

## **NOPT Consultation on PEPS Summary Report (March 2014)**

Thanks to everyone who responded to our Consultation on the implementation of Practice Educator Professional Standards for Social Work (PEPS)

We received responses from every region of England; from individual practice educators working in the local authority and in the independent sector; from practice educators employed by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and also from independent/freelance practice educators.

### **Key Findings**

#### **1. The Training and Assessment of Practice Educators**

In terms of the availability of training and assessment opportunities to support new and existing practice educators (PEs) in achieving the Stage 1 and Stage 2 PE standards, it appeared that every region was actively working towards the updating of existing PEs qualifications to meet the new standards.

Nationally, there appears to be well developed employer and HEI agreed arrangements in place for the training and assessment of new and existing practice educators in order to meet the new requirements.

Local HEIs are generally offering training programmes and a PE assessment and accreditation process in collaboration with both local authority and independent sector employers. The manner in which the PE training and assessment is being delivered however, varies considerably from region to region.

The PE training course is variously delivered through a combined Stage 1 and Stage 2 programme; as two distinct separate units or modules; in some regions, the training is only available as a postgraduate, university credited module; in other areas, it can be completed either with or without any attached academic credits; the PE programme may be delivered entirely in the employer's workplace; jointly delivered within both the employer's work base and within the HEI setting or solely within the HEI. The accreditation of PEs is also done both 'in-house' by the employer or alternatively via a 'panel' system based at the HEI using both employers and HEI staff as assessors.

Whilst there was a general willingness to meet the new standards it was also reported that significant pressures on local authorities in relation to issues of funding, redundancies etc. had meant that this work was seen by staff as having a low priority

and therefore considerable effort had been required to achieve engagement with regards to the PEPS.

## **2. Supervision and Support for Practice Educators**

Whilst some employers and HEIs provide regular PE support groups and ongoing training in their regions to support PEs in undertaking their role, concerns were raised about the lack of supervision offered to both HEI employed off-site PEs and to independent/freelance PEs (see also, later sections of this report re: issues of support and supervision for off-site and independent PEs). When support is offered, it is often via phone or email contact with the relevant practice learning co-ordinator or via the university practice placement tutor or a member of the university's practice learning team. Within local authorities, it was additionally commented that the potential role of managers in supporting the process, was not given any emphasis.

## **3. Assessment evidence required for Stage 1 and Stage 2**

The main approach used to collate evidence for PE assessment at both Stage 1 and Stage 2 appears to be via the completion and submission of a portfolio including some or all of the following pieces of evidence: 1, 2 or 3 direct observation reports; a practice educator report; presentation; supervision notes; quality assurance forms; induction programme; relevant placement related 'work products'; 1 or 2 assignments; a validating statement; position statement and 1 or 2 reflective commentaries. The specific range of evidence required was usually dependent on whether the assessment was for Stage 1, Stage 2 or for a combined portfolio submission relating to both Stages 1 and 2. The type of evidence required was also related to whether or not the PE course had academic credits attached to it. If academically credited, individuals would be required to complete one or two academically marked assignments, in order to meet university requirements. There was some variation in the overall number of direct observations required. Some PE courses required 3 direct observations of the PE to be completed over the course of Stages 1 and 2. Most commonly, a total of two observations (one for each Stage) were required. The overall picture appeared to suggest that the assessment evidence requirements were being devised in accordance with the PEPS requirements.

## **4. Mentor support for Stage 1 and Stage 2 Practice Educators**

Although the PEPS require that a Stage 2 qualified PE mentor be allocated to support every PE candidate training for Stage 1 and for Stage 2, this aspect of the PEPS appears to be inconsistently implemented in practice, at present. In a few regions, arrangements for mentoring PE candidates are already in place. In other regions however, either an 'informal' system of mentoring support is reported as being in operation or an agreed system for mentoring support has not yet been implemented. For those regions where a PE mentor is already being provided, the mentors are reported as being predominantly comprised of PEs who hold the

Practice Teaching Award (PTA). However, Stage 2 qualified PEs are also starting to be used in this mentoring role.

