the Professional Capabilities Framework and Social Work England Professional Standards in order to assess students' practice. One of the respondents used the Professional Capabilities Framework and Social Work England Professional Standards as well as the Knowledge and Skills Statements (KSS).

The balance of responsibility for the final portfolio of evidence, and with it the practice educator's assessment of the student, showed some variation across providers. Whilst for all providers both the practice educator and student are responsible for producing some elements of the final portfolio, for the majority of providers the portfolio was primarily student-led, with the practice educator's assessment against the Professional Capabilities Framework and Social Work England Standards being based upon the portfolio of evidence the student had provided. For a smaller number of providers, there was more onus on the practice educator to gather and provide evidence from the student's practice to support their assessment and recommendation.

Figure 10 - Responsibility for providing portfolio evidence

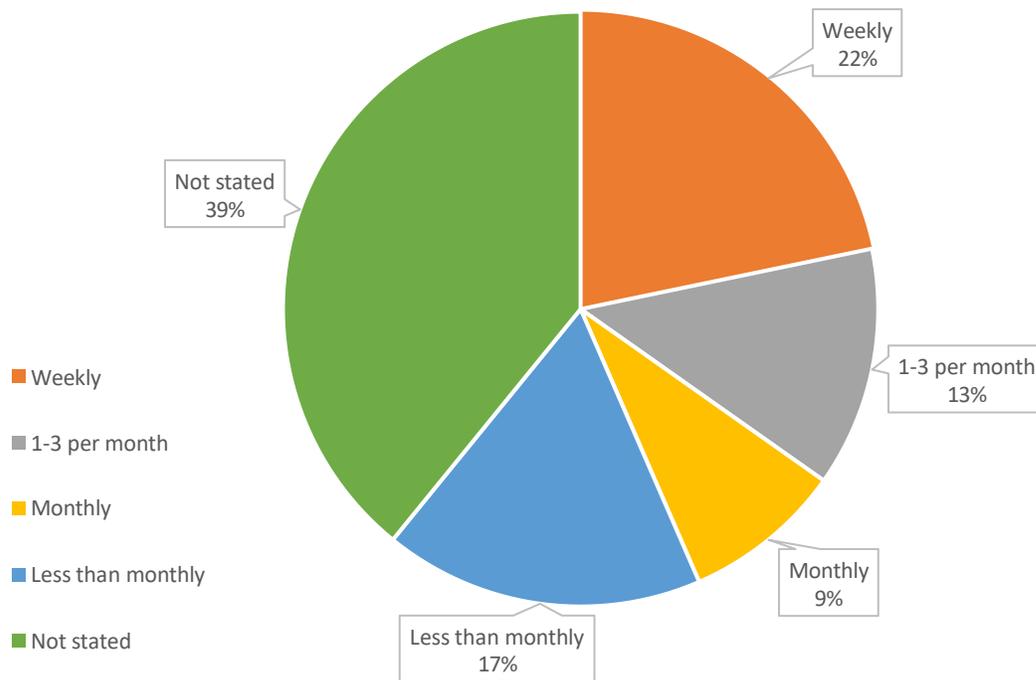


(Figure 10 – Responsibility for providing portfolio evidence)

It was notable from the literature review and this consultation that practice educators felt there was inconsistency in expectations from different course providers (Jasper and Field, 2016; Burton, 2020) and the portfolio of evidence, and the balance of who is primarily responsible for providing and populating evidence for the portfolio, is one area of potential inconsistency.

The number of frequency of days in at university was also an area where significant variance was evident; the number of days in during placement ranged from as few as three for the entire placement, to as many as twenty-five. The table below represents an average of the number of days per placement by provider, as days in were not always distributed evenly across the course of the placement.

Figure 11 - Breakdown of course provider days in from placement



(Figure 11 – Breakdown of course provider days in from placement)

This variance may partially be explained by differences in how providers utilise the thirty skills days and whether these are used within or outside the placement block. It was notable, for example, that one of the fast-track programmes uses the thirty skills days to provide a contrasting learning experience that differed from the specialist setting of their level one and two placements.

Days in from placement – sometimes known as recall days – can offer a useful chance for students to embed learning and to link theory to practice; whilst the literature highlights the importance of greater integration between academic learning and the practical learning that is associated with placement (Higgins, 2014; Lane, 2023), little is known about how days in are used to support students to embed their learning. There would be value in exploring what constitutes an optimal number of days in from placement to better integrate academic and placement learning.

There was evidence of further variation between course providers in terms of specific models or initiatives that they utilised to support practice learning and assessment. This included providing additional guidance and procedures in some areas – for example, in identifying and addressing concerns or undertaking direct observations – or the promotion of models for practice educators to use with students. For example, one fast-track programme follows the Reclaiming Social Work model and provides practice education using the associated unit model. A summary of some of these initiatives is provided below.

Approaches to the support of practice learning

- One course provider included a resource for anti-discriminatory practice incorporating the MANDELA Cycle in their handbook, stipulating its use in supervision
- One fast-track programme uses a unit model for practice education; students are placed in units of four alongside a consultant social worker who is a practice educator and who provides them with weekly group supervision
- One HEI provided clear guidance and templates outlining the process for practice educators to follow when they have concerns about a student’s suitability to practise, with another comprehensive section on how to report discriminatory behaviour, both received and observed
- Another useful resource, included in one course provider handbook, was guidance for practice educators on how to conduct direct observations in order to promote student learning
- Three course providers supported practice educators with current students by providing workshops, CPD briefings, and online assessment guidance
- One course provider handbook equipped students with a document to bring to each supervision outlining two pieces of practice that fulfilled Professional Capabilities Framework domains

Some of these approaches are of particular interest in light of the findings from the consultation with practice educators; for example, those from global majority backgrounds reported encountering discriminatory practice from some students, and use of the MANDELA cycle – or other tools that promote discussion of identity, such as the Social GRRRAACCEEESSS – can help to identify early on how issues of difference may play out in the supervisory relationship. It should be noted, however, that one participant felt the MANDELA cycle was outdated and did not reflect the complexity of issues faced by global majority individuals.

Given that some practice educators report that placement paperwork can be burdensome (Jasper and Field, 2016; Burton, 2020) – a finding echoed by many participants in the consultation – tools that encourage students to bring to supervision examples of how they have met Professional Capabilities Framework domains may help to alleviate some of the burden on practice educators in assessing students’ learning. The use of a unit model for practice education, whilst linked to a particular model of practice in this instance, could provide a solution where sufficiency of practice educators is an issue, since it enables one practice educator to oversee the work of a small group of students. There is some limited evidence from an innovative practice learning module in Scotland that group supervision can be beneficial for social work students (SSSC, 2021).

Summary: Desktop analysis of qualifying programmes

- Handbooks from twenty-three course providers were analysed
- There are many similarities in how practice learning is structured and assessed across different providers
- Key differences relate to the provision of evidence for the placement portfolio, the use of practice educators who are PEPS 1 and 2 qualified or PEPS 2 only, and the number of days in from placement
- Areas of innovation identified may be beneficial for addressing challenges identified in the practice education system

3.2 The perspectives of providers of qualifying social work programmes

When contacting course providers, the research team also asked for expressions of interest in participating in a focus group for placement leads on qualifying programmes in order to understand their views of practice learning, supervision, and assessment in England. Responses were received from fifteen placement leads, who were then provided with a participant information sheet and consent form to sign up. From the fifteen expressions of interest, there were nine attendees at the focus group.

The nine attendees were all employed as lecturers or senior lecturers at higher education institutions in England and all were involved in the matching and coordination of student placements within their institution. Three participants also mentioned that they were involved in running practice educator training courses at

their institution. There were participants from the South West, London, West Midlands, East of England, Yorkshire and Humber, and the North West. Eight of the nine participants worked at higher education institutions which were part of a teaching partnership. This ensured a range of course providers were represented within the focus group, though it should be noted that there were no participants from fast-track programmes, the North East, South East, or East Midlands, and this is a limitation. Four themes were derived from the analysis of the focus group and these are outlined below.

Recruiting, retaining, and working with practice educators

Course providers discussed different strategies that they employed for recruiting and retaining practice educator. Some participants reported that they ran training courses for practice educators, recruiting from a diverse range of organisations. Other course providers offered additional training in diversity and neurodiversity with trainers from global majority backgrounds, which helped them to recruit and retain practice educators from these groups. Providing training was seen as one way of maintaining a flow of new practice educator and retaining those who had trained with their institution:

The success of the practice education course has meant that we know that there is still a good supply of practice educators and currency is important for them (Participant, course provider focus group)

Other course providers used different approaches; for example, one participant shared that they stipulated that practice educators must take their first student from them post-training, which guaranteed at least one placement opportunity for the course provider. Some participants also found other opportunities for their practice educators, including greater involvement in their qualifying programmes:

We have different practice educator opportunities, not just being a practice educator for a student for the whole time but doing one off observations, being part of marking and assessment on different modules that relate to practice and being part of moderation panels. (Participant, course provider focus group)

This greater integration of practice educators within qualifying programmes has been highlighted within the literature as having the potential to bridge the gap between the university and practice (Lane, 2023). Course

providers recognised the value of offering regular workshops for practice educators to support them in their practice and their understanding of the course provider's placement processes; providing such developmental opportunities was seen as important, particularly for independent practice educators:

The CPD that we offer for the local authority and trust educators and the independents some of it will be bringing everybody together. But it is that acknowledgement because I think as an independent you can feel a little bit isolated. (Participant, course provider focus group)

Relationships with local authorities could be challenging at times; some practice educators working in local authorities were keen to undertake work as independent practice educators, but course providers reported that the attitude of some employers was 'well, no, that's our practice educator'. In one instance, the relationship between the course provider and local authority partners had been under strain for some considerable time:

The relationship we had with some of the local authorities became very difficult. We're still trying to mend some of those relationships. I mean, this is decades of stuff that people haven't let go of yet... that's often around pay and things like that. (Participant, course provider focus group)

Other barriers to retaining practice educators were similarly challenging to address. A common experience amongst participants was losing practice educators when they advanced into management 'due to pressure of work', something that was reported to be an increasingly familiar occurrence. Course providers readily acknowledged that practice educators in local authorities were more stretched and stressed with less time for reflective supervision than independent practice educators:

In-house practice educators – work pressures, demands and timescales, lack of team support, management not keen to support with the student, no team approach. Student overloaded with lack of supervision. (Participant, course provider focus group)

In line with the wider consultation, participants recognised that there was a lack of workload relief for practice educators. Despite employers offering assurances of reduced caseloads and protected time, course providers

were mindful that 'in reality they don't get that'. This resonates with findings from the existing literature (Furness and Gilligan, 2004; Doel et al, 2007; Waterhouse, 2011; Domakin, 2014, 2015; Haworth, 2019; Burton, 2020) and these challenges can negatively impact on practice educators working in statutory settings being able to take on students.

Course providers reported that placing students with independent practice educators was not without challenges. One limitation was the tendency of some to take on too many students, rendering them inflexible with supervision or providing supervision of poor quality, with the result that students felt as though they were 'on a conveyor belt'. One participant suggested that the pull to take on large numbers of students was to 'make ends meet', echoing the issues created by poor remuneration identified earlier in the report. Where independent practice educators stretched themselves too thin for financial reasons or struggled for other reasons, course providers described that 'it's more labour intensive for us'. While practice educators working in statutory settings have organisational structures around them – team managers, senior managers, practice education leads – such support structures are not in place for independent practice educator, placing greater onus on the course provider to manage and resolve issues.

Matching and supporting students

Practice educators in the consultation highlighted that a well-thought-out matching process was key to positive relationships with course providers. However, many participants acknowledged that the matching process has been impacted by placement sufficiency; one participant reported that 'we call it allocating because we're trying to manage student expectation'. This limited how much meaningful matching could take place.

The amount of control course providers had over the matching of placements was variable. Course providers with smaller numbers of students had a high level of personal involvement in the process:

It's literally down to me, my time and administration along the way in terms of getting it right. So, there's a little bit of work with the setting and the practice educator as well before the placement is formally offered ... that takes about three months. (Participant, course provider focus group)

Although this more personal approach has significant benefits, there are risks associated with so much emphasis being placed on one individual to manage such complex processes. By contrast, some course providers reported they had minimal input in matching students to placements:

Generally speaking, the local authorities will provide the practice educator and that's all done in-house by the workforce development within the local authority. (Participant, course provider focus group)

Given that the research suggests that collaboration and partnership working should be promoted to optimise practice learning and to bridge the gap between the university and practice (Lane, 2023), such approaches may not be optimal. Other approaches enabled greater collaboration between stakeholders, with one participant reporting 'excellent relationships with our partners, so workforce leads, placement development leads'. For instance, one HEI described being able to hold a 'matching meeting for the final placement, there's some real intelligent matching'.

For some course providers, placement sufficiency was a challenge, particularly in the statutory sector where workloads were high:

Within statutory services ... it's just chaos ... people are burning out and then you're expecting them to be able to support students. So yeah, it's gone the other way. Now it can be more challenging getting the statutory placements. (Participant, course provider focus group)

Again, positive working relationships served to ameliorate some of these challenges; where course providers had trained and worked with practice educators over time, these strong relationships meant that 'we know we haven't got a problem with finding placements'. This highlights the centrality of effective relationships to all aspects of practice education (Brodie and Coyle, 2015). These relationships were often founded on local knowledge and working creatively together to find ways to meet local demand.

In the discussion, course providers shared their procedures to support borderline and failing students. Participants felt it was essential to understand each student as an individual, tailoring learning to their needs,

especially students from global majorities, neurodiverse students, those with caring responsibilities, and school leavers:

A lot of research does suggest that where we have failing or borderline failing students, they are from the Black and Asian Minority ethnic background and we're doing a lot of research into that in terms of how we match, so it does go back to some of those ways of how we match and where we place.

(Participant, course provider focus group)

It is well-known that students from minoritised backgrounds are more likely to encounter difficulties on placement and face discrimination (Thomas et al, 2010) and this issue remains a challenge for the practice education system.

Participants reflected that it was important to provide a 'robust process for struggling students and a strong student support services within the university'. Course providers highlighted that offering this kind of pastoral support had become increasingly common, particularly post-pandemic where students may have had limited exposure to the workplace. Where students were at risk of failing, support for practice educators from their organisation was vital:

Practice education leads are a fantastic resource offering a different type of supervision for the student, perhaps doing an observation with him, taking them away from the situation where they're feeling that pressure, doing some consultation with the practice educator and just looking if there is a kind of a relationship problem there or there's some confirmation bias going on... they've saved a lot of placements from failing. (Participant, course provider focus group)

Existing research has tended to suggest that practice educators can feel isolated when students are failing (Furness, 2012; Domakin, 2015); the discussion in the focus group suggests that providing additional support not only helps to counter this issue, but ultimately increases the chances of a successful outcome for the student.

Several course providers revealed concerns around their perceived inability to fail students:

I have found personally that it's been actually very difficult to – I don't feel like it's in my power to say, this isn't going to work. That power sits very much higher up from an institution level, and I think it's incredibly difficult actually to ask students to leave... (Participant, course provider focus group)

This feeling of powerlessness is echoed in the research by practice educators, who report that it can be difficult to fail students (Finch and Taylor, 2013; Domakin, 2015). It is noteworthy that those responsible for educating social work students experienced similar frustrations.

