

NOPT response to the Croisdale-Appleby and Narey reports in the light of recent changes to the Education Support Grant (ESG)

NOPT would like to comment on the recently published (May 2014) Department of Health (DoH) document, *Reforming the Education Support Grant – the Government Response to the Consultation*.

This document confirms that in the 2014 academic year:

- The daily placement fee will be changed from the existing separate rates of £18 for placements involving statutory interventions and £28 for non-statutory placements, to a flat rate fee of £20 for all placement settings.
- The HEI administration fee for practice placements will remain at £2 per day, but no daily administration fee will be paid for the delivery of the skills development days.
- The block grant of £7,400 per course for the facilitation of service user and carer involvement will remain the same.

The report suggests that these interim changes will allow the DoH to establish some initial budgetary control over the ESG, whilst they fully consider the Narey and Croisdale-Appleby reviews, with the intention of making more substantive arrangements from 2015 onwards.

This interim decision to cut placement related funding flies in the face of the recent Croisdale-Appleby review conclusions and recommendations (see Conclusions 40, 41, 42, 44 and Recommendations 17 and 19) that suggest there is a real need for ESG funding for the skills development days and for practice placements to be significantly increased, if the robustness of quality assurance systems and the quality of practice placement learning is to be enhanced.

Whilst the maintenance of the status quo (Option 1) is suggested to be beneficial as it continues to support employer generation of income '*linked to practice education in order to supply good quality practice educators and placements*' (DoH, 2014:9) it is ironic that the 2014 DoH cuts to both the administration fee (for the skills development days) and to the daily placement fee, are in fact very likely to have exactly the opposite impact. The loss of financial incentives will negatively impact on the ability of employers and HEIs to collaboratively deliver both the skills development days and to deliver a sufficient range and quality of the practice placements.

For example, the training and development of practice educators is a collaborative venture between employers and HEIs and the funding provided by the daily placement fee is often used to support the systems of quality assurance for placements; the training, supervision and support; CPD and the tracking of the 'currency' of practice educators. As the majority of placements (and especially first placements) are now within non local authority settings, the reduction in funding for

non statutory placements will have both a negative impact on the overall financial resources available to support the delivery of good quality practice placements and will be likely to dramatically reduce the number of independent sector organisations willing to offer future placements to social work students.

This is because the cost to the HEI of providing an offsite practice educator to support placements in organisations that do not have a suitably qualified member of staff on site (usually at the cost of half of the daily placement fee) may mean that many independent sector organisations currently offering placements to social work students will no longer do so, as it will no longer be financially worthwhile. There are implications then also, for the future availability of employment opportunities for both independent and university employed Stage 2 qualified practice educators and for the maintenance of an adequate 'pool' of Stage 2 practice educators to support practice placements in the longer term (an issue that will impact on all placements).

In the current climate of 'outsourcing' of social work's key roles and functions (TCSW, 2014) to independent sector organisations, it should also be made clear that the current 'shorthand' of regarding 'statutory' placements as synonymous with local authority placements, can no longer be justified nor sustained. The Narey report especially seems to conflate 'local authority' social work placements with 'statutory' placements'. In reality, the current social care and practice placement landscape is far more complex than this. The 'non statutory' placement sector currently provides a wide range of essential social work services and functions as well as offering valuable placement opportunities for social work students. Recent government initiatives suggest this 'outsourcing' trend is set to continue, with children's services being a particular focus for future change. The competitive and short term nature of bidding processes for 'non statutory' organisations however, makes the decision of the Department of Health to significantly reduce placement funding for 'non statutory' placements with so little notice given, extremely difficult to manage for all concerned. This is likely to have a detrimental impact on the quality and availability of practice placements.

Particularly concerning are recent indications that some independent sector agencies and possibly even some HEIs are already considering responding to these sudden financial constraints on placements by expecting practice educators to take a pay cut. To further erode the already fairly low rates of pay provided to practice educators (especially in light of the currently expected level of skills, expertise, training and CPD required of practice educators) is a clear attack on both the value and expertise of practice educators. It is also potentially undermining of the recently introduced national standards for practice educators (see for example, the separate NOPT response to the Croisdale-Appleby review at www.nopt.org). The reduction in the daily placement fee will run alongside the implementation of the national Practice Educator Professional Standards (PEPS) that require by October 2015, that every placement should be supervised by a practice educator who is both Stage 2 qualified and a registered social worker. The reduction in the financing of 'non statutory'

placements has the potential to derail both HEI and employer commitments towards maintaining and improving overall standards of practice education and practice learning by undermining the status and value of the practice educator role.

A more useful approach to supporting the quality of practice learning and practice placements would in fact be to establish a greater degree of control over the number of social work student placements, as uncontrolled demand for practice placements negatively impacts on both the supply of suitable placements for social work students and on the overall quality of students' experiences of practice learning. This is an issue that the Narey report also acknowledges.

NOPT would therefore regard Option 4 (splitting the budget according to the number of students who receive a student bursary) as being the most effective way (in relation to the current options suggested) of regulating the demand for social work student university places, thereby also regulating the demand for practice placements. However, there is a need for any changes in the Education Support Grant to be both strategically planned for the medium term and be 'joined up' to other aspects of reforms and change in the sector.

In relation to the cuts in funding for the delivery of the skills development days, in order to offer high quality and practice informed skills development days, service users, practitioners and a range of employers often contribute significantly to the development days by contributing to or presenting at whole sessions. Organising this in a collaborative manner, takes considerable amount of collaborative effort, co-ordination and funding (in addition to the large amounts of goodwill that current arrangements frequently survive on). In a climate of ever reducing resources, staff and service users are no longer in a position to 'work for free' or to be released by their employers, if there is no financial recompense.

Whilst the delivery of specialised routes to social work education and training (such as Step Up and Front Line) cost 5-6 times the amount of current undergraduate and postgraduate routes, the additional resources available to fund the new, specialist routes have been positively reflected in the time, priority and energy devoted to the collaborative employer/HEI delivery of these specialised routes. This is in contrast to the lower (and now further reduced) levels of resources being offered to support existing programmes. It should be no surprise then, if issues of placement availability and variations in the quality of students' placement learning experiences continue to be raised. Whilst the Narey report suggest that ESG funding should only be provided to students who have had a 'satisfactory' placement experience and who have at least one placement in a statutory or genuinely equivalent setting, this is to ignore the impact of current funding and other incentives on employer's overall ability and willingness to provide practice placements to social work students.

The withdrawal several years ago of the performance indicator 'stick' that encouraged local authorities to provide a specific number of practice placements

each year has been followed by a subsequent year on year decrease in the availability of 'statutory' placements. If, as the Croisdale-Appleby report indicates, there is no current willingness to reintroduce this particular type of employer incentive, then a sufficiently high level of financial incentive for both HEIs and employers is alternatively required, in order to sustain the delivery of high quality practice placements. The capability to maintain national standards for practice educators would also seem to be a key additional requirement, if the overall governmental desire to drive up standards of social work education and training is sincere.