It should be noted that the NOPT Consultation process began before the start of the 2013-14 academic year, when many HEIs would have been in the process of putting new systems in place to meet the new PE requirements. It is therefore possible that the currently reported information represents a changing picture.

## **5. Arrangements for Accrediting Prior Learning (APL/APEL)**

The only approaches reported were the use of an 'in-house', employer- based system (involving consultation with the HEI) or an HEI-based 'conversion panel' system. Generally, the approach taken appeared to be one of 'mapping' the individual's prior learning against the PEPS and then requiring the individual to 'make up the difference' as appropriate through the submission of additional evidence. The APL of PE candidates appeared to be considered on a 'case by case' basis.

## **6. Payment of PEs supervising social work student placements**

Differing approaches were taken to 'paying' PEs, depending on the particular practice educator model used.

In respect of **practice educators working as practitioners**, employers have continued in several areas, to provide an 'honarium' payment to their staff who work as PEs, in acknowledgement of the significant amount of additional work involved in undertaking this role. In most cases, the amount of the honorarium was not specified, but in one instance £300 for a 100 day placement, was cited and in another region, a rate of between £300 and £450 was paid (with a fee also being paid to the onsite supervisor). In another region, the rate of payment was approximately 50% of the daily placement fee (i.e. £14 per placement day). Some employers also offered the PE an additional 3 days study leave, in recognition of the additional paperwork and reports that need to be completed for each social work student placement. The prospect of promotion was also cited as a benefit 'in kind' for those practitioners undertaking the PE role. However, in other organisations, none of the daily placement fee is paid directly to the individual practice educator, but may be 'pooled' into a team CPD budget which is then used to deliver training and CPD opportunities.

In relation to **off- site practice educators directly employed by the university**, a fixed amount was usually paid for each placement (£1,100 per 100 day placement was the amount paid by one particular HEI, for example).

In relation to **independent/freelance practice educators**, the amount paid for each placement would usually be based on the PE fee recommended by the HEI involved in matching the student to each placement. One standard fee cited was £1200 per placement. In relation to the private and voluntary sector placements in one region, it

was reported that an agreed rate of 50% of the daily placement fee had been established for practice educators.

Each individual placement agency would then however, be responsible for employing and paying the PE directly. There were some reported problems arising for independent PEs in relation to this approach/model. For example, there was no guarantee that the fee would subsequently be paid to the PE by the placement agency. In the current climate where some independent social care agencies have closed down, independent practice educators have reported sometimes losing thousands of pounds in fees. Once the HEI has paid the daily placement fee to the placement agency, the HEI are no longer in a position to assist independent/freelance PEs in reclaiming any monies owed to them, as the placement agency is then responsible for paying the fees directly to the PE. In addition, the unequal nature of the relationship between independent PEs and the HEI was raised, including for example on the one hand, having to rely on the HEI as a source of employment whilst additionally being asked to complete tasks such as portfolio reading or providing input into social work courses for no additional payment. The lack of reimbursement of parking and car mileage costs was also raised as an issue.

#### **7. Payment for undertaking the PE Assessment role (direct observations)**

In several regions, the 'topping up' of existing PEs qualifications in order to meet the new Stage 2 requirements, has involved the completion of 1 or 2 additional direct observations of the PE supervising a social work student. This process appears to have been supported by HEIs through either the direct payment of Stage 2 qualified PEs to undertake these observations or through the provision of information to employers about the employment of 'freelance' Stage 2 qualified PE assessors to undertake this work on behalf of the employer/agency. The most commonly cited amount paid for undertaking each direct observation (including the associated meetings and paperwork) was between £100 and £150 per observation. Some employers expected their Stage 2 qualified staff to undertake this work as part of their normal duties and therefore no additional payment at all was made to staff undertaking this role. Other employers expected some of the work to be completed as part of the staff member's usual workload, but were additionally willing to offer some additional payment at the employer's standard hourly rate (cited as being between £22 and £30 per hour in different areas) as required. Although in several regions, the direct observations have been undertaken separately from the mentoring role, this is not the case in every region.