Assessing and quality assuring practice learning

Course providers felt that standards across courses should be universal, and assessments standardised, however they also conceded that this is difficult to achieve. In contrast to regular academic work, assessing students on placement was seen as 'much more complex ... much more messy'. While taught content can be delivered in a standard way to all students, learning on placement is prone to greater variation:

One of the things that I find quite hard is how much placements can vary based on ... how the practice educator is, how much time they've got ... how much they give time for supervision, different settings, different LAs. (Participant, course provider focus group)

Course providers reflected on the disparate placements available to students and how the allocation of placements could potentially affect students, with one participant suggesting that 'this student who failed placement A, might they have passed if they'd been in placement B'. This led them to question 'are we achieving the sort of equity in in judging students' achievements?'. This issue is long-standing in social work; Furness and Gilligan (2004) highlighted concerns for placement sufficiency and fairly and accurately measuring student, whilst Bates (2018) found that learning opportunities offered to students were largely determined by the quality of placements available.

In some statutory placements, the lack of workload relief for practice educators and the pressures placed on them meant that students were commonly used as 'another pair of hands':

Students' experiences in placement differ and a lot of it now is down to the pressure in practice, particularly in Placement 2 that our students are being treated as another member of staff. They're broken by day 100. (Participant, course provider focus group)

Though high workloads for practice educators are a common theme in the existing literature (Doel et al, 2007; Domakin, 2015) and in the wider consultation, it is of significance that some students are reportedly 'broken' before they have even registered as social workers. This is particularly pertinent given the ongoing recruitment and retention crisis in the social work workforce.

Despite the challenges of contemporary practice, course providers maintained systems to assure the quality of practice education. One procedure that most participants implemented was reviewing all placement documentation as early as possible to identify issues while solutions could still be found:

One of the things we do is we look at every single midpoint review. But we look at all midpoints, so things are picked up on there and the student and the practice educator gets feedback. (Participant, course provider focus group)

Such collaborative approaches are highlighted in the literature (Lane, 2023) as being important to effective practice education. Most course providers also offered an anonymised placement feedback form in place for both practice educators and students, which helped to identify problems. Course providers presented other systems that they had established to support the success of practice educators and independent practice educators, including having an on-site supervisor to aid the practice educator, an audit trail, and the tutor being readily available for the student:

Obviously, the tutor is probably the first point of contact for the students and that will be taken on board and discussed with me and dealt with very quickly if there's issues. (Participant, course provider focus group)

Despite these procedures, course providers reflected that they had little authority over practice education in local authorities, noting that 'we don't however have much control over [them]'. The power dynamics in

practice education are complex; there are power imbalances between students and practice educators (Lefevre, 2005; Bailey-McHale et al, 2019; Roulston et al, 2022), whilst practice educators report feeling marginalised and lacking in authority in comparison to course providers when failing students (Furness, 2012; Domakin, 2015). It is noteworthy that course providers experience similar feelings of powerlessness when working with practice educators employed in statutory settings.

Looking ahead: recognising and valuing practice education

Course providers unanimously felt that practice education should be endowed with accreditation and recognition akin to that provided for AMHPs:

It just is like an add on, you know this supplementary bit that's chucked into someone's job and has nowhere near the credit that AMHPs have. You know there's no particular allowances to be a practice educator. (Participant, course provider focus group)

Recognition is a consistent theme in the literature on practice education (Domakin 2014; Haworth, 2019) as well as in the consultation with practice educators and this need for greater recognition was expressed similarly strongly here. Participants believed that if practice education was identified as a distinct, valued career pathway it would attract and retain more practice educators. Course providers also felt that it would be beneficial 'in terms of ongoing CPD' if annotation came with practice educator-specific CPD requirements. Participants highlighted that practice educators experienced 'no workload reduction, very little support from lots of organisations' and that greater regulation and clear guidelines on what practice educators are entitled to would be one way of addressing this.

Echoing the wider consultation, course providers believed that it was essential to increase the pay of practice educators and not to rely on their goodwill, as has been the case for so long. Participants highlighted that being a practice educator 'certainly wouldn't pay your bills now' and so greater remuneration was required.

While there was a consensus on the above suggestions, participants were split on the issue of standardisation of practice education. Many thought this would lead to greater bureaucratisation and less creativity:

I would just fear that someone's going to come up and say let's somehow amalgamate all the best ideas from all these institutions and come up with a system that everyone has to follow, because that will undoubtedly consist of the most complicated combination of everyone's best ideas and become unwieldy and awful. So, I'd say, for goodness' sake, don't try to standardise. Let's all do what works in our own contexts and learn from one another, of course, but not be over-regulated. (Participant, course provider focus group)

One participant, however, disagreed and felt that there needed to be greater standardisation to ensure consistency nationally. This tension between creativity and standardisation is highlighted elsewhere (Jasper and Field, 2016) and, while consistency is clearly an important consideration, the ability to work flexibly in local contexts was valued by the majority of course providers.

Summary: The perspectives of course providers

- Four themes were derived from the focus group with placement leads from course providers: recruiting, retaining, and working with practice educators; matching and supporting students; assessing and quality assuring practice learning; and looking ahead: recognising and valuing practice education
- A picture of practice learning and assessment as being highly dependent on local relationships emerged from the discussion with placement leads
- There were a number of similarities with the consultation with practice educators, in particular the need for greater recognition of the practice educator role, and challenges of workload and stress in statutory social work placements
- One area of difference was in attitudes towards standardisation of practice education; a majority of placement leads were sceptical of the value of increased standardisation

3.3. Survey of placement providers

This section outlines the findings from a survey sent to placement providers in England. It aimed to provide a demographic picture of the practice educator workforce in England. While all social workers must be registered with Social Work England, there is no compulsory registration of practice educators. This makes it

difficult to determine the numbers and demographics (gender, ethnicity) of practice educators, which in turn limits capacity for oversight and support. The survey sought to answer the following questions:

- How many practice educators does each local authority have recorded/registered in their databases?
- Of these, how many are currently/actively supervising students within the local authority?
- Is information on protected characteristics collected? If so, what is the representation of different genders and what is the breakdown of practice educators by ethnicity, disability etc.?
- Breakdown of practice educators by years of experience supporting students in the local authority (≤ 1 year, 1-2 years, 2-5 years, ≥ 5 years, ≥ 10 years)
- What percentage of practice educators are registered for PEPS 1 and PEPS 2 level placements?

Recruitment and participation

The survey was distributed to each of the local authorities in England (n=153) by RiP via their networks (e.g. ADCS). Participation in the survey was low: fourteen responses were submitted and only ten respondents were able to complete most of the survey questions. The reasons for this became apparent in our subsequent follow-up consultation with placement providers. The low response rate and consultation of placement providers highlighted an important point – that local authorities do not tend to have a standardised way to coordinate, record, and collate practice educator details and demographics. Instead, the coordination of practice educators tends to rest with one person who has personal knowledge of practice educators within the organisation.

Respondents

While there were few responses, they were varied, including representatives from teaching partnerships, local authorities, and universities. Representation also varied in geographical location with responses from the regions of the North East, the East of England, London, the South East, and crown dependencies such as Jersey. Each respondent took responsibility for coordinating practice educators within their organisation; however, their specified roles varied from social workers to team managers to associate tutors to practice educator leads. This suggests that the approach to practice educator coordination varies between organisations.

Procedure

The information sheet gave a brief overview of the study and its purpose and provided contact details for the research team. At the bottom of the information sheet was a consent form. Participants were required to select 'yes' to all consent statements before they began the main survey.

In the main body of the survey, participants were asked to provide details about their organisation, if and how practice educator numbers were recorded and, if so, what information was recorded about them. Most questions were multiple choice, with different paths dependent on responses (the survey can be found in the appendix H).

Survey findings

Keeping records of practice educators

When asked about how their organisation keeps track of their practice educators, 30% (n=3) of respondents suggested that they did not have an official method for tracking the practice educators they employ. Of those who did keep a record of practice educators, most (n=5) utilised databases such as Excel, while the final two used an alternative informal method such as 'mind mapping'. The responses suggested that that these records were managed by one person, rather than at an organisational level. Participants were often unsure how frequently records of practice educators within their organisation were updated. Of those who did know, the consistency of updates ranged from monthly to yearly.

Numbers of practice educators and demographics

The number of practice educators associated with each organisation varied considerably. On average (mean), organisations kept a record of twenty-two practice educators, with a range of one to fifty-eight. However, caution should be exercised in interpreting these results due to the low response rate. Some organisations suggested they had a specific number of practice educators they aimed to maintain at any one time; the highest of these was sixty. Again, there was great variation between respondents, with many not having a target number of practice educators at all. There was also variation in how many students each practice educator in the organisation was allowed to take on. 62% of organisations did not place restrictions on how many students a practice educator can have at any one time, of those who did place restrictions, two was the mean average.

The low response rate, coupled with a lack of record-keeping within organisations, meant that it was difficult to gain a picture of the demographics of practice educators in each organisation. Only 55% of respondents who indicated their organisations kept records of practice educators also kept a record of their demographic information. Only 45% held information regarding the qualifications of their practice educators. Figure 12 expresses the average demographic information held by organisations:

Demographic	Mean Average Per Organisation
Gender:	
Male	3
Female	13
Non-Binary/ Other	1
Unknown	1
Ethnicity⁹:	
White British	5
White Other	0
Black, Black British, Caribbean or African	2
Asian or Asian British	1
Mixed or Multiple Ethnic Groups	0
Other Ethnic Groups	0
Unknown	1
Disability:	
With a Disability	4
Unknown	1

(Figure 12 – Average Demographics Across Organisations)

⁹ These ethnicity categories differ from those used earlier in the report (in the qualitative interviews) where participants were able to self-identify in respect of their ethnicity. Here, due to the restrictions of the survey format, participants selected from a pre-defined list of ethnicity categories.

As shown in Figure 12, practice educators recorded in these databases are mostly female (72%). In terms of ethnicity, the majority are white British (55%). While these findings suggest that practice educators are far more likely to be white and female, it is difficult to draw meaningful conclusions given the low response rate. It was notable that 45% of respondents work for organisations that do not actively record any demographic information.

Only 45% of respondents were able to provide information about the qualifications and experience of practice educators working within their organisation. These (albeit limited) responses suggested that most active practice educators within their organisation had between one and five years' experience in practice education, with under 10% having more than ten years' experience. Where these details were given, the number of practice educators with PEPs 1 level training was almost double that of practice educators with both PEPs 1 and 2. However, for most practice educators (56%), their specific qualifications were unknown.

The survey also asked respondents to identify if they provided support to practice educators within their organisation and, if so, what this support entailed. Ten respondents replied to this question; of these, three indicated that additional support was not routinely provided to practice educators. The remaining seven identified peer-support workshops and in-house training as the support offered to practice educators within their organisation.

Summary

Given the low response rate, it is difficult to draw any robust conclusions about the numbers and demographics of practice educators employed within organisations in England. The low response rate can be partially attributed to the fact that practice education arrangements were often managed by one person within the organisation who did not necessarily have this as a named part of their role. This made it difficult to target and identify the relevant person to complete the survey. The findings from the consultation (described below) also reinforced this – oversight of practice educators was conducted differently across organisations and often relied on the informal knowledge and working relationships of a single worker who had a sense of practice educators in their organisation who were available to take on students.

The practice educator workforce in England: who, where and how many?

It is difficult to gain an overall picture of the numbers and demographics of practice educators in England. As practice educators are not registered, there are no comprehensive data at national level. At a local level, organisations often rely upon informal arrangements for coordinating practice educators, often with minimal record-keeping of their characteristics. In the wider consultation, practice educators raised this as a concern. Without a sense of who, where, and how many practice educators are operating in England, it is difficult to achieve an overview of the workforce and identify issues around diversity and sufficiency of practice educators. Many practice educators suggested that a 'national database' of registered practice educators would help address this, a suggestion which was welcomed by the majority of course and placement providers in the consultation.

3.4 The perspectives of placement providers

This section describes findings from a focus group with placement providers. Participants were recruited for the focus group via advertisement distributed by Social Work England. Thirteen professionals attended the focus group; ten worked in local authorities, two were representing teaching partnerships, and one participant was from CAFCASS. Participants held a range of roles within their organisation, including placement coordinators and workforce development leads. All had responsibility for, or involvement with, the coordination of student placements and practice educators within their organisation. Key themes from the focus group are outlined under three main headings: support and coordination of practice education within organisations, enablers and barriers in the provision of student placements, and recommendations for change.

Support and coordination of practice education within organisations

Participants described a range of approaches to coordinating, supporting and tracking practice educators within their respective organisations. As indicated in section 3.3. above, organisations varied in the records they kept of practice educators within their organisation and how often these records were updated:

We keep a record of all our practice educators which is really hard, because at the moment we do it on a spreadsheet. So, we have to keep double-checking everything and we prompt them when we know they've done the five days. We keep our eye on them to make sure that we're reminding them to get their observations done in order to get through Stage 1 and Stage 2. We provide a day of helping them to write their assignments ... and we'll provide them with lots of resources and references, and we also do a proofreading service for that. (Participant, placement provider focus group)

Placement providers were in favour of 'a national register of practice educators, that had to be annotated on the register somewhere' to help them to track the numbers and demographics of their practice educator population. Despite challenges in maintaining records of practice educators, placement providers were committed to supporting and retaining practice educators:

We have practice educator forums that we have regionally ... but we also have internal ones that we do joint with children's and adults, and we support them with some resource tools ... my role is to have one-to-one sessions with the practice educators, particularly if they're new ... What we have recognised is that we offer a lot of support for the newly qualifieds, so our focus this year is around also supporting the longer-standing ones, making sure they're up to scratch ... So, it might be that we get them to also do some training, to keep themselves upskilled. (Participant, placement provider focus group)

In some organisations, this training offer covered some gaps identified within the wider consultation by focusing on 'anti-racist practice, and some stuff on neurodiversity, and how to support students that may learn in other ways'. Participants also identified the importance of providing opportunities for peer-support, with one providing 'support hubs once a month, there's a drop-in support hub that we run over a lunchtime to make it easier for practice educators'. There were pockets of extensive support on offer in some of the organisations involved in the focus. This included providing additional support for practice educators working with borderline or failing students 'the minute you've got any niggles or worries come to us, let us talk it through and see what's going on in order to try to sustain placements'. Again, this kind of support eases some

of the feelings of isolation that practice educators are prone to experience when working with failing students (Furness, 2012).

Enablers and barriers in provision of student placements

Participants indicated that providing placements for qualifying social work students had many benefits for their organisation, in particular placement providers saw the value of students for improving 'recruitment and retention' and offering 'fresh ideas':

Students bring vibrancy to teams and are questioning. They help social workers in the teams reflect on their practice and go back to basics in considering the use of theories ...

The opportunity for us is having fresh energy, new ways of thinking, and the practice educators having a challenge. We can also offer ASYE posts to those able students. (Participant, placement provider focus group)

The value of students to the future workforce was recognised in initiatives to encourage them to apply for posts, this included ring-fencing interviews for placement students and offering workshops 'on how to apply and tips on applications and interviews'.

Organisations also experienced challenges in supporting students and practice educators. Participants cited 'increasing workloads' as a barrier to taking on students and some teams simply did not have capacity to support students. In addition, the demands and complexities practice educator training and the practice education system were also seen as challenging to manage:

The issue is capacity and resources ... we have practice educators on the PEPs programme that are quite openly saying, wow, I had no idea what this role entailed, the time that's involved alongside your day job ... We've really struggled to recruit mentors within our teaching partnership because it's a huge role. It's not the support we're offering because it's there, but they don't have the time to access the support, that's the problem. (Participant, placement provider focus group)

Organisations were operating in a context of reduced resources. This had an impact on their ability to provide for students with increasingly complex needs. One participant highlighted the ‘financial implication’ of making reasonable adjustments for neurodivergent and disabled students. Placement providers also highlighted that the cost-of-living crisis had meant that more students were unable to drive, either because ‘driving lessons are expensive’ or because they were ‘struggling with the costs of maintaining the car’. This issue was felt particularly acutely in relation to international students, who rarely owned a car. Placement providers described needing to be increasingly flexible to accommodate the needs of the student population.

