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## **Integration of learning for practice**

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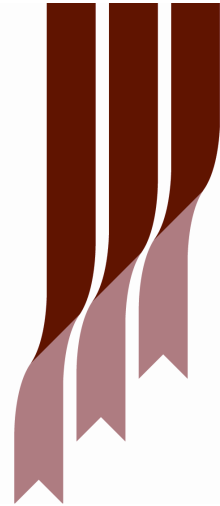
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SCOTTISH INSTITUTE  
FOR EXCELLENCE IN  
SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION



## **LEARNING FOR EFFECTIVE AND ETHICAL PRACTICE**

*Integration of Learning for Practice*

Evaluation of a novel method of supporting the integration of  
learning for practice in Social Work settings: the Academic  
Advisor role

January 2005

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## **Acknowledgements**

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Alison Munro, Researcher, Glasgow Caledonian University

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## Foreword

In October 2003, the Universities of Edinburgh, Dundee and the Robert Gordon University (Aberdeen) were commissioned by the Scottish Institute for Excellence in Social Work Education to undertake a nation-wide project entitled Learning for Effective and Ethical Practice (LEEP). The overall purpose was defined as: *'To improve radically the quality, quantity, range, relevance, inter-professionalism and management of practice learning opportunities for the new social work degree.'* Key objectives were set for each project; for the University of Edinburgh (LEEP 1.1), the objective was: *'To enhance the integration of learning for practice within the university and workplace.'* The project specification stated that this was to be achieved by conducting a practice audit and literature review, and by setting up and running 'demonstration projects' on integration of learning for practice.

In November 2003, the project manager from the University of Edinburgh, Viv Cree, met with the course leader at Glasgow Caledonian University, Ian Brodie, to explore how GCU and the University of Edinburgh might work together on the LEEP1.1 project. It was agreed that the University of Edinburgh should commission GCU to carry out discrete pieces of work on the project, including the evaluation of the demonstration projects, which would be run in both Edinburgh and Glasgow.

The evaluation was thus subcommissioned and paid for by the University of Edinburgh, but conducted by GCU. Members of staff from GCU and the University of Edinburgh met regularly with the researcher, Alison Munro, during the course of the evaluation, and both commented on drafts of interview schedules and questionnaires, as well as the interim and final evaluation report. The project Advisory Group also had the opportunity to receive reports from the researcher at interim and final stages. It should be made clear, however, that none of those participating in the LEEP projects, in either Glasgow or Edinburgh, had access to any of the raw data of the evaluation, including transcripts of interviews and questionnaire forms. These were held solely by the researcher at GCU.

This paper reports on the evaluation of the LEEP1.1 demonstration projects. The University of Edinburgh wishes to express its appreciation and thanks to GCU for its collaboration on this project.

Dr Vivienne Cree, Project Manager, LEEP 1.1 Project, The University of Edinburgh

## **Executive Summary**

### **Background**

This evaluation examines the process and workings of a new approach to the integration of learning and practice, namely the introduction of 'Academic Advisors' to practice learning settings in Edinburgh, Midlothian and Glasgow, initiated as part of the LEEP 1.1 project.

The ideas behind the demonstration projects are set out in the Information Sheet in Appendix 1, which was sent to all students and agencies before the commencement of the demonstration projects; a fuller analysis is also available through the Practice Audit and Literature Review (Clapton and Cree 2004).

Demonstration projects operated in Edinburgh and Midlothian between April and June 2004, and in Glasgow, from August to December 2004. 39 students took part in total, along with 19 Practice Teachers and six Academic Advisors.

### **Aims and Objectives**

This evaluation study had two main aims:

- 1 To conduct a process evaluation of the implementation of the new Academic Advisor model of assisting Social Work students with the integration of learning and practice.
- 2 To illuminate the issue of how best the Academic Advisor role can be implemented in future to maximise the potential for such a role to aid student learning, Continuing Professional Development, and establish productive partnership working between placement agencies and Universities.

### **Methods**

#### Research design

The research design employed was a process evaluation that focused on the process of implementing the Academic Advisor role and the perceptions of key stakeholders involved with the projects, as is common in this type of evaluation (Clarke 1999). Data were collected through interview and survey methods. Interview data were collected via



structured face-to-face interviews with key stakeholders attached to the Academic Advisors.

The key stakeholders were:

- Academic Advisors (N=6)
- Practice Teachers (N=19)
- Students (N=39)
- Key Agency Staff (N=5)
- Project Manager (N=1)

Survey data were collected via a postal questionnaire. Questionnaires were distributed to 27 Link Supervisors and Practice Teachers attached to the students' split placements, and who were therefore more tangential to the Academic Advisors roles. 13 completed questionnaires were returned; a response rate of 48%.

### **The Demonstration Projects**

Six Academic Advisors participated in the six demonstration projects. Four of the Academic Advisors were located in Edinburgh/Midlothian, and the remaining two were located in Glasgow and the surrounding area.