It was also noted that some off-site practice educators (OSPES) have been expected to fund their own direct observations, despite the pivotal nature of the OSPE role in relation to the social work programme.

## **8. Payment for the PE Mentoring role**

Arrangements for the allocation of PE mentors were reported as still being in the process of development in some regions. (This may be a reflection of the fact that the NOPT Consultation process began prior to the date of implementation of the new PEPS requirements).

In those regions where mentoring arrangements were already in place, in respect of some employers, the mentoring role was being undertaken 'in-house' and no additional payment was offered to staff for undertaking the mentoring role. Where an organisation needed to 'buy in' a mentor for some or all of their staff in order to support them in gaining their Stage 2 qualification however, it was reported that mentors were being paid at the rate of £300 per candidate or for the equivalent of 10 hours work paid at an agreed hourly rate. In the majority of areas, it appears that Stage 2 qualified PEs undertaking the mentoring role are not currently receiving any additional payment for undertaking this additional role/work.

## **9. Timescale for progression to Stage 1 and from Stage 1 to Stage 2**

In the majority of areas, the agreed employer/HEI arrangement seemed to be that Stage 1 would be completed within one academic year and that Stage 2 would be completed the following academic year. Individuals were not allowed to supervise a student on placement unless they were receiving the relevant PE training and would also then be expected to use that particular student for their Stage 1 or Stage 2 submission, as appropriate. For example, if an individual practitioner wished to offer a placement to a student in their final year, they would have to be undertaking the Stage 2 training.

A few differing issues were reported regarding the progression from Stage 1 to Stage 2. One issue raised was that the rapid progression from Stage 1 to Stage 2 could make it difficult for candidates to maximise their opportunities for learning as they did not then have a broad range of PE experience to share and reflect on. In some regions, it was reported that there was a less than 100% progression rate of candidates from Stage 1 to Stage 2. It was additionally suggested in another region, that there sometimes appeared to be a reluctance to go forward to Stage 2. In a further region however, very little 'drop out' between Stages 1 and 2 was reported. A lack of opportunity was identified in relation to some candidates who had completed Stage 1 through a particular (Masters) route, but did not then have a suitable subsequent route available to them to be able to complete Stage 2. A new programme therefore had to be devised to accommodate this need. Another reported view was that social workers were generally keen to complete the course, viewing it as part of their continuing professional development (CPD) for HCPC registration.

## **10. Interpretation of ‘working towards’ Stage 1 and Stage 2**

In some regions, there was no jointly agreed employer/HEI definition of what ‘working towards’ meant in practice. However, where the concept of ‘working towards’, had been defined, it was generally interpreted as meaning ‘currently undertaking study’. Where the Stage 1 and Stage 2 training was being delivered as a combined/single course for example, all new PEs taking a student on placement would be regarded as ‘working towards’ Stage 2.

## **11. Continuing Professional Development (CPD) arrangements for practice educators**

The provision of ongoing training for PEs was found to be variable in terms of its availability. Many HEIs clearly offered some degree of ongoing training; the opportunity for PEs to attend a PE support group or through facilitating the existence of a ‘support group’ for off-site and independent/freelance practice educators. The issue of independent/freelance PEs not being supported in organising a forum independent of the university was however, raised as an issue of concern.

Training/support sessions for PEs were generally offered a few times (i.e. 3-4 times) a year. In some areas, CPD sessions were delivered in the employer’s work base (see also 12. below). CPD was also regularly delivered within the HEI setting. There were no specific arrangements cited regarding the provision of supervision for off-site practice educators directly employed by the university or for independent/freelance off-site practice educators. Whilst the HEIs generally provided regular consultation, the general picture seemed to indicate that regular supervision was not provided to off-site practice educators.