The challenges of hosting students in the context of increased hybrid working post-pandemic – a concern echoed by practice educators as part of the wider consultation (see section 2.3) – was also an issue for placement providers:

We have challenges around teams now not being co-located and a lot more virtual and hybrid working ... certainly what I'm hearing from students and what I'm observing is it's quite difficult to learn how to be a social worker when you're removed from your team ... we're having some concerns raised within the teaching partnership around students not really knowing how to conduct themselves, not really knowing how to dress, how to ... be ready to practice. (Participant, placement provider focus group)

This reflects some of the challenges identified within the literature in respect of the impact of COVID-19 on practice education (Beesley and Taplin, 2022). The dual impact of the pandemic and cost of living crisis has created additional challenges for social work students and the practice education system.

Recognising the contribution of practice educators

Placement providers echoed the views of others within the consultation. They highlighted the need for greater remuneration for practice educators and felt that the role of practice educator should be given accreditation in line with AMHPs and BIAs:

Raise the status of a practice educator and really value this within the profession. We know how fundamental it is to our recruitment, retention and our placement's efficiency, but what we want to do is annotate that status of the practice educator and really consider a pathway for social workers to look

at it as a career progression so that they become a practice educator, then they become a practice educator mentor, then there's some other status that they can get to. Look at it about enabling learning as really valued within the profession and not an add-on, or a point that you step on and step off when you actually go on to leadership and management. (Participant, placement provider focus group)

It was felt that practice education as an annotated role would have several advantages, including allowing them to command greater workload relief, as well as greater consistency of standards:

Social workers might move around the region, but they also move out of a region and into a region to actually get employment, and the practice educator qualification – yes, they've got Stage 2 – but it's all done differently. There's a lack of consistency nationally that we would really like addressed.

(Participant, placement provider focus group)

As with other parts of the consultation, the issues of recognition and local variations in delivery of practice education came strongly to the fore in discussion with placement providers.

Summary: The perspectives of placement providers

Placement providers indicated that offering placements to social work students had benefits for the recruitment of social workers and bringing new perspectives and knowledge into the organisation

- There was variation between placement providers in terms of coordinating and tracking practice educators within their respective organisations
- Placement providers emphasised that registration and annotation of the role would be useful for gaining insight into the demographics of the practice educator workforce, both in their organisation and nationally
- Placement providers offered a range of different workshops, peer support, and training for practice educators. This provision varied significantly between organisations
- Organisations were operating in a context of reduced resources. This had an impact on their ability to provide support for neurodivergent students and those with additional learning needs

CHAPTER FOUR: Practice education in England: recommendations for change and SWOT analysis

This chapter opens with an overview of practice educators' recommendations for change. Drawing on the findings from the review of the literature, placement handbooks, survey of local authorities, trusts, and teaching partnerships, and the consultations with practice educators, course and placement providers, it then provides an overview of the current state of practice education in England. The discussion will be structured as a SWOT analysis, outlining strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in relation to practice education.

4.1 Practice educators' recommendations for change: greater recognition

There was consensus among practice educators that practice education was insufficiently valued and required greater recognition. Practice educator recommendations to achieve greater recognition can be grouped under six themes: registration and regulation, fair and consistent remuneration, consistency of placement paperwork and student assessment, changes to practice educator qualification/training, progression opportunities, and workload relief and protected time. These six themes are now explored in turn.

Key message

Practice educators across England felt that the practice educator role was insufficiently valued and required greater recognition. While there were a range of views about how to achieve this, the majority of those consulted felt that the registration of practice educators would be beneficial.

Recommendation 1: Registration and regulation

Throughout the four focus groups, participants consistently emphasised registration as key to greater recognition of the role. There were repeated suggestions to 'build a register of practice educators' to acknowledge the importance, expertise and skills associated with the role:

Recognising the role of a practice educator ... so if Social Work England recognise the role – the way that an AMHP is part of your registration – put in that you are practice educator qualified on part of

our registration to make it more recognised. We feel that it would be good to have more appreciation for doing this job (Main room, Focus group 2)

Participants made frequent comparisons between practice education and the role of AMHPs and the BIAs. Many practice educators viewed these roles as requiring comparable skills yet noted that as regulated roles, AMHP and BIA had greater status and recognition. It was therefore felt that registration would make the role 'equal' in terms of recognition to BIA and AMHPs' and help to 'maintain standards'. Participants identified that registration would help 'local authorities' to recognise that practice education is an 'important role' and therefore increase the support and CPD allowance for the role within existing workloads. CPD as a requirement for ongoing registration was also suggested by many practice educators:

I'm an AMHP as well ... you have to do a certain amount of training per year to keep your registration and therefore, that's expected. It's all known. And you do keep your knowledge up to date. And I just wondered whether there might be an opportunity to put practice education on a similar level, because I think it's a really, really important role and it should be really recognised as such (Breakout room, Focus group 2)

CPD as a criterion for continued registration was also regarded as having other potential advantages. For instance, several practice educators identified that needing to 'keep on top of the PEPs, keeping the qualification updated' would ensure ongoing safe, evidence-based, and up-to-date practice for those who have been 'practice educators for many years'. Given the concerns of independent practice educators about access to CPD, and the concerns of global majority practice educators about their lack of access to CPD opportunities, consideration would need to be given to ensuring equitable access to CPD opportunities for all practice educators.

In sum, there was consensus that registration and regulation was needed to underpin practice standards, support for CPD, and workload relief for practice educators. Participants in the consultation expressed concern about a lack of oversight of practice education, and several global majority practice educators raised concerns about their underrepresentation within the practice educator workforce (see section 2.5). A register of

practice educators would provide an opportunity to identify and address issues around diversity in the practice education workforce.

Key message

Practice educators identified that Best Interests Assessor and Approved Mental Health Professional roles would provide a useful blueprint for the registration and regulation of practice educators

Recommendation 2: Fair and consistent remuneration

While independent practice educators made most frequent reference to the issue of remuneration (see section 2.4) this was a concern shared by all practice educators. Insufficient payment was identified as a factor in practice educators discontinuing the role and was framed by many as symptomatic of a lack of recognition:

I think it's around status, isn't it? And I think [the] key messages for Social Work England is actually practice educators are key to our workforce. We've got a massive recruitment and retention crisis. Without practice educators, we are not providing the future workforce. So it's so significant thinking about payment (Breakout room, Focus group 2)

Practice educators also expressed frustration that payment rates for practice education are not keeping pace with inflation, and in many cases are actually reducing. In addition to insufficient rates of payments, practice educators also expressed a concern about inconsistency between organisations, with one participant describing remuneration as a 'complete postcode lottery'. Some practice educators reported that they received no compensation for being a practice educator, it was seen as an 'add-on' but one that 'makes it look less of an incentive for people to do the role'. As a result, practice educators were keen to see some guidelines for organisations around remuneration or a standardisation of the payment:

I think financial remuneration is big, that there's such a discrepancy. It should be a set amount (Breakout room, Focus group 2)

The issue of remuneration speaks to two wider issues identified within this report: a lack of recognition of the practice educator role, and arrangements for practice education being localised and variable.

Key message

Practice educators expressed frustration around insufficient and inconsistent remuneration for the role. They indicated they would welcome standardisation of payments for practice education

Recommendation 3: Consistency of placement paperwork and student assessment

Practice educator identified inconsistency in placement paperwork and expectations of course providers as being a significant challenge:

There's so much difference between the universities that we use ... you think that you've got your head around the paperwork for one student and then all of a sudden you're supporting a student from another university and that actually you've got to relearn the expectations, the requirements and the standards (Breakout room, Focus group 2)

This participant echoed the majority of practice educators in suggesting that 'there should be a set paperwork portfolio that all universities use ... and it should be a national thing'. However, it should be noted that course providers had a different perspective on this (see section 3.2).

When asked to identify key recommendations for Social Work England to take forward, participants also spoke of the need to standardise assessment in relation to the existing professional standards. There was a great deal of discussion across the focus groups about the challenges and frustrations of using multiple assessment frameworks, for example, the Professional Capabilities Framework, and Social Work England's Professional Standards. Practice educators felt strongly that using more than one framework felt unnecessarily complex and was confusing and unfair on students. As was also evident within the literature (Plenty and Gower, 2013; Jasper and Field, 2016) practice educators in the consultation were generally positive about the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF), seeing it as a good fit for social work practice, and many favoured this as the primary assessment framework for practice education.

Recommendation 4: Changes to practice educator qualification, training and CPD

While many practice educators spoke positively of their practice education qualifying programme, they suggested that the training could be improved in two main respects. Firstly, they identified that some of the training could be more accessible, a theme which was reiterated by neurodivergent practice educator and those with disabilities (see 2.6). Secondly, they identified an urgent need for practice educator training to include working with neurodivergent students and the inclusion of global majority perspectives:

Neurodiversity is not covered on your practice educator qualifying programme (Main room, Focus group 1)

We were thinking about Social Work England and maybe development around anti-racist practice ... we were discussing the numbers of failing learners from Black and ethnic minority backgrounds and how that's a concern (Main room, Focus group 2)

Participants suggested that there needed to be a wider range of ongoing CPD opportunities and 'refresher' training for practice educators; they felt that this would 'keep their knowledge current' in response to the fact the 'things change frequently in social work). Many practice educators suggested that course providers could play a greater role in coordinating such training. They also identified a need for knowledge-exchange between practice educators at a national level, and a need to 'come together with practice educators from across the country in order to learn from one another and strive for the best'.

Recommendation 5: Progression opportunities

Practice educators felt there were a lack of opportunities for progression within their role and some identified this as a barrier to continuing as a practice educator:

Let's say I stayed in the local authority, and I went on into management. How would you ensure that I keep my hand in practice education? What are you doing to keep my interest? Because I'll have all this experience ... surely, you'd want people who have had a number of social students to carry on rather than ... just drop off and then you start again with somebody who has had no students. You're going to end up just having new practice educators and no experienced ones (Interview participant)

A number of practice educators recommended the creation of opportunities for progression within the role as a way to support, develop, and ultimately retain experienced practice educators. Several suggested that an advanced or experienced practice educator status would be useful. In addition, social workers emphasised that progression needed to be internal to practice education to avoid the role being seen as 'just a stepping stone to management', which can create further issues with retention of practice educator who feel unable to continue in their role once they reach management level.

Recommendation 6: Workload relief and protected time

Participants repeatedly emphasised the challenges in managing their caseload alongside their work as a practice educator (see chapter 2.3). As one practice educator summarised, organisations need to start 'recognising the time and effort student placement takes and providing time within the day job to do it'. A number of participants spoke of their intention to discontinue practice education due to the lack of workload relief. They also expressed concerns that their work with students, while important, was often at the detriment of their work with service users and their life outside of work:

So, it's work to the detriment of our other work. Or you're doing your work when work time has ended ... during my personal time (Breakout room, Focus group 4)

Practice educators therefore felt that protected time was essential and identified that they would welcome workload reduction 'with teeth'; they were keen for any future regulation around practice education to designate a specific amount of protected time per student. It was felt that this would create a fairer and more consistent experience for practice educators across England and would reduce the risk of local variation meaning that some experienced practice educators become 'lost to the system'. As with other recommendations, the twin issues of recognition and moving away from variable, localised approaches underpinned the desire for standardised protected time and workload.

Practice educators' recommendations for the future of practice education system in England

- Registration of practice educators to increase recognition and parity with BIA and AMHP roles
- Fair and consistent remuneration for the practice educator role
- Standardisation of placement paperwork between course providers and in respect of professional standards
- Changes to practice educator qualification/training to include specific training on neurodiversity and global majority perspectives
- Progression opportunities, such as experienced or advanced practitioner within the practice educator role
- Mandated, standardised workload relief and protected time for practice educators

Practice education in England: SWOT analysis

4.2 Strengths

There are a number of strengths within the current practice education system. Throughout the consultation, the dedication of the practice education workforce – including those who are not practice educators but who are involved within the system – has been impressive. Practice educators are passionate about supporting students and advancing the social work profession. The level of participation within the consultations suggests that they want to speak up for the importance of their role and have a voice in future conversations.

Strengths of the practice education system

- Practice education in social work is underpinned by a passionate and motivated workforce. On the whole, practice educators feel very positive about their role, viewing it as integral to social work profession
- The current system allows for a degree of creativity and innovation at local level, which enables responsiveness to local issues
- There appears to be a good inflow of new practice educators into the system; in some areas, practice educators identified substantial waiting lists for practicing social workers to undertake practice educator training

- There are many pockets of effective support for practice educators; this support usually consists of practice educator-specific training, fora and workshops
- There is support amongst stakeholders for the Professional Capabilities Framework as a framework that is useful, intuitive, and that fits well with the knowledge, skills, and values of the profession
- Despite aspects of practice education being localised and variable, there are considerable areas of consistency across the system in terms of how practice learning is delivered, supported, and assessed

4.3 Practice education in England: weaknesses

Throughout the process of reviewing materials and undertaking the consultation, it has been clear that one weakness of the practice education system is the lack of national oversight and the challenges that this creates for achieving a clear picture of the practice educator population. A number of the strengths identified above are applicable to their local context, and whilst strengths were highlighted in a number of local contexts, it is difficult to say with any certainty how applicable they are at a national level. For example, whilst some areas have significant waiting times for social workers to undertake practice educator training because of high demand, it is feasible that in other areas there are insufficient practice educators to meet the demands of local qualifying programmes. Maintaining the practice educator workforce at a sufficient level – whilst not always presented as a current difficulty – was a consistent worry for stakeholders.

Weaknesses in the practice education system

- There is no national oversight of practice educator, meaning that there is no accurate record of numbers or their demographic characteristics
- This makes it difficult to gain a clear picture of sufficiency and diversity issues in the current workforce
- The provision of practice learning, support, and assessment is highly localised and therefore prone to variability in quality, capacity, and consistency
- Information about practice education provision is often held by a small number of key individuals; in many instances, it is one individual within one organisation who holds information about practice educators in the area

- Lack of consistency – particularly in respect of remuneration and paperwork – is a source of frustration for practice educators and placement providers
- In some areas, there is a lack of appropriate CPD opportunities for practice educators
- Practice educators do not always receive effective support, particularly in relation to failing or borderline students, requirements for reasonable adjustments, or issues of discrimination
- Practice educators from global majority backgrounds report being underrepresented within the practice educator population
- Linking the practice educator role to organisational career progression can lead individuals to become practice educators as a ‘stepping stone’ to promotion. This can have a detrimental effect on retention and student experience

4.4 Practice education in England: opportunities

During the consultation, practice educators readily identified clear opportunities to change the practice education system for the better. There was a sense of optimism that the strengths of the practice educator population could be harnessed to create a robust and sustainable workforce. One opportunity that was unanimously agreed on by all stakeholders was for practice education to be better recognised, and a range of measures were suggested to ensure the value of practice educators’ role within the profession is seen and heard.

Opportunities for the practice education system

- To increase recognition, the practice educator role could be put on an equal footing with AMHPs and BIAs with annotation on the Social Work England register
- This would provide an overview of the practice educator population, including numbers of practice educator nationally and regionally, and of the demographics of the workforce
- Registration of practice educators with Social Work England would also enable the development of practice educator-specific CPD requirements, something that participants from all groups would welcome

- There is a desire for greater governance in respect of workload relief, protected time, and remuneration for practice educators, which could be addressed through national regulation of practice education
- There is appetite to simplify processes relating to practice education; in particular, stakeholders are keen for practice assessment to involve a single assessment framework and standardised paperwork
- Practice educators and other stakeholders would welcome greater support for practice educator and students from underrepresented and minoritised groups; this could be in the form of training, support networks, and financial support to facilitate reasonable adjustments
- Local examples of best practice – e.g. where local authorities have dedicated practice learning teams or where practice educator are actively included in course provider programmes and processes – can help to inform national guidelines around practice education
- Retention of practice educators could be supported through the creation of career progression routes related specifically to practice education

4.5 Practice education in England: threats

This research has identified some vulnerabilities within the current practice education system. Practice educators in the consultation highlighted a range of risk factors which, if unaddressed, could lead to a retention crisis. Challenges are also posed by the highly localised approaches to the delivery of practice education.