Each Academic Advisor was attached to a group of students located within one or more Social Work or Community Work agencies. In Edinburgh/Midlothian, each Academic Advisor was purposely located within one central agency on a day per week basis to assist not only the integration of learning for practice for students, but also to enable a potentially reciprocal practice development link between agency and university. This was not possible within one of the Glasgow-based projects because students were located in a variety of individual placements that were geographically dispersed, meaning that there was no central agency for the Academic Advisor to become integrated within. In the Glasgow-based projects, one Academic Advisor was attached to two students and two agencies, and had one day per week to devote to the role; the other Academic Advisor worked with nine students and had an unspecified amount of time allocated to the role, which amounted on average to between two and three days per week.

The projects were set in a variety of types of agency, both statutory and voluntary, and where the focus of work for agencies and students was inevitably varied. In Edinburgh/Midlothian, two of the agencies were designated as Practice Learning Centres, and two were voluntary sector agencies focused on either multi-cultural work or children and families work. In the Glasgow-based projects, eleven students were located within nine different agencies but all were involved in working with people seeking asylum or people who have or are seeking refugee status.

## **Key Findings**

### **Interviews with key stakeholders**

- That the Academic Advisors were able to support student learning in a positive way, and that group-work was a valued method of teaching by Academic Advisors, most Practice Teachers and most students. (See Sections 5.1.1.2 and 5.1.1.3).
- Peer support gained in group placements and group supervision was highly valued by the majority of students. (See Section 5.1.1.2)
- Informal support given by Academic Advisors to students occurred frequently and was valued by the students. (See Section 5.1)
- It is difficult to pinpoint whether the Academic Advisor role exclusively helped students to integrate theory and practice but in general Academic Advisors felt that they were more supportive to students they were on placement with than otherwise. Similarly, Academic Advisors in the Glasgow-based projects felt that through direct teaching on the topic, they may have been able to help students better integrate theory and practice. (See Section 5.1.4.1).
- The Academic Advisor role appears to have great potential for supporting learning and self-learning within the agency setting. A variety of training inputs were given by three of the four Academic Advisors in the Edinburgh/Midlothian-based projects, and these were highly valued by the relevant staff. One of the Academic Advisors in Glasgow also delivered a very valued training input into one agency. (See Section 5.2).

- The learning opportunities that were made available to Academic Advisors through being located in the agencies were also greatly valued. (See Section 5.3.1).
- Practice Teachers (especially noted in Edinburgh and Midlothian) felt that through being involved in the Demonstration Projects, a closer working relationship had been fostered between the university and the agencies. (See section 5.3.2).
- A number of organisational/time constraints on the role were identified including the pressures of carrying a high work-load as well as doing the Academic Advisor role. Similarly, the geographical distribution of students had an impact on the amount of contact between Academic Advisors and students. (See Section 5.4)
- In two projects, the suggestion was made that Academic Advisors could perhaps more usefully be located either in units that had direct contact with clients, or within the training section of the agency. (See Section 5.4.3).
- The main challenges of implementing the Academic Advisor role were time constraints, the geographical distribution of students, initial lack of clarity over the Academic Advisors' role and fear of raising the expectations of agencies as to what support the Academic Advisor could provide. (See Section 5.5).
- The main positive aspects of the Demonstration Projects from the participants' points of view were the Academic Advisors proximity to the students and to the agencies, the supportive collaborative relationship that developed between agencies and universities and the additional support that the Academic Advisors were able to provide for students. (See Section 5.6).
- To date, one agency has invited an Academic Advisor from the demonstration projects to continue her role there to support student and agency learning. This can obviously be considered a very positive outcome of the demonstration projects, and a very concrete outcome as well. Indeed, all but one of the Practice Teachers, and all of the key staff interviewed expressed a desire to continue the Academic Advisor roles within their agencies (if it could be resourced). (See Section 5.6).

### **Postal survey of link supervisors**

- When asked whether they thought that the Academic Advisor role had helped students to integrate theory and practice, nine of the thirteen (69%) respondents answered in the positive. The main reason that respondents gave for believing that the integration of theory and practice was facilitated was that their students had fed this back to them. (See Section 6.1.1)
- Seven respondents (54%) perceived that the Academic Advisor role had also helped to aid students' theoretical learning and gave a variety of reasons for believing this. (See Section 6.1.2).
- With regard to the issue of whether Academic Advisors were able to offer support to Practice Teachers in relation to students' learning, six respondents (46%) indicated that this was the case. Four respondents (31%) felt that they were not supported in this aspect but did not elaborate on why this might be. The remaining respondents either did not answer this question or said they 'did not know'. (See Section 6.1.2).
- Seven respondents answered a question about their perceptions of the most positive aspects of the Academic Advisor role. A number of different points were raised in relation to this. Three respondents commented that the ease of access to the Academic Advisor provided a strong link between the agency and the university. Two further respondents suggested that the 3/4 way meetings involving the Academic Advisor were very useful. One respondent mentioned the value of having an experienced teacher from the university do teaching inputs over the course of the placement, and one respondent also mentioned a specific training event, which the Academic Advisor had been involved in, as being particularly positive. (See section 6.1.3).
- When asked whether they thought that the Academic Advisor role ought to be continued in future, the majority of respondents (54%) agreed that it should. (See Section 6.1.3).