In respect of CPD arrangements for local authority employed PEs, in one region, it was reported that regular CPD in the form of workshop and support group meetings, was still made available for all the local authority’s PEs to access.

## **12. Tracking arrangements for PEs (‘maintaining currency’ through taking full responsibility for a social work student at least every 2 years)**

Tracking arrangements within HEIs for PEs are still in the process of being set up in several regions through the development of a register of off-site PEs that also includes their CPD details. Where local authority employers still retain staff with specific responsibility for and expertise in practice learning, these staff similarly monitor the CPD and track the progress of PEs employed by their organisation and sometimes also hold responsibility for tracking freelance PEs as well. These staff additionally tend to run and facilitate support groups for their PEs and offer practice learning related training. Regional groups were also reported as having a role regarding the monitoring of PE progress.

Portfolios, 12 monthly employee reviews; 2 yearly portfolio and direct observation submissions and general social worker CPD requirements were cited as methods of tracking PE 'currency'.

Agreed employer/HEI arrangements regarding how PEs might be able 'top up' or regain PE 'currency' if unable to take a student every 2 years however, were generally reported as still in the process of being discussed or developed.

## **Additional issues**

The requirement for final placements to have a qualified social worker on-site was felt to have some negative consequences. It was felt that this requirement would both result in the loss of some excellent placement opportunities for social work students, but also lead to a possible placement shortfall.

The view was additionally expressed that the 'qualified social worker' requirement also undermined the complex work currently undertaken within private and voluntary settings that also hold an element of statutory responsibility or experience.

The need to address some of the issues regarding independent/freelance practice such as the training and supervision of independent PEs; CPD arrangements and the consistency/transparency regarding how PE work is allocated by universities and agencies, to independent PEs, was also highlighted.

It was suggested that making funding available for the development of a regional or national forum for independent PEs would be greatly valued both as a 'voice' for independent PEs but also as a way of contributing towards improving professional standards in relation to practice learning/practice education .

## **Key Issues and Challenges**

There appears to be a general level of support and acceptance across all regions of England, of the importance of having national standards for practice educators. All regions also appear to be putting considerable effort into implementing the PEPS.

A diversity of approaches has been successfully used to deliver the Stage 1 and Stage 2 outcomes in response to local requirements. However, the current lack of clarity and consistency regarding the interpretation of 'working towards' in relation to the timescale between the provision of initial training and PE assessment, may present a challenge in terms of quality assurance and in meeting the PEPS requirements.

The development of the mentoring role is clearly in the early stages of development in most regions and needs further time for clear systems to be agreed and established.

A significant issue that emerged from the consultation was a dissatisfaction with the current level of support and supervision offered to practice educators (especially off-site and independent /freelance PEs) and arrangements for CPD for PEs.

The need for additional resources to support the development of an independent forum and 'voice' for practice educators (especially for independent/freelance PEs) was also raised. **It may be that NOPT could potentially have a role to play in supporting the development of this.**

The recently published Croisdale-Appleby report (2014) 'Re-visioning social work education' emphasises both the central importance of high quality practice placements and the need for a much greater degree of acknowledgement of the central role that practice educators play in delivering social work education and training. The need to strengthen the support, profile, training and CPD for PEs is also clearly stated in this report. **NOPT will therefore aim to contribute to the ongoing debate about how this can be achieved.**

The Croisdale-Appleby report also highlights the need for the current minimum national standards outlined in the PEPS to be further enhanced. Whilst the College of Social Work has already made some minor revisions to the original PEPS, it may be that there is now a window of opportunity for **NOPT to become more actively involved in contributing to any future developments regarding the 're-visioning' of national standards for PEs.**

We hope you find the information contained in this Summary Report useful.

We would welcome any further thoughts or comments either in response to this report or in respect of any other current issues in practice education that you feel NOPT should be focussing on.

Please email any comments, thoughts or ideas to [admin@nopt.org](mailto:admin@nopt.org). These suggestions will then be shared and discussed at the next NOPT committee meeting.

Many thanks

The NOPT committee