Threats to the practice education system

- The practice educator workforce, and particularly the highly-experienced independent workforce, may ‘age out’ of the role. Practice educators across all groups were concerned that there are insufficient incentives to attract new practice educators to replace them
- The lack of a national register of practice educator makes it difficult to get a sense of where there may be sufficiency and capacity issues within the system
- A key threat to practice educators working in organisations is the pressure created by ever-increasing workloads, exacerbated by the recruitment and retention crisis in social work. This

creates a risk that some practice educators may be unable to continue to offer placements or have reduced capacity to fully meet students' needs

- Many practice educators, especially independent practice educators, report that remuneration is a significant disincentive to continuing in the role with potential impacting on workforce retention
- The cost-of-living crisis is impacting practice educators both directly (in terms of insufficient remuneration) and indirectly (when supporting students affected by cost of living issues, such as learning to drive)
- There are multiple potential single points of failure within the current practice education system; the management of information and implementation of processes are overly-reliant on key individuals
- The localised nature of the provision of practice education risks variability in the quality and sufficiency of placements and practice learning opportunities for students
- Patchy opportunities for support and professional development risk practice educators losing currency in their knowledge and skills, creating a disincentive to remaining in the role and risking poor practice from practice educators whose knowledge and skills are not current
- Insufficient support of practice educators and students from underrepresented groups risks social work not being the inclusive and supportive profession that it should be
- Practice educators highlighted that, without careful planning, increased hybrid working could represent a threat to student learning (e.g. through reducing opportunities for vicarious learning opportunities in the office)

Conclusion

This scoping review, carried out by the University of East Anglia and Research in Practice, has provided an overview of practice learning and education in England. The research consisted of a review of the existing literature on practice education, a desktop analysis of handbooks from qualifying programmes, a survey of placement providers, a large-scale consultation of practice educators across England, and focus groups with qualifying social work course and placement providers. The review identified six key recommendations for change and a provided a SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) of the current practice education system.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Participant information and consent: practice educator focus groups

Shaping the future of practice education in England: a national scoping review

The University of East Anglia (UEA) have been commissioned by Social Work England to undertake a national review of practice education and learning in social work. In this part of the project UEA are working in partnership with Research in Practice.

You are invited to take part in this research because you are a practice educator with experience in supporting students on the qualifying programmes in social work. We are interested in your experiences of supporting students and your views on the needs and future regulation of the practice educator workforce.

What will happen if I agree to take part in the research?

You will be asked to take part in focus group which will consist of approximately 50 practice educators. The focus group will last 2 hours, will take place online via Microsoft Teams and will be facilitated by Research in Practice.

During the focus group, you will be invited to share your experiences of practice education in small breakout groups. The group will then work together to generate key themes for discussion. Topics will include (all of the following): your motivations to become a practice educator, your experiences of supporting students and the challenges and needs of the practice educator workforce.

What are the benefits of taking part?

Your contribution will help to us to understand the support needs of practice educators and the challenges and rewards of the role. Social Work England will use the findings to inform and enhance their support of practice educators. More broadly, your contribution will help to increase understanding of when, why and how social workers decide to stay or leave the practice educator role. In addition, the focus group will provide you with a space to share your knowledge of this topic with other practice educators, which you may find useful.

Do I have to participate? Can I change my mind later?

You do not have to participate in the research, participation is voluntary. In the unlikely event that you feel uncomfortable during the group you may leave at any time or choose to take a break. The facilitators will be available after the group to discuss any concerns.

You can also contact us after the event by email via events@researchinpractice.org.uk if you would prefer. You are free to withdraw from the study itself up to two weeks after the focus group has taken place. You can do this by contacting events@researchinpractice.org.uk.

If you withdraw from the study your verbal or chat responses will not be used in the final analysis. Additionally, any responses given by other participants which mention your contribution will also be deleted. After two weeks it will not be possible to withdraw the data as analysis will have started and the data will have been anonymised. Information added to Miro or Jamboards is anonymous, so we cannot be removed.

Confidentiality

Focus groups involve gathering information from multiple participants. We ask those attending to respect [Chatham House Rules](#), so that information disclosed during a meeting may be reported by those present, but the source of that information may not be explicitly or implicitly identified. This will be explained at the start of the session. If any confidential information arises during the focus group (which could identify, or potentially identify, particular families anyone is working with, students or colleagues) these will be deleted before transcription takes place. If identifying information is disclosed during the group, participants will be reminded of the confidentiality clause.

During the focus group, you will be invited to share your own practice experiences and views. It is important to be sensitive and respectful towards other participants' views. As stated above, confidentiality will be maintained as far as possible. However, should information be obtained during the focus group indicating either serious risk to the participant or service users, or breaches of professional regulations, this information would need to be passed on. In the unlikely event that this should occur, the decision to pass on information would be discussed with you where possible.

How will my contribution be used?

A video-recording of the session will be transcribed (written up as a Word document) and comments from the chat downloaded. Any identifying details will be removed or changed. The data will be written-up into reports, presentations and other academic publications. No data will be used that allows participants to be identified.

Social Work England have commissioned this research. The UEA team will provide a report on the findings to Social Work England. In this report, we will alter, remove and/or anonymise any responses which could reveal your identity, other professionals or service users.

How will data be stored?

All data will be stored in accordance with the principles of the [GDPR 2018](#) and in line with UEA Privacy Policy.

Video files will be transferred by Research in Practice to UEA using secure method. A third-party transcription service (with which UEA has a GDPR-compliant Data Processor Agreement) will be used to convert video files into a word document. Video files will be destroyed after transcription has taken place by UEA and Research in Practice. The transcribed files and chat files will be anonymised and contain no personal or identifying details.

Any documents which link participants to their data will be destroyed at the end of the project by UEA and Research in Practice.

Consent

At the beginning of the focus group, the researcher will check that you understand the information on this sheet and consent to take part in the focus group according to the terms set out above.

The research team

This evaluation is led Drs Laura Cook and Mark Gregory at the University of East Anglia. Focus groups sessions will be led by Dr Danielle Turney with support from Research in Practice staff and UEA staff to facilitate breakout room discussions, a research associate from Research in Practice and a research intern from UEA.

Contact information

For all enquiries about focus groups or this project please contact Ali Huntley, who will be able to forward your enquiry to the relevant member of the research team:

Ali Huntley: events@researchinpractice.org.uk

School of Social Work, University of East Anglia, NR4 7TJ

If you want to talk to someone external to the project, you can contact Professor Christine Cocker, Head of the School of Social Work, UEA: c.cocker@uea.ac.uk.

Please tick each of the following boxes to indicate your consent.

1. I have read and understood the information sheet and have taken the time, if needed, to ask any questions and receive satisfactory answers to these questions.
2. My participation is voluntary, and I know that I am free to withdraw, without the need to explain why, at any time during the focus group and up to two weeks after its conclusion.
3. I know that no personal information about myself that could be used to identify me will be shared outside of the research team or published in the final report(s) from this research.
4. I understand that the data collected from this focus group will be converted into a Word file without any personally identifying data and any audio recordings will be destroyed after transcription.
5. I agree to take part in the above study

Appendix B: Practice educator focus group schedule

Activity/ Question	Minutes
Greeting and introduction to session – consent	5 mins
1. What motivated you to become a PE and why do you continue to do it?	
Collate views on Jamboard (explain first)	10 mins
Breakout rooms	15 mins
Feedback to main room	10 mins
2. What makes an effective PE?	
Collate views on Jamboard	10 mins
Breakout rooms	15 mins
Feedback to main room	10 mins
3. Hopes for the future of PE?	
Collate views on Jamboard	10 mins
Breakout rooms	15 mins
Feedback to main room and general discussion	15 mins
Thanks and close	5 mins

Appendix C: Jamboard activity examples

1. What motivated me to become a PE?

Opportunity to share my learning and promote good practice.	Now after 25 years I hope that my work improves the placement experiences for all.	Share my knowledge, ways of working, challenge myself.	Having a good PE myself.	Had an excellent PE for my final placement.	To help encourage students to have a good experience.
To gain skills and variety without having to move jobs.	As a mature student myself I am passionate about social worker education and providing a positive placement and opportunities for others.	Had a great PE and wanted to pass that on	I wanted to keep my learning up to date and share my experience with the next generation of sws. I enjoy the variety of working with students – always a new issue/learning.	Wanting to give a good learning opportunity to students.	Being passionate about the role of a social worker and the desire for others to succeed
Became a PE as had one placement in my employment and 1x in statutory setting and really wished to gain greater experience of placement facilitation to expand my practice and knowledge.	My own personal Seemed a natural progression.	What motivates me to carry on being a PE is the enjoyment I get from watching a student grow into an autonomous SW, and the positive impact it has on my learning and development.	I enjoy helping and learning from others.	An opportunity to earn a little bit more money in my role without getting a pay rise.	My own personal Seemed a natural progression.
Keeping my hands in with social work education and what is going on in education and the wider sector.	As an independent PE I stay connected to various areas of social work practice.	To help develop the upcoming work force, support them to be good social workers for children and families we work with.	Enjoying working for the organisation, I wanted to encourage others to see the voluntary sector as a good job opportunity.	I wanted the option to invest in social workers	So rewarding to see your student in practice – bringing fresh ideas and challenging status quo

To give someone the good experience of placement that I was lucky enough to have when I was a student	Having a supportive PE myself interest in theory and practice and discussing this in supervision/developing my own knowledge	To be self-aware so that I can tailor my approach in a reciprocal manner. Having empath, good listener and up to date with knowledge	Mum was a nurse tutor – seeing her prepare lectures etc planted the seed when I was young. I had good teachers and a good PE when I was training as a SW	Continue with my own development	CPD opportunity
Opportunity to encourage students to work in my area of social work to improve the pipeline of applicants	Persuaded by my original PE to train and then take her job!	I had a really good PR in my final placement many years ago...they really shaped some fundamental thinking and SW identity	Share good practice	To create capacity in our team	Practice Education Development Lead – ESCAEnjoy the journey of learning for all involved, good and challenging
Improve quality of practice via role modelling and education	Have always been interested in sharing knowledge and training others	Wanting to ensure good placement opportunities for students	Share my passion for social work	Opportunity to share good practice	The chance to shape practice for future social workers, hoping that this could impact positively for lots more families that I could work with on my own
Wanted to be part of ensuring students enter the profession with a good standard of skills and knowledge	I wanted to become a PE to support other social workers training and to ensure my continual development keeping on top of current theory and thinking	I loved my experience of uni and saw it as an opportunity to remain part of the process. I also feel it's an essential role in terms of protecting the profession	I enjoy teaching and supporting learners and wanted to use the opportunity to share my skills, knowledge as well as my learning journey in order to promote good practice	Wanting further training	What motivates me to be a PE was the positive experience I had from my PE and how that supported me to learn and become a good social worker

2. What makes me want to continue being a PE?

Supportive and approachable	Constructively challenging especially regarding values biases etc	Passionate about raising standards in social care	Gives me opportunities beyond my normal day to day, to engage with students and the university to help where I can to give students a rich training experience	Helps keep me up to date with theories, research, etc. Very much a 2 way process and always learn from the student
Keep enhancing both my social work and practice educator knowledge	Preparation and planning before taking on a SSW within the team	I enjoy teaching good practice and passing this on. All my students at LCC have continued employment with the organisation	Financial incentive does also help!	Keep enhancing both my social work and PE knowledge in order to improve our practice
Being able to share knowledge and support students in a positive working environment	I want to support students to have a realistic view and support later staff retention	Helps to keep me going!	Gives students a great placement and I enjoy seeing progress	Helps me keep up to date with day-to-day processes within teams – e.g. panels, local resources
It's part of our commitment as social workers to support the learning of others (PCF9)	Continuous learning in practice	Enjoy supporting students	To try to enthuse others in the way I was enthused at the start of my career	I learn new things from students and keep up to date
To keep myself up to date on latest theory and research	I feel that stage approaches/concerns meetings can be better and seek to ensure each HEII work with their process is undertaken	Motivate social workers to challenge and innovate	To support students and new practitioners to enhance their skills. Provide on-going support to my team and service	To give the students the opportunity to see social work in a non-stat setting

3. What makes an effective PE?

To have good knowledge and understanding of the student journey and how to get the best from a student	Being experienced, emotionally available, physically present, approachable, kind, understanding, organised	Good Listening and communication skills	Supportive to student, enables student to work with whole team, provide safe, challenging space for student to go outside of their comfort zone and learn, using the academic learning	Recognition of the importance of time management and organisational skills
Being able to manage cultural differences	Open to different learning styles	Being open to new ideas and learn yourself	Providing valuable experiences and not using the student for covering tasks	Being approachable and empathetic to a students' needs
Being proactive	Adaptable to different learning styles and opportunities	Knowledgeable and experienced, approachable, flexible, time, committed to the role, passionate about SW, not scared to fail someone if required, organised, sound values & Ethics	Timely and honest feedback	Approachable and honest, being able to deliver feedback according to the students needs/understanding
Enthusiasm for social work and student development	Empathy Advocate	Approachable, friendly, kind, caring, nurturing	Being able to take time to nurture a student	Give the opportunity to grow, don't sit on their shoulder
PEs should constantly look for ways to improve students' experience of placement. Need to be reflective about own practice	Being a good role model and modelling best and good practice standards	Ability to provide good and bad feedback constructively	Genuine interest and passion in developing practitioners	Able to have difficult conversations
Patience Time	Being passionate about being a social worker	Emotionally supportive being approachable	Offers reflection both formally and informally	Seeking help when needed and not struggling to trying to resolve on their own

Proactive in planning for having a SSW, working with their team, prep for placement meeting, planning induction and attending forums and workshops	Being able to adapt to the different learning styles and needs of students	Being organised regarding observations and paperwork so that the student isn't getting stressed by things not happening	Able to step back and facilitate others critical reflections rather than fix	Knowledgeable, kind and compassionate
Helping students hypothesise and link knowledge to practice	Good communication skills	Commitment, compassion and supportive	Must be flexible enough to work with all personality types	Knowledgeable, experienced, confident, open, good communicator, good relationships with team(s)
Good PE should be experienced and confident in their practice. They should have the ability to teach and mentor, with good supervisory skills. They should also be able to quality	Being present and available	Good knowledge of theory to practice	Commitment for placement learning and development	Knowing when things aren't going well, seeking support to take action and then taking the appropriate and supportive action

4. Hopes, ideas for practice education and key messages for Social Work England

Hopes			Ideas		
Leadership – SWE to oversee the courses and portfolios, standardise these so everyone is completing the same PEPs and student portfolios	For PE role to be recognised by SWE	Greater recognition Better support from universities	PE given parity with AMPH and BIA	PE role more accountable but having feedback from universities etc, about the quality of their work	Specialist PE supervision to be available
More PE support groups with peers	That it becomes an acknowledged and valued role	That the role of PE is acknowledged and there is greater recognition and support for PE's	More creative and progressive roles for PE's who are interested in progressing people. For example, trainers for NQSW doing ASYE's and good progressive routes	More support/guidance on how to assess students accurately/clarity on what is enough evidence to meet PCFs	Standardised paperwork
PE will be recognised as important a role as AMHP & BIA work	Refresher training/courses regularly available	More time to focus on the PE role	More PE specific training to be offered locally/nationally (for qualified PEs)	Clear toolkit of resources for PE's to standardised approaches and key learning essential for social work practice	SWE to register SW students and put PE accreditation on our entry in the register
That we celebrate our roles: that we continue to have fantastic SWs and PEs...despite challenges. Today have been so positive, hearing about PEs values and motivation	Recognition, balance of workload, and paid for that extra role they do	Recognition of the importance of the role in the future of the profession	All routes into SW to use the same paperwork and have the same requirements in terms of student observations etc	Modelling of resources during PE training e.g. theory cards, postcards, values exercises	Peer support and feedback