## **Recommendations**

On the basis of this evaluation, a number of recommendations can be made. It is, however, important to bear in mind the uniqueness of each of these projects. As with other qualitative studies, the transferability of findings to other agency-university partnerships is open to debate. The recommendations are the following:

- That consideration is given either to enhancing the traditional tutor role, or to employing Academic Advisors (whatever they may be entitled in future), to incorporate group supervision for students on placement.
- That consideration is given either to enhancing the traditional tutor role, or to employing Academic Advisors (whatever they may be entitled in future), to include a greater role in partnership working with agencies where students are on placement.
- That consideration is given to creating a new forum where Practice Teachers are able to work more closely with each other and with universities to develop the curriculum and generally enhance partnership working. In future, it is likely that Learning Centres may provide this forum.
- That if the Academic Advisor role is continued in the future, more time is allocated to the role, or efforts are made to alleviate the existing workloads of those who provide the Academic Advisor function.
- That consideration is given to offering students some degree of group supervision/sessions while on placement to facilitate peer support. While this does happen routinely in some agencies, it is by no means common in all.

## **Study limitations**

The evaluation of the Academic Advisor role was limited to six projects each of which was very different, and each of which involved Social Work or Community Work agencies which had various historical relationships with the universities involved in the study. The type of placement work, and therefore practice learning, that students undertook was so diverse that to single out the impact of the Academic Advisors' formal and informal teaching was not possible in this instance.

The fact that in this study all of the Social Work and Community Work agencies volunteered to be part of the study may also mean that the overall willingness of the staff to be joint partners in this venture may not necessarily be replicated in the future. This could be considered as a form of elite bias in the present study; where those who are most interested in the study (and who therefore are not a representative sample of the population), constitute the majority of the sample.

Perhaps in future, now that the process of integrating universities and practice agencies, and the potential utility of the Academic Advisor role are clearer, any further research could focus on outcome orientated evaluation. Such future studies may therefore be able to shed light on the question raised above. Additionally, future studies may also concentrate on questions relating to cost-effectiveness which of course will be of interest to anyone who may be in a position to consider funding any future Academic Advisors or enhanced tutor roles. Neither of these issues formed part of the remit in this study.

## Full report

### **1 Background**

As stated in the Foreword, this is an evaluation of the demonstration projects set up as part of the Learning for Effective and Ethical Practice (LEEP) 1.1 project, on integration of learning for practice. It is not, in itself, a study of integration of learning for practice. Instead, it examines the process and workings of the new approach to learning which the LEEP project team initiated on the basis of findings from a practice audit and literature review on integration of learning for practice. The findings suggested that much could be done to improve relationships between the university and the field, and that the tutor and practice teacher's roles were central to this. The LEEP project team's response was to introduce a new role of 'Academic Adviser' to practice learning settings in Edinburgh, Midlothian and Glasgow, between April and December 2004. This evaluation thus provides feedback and insight into this specific approach to the facilitation of integration of learning, but cannot comment on other approaches which may also assist integration of learning for practice.

The ideas behind the demonstration projects are set out in the Information Sheet in Appendix 1, which was sent to all students and agencies before the commencement of the demonstration projects; a fuller analysis is also available through the Practice Audit and Literature Review (Clapton and Cree 2004). The Information Sheet sets out the proposal as follows:

*Put simply, instead of bringing the field to the classroom, we are proposing taking the classroom to the field. This flies in the face of what can be seen as a gradual erosion of contact between university staff and students undertaking practice learning....we are suggesting that we re-visit what the university might offer students and agencies during practice learning.*

*It is proposed that the university appoints a number of staff to the new role of 'Academic Adviser'. Academic Advisers will spend time in a placement agency, working with groups of between 6 and 8 students, who are all supervised and assessed by a practice teacher in that agency. The Academic Advisor will carry some conventional tutoring responsibilities for the chosen group of students on placement in the agency. This means that they will act as tutor and dissertation facilitator to the students over the length of the placement, including taking the usual tutor's role if a placement gets into*

*difficulty. Over and above this, it is envisaged that the new role will bring a number of general opportunities for agency learning and continuing professional development for agency staff.*

Subsequently, demonstration projects operated in Edinburgh and Midlothian, between April and June 2004, and in Glasgow, from August to December 2004. 39 students took part in total, along with 19 practice teachers and six Academic Advisers. Academic Adviser activity continues in Edinburgh with students and staff on a November 2004 to April 2005 placement.

## **2 Aims and Objectives**

This evaluation study had two main aims:

- 1 To conduct a process evaluation of the implementation of the new Academic Advisor model of assisting Social Work students with the integration of learning and practice.
- 2 To illuminate the issue of how best the Academic Advisor role can be implemented in order to maximise the potential for such a role to aid student learning, Continuing Professional Development, and establish productive partnership working between placement agencies and Universities.

It is important to say at the outset though that the evaluation did not seek to decipher participants understanding of the concept of 'integration of learning and practice'. This concept appears to be a nebulous one and has been written about extensively elsewhere (Clapton and Cree, 2004; Cree 2004 (Appendix 1)) During interviews it was generally understood that the integration of learning and practice referred simply to how students apply and develop theoretical learning to their work during placements.



