

## Practice Education Strategies: a thematic analysis of the approaches to practice education within local authorities and trusts: an executive summary

### Introduction

A key aspect of the role of Social Work Teaching Partnerships is to promote collaboration between High Education Institutes (HEIs), service providers (local authorities and Trusts) and the voluntary sector to help ensure good quality social work education and training and that social workers entering the workforce have the necessary knowledge skills and values to practice effectively. Practice education is fundamental to this and its role and value in the training and development of the next generation of social workers cannot be understated.

As such, the development of a practice education (PE) strategy is key to the West Midlands Social Work Teaching Partnership's (TP) implementation plan for 2021-2022 and in order to support the work of the TP in implementing this area of work, a PE Strategy working group was set up with representation from HEI partners and service providers across the West Midlands. It was quickly established that in order to develop a regional approach to practice education, we needed to understand the current position of all our partners in respect of their individual PE strategies.

### What is a practice education strategy?

- A plan of action designed to achieve and embed a long term and sustainable approach to planning for social work qualifying placements which are overseen by Practice Educators.
- The strategy should consider how many placements an organisation should be providing to meet the local and regional need for social worker, where these placements are located and how they are co-ordinated, supported and quality assured.
- The strategy also needs to consider the number of practice educators required and how practice educators are selected, developed and supported.

### Why Have a Practice Education Strategy?

- A strategy to offer a plentiful supply of quality placements to students can align with recruitment needs for newly qualified social workers.
- Sufficient appropriately experienced and capable social workers can be supported to train and retain currency as practice educators.

### Background

Most partners are still in the early stages of developing their PE strategy against a backdrop of challenges within the profession which have been exacerbated because of the Covid 19 pandemic. Partners told us that they would welcome the sharing of ideas and approaches on the development of PE strategies and felt that this is a key role for the TP. Consequently, the programme team held one to one conversations with partners (it was agreed this would be only service providers initially) based on a set of semi-structured questions designed to explore the key elements of their PE strategy and help them to consider key components.

## Key Components of a Practice Education Strategy

- Strong senior management leadership regarding embedding the PE Strategy
- Champions for practice education at all levels within the organisation
- A whole team approach to student placements and the value they bring to the team by providing a joint up approach to offering their support in the learning process
- Development of collaborative relationships with HEIs to promote good practice and an understanding of the number of placements required
- Understanding the range of placements available across all areas of the organisation to support placement needs
- Quality assurance of placements using QAPL or similar, ensuring that there is a feedback loop to inform an individual PE's development needs and organisational support and CPD for PES
- Opportunities for Practice Education training and refresher training (PEPS Refresh 2019) to be made available as required and ensuring appropriate resources are accessible as needed
- Communities of Practice/learning and support groups available for practice educators
- Ensuring a stable network of practice educators across the workforce with Practice Education linked to strategies for recruitment and retention
- A comprehensive recording system to identify the number of practice educators and placements across the organisation taking into consideration:
  - those that are "active" and "inactive"
  - the assessment of practitioners completing their PE1 and PE2 and the potential impact on the number of PE2s that are then available to assess students

## Key Themes from discussions:

As these conversations progressed emerging themes became apparent in terms of the approaches being taken and the challenges being faced by our partners as they look to develop their PE strategies. Some key findings were:

- Placement supply is limited when there are insufficient numbers of available practice educators to support students. Often practice educators complete level 1 of the training and then don't continue to take students.
- The availability of practice educators was affected by commitment to work-based routes such as apprenticeships, step-up and frontline placements.
- Workload pressure and capacity were seen as the main barriers to recruiting practice educators, even where financial incentives were offered. Capacity of teams to take students was also impacted by workload pressure.
- 55% of services offered financial incentives to Practice Educators. There was no clear link between offering financial incentives and recruiting/retaining practice educators.
- Where there was an organisational culture which valued social work and practice education, there were less problems with P.E recruitment and retention. Teams were more likely to accept and support students when support from senior managers was strong.
- A "grow your own" approach: 42% of services directly linked the number of placements provided to their recruitment needs, which supports them to recruit and retain newly qualified social workers.

## Challenges

Unsurprisingly, the conversations have highlighted that service providers are experiencing common challenges within the social work workforce that are impacting on their priorities and this is in turn, impacting upon the supply of placements available to HEI partners. Workloads within all areas of social care are extremely high, and whilst this was an issue long before the outbreak of Covid –19, the pandemic has exacerbated the issue further. Retention of social workers is also a growing concern both regionally and nationally. These combined issues mean that not all teams are well equipped to offer supportive, nurturing placements to students.

In addition, placement agencies are also committed to supporting employer-led routes into social work. It is not yet known what the impact of the Social Work Degree Apprenticeships will be on the availability of practice educators and placements in the forthcoming academic year.

Despite the challenges, there is evidence of good collaborative relationships between service providers and HEIs and a recognition within social work teams of the value and importance of having students on placement. Service leads are pro-active in their approaches to address the challenges they are facing. They are exploring ways in which they can encourage more staff to consider practice education as a career progression option and strategies to support recruitment and retention of practice educators as well as supporting their learning and development.

## The teaching partnership response

- To provide CPD opportunities for practice educators based on the needs and challenges that have been identified.
- To implement sub-regional 'Valuing PE' events to celebrate the value and contribution of PE, and to showcase the successes and learning from PE projects within the region.
- Strategies to address the issues of placement supply and retention will continue to be explored within sub-regional meetings, placement coordination, and the P.E Strategy Working Group
- One to one conversations with HEI representatives are planned to explore their approaches to PE challenges.

We hope that the information gained can supplement the quantitative workforce and HEI data to help form an accurate picture of the social work workforce needs as well as a projection of the gaps in terms of supply and demand of placements in our region which can inform future workforce strategy.