For practice educators to have same recognition as other develops such as AMHP etc	Reduced case load from management when undertaking PE role. This should also be based on students needs. For example, if a student has additional needs	More recognition for the role both within social work and within society – promoting more people to want to come into the role	PE given allocated time to complete the course, portfolio and undertake the role & get rewarded for doing this	To celebrate PE's, they are key organisations and the future of SW, to be given recognition of what can be a tough but worthwhile role	Move away from use of Teams/Zoom for placement meetings, particularly during times of concerns or placement struggles
Key Messages SWE			Key Messages System		
Confirmed workload relief for PE's that employers must adhere to	Workload relief to be consistent	Annotate role to SWE	No more frameworks of assessment!	PEPS refresh is set too high and doesn't reflect the realities of PE	PE vital role in student sw learning and more resource needs devoting to this as part of recruitment and retention of SWs on a structural level by SWE, DHSC etc
More training in supervision techniques	SWE to also respond to PE re implication for fitness to practice to again reinforce accountability and responsibility	ASYE assessors must be PEs	A PE team or PE support team is important... gives a space for practice education – need the organisation to have education and learning as a fundamental part	The PE role is often marginalised and should be more central to SW training	Without good PE's you don't get good newly qualified social workers who are going to continue the high standard of the profession
Protected caseloads (percentage) for PEs to factor time it takes to do role	Workload relief to be mandatory and recognised by SWE	PE to be offered as a SWE annotation like BIA/AMHP	Rate of pay for PE's to be taken up with Government funding for SSW courses, that pay for expenses as this has not changed for many years	Importance of PE role in providing robust support and assessment is crucial to good social work practice and raising professional standards	All NQSW assessors should be qualified PE or PE in training to standardise learning outcomes and assessment frameworks and ASYE Assessors paid for this commitment

<p>PE to be recognised status like AMHP/BIA</p>	<p>Increase daily placement fee and campaign to increase sw student bursary</p>	<p>Linked to registration and CPD</p>	<p>A PE team would be so beneficial, rather than just one person trying to do it for the whole service</p>	<p>Covid is sometimes starting to feel like an excuse for not having team approaches to practice and educating students/NQSWs – a focus on brining SWs back to the office would...</p>	
<p>SWE to produce more Podcasts, tools for practice to support PE learning and development</p>	<p>Can we agree to assess against the SWE professional standards only. Instead, we have to still use PCF's and KSS. If the SWE standards are what we will be measured against the...</p>	<p>Amalgamate PCF's SWE Professional Standards and KSS/PQS</p>			
<p>Caseloads to be reduced, it is really hard to support a student when you have lots of work to do</p>	<p>Restore the 20% protected time for PEs PE refresher or evidence of competency linked to registration/PD</p>	<p>SWE to put greater value on face-to-face meetings to support learning environment in response to HEI involvement in placement collaborative approach</p>			

Appendix D: Participant information sheet: practice educator interviews

Practice education in England: a national scoping review

The University of East Anglia have been commissioned by Social Work England to undertake a national review of practice education and learning. **You have been invited to take part in this research because you are a practice educator with experience in supporting students on the qualifying programmes in social work.** We are interested in your experiences of supporting students and your views on the needs and future regulation of the practice educator workforce. We are particularly interested in hearing the views of practice educators (PEs) from underrepresented groups, such as global majority PEs, LGBTQ+ PEs and practice educators with a disability.

What will happen if I agree to take part in the research?

Your participation will consist of a one-off interview. The interview will take place via telephone or online at a time convenient for you. The interview will take a maximum of 45 minutes but may take less than this. During the interview, we will invite you to share your experiences of supporting students as a practice educator. We will also ask your views about how practice educators can be better supported in their role. The interviewer will take an audio-recording of the interview.

What are the benefits of taking part?

Your contribution will help to us to understand the support needs of practice educators, the challenges and rewards of the role. Social Work England will use the findings to inform and enhance their support of practice education. More broadly, your contribution will help to increase our understanding of when, why and how social workers decide to take up, stay in, or leave the practice educator role. In addition, the interview will provide you with a space to reflect on your development as a practice educator, which you may find useful.

Do I have to participate? Can I change my mind later?

You do not have to participate in the research. If you do decide to take part, you can ask that the interview be stopped or paused at any time. You are free to withdraw from the study up to two weeks after the interview has taken place. You can do this by contacting the team at UEA. After two weeks it will not be possible to withdraw the data as analysis will have started and the data will have been anonymised.

Confidentiality

As stated above, confidentiality will be maintained as far as possible. However, should information be obtained during the interview process indicating either serious risk to you or others, or breaches of professional regulations, this information would need to be passed on. In the very unlikely event that this should occur, the decision to pass on information would be discussed with you wherever possible.

How will my contribution be used?

An audio-recording of the session will be transcribed (written up as a Word document). Any identifying details will be removed or changed. The data will be written-up into reports, presentations and other academic publications. No data will be used that allows participants to be identified. Social Work England have commissioned this research. The UEA team will provide a report on the broader findings from the study to Social Work England. In this report, we will alter, remove and/or anonymise any responses which could reveal the identity of participants, other professionals or service users.

How will data be stored?

All data will be stored in accordance with the principles of the GDPR 2018. A third-party transcription service (with which UEA has a GDPR-compliant Data Processor Agreement) may be used to convert audio files into a word document. Audio files will be destroyed after transcription has taken place. The transcribed files will be anonymised and contain no personal or identifying details. Any documents which link participants to their data will be destroyed at the end of the project.

Consent

At the beginning of the focus group, the researcher will check that you understand the information on this sheet and consent to take part in the interview according to the terms set out above.

The research team

This evaluation is led by Dr Laura Cook at the University of East Anglia. This national project has been granted ethical approval from the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) and the UEA Research Ethics Committee. Data collection will be assisted by a research associate (details below).

Contact information

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Thomas Butt: t.butt@uea.ac.uk

School of Social Work, University of East Anglia, NR4 7TJ

If you want to talk to someone external to the project, you can contact Professor Christine Cocker, Head of the School of Social Work, UEA: c.cocker@uea.ac.uk.

Appendix E: Practice educator interview schedule

Introduction

- Greeting and introductions
- Check whether participant has read the information sheet. If they did, do they have any questions?
- Seek informed consent using key prompts on the information sheet
- Brief overview of project aims
- Confirm that they understand, consent and are happy to be recorded

Collect demographic information

- Can you tell me how long you've been a qualified social worker?
- How long have you been a PE?
- How many students have you had as a PE (estimate is fine) and how many do you currently have?
- If you are comfortable to, could you please share your gender and ethnicity?
- Are you happy to share any other protected characteristics?

Questions

- How did you first get involved in social work? What interested you?
- How did you become a PE and what motivated you to take on the role?
- For you, what are the main motivations for remaining a PE?
- What common challenges have you encountered during your time as a PE? (Can you give me an example of that?)
- In your view, and/or experience, do social workers from minoritised groups (refer to protected characteristics as relevant to the participant) face additional barriers to becoming being a PE? (If appropriate - could you please give an example?)
- What support do you receive from your LA in terms of your role as a PE? (Probes: What could be improved, do you have CPD opportunities in relation to the role?)
- Do you receive any support specific to your protected characteristic? How might this be improved?
- Do you feel valued as a PE? (If not why? What would help you to feel more valued?)
- How have you found working with the student's qualifying course providers (e.g. HEI)
- What are your views on the existing standards and training requirements for PEs?
- In your view, what could be changed at a policy or regulatory level to support you in your PE role?
- Have you supported a student who has been deemed borderline or at risk of failing their practice placement? If so, can you tell me about this briefly?

Debrief

That is all the questions I have for today. Is there anything we haven't covered that you'd like to add?

Any worries or concerns about anything we've talked about today? (Signpost if necessary)

Thanks for taking part.

Appendix F: Participant information sheet: course provider focus group



Practice education in England: a national scoping review

The University of East Anglia have been commissioned by Social Work England to undertake a national review of practice education and learning. **You have been invited to take part in this research because your institution delivers social work qualifying programmes.** We are interested in your experiences of supporting qualifying students, your work with practice educators and your views on the needs and future regulation of practice learning.

What will happen if I agree to take part in the research?

You will be asked to take part in focus group which will consist of approximately 10-12 course providers (including HEI's and independent providers). The focus group will last 60-90 minutes and will take place online via Microsoft Teams and will be facilitated by researchers at the University of East Anglia. During the focus group, you will be invited to share your experiences of assessing practice learning on qualifying social work programmes. Topics will include: the practice learning curriculum, assessment of practice learning, quality assurance of placements and the recruitment and retention of practice educators.

What are the benefits of taking part?

Your contribution will help to us to understand the support needs of practice educators and the challenges and rewards of the role. Social Work England will use the findings to inform and enhance their support of practice education and learning. More broadly, your contribution will help capture the range of approaches and models for the assessment of practice learning in social work. In addition, the focus group will provide you with a space to share your knowledge of this topic with other course providers, which you may find useful. You will also have the option to receive a copy of the findings when the research is complete.

Do I have to participate? Can I change my mind later?

You do not have to participate in the research, participation is voluntary. In the unlikely event that you feel uncomfortable during the group you may leave at any time or choose to take a break. The facilitators will be available after the group to discuss any concerns. You can also contact the researcher after the event via telephone or email if you would prefer. You are free to withdraw from the study itself up to two weeks after the focus group has taken place. You can do this by contacting the researcher. If you withdraw from the study your responses will not be used in the final analysis. Additionally, any responses given by other participants which mention your contribution will also be deleted. After two weeks it will not be possible to withdraw the data as analysis will have started and the data will have been anonymised.

Confidentiality

Focus groups involve gathering information from multiple participants. We ask those attending to respect Chatham House Rules, so that information disclosed during a meeting may be reported by those present, but the source of that information may not be explicitly or implicitly identified. This will be explained at the start of the session. If any confidential information arises during the focus group (which could identify, or potentially identify, particular cases) these will be deleted before transcription takes place. If identifying information is disclosed during the group, participants will be reminded of the confidentiality clause. During the focus group, you will be invited to share your own practice experiences and views. It is important to be sensitive and

respectful towards other participants' views. As stated above, confidentiality will be maintained as far as possible. However, should information be obtained during the focus group indicating either serious risk to the participant or service users, or breaches of professional regulations, this information would need to be passed on. In the unlikely event that this should occur, the decision to pass on information would be discussed with you where possible.

How will my contribution be used?

An audio-recording of the session will be transcribed (written up as a Word document). Any identifying details will be removed or changed. The data will be written-up into reports, presentations and other academic publications. No data will be used that allows participants to be identified. Social Work England have commissioned this research. The UEA team will provide a report on the findings to Social Work England. In this report, we will alter, remove and/or anonymise any responses which could reveal your identity, other professionals or service users.

How will data be stored?

All data will be stored in accordance with the principles of the GDPR 2018. A third-party transcription service (with which UEA has a GDPR-compliant Data Processor Agreement) will be used to convert audio files into a word document. Audio files will be destroyed after transcription has taken place. The transcribed files will be anonymised and contain no personal or identifying details. Any documents which link participants to their data will be destroyed at the end of the project.

Consent

At the beginning of the focus group, the researcher will check that you understand the information on this sheet and consent to take part in the focus group according to the terms set out above.

The research team

This evaluation is led Drs Laura Cook and Mark Gregory at the University of East Anglia. Data collection will be assisted by a research associate and a research intern, details below.

Contact information

Laura Cook: l.cook@uea.ac.uk

Mark Gregory: mark.gregory@uea.ac.uk

Thomas Butt: t.butt@uea.ac.uk

School of Social Work, University of East Anglia, NR4 7TJ

If you want to talk to someone external to the project, you can contact Professor Christine Cocker Head of School of Social Work: christine.cocker@uea.ac.uk

Please sign to indicate you have read and consent to the following:

1. I have read and understood the information sheet on the previous page
2. My participation is voluntary, and I know that I am free to withdraw, without the need to explain why, at any time during the focus group and up to two weeks after its conclusion.
3. I know that no personal information about myself that could be used to identify me will be shared outside of the research team or published in the final report(s) from this research.
4. I understand that the data collected from this focus group will be converted into a Word file without any personally identifying data, and any audio recordings will be destroyed after transcription.
5. I understand that should I disclose anything indicating either serious risk to the participant or service users, or breaches of professional regulations, this information would need to be passed on.

6. I agree to take part in the above study

Signature:

Date

Appendix G: Course provider focus group schedule

Welcome

Introduction

Overview of the research. Participants have provided consent, but revisit terms of participation to ensure they understand purpose of research and consent to recording.

Housekeeping

Introduction to the team

Outline Chatham House Rules

Describe how to participate via the Teams 'raise hand' feature and clarify use of the chat section

Ask participants to introduce themselves the first time they respond

Questions

- What are the challenges of assessing practice learning on your qualifying programmes

(Have these promoted any innovative changes to the qualifying programmes? How have the qualifying programmes developed overtime (if they have changed)?)

- How do you work with PEs to ensure students meet the practice requirements?

(Do you have any performance reviews throughout the placement? What are your practice requirements? How are the students assessed?)

- What is your process for addressing concerns in placement?

(Who is responsible for identifying these issues?)

- What is your student/PE matching process and how have you developed this over time?

(Has the matching process been a success? If you do not match students and PEs, why? Have you tried to match in the past?)

- How do you recruit and retain PEs to support students on your qualifying programmes? What are the challenges?

(How do you overcome these challenges? Do you work with multiple organisations? What have they done better or worse than others?)

- What are your experiences of working with LA and independent PEs?

(Is one preferred over the other? What are the specific strengths or challenges associated with each?)

- What is your QA process for both placements and PEs?
- Views on future regulation/CPD and registration of PEs
- Do have any final comments or messages to pass on to Social Work England?

Debrief

Thanks for taking part.

Provide information about how to find out about the outcome of the review.

Appendix H: Placement provider online survey

Administered via Qualtrics

Introduction and Consent Form

Practice education in England: a national scoping review

The University of East Anglia have been commissioned by Social Work England to undertake a national review of practice education and learning. You have been selected to undertake the following survey as you are able to provide insight into the numbers and demographics of practice educators (PE) operating within your local authority, trust, or teaching partnership.

What will happen if I agree to take part?

You will be asked to complete a questionnaire focusing on the number and characteristics of practice educators working within your organisation. The survey will take 15-20 minutes and take place via Qualtrics using a questionnaire designed by the research team.

What are the benefits of taking part?

Your contribution will provide valuable insight into the demographics of PEs in England. This will help Social Work England consider how best to target support to aid the recruitment and retention of PEs across England. This survey may also help consolidate your information on practice education in your local authority, trust or teaching partnership. It may also help you identify what information it would be useful for your organisation to collect in the future or highlight demographic gaps in your practice educator workforce.

Do I have to participate? Can I change my mind later?

You do not have to participate in this research. Participation is voluntary. We do not anticipate any of the survey content will cause discomfort. However, if you do begin to feel uncomfortable, you are welcome to take a break or stop filling out the questionnaire entirely. Members of the research team are available via email to answer any questions. You are free to withdraw your data up to two weeks after your response is submitted. Within these two weeks, if you wish to withdraw, contact a member of the research team and your contributions will be removed from the analysis.