### **3 Methods**

#### **3.1 Research design**

The research design employed was a process evaluation that focused on the process of implementing the Academic Advisor role and the perceptions of key stakeholders involved with the projects, as is common in this type of evaluation (Clarke 1999).

Process evaluations focus on questions about the interaction of stakeholders involved in the process of implementing new programmes, on the perceptions of the stakeholders involved, on what the day-to-day activities of the programme are, and on how the programme changes and develops over time (Robson 2000). These were the types of research questions utilised in the present study. Qualitative methods of data collection and analysis are recommended in process evaluations and indeed this was the method used here. Data were collected from key stakeholders via structured face-to-face interviews. In addition, data were collected from participants who were considered to have a more tangential role in the evaluation via a postal questionnaire.

#### **3.2 The study participants**

For the interview part of the study, five key stakeholder groups were identified:

1. Academic Advisors (N=6)
2. Students (N=39)
3. Practice Teachers (N=19)
4. LEEP project manager (N=1)
5. 'Key' agency staff (N=5) (Edinburgh/Midlothian only)

The Academic Advisors, Students and Practice Teachers were purposively selected as part of the study because they were those most closely associated with, and therefore those most likely to be able to give useful information about the process and impact of being part of the new Academic Advisor role. The 'key' agency staff were also selected purposively, and for the same reason. 'Key' agency staff were only interviewed in the Edinburgh/Midlothian projects because these projects were set-up with an explicit intention of integrating Academic Advisors into agencies where students were located. The set-up of the projects in Glasgow was different from this because the Academic Advisors there had students located in so many agencies (i.e. none were group-based placements) that integration of the Academic Advisors was not likely to happen.

Those who were included in the sample for the survey element of the evaluation were those Practice Teachers and Link-Supervisors who supported student learning in long-arm placements but could be considered to be less central to the Academic Advisor role.

### **3.3 Data Collection and Analysis**

#### **3.3.1 Interviews with key stakeholders**

The Academic Advisors, Practice Teachers and the LEEP Project manager were all interviewed on two occasions over the study's duration: once near the beginning of the students' placements and then again at the end of the placements. The majority of interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis (33 interviews). However, where appropriate Practice Teachers were interviewed in groups of either two (4 interviews) or three (two interviews). All of the interviews conducted with the students were done in groups, according to placement location (6 interviews).

Students and 'key' agency staff were interviewed on only one occasion, at the end of the placements. 'Key' agency staff are defined as individuals who were identified as being in a position to give feedback about what impact, if any, that the Academic Advisors made on agency staff and agency in general.

All of the interviews were audio-tape recorded and transcribed verbatim for the purpose of analysis, except in the Glasgow based projects where pressure of time did not allow for full transcription of tapes. From the interviews conducted in Glasgow, extensive notes were taken directly from the tapes. A thematic analysis was used for analysis of qualitative data. Data were coded and organised manually.

#### **3.3.2 Postal survey of link supervisors/practice teachers**

27 structured questionnaires (Appendix 3) were sent to those Practice Teachers who were not part of the host agency where the students were centrally based, and to link-supervisors who worked with students in their 'split' placements. Thirteen completed questionnaires were returned, giving a response rate of 48%, a good response rate for a postal survey. These data were entered onto SPSS/PC v11 for analysis.

### **3.4 Ethical issues**

Ethical approval to conduct the study was granted by the School of Health and Social Care at Glasgow Caledonian University and by the School of Social and Political Studies at the University of Edinburgh.

## **4 The Demonstration Projects**

### **4.1 Project settings**

Each Demonstration Project is defined by the attachment of an Academic Advisor. In Edinburgh and Midlothian, four Academic Advisors were attached to four specific agencies. The agencies were similar only in that they routinely take placement students from the University of Edinburgh. Of the four agencies, two provide statutory Social Work services, and two are voluntary agencies but one of these also carries out contracted statutory child protection work for a local authority.

In the projects based in Glasgow, two Academic Advisors were employed but one was attached to nine separate agencies and one was attached to two different agencies. The eleven placement locations used in these two projects were also quite different in the type of work that students were required to undertake, though they did have a common theme of involving work with people who are seeking asylum or who have refugee status. As was the case in some of the placement work in Edinburgh/Midlothian based projects, some of the students in Glasgow were located within Community Work agencies and some in Social Work agencies. These details are given in Table 1, overleaf.

**Table 1 – Project Settings**

Project	Location	Host agency/agencies	Agency Work
1	Edinburgh/Midlothian	Social Work – Practice Learning Centre	Statutory
2	Edinburgh/Midlothian	Children and Families (multi-cultural focus)	Voluntary
3	Edinburgh/Midlothian	Families and Children	Voluntary & Statutory
4	Edinburgh/Midlothian	Social Services – Practice Learning Centre	Statutory
5	Glasgow	Asylum seeking and refugee projects	Voluntary & Statutory
6	Glasgow	Asylum seeking and refugee projects	Voluntary & Statutory

In the Edinburgh/Midlothian projects, the majority of students were in placement within student groups. These students had very regular contact with one another (ranging from daily to weekly) and were different from the students based in Glasgow for this reason. In Glasgow, every student was in an individual placement and only met in groups, vis a vis the LEEP project, through group sessions organized by one of the Academic Advisors.