Confidentiality

No personal details will be taken. This includes online identifiers such as your IP address. While you are being asked to provide details of PEs, the information will not be used to identify any particular individuals.

How will my contribution be used?

The data will be collated on Qualtrics and transferred into an Excel spreadsheet. The data will be written into reports, presentations, and other academic publications. No data that could identify you or any of the practice educators included in your database will be presented. Social Work England has commissioned this work. The findings will be reported to them by the UEA team.

How will data be stored?

All data will be stored in accordance with the principles of the GDPR 2018. The information from Qualtrics will be transferred into an Excel spreadsheet in a OneDrive folder with access limited to the research team.

Consent

Before beginning this survey, you are required to indicate that you consent to participate in this research. Please fill out the following form and then the survey will begin.

The research team

This review is led by Drs Laura Cook and Mark Gregory at the University of East Anglia. A research associate, Tom Butt, will assist with data collection.

Contact information

Laura Cook: l.cook@uea.ac.uk

Mark Gregory: mark.gregory@uea.ac.uk

Thomas Butt: t.butt@uea.ac.uk

School of Social Work, University of East Anglia, NR4 7TJ. If you wish to talk to someone external to the project you can contact Professor Christine Cocker, Head of School of Social Work, UEA: c.cocker@uea.ac.uk

Please tick each of the following boxes to indicate your consent.

1. I have read and understood the information sheet (located above) and understand that I can contact the research team with any questions via the contact information above. (1)
2. My participation is voluntary, and I know that I am free to withdraw at any time while completing the survey and up to two weeks after I have submitted my responses. (2)
3. I know that no personal information about myself (such as my name or IP address) will be shared outside of the research team or published in the final report(s) from this research. (3)
4. I understand that the data from the survey will be compiled into an excel spreadsheet without any personally identifying data. (4)
5. I agree to take part in the above study (5)

(Page break)

Q18 Which organisation (e.g. local authority, trust or teaching partnership) are you answering on behalf of?

Q41 What is your current role within your organisation?

Q19 Does your local authority/ trust/ teaching partnership keep a record of their practice educators?

- Yes - a database (1)
- Yes - an alternative method of data collection/ organisation (2)
- No (3)

Skip To: Q32 If Does your local authority/ trust/ teaching partnership keep a record of their practice educators? = Yes - an alternative method of data collection/ organisation

Skip To: Q48 If Does your local authority/ trust/ teaching partnership keep a record of their practice educators? = No

Q42 Do you manage the database of practice educators as part of your role within the organisation? (If not, do you know who is responsible for this?)

- Yes (1)
- No - I know who manages the database (please specify their role, rather than name) (2)

- No - I do not know who manages the database (3)

Q33 How often is this database updated? (leave blank if unknown)

Display This Question:

If Does your local authority/ trust/ teaching partnership keep a record of their practice educators? = Yes - an alternative method of data collection/ organisation

Q32 Please describe your alternative method of storing practice educator information (leave blank if unknown)

Display This Question:

If Does your local authority/ trust/ teaching partnership keep a record of their practice educators? = Yes - an alternative method of data collection/ organisation

Q47 Do you manage the alternative storage method as part of your role within the organisation? (if not, do you know who is responsible for this?)

- Yes (1)
- No - I know who manages the alternate storage method (please specify their role, rather than name) (2)

- No - I do not know who manages the alternate storage method (3)

Display This Question:

If Does your local authority/ trust/ teaching partnership keep a record of their practice educators? = No

Q48 Is there any strategy you employ to keep track of the practice educators working within your LA/ trust/ teaching partnership? (leave blank if unknown)

Q34 Does your organisation provide support for practice educators?

- Yes (please add detail) (1) _____
- No (2)
- Prefer not to say (3)

(Page break)

Q2 How many practice educators do you have registered within your organisation?

Q36 How many of these are independent practice educators? (leave blank if unknown)

Q35 Do you have a target for how many practice educators you employ?

- Yes (please specify how many) (1) _____
- No (2)

- o Unknown (3)

Skip To: Q43 If Do you have a target for how many practice educators you employ? = No

Skip To: Q43 If Do you have a target for how many practice educators you employ? = Unknown

Q37 What strategies does your organisation use to achieve a sufficient number of practice educators? (please leave blank if unknown)

Q43 Do you have a limit on how many students a practice educator can take at any one time?

- o Yes (if known, please provide further detail) (1) _____
- o No (2)
- o Unknown (3)

Q3 How many of your registered practice educators are currently supervising students within the local authority/trust/teaching partnership? (leave blank if unknown)

Q44 How are practice educators recognised or rewarded within your organisation? (leave blank if unknown)

Q45 Which Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) do practice educators from your organisation work with?

Q5 Is information on practice educators protected characteristics (gender, disability etc) collected?

- o Yes (1)
- o No (2)

Skip To: Q19 If Is information on practice educators protected characteristics (gender, disability etc) collected? = No

Q10 How many PEs of each gender are there?

Male : _____ (1)

Female : _____ (2)

Non-binary / Other : _____ (3)

Unknown : _____ (4)

Total : _____

Q11 How many PEs of each ethnicity are there?

White British : _____ (1)

White Other : _____ (2)

Black, Black British, Caribbean or African : _____ (3)

Asian or Asian British : _____ (4)

Mixed or multiple ethnic groups : _____ (5)

Other ethnic group : _____ (6)

Unknown : _____ (7)

Total : _____

Q11 How many PEs with a disability are there?

With a disability : _____ (1)

Unknown : _____ (2)

Total : _____

Q46 How many practice educators have caring responsibilities? (leave blank if unknown)

Q19 Do you hold information regarding practice educators' experience and qualifications?

Yes (1)

No (2)

Skip To: Q38 If Do you hold information regarding practice educators' experience and qualifications? = No

Q8 How many PEs have (x) years of experience supporting students?

≤ 1 Years : _____ (1)

1-2 Years : _____ (2)

2-5 Years : _____ (3)

≥ 5 years : _____ (4)

≥ 10 years : _____ (5)

Unknown : _____ (6)

Total : _____

Q9 How many PEs are registered for PEPS 1 and PEPS 2 level placements?

PEPS 1 : _____ (1)

PEPS 1 and PEPS 2 : _____ (2)

Unkown : _____ (3)

Total : _____

Q38 For your organisation, what are the challenges in retaining and supporting a sufficient number of practice educators? (leave blank if unknown)

(Page break)

Q20 Thank you for taking part in this survey. Do you have any final comments or anything else you would like to add? (leave blank if not)

End of Survey

Appendix I: Participant information sheet: placement provider focus group



Practice education in England: a national scoping review

The University of East Anglia have been commissioned by Social Work England to undertake a national review of practice education and learning. **You have been invited to take part in this research because your organisation provides practice placements for qualifying social workers.** We are interested in your experiences of supporting qualifying students, your work with practice educators and your views on the needs and future regulation of practice learning.

What will happen if I agree to take part in the research?

You will be asked to take part in focus group which will consist of approximately 10-12 placement providers (including local authorities and third sector organisations). The focus group will last 60-90 minutes and will take place online via Microsoft Teams and will be facilitated by researchers at the University of East Anglia. During the focus group, you will be invited to share your experiences of providing practice learning on qualifying social work programmes. Topics will include: challenges and opportunities in the provision of practice placements, assessment of practice learning, quality assurance of placements and the recruitment and retention of practice educators.

What are the benefits of taking part?

Your contribution will help to us to understand the support needs of practice educators and the challenges and rewards of the role. Social Work England will use the findings to inform and enhance their support of practice education and learning. More broadly, your contribution will help capture the range of approaches and models for the provision of practice learning in social work. In addition, the focus group will provide you with a space to share your knowledge of this topic with other placement providers, which you may find useful. You will also have the option to receive a copy of the findings when the research is complete.

Do I have to participate? Can I change my mind later?

You do not have to participate in the research, participation is voluntary. In the unlikely event that you feel uncomfortable during the group you may leave at any time or choose to take a break. The facilitators will be

available after the group to discuss any concerns. You can also contact the researcher after the event via telephone or email if you would prefer. You are free to withdraw from the study itself up to two weeks after the focus group has taken place. You can do this by contacting the researcher. If you withdraw from the study your responses will not be used in the final analysis. Additionally, any responses given by other participants which mention your contribution will also be deleted. After two weeks it will not be possible to withdraw the data as analysis will have started and the data will have been anonymised.

Confidentiality

Focus groups involve gathering information from multiple participants. We ask those attending to respect Chatham House Rules, so that information disclosed during a meeting may be reported by those present, but the source of that information may not be explicitly or implicitly identified. This will be explained at the start of the session. If any confidential information arises during the focus group (which could identify, or potentially identify, particular cases) these will be deleted before transcription takes place. If identifying information is disclosed during the group, participants will be reminded of the confidentiality clause. During the focus group, you will be invited to share your own practice experiences and views. It is important to be sensitive and respectful towards other participants' views. As stated above, confidentiality will be maintained as far as possible. However, should information be obtained during the focus group indicating either serious risk to the participant or service users, or breaches of professional regulations, this information would need to be passed on. In the unlikely event that this should occur, the decision to pass on information would be discussed with you where possible.

How will my contribution be used?

An audio-recording of the session will be transcribed (written up as a Word document). Any identifying details will be removed or changed. The data will be written-up into reports, presentations and other academic publications. No data will be used that allows participants to be identified. Social Work England have commissioned this research. The UEA team will provide a report on the findings to Social Work England. In this report, we will alter, remove and/or anonymise any responses which could reveal your identity, other professionals or service users.

How will data be stored?

All data will be stored in accordance with the principles of the GDPR 2018. A third-party transcription service (with which UEA has a GDPR-compliant Data Processor Agreement) will be used to convert audio files into a word document. Audio files will be destroyed after transcription has taken place. The transcribed files will be anonymised and contain no personal or identifying details. Any documents which link participants to their data will be destroyed at the end of the project.

Consent

At the beginning of the focus group, the researcher will check that you understand the information on this sheet and consent to take part in the focus group according to the terms set out above.

The research team

This evaluation is led Drs Laura Cook and Mark Gregory at the University of East Anglia. Data collection will be assisted by a research associate and a research intern, details below.

Contact information

Laura Cook: l.cook@uea.ac.uk

Mark Gregory: mark.gregory@uea.ac.uk

Thomas Butt: t.butt@uea.ac.uk

School of Social Work, University of East Anglia, NR4 7TJ

If you want to talk to someone external to the project, you can contact Professor Christine Cocker Head of School of Social Work: christine.cocker@uea.ac.uk

Focus Group Consent Form

Please sign to indicate you have read and consent to the following:

1. I have read and understood the information sheet on the previous page
2. My participation is voluntary, and I know that I am free to withdraw, without the need to explain why, at any time during the focus group and up to two weeks after its conclusion.
3. I know that no personal information about myself that could be used to identify me will be shared outside of the research team or published in the final report(s) from this research.
4. I understand that the data collected from this focus group will be converted into a Word file without any personally identifying data, and any audio recordings will be destroyed after transcription.
5. I understand that should I disclose anything indicating either serious risk to the participant or service users, or breaches of professional regulations, this information would need to be passed on.
6. I agree to take part in the above study

Signature:

Date

Appendix J: Placement provider focus group schedule

Welcome

Overview of the research. Participants have provided consent, but revisit terms of participation to ensure they understand purpose of research and consent to recording.

Housekeeping

Introduction to the team

Outline Chatham House Rules

Describe how to participate via the Teams 'raise hand' feature and clarify use of the chat section

Ask participants to introduce themselves the first time they respond

Questions

- How do you support and retain practice educators within your organisation?

(What works, what are the challenges, what specific support provided, how are PEs coordinated across your org? How are PEs rewarded and recognised? How do you ensure ongoing development for your PEs?)

- How do social workers in your organisation become PEs?

(How does your organisation facilitate this? How are opportunities to qualify as a PE advertised or allocated?)

- What is your experience of working with HEIs to support student placements?

(How is this managed, how are PEs matched with students, what works & what are the challenges)

- For your organisation, what are the rewards and challenges of offering placements for student social workers?

- What could be changed to better support practice education – both for your org, PEs and students?

(Changes at a local, national and regulatory level)

- What key messages would you like to convey to Social Work England?

Thanks for taking part

Info about how they can find out the outcome of the review.

Appendix K: Ethical approval



Study title: Practice education in England: a national scoping review

Application ID: ETH2223-2577 (significant amendments)

Dear Laura,

Your application was considered on 27th June 2023 by the SWK S-REC (School of Social Work Research Ethics Subcommittee).

The decision is: **approved**.

You are therefore able to start your project subject to any other necessary approvals being given.

This approval will expire on **31st August 2023**.

Please note that your project is granted ethics approval only for the length of time identified above. Any extension to a project must obtain ethics approval by the SWK S-REC (School of Social Work Research Ethics Subcommittee) before continuing.

It is a requirement of this ethics approval that you should report any adverse events which occur during your project to the SWK S-REC (School of Social Work Research Ethics Subcommittee) as soon as possible. An adverse event is one which was not anticipated in the research design, and which could potentially cause risk or harm to the participants or the researcher, or which reveals potential risks in the treatment under evaluation. For research involving animals, it may be the unintended death of an animal after trapping or carrying out a procedure.

Any amendments to your submitted project in terms of design, sample, data collection, focus etc. should be notified to the SWK S-REC (School of Social Work Research Ethics Subcommittee) in advance to ensure ethical compliance. If the amendments are substantial a new application may be required.

Approval by the SWK S-REC (School of Social Work Research Ethics Subcommittee) should not be taken as evidence that your study is compliant with the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018. If you need guidance on how to make your study UK GDPR compliant, please contact the UEA Data Protection Officer (dataprotection@uea.ac.uk).

I would like to wish you every success with your project.

On behalf of the SWK S-REC (School of Social Work Research Ethics Subcommittee)

Yours sincerely,

Georgia Philip.

Chair, Social Work Research Ethics Subcommittee.

Appendix L: Literature review table

Research citation	Aims, sample, and methods	Key findings
<p>Domakin, A. (2015). The Importance of Practice Learning in Social Work: Do We Practice What We Preach?. <i>Social work education, 34(4)</i>, 399–413</p>	<p>Aim(s): To explore concerns of practice educators about limiting factors of their work with students on placement.</p> <p>Sample: 11 practice educators.</p> <p>Method(s): 2 focus groups.</p>	<p>Findings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Absence of workload relief. • Sense of isolation from course providers placing students with them and lack of knowledge about the academic curriculum. • Concerns about the quality of practice learning experiences they could provide to students. • Inconsistency – great variation in daily fee for practice educators • Fitness for practice learning – variations, precarious balance between creative divergence and consistent standards. • Strengthen partnerships between course providers and agencies • Changing roles – of practice educators, course providers, assessors and students.
<p>Higgins, M. (2014). Can practice educators be a 'bridge' between the academy and the practicum?. <i>The Journal of Practice Teaching and Learning, 12(3)</i>, 62-78.</p>	<p>Aim(s): To look more closely at the role of the practice educator in the academy/practicum relationship by adopting a 'signature pedagogies' model.</p> <p>Sample: 48 participants – included academics, practice educators, practice leads, students, and service users.</p> <p>Method(s): Academics (n=10), Practice Educators (n=8), and University Based Practice Leads (n=2) were interviewed. There were 3 focus groups for students (n=17) and 2 focus groups for service users (n=11). Data were analysed using Thematic Analysis.</p>	<p>Findings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The change from Diploma to Degree put more focus on theory as a method for resolving issues. • On placement students became more and more disillusioned by social work as the practice did not seem to fit the ethical ideals that were considered within the university setting • Practice educators are understood as the 'bridge' between education and practice. • They are not caught between two opposing sides; they are on the side of practice. • Development of a critical pedagogy to better close the rift between theory and practice by better understanding the importance for both
<p>Plenty, J., and Gower, D. (2013). The reform of social work practice</p>	<p>Aim(s). To assess the impact of the social work reforms on practice</p>	<p>Findings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practice educators had some reservations about the new frameworks but did get to

<p>education and training and supporting practice educators. <i>The Journal of Practice Teaching and Learning</i>, 12(2), 48-66.</p>	<p>educators.</p> <p>Sample: 48 practice educators.</p> <p>Method(s): Six focus groups and mixed methods questionnaire.</p>	<p>grips with it.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guidance around the new tasks was seen as generally useful for practice educators and they felt that the new process of direct observation along with a portfolio was useful in assessing students. • Practice education workshops were seen as informative and educational – providing excellent learning as well as opportunities for networking.
<p>Stone, C. (2016). The role of Practice Educators in initial and post qualifying social worker education. <i>Social Work Education</i>, 35(6), 706-718.</p>	<p>Aim(s): To explore how practice educators contribute not only to students’ learning through placements but are also invaluable to their learning journey post-qualification.</p> <p>Sample: 17 practice educators.</p> <p>Method(s): Semi-structured interviews and focus group Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis.</p>	<p>Findings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students need a range of knowledge and skills, and need to know what they are doing and why • Additional qualities practice educators recognise in more able students, attitude to learning, emotional intelligence, resilience. • Want students to be motivated to learn, self-directing, recognise and build on prior experience. • Place value on reflective practice for learning and professional development.
<p>Thomas, G. C., Howe, K., and Keen, S. (2010). Supporting black and minority ethnic students in practice learning. <i>The Journal of Practice Teaching and Learning</i>, 10(3), 37-54.</p>	<p>Aim(s) To pilot and evaluate the effectiveness of support mechanisms for black and ethnic minority students on placement.</p> <p>Sample: 1st focus group – 6 participants, all students. 2nd focus group – 4 participants, 3 practice educators, 1 placement supervisor Practice learning conference – 50 (approx.) practice educators, placement supervisors, training officers and university tutors.</p> <p>Method(s): Focus groups, mentor support and a practice learning conference.</p>	<p>Findings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Failure to acknowledge and value diversity; some participants felt more accepted by service users that their PE. • There was a sense of ‘keeping your head down’ and not asking for support. • Students who have English as an additional language also faced a specific barrier due to the complex nature of social work terminology. • Placements should be carefully selected for black or ethnic majority students, especially those with English as an additional language. • More time is needed at the start of placement to make the student feel more comfortable and accepted within the agency. • Celebrating diversity should be an agency wide responsibility, not just on the practice educator.

<p>Lefevre, M. (2005). Facilitating Practice Learning and Assessment: The Influence of Relationship. <i>Social Work Education, 24</i>(5), 565–583</p>	<p>Aim(s): To examine student perceptions of the nature of the relationship between students and practice educators.</p> <p>Sample: 44 social work students.</p> <p>Method(s): Questionnaire with both quantitative and qualitative data. Open and ranking Likert scale questions.</p>	<p>Findings Relationship with PE:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Majority found relationship positive, almost half described at ‘supportive’. Minority reported negative, ‘oppressive’ relationship (13%). • 90% felt relationship had positive impact on learning; constructive relationship key to this. • Role of practice educator in linking theory to practice highlighted. • Students valued being listened to, respected and valued, and trust and safety as being key to relationship-building.
<p>Mathews, I., Simpson, D., Croft, A., Lee, M., and McKinna, G. (2009). <i>Unsung heroes. The Journal of Practice Teaching and Learning, 9</i>(2), 57-71.</p>	<p>Aim(s). The research looks to explore the experiences of students during their placements.</p> <p>Sample: 36 students for questionnaire, 9 students for interviews.</p> <p>Method(s): Questionnaire and semi-structured interviews.</p>	<p>Findings</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • University staff important to placement experience, though placement tutors not always available/responsive. • Placement team provided key opportunities for learning. • Family and friends play important supportive role and relationships with service users were key to learning. • Relationship with practice educator took precedence over other supportive relationships whilst on placement.
<p>Develin, D. and Mathews, I. (2012). What motivates social workers to become practice teachers?. <i>The Journal of Practice Teaching and Learning, 8</i>(1), 18-30</p>	<p>Aims: Motivation of social workers to become practice educators, intrinsic and extrinsic factors.</p> <p>Sample: 50 surveys and 2 focus groups – participant numbers low, but not revealed.</p> <p>Methods: Questionnaire and focus groups.</p>	<p>Findings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desire to shape practice and develop new generation of social workers a key motivator. • Despite some disillusionment, practice educators wanted to ‘give back’ to social work • Experience while on their own placements influenced some respondents, either wanting to do better than their own practice educator, or to model practice on their own practice educator. • Practice educators less motivated by career progression and/or financial reward. • Limited benefits to being a practice educator in terms of organisational recognition and valuing of the role.

<p>Brodie, I. and Coyle, B. (2015). Sustaining partnership working in practice learning: An exploration of the perspectives of practice teachers and students. <i>Journal of Practice Teaching and Learning</i>, 13(2/3), 8-21.</p>	<p>Aim(s): To explore relationships between the university and placement providers.</p> <p>Sample: 35 practice educators for survey. 16 practice educators (n=8) and students (n=8) for interviews.</p> <p>Method(s): Questionnaire and semi-structured telephone interviews. No specifics as to how data were analysed.</p>	<p>Findings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most (94%) satisfied with relationship with university; communication, responsiveness, and good admin support cited as important factors. • Confusing documentation, a reduction in contact with tutors, and need for improved preparation for practice were areas for improvement. • Greater collaboration around problem-solving and clearer guidance and paperwork seen as important ways forward in interview.
<p>Plenty, J., Dix, H. and Barley, L. (2016). Practice Education Network for Social Work (PENSW): Evaluation of an online resource. <i>Journal of Practice Teaching and Learning</i>, 14(3), 81–96</p>	<p>Aims: To explore how easily online networking and sharing resources can be established.</p> <p>Sample: 30 practice educators, 4 on site supervisors, 3 placement providers, 6 academic tutors.</p> <p>Methods: Online questionnaire using a Likert Scale. Further qualitative questions asked participants to elaborate on answers.</p>	<p>Findings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Majority (>90%) of respondents felt resources and workshops were useful for both development and networking and enabled discussion of key topics and sharing best practice. • On-site supervisors not from social work background found resources particularly useful. • Provision of online resources able to be accessed quickly and efficiently helped provide information, support and resources when needed. • Resource was, however, currently under-used.
<p>Bates, C. (2018). What influences practice educators in determining appropriate learning opportunities for social work students on their final practice learning placement?. <i>The Journal of Practice Teaching and Learning</i>, 15(1), 39-62.</p>	<p>Aim(s). To find out from practice educators how they decide on learning opportunities for final placement students and develop a better understanding of the process of supervising students on placement.</p> <p>Sample: 6 practice educators</p> <p>Method(s): Semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis, supported by 'indexing data' framework.</p>	<p>Findings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Person centred approach reflecting student's learning journey/needs used to identify learning opportunities. • Nature of interventions within organisation determine opportunities available to students and could be limiting. • Challenges in understanding professional standards and ensuring standardised experience for students on placement.
<p>Apeah-Kubi, D. (2021). Supervising fast track</p>	<p>Aims: To explore and describe the</p>	<p>Findings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students generally well-prepared and

<p>social work students on placement: Evaluating the experiences of trainee practice educators. <i>Journal of Practice Teaching and Learning</i>, 17(3), 47-63</p>	<p>experiences of trainee practice educators supervising students on a new fast-track postgraduate social work programme</p> <p>Sample: 14 trainee practice educators</p> <p>Methods: Analysis of QAPL form, both quantitative and qualitative and Likert scale questions. Thematic analysis of final 'open text' question.</p>	<p>practice educators happy with placement process</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Concerns that pace of learning was 'too fast' on the fast-track course and may impact preparedness. Important to acknowledge demanding pace of the programme and ensure that time and space is made for reflection on learning.
<p>Henderson, K. J. (2010). Work-based Supervisors: The Neglected Partners in Practice Learning. <i>Social Work Education</i>, 29(5), 490-502.</p>	<p>Aim(s). To explore the use of work-based supervisors (on-site supervisors) supporting students alongside off-site practice educators.</p> <p>Sample: 8 practice educators and 7 on-site supervisors</p> <p>Method(s): Mixed methods, postal survey followed by semi-structured interview.</p>	<p>Findings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Power imbalances between practice educators and on-site supervisors; do similar roles but on-site supervisors feel under-recognised for their work. Some confusion over who is responsible for what at times. Important for to 'match' practice educators and on-site supervisors to support relationship-building and shared experience. Communication key to positive relationships. Need for further support and training for on-site supervisors, particularly those who are not social workers.
<p>Furness, S. and Gilligan, P. (2004). Fit for purpose: issues from practice placements, practice teaching and the assessment of students' practice. <i>Social Work Education</i>, 23(4), 465-479.</p>	<p>Aim(s): Paper aims to explore issues relating to practice education in relation to institution of new social work degree.</p> <p>Sample: 70 practice educators.</p> <p>Method(s): Not stated. Draws on discussions from a conference workshop.</p>	<p>Findings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Challenges in measuring 'good enough' practice; frameworks not well-equipped for doing so. Hard to determine suitability for practice for new entrants. Challenges noted in role of off-site practice educators; need to ensure appropriate matching. Argue for importance of properly funding practice education and ensuring placement sufficiency.
<p>Rawles, J. (2021). How social work students develop the skill of professional judgement: Implications for practice educators. <i>Journal of</i></p>	<p>Aims: To identify how social work students develop the skill of professional judgement while on placement.</p>	<p>Findings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students needed to have responsibility for making judgements and opportunities to develop their professional voice. Practice educators need to provide students with opportunities to make

<p><i>Practice Teaching and Learning</i>, 17(3), 10-30</p>	<p>Sample: 14 social work students.</p> <p>Methods: Semi-structured interviews around 'critical incidents of learning on placement. Hermeneutic phenomenological methodology: hearing, interpreting and analysing students' reflections of experiences on placement.</p>	<p>recommendations, to voice these, and to take responsibility for their own learning.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practice educators provide valuable forum for students to reflect on their learning and the judgements they are making and voicing.
<p>Basnett, F. and Sheffield, D. (2010). The Impact of Social Work Student Failure upon Practice Educators. <i>The British Journal of Social Work</i>, 40(7), 2119–2136.</p>	<p>Aims: To explore the impact of having a failing student on practice educators, using psychological theories related to stress and coping.</p> <p>Sample: 8 practice educators.</p> <p>Methods: Semi-structured interviews, transcribed and then analysed using interpretive phenomenological analysis.</p>	<p>Findings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practice educators reported stress related to failing a student impacted well-being and professional identity. Practice educators often initially saw themselves rather than the student as being the 'problem'. Realising it was a practice issue was a source of stress and anxiety. Support from colleagues and recognising the importance of and feeling confident in the practice educator role enabled positive coping. How concerns were resolved could leave practice educators either feeling validated or invalidated, impacting on sense of professional identity. Uncertainty when decisions were not communicated was a source of worry.
<p>Haworth, S. (2019). Consideration of Practice Education within a Regional Teaching Partnership Employing a Communities of Practice Lens. <i>Practice</i>, 31(3), 163–186.</p>	<p>Aims: To explore how practice education could support and augment the Teaching Partnership's stated aim of developing a 'University at Work' model.</p> <p>Sample: 6 local authorities.</p> <p>Methods: Small scale scoping exercises and face to face interviews within the Teaching Partnership. Not based on systematic data collection.</p>	<p>Findings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of recognition for the status and value of practice education and lack of harnessing benefits of practice education. Organisational context issues hampered practice education. Lack of research into the experiences of PEs and what constitutes effective and valuable practice learning. Examples offered of good practice in practice education that support holistic and deep learning. Need to support and promote practice education within a broader continuing professional development and organisational learning cultures.

<p>Burton, J.E. (2020). Reframing social work practice education: practice educators' perceptions of the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) and the support provided during implementation. <i>Journal of Social Work Practice, 34</i>(1), 39–52</p>	<p>Aims: To explore experiences of practice educators just before and following the implementation of Professional Capabilities Framework.</p> <p>Sample: 12 practice educators.</p> <p>Methods: Small group interviews Individual interviews 6 months later. Thematic analysis of data.</p>	<p>Findings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practice learning is not adequately recognised, despite importance of the relationship established between PE and student to assessment process. • Although Professional Capabilities Framework meant greater depth of assessment of practice, it increased workload pressure for practice educators. This was exacerbated by lack of workload relief. • Practice educators felt deep personal commitment to the role, which meant when having to fail students they questioned their own competence and internalised the failure.
<p>Finch, J. and Taylor, I. (2013). Failure to Fail? Practice Educators' Emotional Experiences of Assessing Failing Social Work Students. <i>Social Work Education, 32</i>(2), 244-258.</p>	<p>Aims: To explore the experiences of practice educators working with failing students, in particular exploring emotional experiences of practice educators.</p> <p>Sample: 20 practice educators.</p> <p>Methods: Narrative-style interviews. Data analysed using voice-centred relational method, involved four distinct readings of data which were synthesised thematically.</p>	<p>Findings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analysis yielded five types of story: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The guilty story – feelings of guilt for failing or not failing a student. ○ The angry story – anger directed at student or course provider. ○ 'What is my role?' story – tensions between nurturing, developing role and acting as authoritative assessor. ○ Idealised learner story – disconnect between their expectations and reality, often leading to guilt and/or anger. Led some to become 'rescuers'. ○ The internalising failure story – the feeling that the failure of the student was their own failure.
<p>Bailey-McHale, J., Bailey-McHale, R., Caffrey, B., MacLean, S., and Ridgway, V. (2019). Using visual methodology: Social work student's perceptions of practice and the impact on practice educators. <i>Practice, 31</i>(1), 57-74.</p>	<p>Aims: To examine the relationship between students and practice educators and how this influenced the placement.</p> <p>Sample: 13 social work students. 6 practice educators.</p> <p>Methods: Visual methods and focus groups. Students drew idealised practice educator and practice educator focus group reflected on what</p>	<p>Findings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practice educators seen as needing to have professional knowledge and to manage disconnect between the heart and head of practice, and theory and practice. • Students saw practice educators as generally being white women who were older, middle class, and often 'busy' or 'rushed'. • Students saw practice educators as holding power in the relationship, students fearful of being wrong and being judged. Good practice educators work to empower students.