**Table 2 – Student Distribution and Locations**

Project	No. of Students Attached	Location of Students	Placement (All 1 <sup>st</sup> placement students)
1	9	Various	Split
2	7	Various	Split
3	6	Main agency office	Single
4	6	Various	Split
5	9	Various	Single
6	2	Various	Single

Table 2 shows the distribution of students across the six projects. In the Edinburgh/Midlothian-based projects, the students were fairly evenly distributed between the Academic Advisors. However, in two of the Edinburgh/Midlothian projects the students were distributed across large geographical areas which meant the Academic Advisors there expended much more time getting around to visit students on placement, and the placement agencies, than was necessary in those projects where students were located in close proximity.

In Project 5, one of the Glasgow-based projects, students were also spread in agencies all over Glasgow and its outskirts, again making the task of visiting students in placement agencies a time-consuming one.

Other differences between the students' placements are, not surprisingly, the fact that they were all engaged in very different work on a day-to-day basis. Similarly, the organisational structures and procedures to be learned and understood by students varied from placement to placement. All of the placement agencies also, inevitably, have different historical relationships to the universities.

Differences between Practice Teachers' and Link Supervisors' methods of working with students, and their own efforts to assist students with the integration of learning and practice are also very difficult to quantify. All of these confounding issues must be borne in mind when reading this evaluation in order to avoid making unrealistic and inappropriate comparisons between the projects' strengths and limitations.

## 5 Key Findings

### 5.1 How did the Academic Advisors function with regard to students' learning?

Since one of the key intended outcomes of this study was to discover what role Academic Advisors could adopt and implement most effectively to support learning for students and professional development for agency staff, it is perhaps most useful to begin by outlining what support was given. The table below summarises the responses given by Academic Advisors when asked to indicate whether or not they utilised a variety of teaching methods with students involved in the Demonstration Projects.

**Table 3 – Teaching Undertaken by the Academic Advisors**

	Project 1	Project 2	Project 3	Project 4	Project 5	Project 6
Group supervision/discussion	x	√	√	√	√	√
Critical Incident Analysis	x	x	x	√	x	x
Teaching on Social Work Theory	√	√	√	√	√	√
Teaching on Social Work Skills	√	√	√	√	√	x
Teaching on Social Work research	x	√	x	X	√	√
Teaching on Assessed Tasks	√	√	√	√	√	x
Formal Input into Assessment of Students work	x	x	x	X	x	√
Informal support	√	√	√	√	√	√

### **5.1.1 Group supervision/Case discussion**

In the majority of projects (N=5), the Academic Advisor role included running or co-running student groups so that to a large extent, students' learning occurred in group settings. In Projects 3 and 4, the student groups occurred on a regular weekly basis for all students. In Project 5, the students met for group discussions fortnightly during the latter half of the placement. Within Projects 3 and 4, group discussion and group supervision utilised case discussions as a key teaching method. These tended to be student led discussions and were felt by Academic Advisors, the Practice Teachers and by the students to be a good way of enhancing learning.

#### **5.1.1.1 Academic Advisors**

In Projects 3 and 4, the groups were run jointly by Academic Advisors and Practice Teachers, although in Project 5, the groups were run by the Academic Advisor alone. The latter was the case because to co-ordinate joint sessions with Practice Teachers from one or more of the nine agencies associated with this project would have been too protracted a process. Where input was given to the groups by Academic Advisors and Practice Teachers, the students appeared to value the contributions of both parties/perspectives, but equally where the input was given only by the Academic Advisor that was also valued by students.

For different reasons, Projects 1 and 6 did not utilise group learning to the extent that the others did. In Project 1, the Academic Advisor tended to provide more sporadic inputs for a variety of reasons including teething troubles in negotiating a clear role with the Practice Teachers. Indeed, the theme of 'role clarity' is discussed in sections 5.1.2 and 5.2.2 more broadly. In Project 6, the Academic Advisor simply did not have a high enough numbers of students attached to the role to warrant any group-work. However, one of this Academic Advisor's students did attend some group sessions offered by the other Glasgow-based Academic Advisor. The Academic Advisors involved in Projects 2 and 5 both commented on the difficulties of working with student groups spread over large numbers of different agencies. Both of these Academic Advisors felt that this factor restricted their potential roles in supporting students and in terms of offering Continuing Professional Development to agency staff.

#### **5.1.1.2 Students**

A number of students also felt that the student groups provided a valuable space where they could develop their learning, and at the same time have peer support. One group in

particular emphasised the perceived importance of having protected time to participate in groups. Perhaps even more importantly where they could express worries or concerns which they felt they might not have been so comfortable to raise elsewhere:

“It’s quite good to have the informal settings where it’s just a small group. You feel.....a lot more free to contribute” (student).

“They were a lot more student led discussions. They were really good” (student).