	<p>these drawings meant. Drawings and transcribed discussions were analysed thematically.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practice educators felt students perceptions of the role were not fully accurate and were concerned that too much closeness in the relationship could be problematic.
<p>Finch, J. (2017). "...It's Just Very Hard To Fail A Student...": Decision-Making And Defences Against Anxiety—An Ethnographic And Practice-Near Study Of Practice Assessment Panels. <i>Journal of Social Work Practice</i>, 31(1), 51-65.</p>	<p>Aims: To explore the decision-making process in placement assessment panels when discussing failing students.</p> <p>Sample: Four placement assessment panels where 9 students assessed as failing were discussed.</p> <p>Methods: Ethnographic study using non-participant observation. Field notes were taken and where permission was given, panel meetings were audio recorded and transcribed.</p>	<p>Findings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Powerful voices in the panel meetings had a significant impact on decision-making. Often, difficult decisions led to deferred outcomes (e.g. giving the student a further opportunity). Tutors sometimes internalised failure of the student, leading to passionate advocacy for them to be given a chance. Challenging emotional climate made the gatekeeping function of the panel difficult to maintain.
<p>Collins, S. <i>et al.</i> (2000). Racism and anti-racism in placement reports. <i>Social Work Education</i>, 19(1), 29–43</p>	<p>Aims: To examine the way PEs and students considered individual and institutional racism and anti-racism.</p> <p>Sample: 40 first placement reports from postgraduate students.</p> <p>Methods: Documentary analysis of placement reports with a focus on discussion of racism and anti-racism.</p>	<p>Findings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 50% of practice educators made reference to racism and anti-racism pre-revisions. 25% of practice educators made reference to racism and anti-racism post-revisions. 25% of students discussed racism, though only two commented on anti-racism. Very minimal discussion of institutional racism in the reports. Overall, a lack of consideration of racism and anti-racism, and consideration given was very surface.
<p>Furness, S. (2012) 'Gender at Work: Characteristics of "Failing" Social Work Students', <i>The British Journal of Social Work</i>, 42(3), pp. 480–499.</p>	<p>Aims: To identify factors that contribute to men being overrepresented amongst those failing social work courses.</p> <p>Sample: 16 practice educators, who had all had students who had failed.</p>	<p>Findings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Men seen as having patriarchal attitudes, unwilling to be vulnerable learners and often over-confident in their abilities and reluctant to take feedback. Men often misunderstood or underestimated the challenge of social work but could not acknowledge difficulties or open up about their worries.

	<p>Methods: Semi-structured interviews.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practice educators found failing students stressful and isolating, the process could be difficult with students often being given multiple chances despite practice educator's concerns.
<p>Domakin, A. (2014). Are We Making the Most of Learning From the Practice Placement?. <i>Social Work Education</i>, 33(6), 718-730</p>	<p>Aims: To explore how a distance learning MA social programme affords opportunities for innovation in curriculum delivery and increases connections with learning on placement.</p> <p>Sample: 48 practice educators</p> <p>Methods: Questionnaire with closed and open-ended questions, using Likert scale and free text. Analysis through grounded theory.</p>	<p>Findings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Noted tensions between university and practice and the need to better integrate theory and practice; reflective and group supervision useful for this. Lack of recognition of role of practice educators and lack of workload relief stifled their development. Practice educators wanted greater partnership working with course providers and access to curriculum learning. Lack of alignment between placement experiences and the order and content of academic units.
<p>Parker, J., Keen, S., Brown, K., Rutter, L. and Williams, S. (2010). Practice education: Where next?. <i>Journal of Practice Teaching and Learning</i>, 10(2), 63-88</p>	<p>Aims: To report on evaluations pilot practice education programmes.</p> <p>Sample: Included tender documents (n=15), interim pilot project reports (n=150), final project reports (n=13), programme materials (n=14), and candidate feedback forms (n=49).</p> <p>Informal telephone or email consultations with 12 course providers and 12 employers.</p> <p>Methods: Documentary analysis of documents, conversations analysed through methods of collection and analysis not rigorous.</p>	<p>Findings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employers and course providers from pilot sites described their partnerships as strong, good, collaborative, mutually supportive, respectful and full of active engagement. Most candidates agreed or strongly agreed their programme had been effective in enabling development of skills, knowledge and values related to practice learning and assessment. Most candidates also agreed or strongly agreed their programme had provided them with sufficient resources and support. Candidates believed the practice educator role would promote career development, leading to further supervisory roles and responsibilities.
<p>Lane, D. (2023). Social Work Education and Practice Learning at a</p>	<p>Aims: To explore the components of quality in practice learning.</p>	<p>Findings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Good communication noted between placements and universities, however participants felt these largely focused on

<p>Crossroads: Challenges. <i>Practice</i>, 35(1), 27-45.</p>	<p>Sample: 35 participants, including practice educators, practitioners (including team managers), and service users (adults only).</p> <p>Methods: Semi-structured interviews. States that underpinning framework is interpretive phenomenology, though analysis looks more thematic.</p>	<p>practical arrangements rather than shared understandings of practice.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Found that communication skills, along with assessment and report-writing and being able to use theory to understand complex situations, were seen as key skills that could be better supported in the curriculum. • Highlights the need for reducing 'blame culture' through developmental supervision, and notes the value of developing resilience and respect. • More equal partnership between course providers and placements needed to ensure effective social work education, including involvement of practice educators in qualifying programmes.
<p>Beesley, P. and Taplin, S. (2022). Blended social work placements: New opportunities. <i>Journal of Practice Teaching and Learning</i>, 19(3), 67-80.</p>	<p>Aims: To explore changes in practice learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.</p> <p>Sample: Approximately 70 social work educators, placement providers, and practice educators.</p> <p>Methods: Empirical data is drawn from two workshops held at national social work and social work education conferences. The discussion from these workshops has been analysed using thematic analysis.</p>	<p>Findings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practice educators experienced loss of their home as a private space, loss of interaction with students and placements or colleagues, and vicarious loss for students' lack of learning opportunities. • Over time, practice educators reported adjusting and seeing benefits in blended approaches. Capacity for students to work from home enabled greater flexibility and opened up different placement opportunities. Practice educators became more confident in use of technology and using group supervision. • Connections – through peer support groups, students having more contact with tutors, and encouraging teams to 'adopt' students – helped mitigate impacts of the pandemic. Face-to-face inductions, where possible, seen as good practice.
<p>Lister, P. G., and Crisp, B. R. (2007). Critical incident analyses: A practice learning tool for students and practitioners. <i>Practice</i>, 19(1), 47-60.</p>	<p>Aims: To evaluate the use of critical incident analysis between students and practice educators.</p> <p>Sample: 10 postgraduate social work students and their practice educators.</p> <p>Methods:</p>	<p>Findings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical incident analysis supported more structured, and ultimately deeper, reflection from students, though some felt the model did not work well in all situations. • The proforma used supported students to make connections between theory and practice, and supported examining their own values. This helped them to consider issues such as empowerment and how the

	<p>Semi-structured interviews with students at midpoint and end of placement. Interviews with two practice educators (who supported six of the students) also took place.</p>	<p>tool could be used to help service users make sense of their own issues.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The tool was also found to be useful to aid supervision between practice educators and students. Students also felt it could have value as an assessment tool, contributing to the assessment of their capability on placement.
<p>Zuchowski, I. (2016). Getting to Know the Context: The Complexities of Providing Off-Site Supervision in Social Work Practice Learning. <i>British Journal of Social Work</i>, 46, 409-426.</p>	<p>Aims: To explore the experiences of off-site practice educators supervising practice placements.</p> <p>Sample: 15 off-site practice educators.</p> <p>Methods: Semi-structured interviews. Method of analysis not clearly stated.</p>	<p>Findings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Important for off-site practice educators to know (or to get to know) the student's placement context. Supervision tends to focus more on professional development and is improved by the off-site practice educator's knowledge of placement and student context. Inability to informally observe practice is a limitation of the off-site practice educator role. Relationships between off-site practice educators, on-site supervisors, and students are key and are based on an understanding of context.
<p>Doel, M., Deacon, L. and Sawdon, C. (2007). Curtain down on act one: Practice learning in the first year of the new social work award. <i>Social Work Education</i>, 26(3), 217-232</p>	<p>Aims: To explore how practice learning in the first year of the SW degree has been experienced by social work educators.</p> <p>Sample: 71 in total, 39 agency-based practice educators, 16 independent practice educators, and 16 university-based tutors.</p> <p>Methods: Questionnaires collecting quantitative and qualitative data.</p>	<p>Findings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Significant variation in the distribution of placement days across programmes. Also significant variance in number of days in from placement. Challenging practice landscape with high vacancy rates and high levels of team stress; impact on ability to take on students.
<p>Jasper, C. and Field, P. (2016). "An Active Conversation Each Week in Supervision": Practice Educator Experiences of the Professional Capabilities Framework and Holistic Assessment. <i>The British Journal of</i></p>	<p>Aims: To explore practice educators' views of the Professional Capabilities Framework.</p> <p>Sample: 43 practice educators.</p> <p>Methods:</p>	<p>Findings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practice educators liked the holistic nature of the Professional Capabilities Framework and felt it enabled both creativity and clearly staged progression requirements which helped with identifying current and future learning needs. Professional Capabilities Framework was seen as contributing to a sense of

<p><i>Social Work</i>, 46(6), 1636–1653</p>	<p>Semi-structured questionnaire with Likert-scale and open text. Focus group of those who indicated a willingness on questionnaire. Data thematically analysed.</p>	<p>professional identity and a good fit for the values of the profession.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enabled greater reflection in supervision and more time for analysing practice. • Differences in portfolio requirements and increased paperwork for practice educators with less student engagement were seen as negatives.
<p>Torry, B., Furness, S., and Wilkinson, P. (2005). The importance of agency culture and support in recruiting and retaining social workers to supervise students on placement. <i>Practice</i>, 17(1), 29-38.</p>	<p>Aims: Provide a snapshot of social work placements in a region of England.</p> <p>Sample: Responses from 6 social work agencies.</p> <p>Methods: Mixed-methods study. 9 semi-structured interviews with key personnel from placement agencies. Questionnaire, answered by 30 practice educators that were supervising students on the programme. A focus groups was also held.</p>	<p>Findings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agency culture plays a key role in the placement. Work pressures in statutory agencies can lead to students being seen as a burden and this impacted on their capacity to take students. The level of support offered within placement also varied by setting. • Perception that agencies did not always support practice educators with student placements and that students were not always adequately prepared for placement. • Significant variations across agencies in terms of how placements are matched and what factors are considered in the matching process. Practice educators and university both felt somewhat disconnected from this process with placement agencies having designated staff who led the process.
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		placement agencies having designated staff who led the process.
Waterhouse, T., McLagan, S. and Murr, A. (2011). From Practitioner to Practice Educator: What Supports and What Hinders the Development of Confidence in Teaching and Assessing Student Social Workers?. <i>Practice: Social Work in Action</i> , 23(2), 95–110.	<p>Aims: To explore facilitators and barriers for practice educators in their role.</p> <p>Sample: 42 practice educators.</p> <p>Methods: Mixed methods, using questionnaires, interviews, and group discussions.</p>	<p>Findings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workload, time, lack of incentive, lack of support, and different portfolio requirements were main barriers to practice education. • Independent practice educators felt they had more time and capacity, though less access to support groups and supervision. Those in statutory settings lacked time and workload relief and felt they had lower levels of support from course providers when difficulties arise. • Motivations to be practice educators tended to be based on either a desire to keep their own practice up to date or a commitment to social work education.
Higgins, M., Popple, K., and Crichton, N. (2016). The dilemmas of contemporary social work: A case study of the social work degree in England. <i>The British Journal of Social Work</i> , 46(3), 619-634.	<p>Aims: To explore whether the dilemmas of social work education and practice are linked to a fundamental debate about the nature and future of social work.</p> <p>Sample: 48 participants, comprising 10 academics, 2 university practice learning leads, 8 practice educators, 17 students, and 11 service users.</p> <p>Methods: Individual interviews at two time points with the academics, practice learning leads and practice educators. Four focus groups were held, three for students and one for service users. Data analysed thematically.</p>	<p>Findings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reported a disconnect between university and practice; practice educators felt university learning (e.g. theory) was not easily promoted in practice. • This represented competing conceptions of social work; students reported practice being much more ‘tick box’ and involving less work with people than they had hoped. Social work generally seen as not well-understood. • Actual practice seen as much narrower than the broader theory- and value-based ‘aspirational’ version of social work promoted by universities. Practice seen as inflexible and increasingly focused on allocation of resources rather than building valuable helping relationships. • There was a lack of optimism and much ambivalence about the prospect for change.
Haanwinckel, B. Z., Fawcett, B., and Garcia, J. A. B. (2018). Contrasts and reflections: Social work fieldwork supervision in Brazil and England. <i>International Social Work</i> , 61(6), 943-953.	<p>Aims: To compare placement supervision in two different countries, Brazil and England.</p> <p>Sample: 17 practice educators.</p> <p>Methods:</p>	<p>Findings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Found that, in England, students spend more time on placement and have more prior experience. Practice educators have to have specific training which is not the case in Brazil. In England, service user participation is more established. However, the role of practice educator is similar in the two contexts.

	<p>Semi-structured interviews were used. Data were analysed thematically.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practice educators reported that learning was a two-way process, they learnt from students as well as students learning from them. • Note the importance of reflection and analysis but feel that social work is becoming more 'practical' and less theoretical. • Issues of generic vs. specialist qualification and whether first placements should be longer to give students time to properly learn were also discussed.
<p>Roulston, A., Cleak, H., Nelson, R. and Hayes, D. (2022). How Power Dynamics and Relationships Interact with Assessment of Competence: Exploring the Experiences of Student Social Workers Who Failed a Practice Placement. <i>British Journal of Social Work</i>, 52(3), 1662-1682.</p>	<p>Aims: To explore the experiences of student social workers who have experienced failing a practice placement.</p> <p>Sample: 11 social work students.</p> <p>Placement reports for the students were also used to gain perspective of practice educator.</p> <p>Methods: Semi-structured interviews and analysis of placement reports. Data analysis took place using thematic analysis.</p>	<p>Findings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal factors – e.g. mental health, loss, relationship breakdowns, family issues – a significant contributor to failing placement. These experiences were often a motivator as well but when they impacted placement, this was characterised as them not being capable. • Poor or difficult relationships with practice educators left students feeling unsupported or judged, though some also reported feeling practice educators were over-familiar or over-friendly and did not address concerns. • These poor relationships highlighted power imbalances in student/practice educator relationships. • Decision-making not always transparent; students not always aware of concerns at an earlier stage (e.g. midway). Some students felt ill-prepared by their first placement. • Some students developed greater self-awareness and grew as a result of the experience, particularly if they passed a repeat placement. Students highlighted the value of positive relationships and effective communication.
<p>Finch, J., Schaub, J., and Dalrymple, R. (2014). Projective identification and the fear of failing: Making sense of practice educators' experiences of failing social work students in practice</p>	<p>Aims: To examine the emotional distress experienced by practice educators supporting failing or borderline-failing students.</p> <p>Sample: Study 1: 20 practice educators.</p>	<p>Findings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some practice educators felt the need to voice or act out the angry feelings they experienced and this was reflected in the language used in interview. • Practice educators can be prone to internalise failure or to see themselves as

<p>learning settings. <i>Journal of Social Work Practice, 28(2), 139-154.</i></p>	<p>Study 2: 15 practice educators and tutors from.</p> <p>Methods: Study 1: In-depth qualitative interviews. Study 2: Dual strand qualitative methodology. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups. (Indicates the use of Thematic Analysis but is unclear).</p>	<p>deficient or to vicariously experience what the student is going through.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficult feelings can limit practice educators' capacity for reflection and impact their decision-making. <p>Suggest use of containing strategies and recognition of possibility of self-blame to help mitigate some of this projective identification and its impact.</p>
<p>Gibson, M. (2012). Narrative practice and social work education: Using a narrative approach in social work practice education to develop struggling social work students. <i>Practice, 24(1), 53-65.</i></p>	<p>Aims: Outlines the work of the researcher (as a practice educator) in using a narrative approach with a struggling student.</p> <p>Sample: One student.</p> <p>Methods: Essentially a form of autoethnography using narrative methods.</p>	<p>Findings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student's struggles were partly influenced by and compounded a negative 'master narrative' that she held about herself. This impacted her confidence and ability to make positive changes. • Narrative methods enabled student to recognise the source of this master narrative, which came from experiences within her family. This narrative made her hold on to negative experiences whilst dismissing positive ones. • With support, student was able to begin to recognise and challenge the master narrative and more able to accept positive feedback and became better able to manage demands of placement. • Narrative approaches may be useful in supporting struggling students, particularly where they are open to using it.