“It was quite good because everyone found out things about their cases from other people because we had some of the same kinds of things to do” (student).

### **5.1.1.3 Practice Teachers**

Group supervision and group teaching was already routinely practised by Practice Teachers in three of the four Edinburgh/Midlothian projects, and three of the Glasgow projects, and was viewed as an effective method of enhancing students learning.

An issue arose in one project in particular over whether or not an Academic Advisor could or should be privy to group discussions involving ‘live’ client cases, which led to difficulties in allowing the Academic Advisor at that project to become involved in some of the group-work with students.

In two projects, including one in Edinburgh/Midlothian, Practice Teachers also commented on a perceived difficulty of providing extra groups for students to attend when placements are already very busy and considered by some to be too short. Alongside this, the same two projects mentioned that there was perhaps a need to consider carefully whether the introduction of group teaching by Academic Advisors might lead to the duplication of teaching. However, it was also felt that this could be avoided by giving more time to planning and co-ordinating roles if the Academic Advisor model was adopted again in the future. These issues are discussed in more detail in Section 5.6 below.

### **5.1.1.4 Changes over time**

It is worth noting that within Project 4, the student groups were initially run by one or more Practice Teachers as well as the Academic Advisor but that very quickly this was felt by the teachers to be too ‘top heavy’. The groups were subsequently run by the

Academic Advisor and that person was joined by one of the three other Practice Teachers attached to the students' central placement on a rotational basis. One senior Practice Teacher attached to this project reported that having someone else to take the lead responsibility for the student group was a valuable support to that placement.

### **5.1.2 Teaching input with students**

Formal teaching input by Academic Advisors was very commonly undertaken, as illustrated in Table 3, above. All of the Academic Advisors did teaching inputs on social work theories, and five out of the six also did teaching inputs on social work skills and on assessed tasks. Critical incident analysis was utilised by only one of the Academic Advisors but not for long because the Academic Advisor had not been already familiar with the method and felt that it would require later adjustment to be utilised properly with the student group. In some of the projects based in Glasgow, the Academic Advisors took conscious decisions not to use critical incident analysis because it was already known that a number of Practice Teachers were using it, and therefore did not want to duplicate this work. Instead alternative teaching tools such as narrative analysis were utilised.

Much of the individual work that was done with students involved informal support such as ad-hoc discussions about Practice Studies, final reports and case work. In addition, other work done with individual students was done at three or four way meetings alongside Practice Teachers and/or link-workers.

### **5.1.3 Individual work with students**

In terms of Academic Advisors' involvement in three or four way meetings with students and Practice Teachers/Link-Supervisors, these appear to have worked very well. The Academic Advisors in particular felt that they brought something extra to these meetings that as traditional tutors, they did not, i.e., a working knowledge of the student and the specifics of their placements:

“In the three way meetings with the LEEP project, I felt that I came in there as a working partner. They allowed me to focus on very specific current issues”  
(Academic Advisor).



“It helps in the three way meetings because you know the students better, you know better from them how the students are getting on in the placement” (Academic Advisor).

All of the Academic Advisors who undertook three or four way meetings expressed a view that these were more productive than the traditional tutor visits are. Two Academic Advisors also mentioned the potential to undertake “early intervention” work with students who were beginning to experience difficulties during their placements, vis a vis the Academic Advisor role. It was felt that this offered a very tangible advantage over the traditional tutor role.

On the whole, Practice Teachers also found the three or four way meetings to be more fruitful than traditional tutor visits.

#### **5.1.4 Perceptions of whether the Academic Advisor was able to facilitate the integration of theory and practice**

##### **5.1.4.1 Academic Advisors**

There was uniform agreement amongst Academic Advisors that they had been able to provide, to a greater or lesser extent, a supporting role to the students on placement. There were differences to be found though with regard to the extent to which the Academic Advisors felt that their role potential had been maximised. A number of possible explanations were given for this including that time to allocate to the role was not sufficient. All of the Academic Advisors also commented that it would be difficult to say that their input *exclusively* had facilitated the integration of theory and practice for students, not least because many (if not all) of the Practice Teachers were also engaged in that purpose. However, one Academic Advisor said:

“I find it very difficult to say very specifically what it was that an Academic Advisor might or might not have done.” That same Academic Advisor then later added,

“..but I do think the presence of somebody from the university does strengthen the link and it makes the link more obvious and it makes people perhaps begin to relate the two parts of the training [University and agency] more closely”.

Another of the Academic Advisors said:

“I can’t say about whether I personally made a difference to their [students] integration of theory and practice but I thought they got added value as a placement. There is no question that having the University, in the shape of me, in the field was of great benefit to students”

Two other Academic Advisors referred to the direct teaching that they had done in trying to assist students with the integration of theory and practice, and that they had been quite explicit in terms of discussing how the students’ own practice related to theory. One of these Academic Advisors also commented that she felt she had been able to offer students a model of how to apply theory to practice.

#### **5.1.4.2 Students**

It would seem fair to suggest that four out of the five student groups felt on the whole that the Academic Advisor was able to help facilitate the integration of theory and practice. Numerous very positive comments were made on this topic. One student said:

“The Academic Advisor very much made us think about what theory we were using.”

Another student from the same group said, “the Academic Advisor made us think about using different ones [theories], different theoretical perspectives and not just sticking to the same one”.

One student from another group also thought that the Academic Advisor attached to that group had helped her to understand that various theoretical approaches can be applied to any particular issue. Another one from that same group said that “the Academic Advisor helped me to relate theory to my practice in that setting”.

Not all students or student groups did find the Academic Advisor role helpful. One group in particular felt that on the whole it had been a bit of a missed opportunity, that there was a huge gap between university learning and practice but that the Academic Advisor had not been able to offer much support to them. One of the key reasons that this was felt to be the case was the lack of time that the Academic Advisor had been able to spend with them over the course of the whole placement.

#### **5.1.4.3 Practice Teachers**

As with the Academic Advisors, a number of Practice Teachers commented that it would be very difficult to ascertain the extent to which the introduction of an Academic Advisor impacted on students' abilities to integrate theory and practice. However, three of the four sets of Practice Teachers in Edinburgh/Midlothian suggested that students had reported to them that they felt their learning had been enabled by the Academic Advisor.

Three of the five Practice Teachers attached to the Glasgow-based Projects, and who were interviewed at the end of the placements, felt on the whole that the students were demonstrating good integration of theory and practice. While this successful integration could not be attributed in any precise quantities to the Academic Advisor, it was nevertheless felt that the additional support given by the Academic Advisor was valuable. Of the remaining two Practice Teachers, one felt that the attachment of the Academic Advisor had made "no apparent difference" to the students' learning (over what a traditional tutor could have provided). The fifth Practice teacher also felt that it was too difficult to quantify what the students got from the Academic Advisor because each student has such different abilities in the first place.

#### **5.2 How did the Academic Advisors' roles function with regard to supporting agency learning?**

This issue was more pertinent to the Edinburgh/Midlothian based projects than to the Glasgow-based projects because of the way they were instigated in each location. (As was mentioned earlier, the main Academic Advisor in the Glasgow-based Projects had so many agencies to cover that any possible involvement in supporting Continuing Professional Development would inevitably be very difficult). However, as will be outlined below, some Continuing Professional Development was enabled in Glasgow.

Table 4 gives a brief summary of the extent of participation in CPD that each Academic Advisor was able to provide, either individually, jointly or by assisting agency staff in any other ways.

**Table 4: Academic Advisors support for agency learning**

	Project 1	Project 2	Project 3	Project 4	Project 5	Project 6
Direct delivery of training to agency staff	x	x	√	√	x	√
Supplying literature to staff members	x	√	√	√	√	√
Introduction of staff members to other university learning resources	x	x	x	x	√	√
Introduction of staff member(s) to university modules	x	x	x	x	√	√
Any other involvement	√	x	x	x	x	x

**5.2.1 Academic Advisors**

As can be seen from the table above, the majority of Academic Advisors were able to become involved to some extent in supporting Continuing Professional Development within the agencies to which they were attached. The Academic Advisors in Projects 3 and 4 were those who delivered training to staff in the greatest quantities, in terms of number of hours training given and number of staff trained. The Academic Advisors for Projects 2, 3 and 5 all reported that the relatively short duration of the Projects, coupled with having students located in a variety of agencies (rather than in one central agency), compounded the problems of managing to deliver training as well as supporting student learning more generally.

The Glasgow-based Academic Advisors appear to have focused more on encouraging staff in agencies to uptake resources already on offer through the University, which seems a sensible way forward in otherwise difficult circumstances where creating and delivering many new training packages would have been difficult. Indeed the Academic Advisors in Projects 5 and 6 both reflected that they had not been able to give the role of facilitating Continuing Professional Development as much time as they had planned.

**5.2.2 Practice Teachers**

Formal training inputs were given in three of the six projects, as indicated in Table 4 above. According to two of the Practice Teachers, these formal training sessions were well received by staff. (The third Practice Teacher was interviewed prior to the training being delivered and there is no reason to think that that training would not have been

well received, since the Practice Teachers and 'key' agency staff were all very impressed with the role that the Academic Advisor had played throughout the duration of that Project).

In the three remaining projects where no formal training was delivered, two of the sets of Practice Teachers commented that being able to provide any support in relation to CPD was anyway a very high expectation of the role. Two of the five Practice Teachers interviewed at the end of the Glasgow-based placements also commented that informal support in terms of CPD was offered by the Academic Advisors, namely that of supplying literature and references to current reading materials, and was greatly appreciated.

One additional theme that emerged with regard to the 'relationship' between Academic Advisors and Practice Teachers, particularly in respect of the Glasgow-based projects was that those Practice Teachers who could be considered as 'less experienced' appeared to gain more from the supportive role that Academic Advisors could provide than more experienced Practice teachers. Even simply at the level of providing reassurance that the Practice Teachers were working appropriately to support the students, the less experienced Practice Teachers considered this a worthwhile role.

### **5.2.3 'Key' Agency Staff**

As already explained, only two of the four Edinburgh/Midlothian-based projects benefited from direct training from the Academic Advisors, and one of the projects had not yet received the training at the time of the last interview. Therefore the 'key' staff interviewees were not able to shed much light on this issue. However, with regard to Project 3 it was said that:

“...the feedback from all the workers has been extremely positive” ('Key' staff member).

Another 'key' staff member attached to the same agency said that through:

“having [the Academic Advisor], the whole organisation has benefited because, you know, it has been about organisational learning as well as students' learning” ('Key' staff member).

### **5.3 Reciprocal learning between agencies and Universities**

As well as hoping to be able to support Continuing Professional Development within agencies, another anticipated benefit of the Academic Advisor model was that there would be a mutual exchange of learning and learning opportunities between the Academic Advisors and the agency staff, or between the University and the agencies more generally. The Academic Advisors, Practice Teachers and 'key' agency staff were asked to give examples of where this has happened over the course of the placements.

#### **5.3.1 Academic Advisors**

Two very concrete examples of how the attachment of Academic Advisors to agencies has led to reciprocal partnership working between the two are found in the Edinburgh/Midlothian projects. In the case of Project 3 the Academic Advisor and Practice Teacher have, since the commencement of the demonstration project, been involved in delivering a number of joint presentations about the project at various forums. With regard to Project 4, the agency which hosted the Academic Advisor for the project's duration found the partnership between the Academic Advisor and the practice teaching team to be so successful that it has since negotiated an extension of the role to continue with another group of students.

As a result of discussions held between the Academic Advisor and one of the Practice Teachers involved in the Glasgow-based projects, that Practice Teacher has subsequently delivered a formal input to one of the Social Work courses at the attached University.

#### **5.3.2 Practice Teachers**

One set of Practice Teachers said that working with the Academic Advisor had helped them to develop a closer working relationship with the University involved because they were able to make direct input into the University's teaching materials. The same Practice Teachers were also able to give an example of how working more closely with the University had led to discussions about co-authoring a workbook for students coming into children and family work.

Another of the Practice Teachers in the Edinburgh/Midlothian projects said that having the Academic Advisor regularly on site had led to "more consistent and open communication between the University and us" (Practice Teacher).

## **5.4 Organisational Issues**

When asked what kinds of difficulties, if any, were encountered in trying to become 'integrated' within their respective agencies, a number of key issues were identified by Academic Advisors. In the main, however, the Academic Advisors experienced few barriers or difficulties in becoming ensconced within the agencies.

### **5.4.1 Limited time**

Those Academic Advisors who were supporting students in a number of agencies, particularly when they were located over large geographical area, commented that the time needed to physically make all the anticipated placement visits was too limited. Bearing in mind that all but one of the Academic Advisors had only one day per week to allocate to the role, this is not surprising.

### **5.4.2 Pressure of other commitments**

Another aspect of time constraints that most Academic Advisors mentioned (five out of six) was the difficulty of managing this role on top of numerous other work commitments. For those Academic Advisors who engaged in a lot of formal teaching and/or regular group sessions, the time needed to prepare these sessions became an issue. This might imply that, in future, consideration may need to be given either to allowing the Academic Advisors more time to devote to the role, or to be alleviated of some of their existing workloads. Both of these options would of course have resource implications.

### **5.4.3 Location of Academic Advisor**

In two interviews, the question of where to most usefully base the Academic Advisor within agencies was raised. In one project it was felt that the Academic Advisor role could perhaps be more useful if located within the training section of the agency, as it was felt that this might enable a more co-ordinated approach to CPD overall. It was felt that this may be more 'logical' than necessarily having the Academic Advisor based according to where students were placed. Whether this would make better sense from the point of view of the University though would be difficult to say.

In another project, it was suggested that the Academic Advisor could fulfil more of a Continuing Professional Development role if s/he was based in units which also had client contact. It was also felt that this could benefit the Academic Advisor more in the sense of keeping them up to date with practice issues, rather than being a step removed in agencies which do not have day-to-day client contact.

## **5.5 Main challenges/barriers to implementing the Academic Advisor role**

### **5.5.1 Time**

Owing both to time-scales imposed by the Scottish Institute for Excellence in Social Work Education (the Institute), and semester structures at the University of Edinburgh, the time available for the setting up stages of the projects was limited. This issue was commented on in every initial interview with participants in the Edinburgh/Midlothian projects, including the Project's manager. A number of Practice Teachers in the Glasgow projects also commented on this factor.

One of the main consequences of the speedy inception of the projects was that some participants felt they had insufficient time to undertake joint planning work, for example between Academic Advisors and Practice Teachers to consider how best to work together to support student learning. While many participants felt that this added a bit of extra pressure to their respective roles within the projects, they also on the whole expressed an acceptance that this was part and parcel of otherwise busy remits. If the role were implemented in the future, however, it would be extremely unlikely that it would happen at such short notice or without sufficient pre-planning.

From the perspective of some of the students participating in the projects, the lack of time available to consider the possible impact of the Academic Advisor, left them with a sense of lack of choice over participation in the project.

### **5.5.2 Role clarity over time**

Since part of the purpose of the demonstration projects was to establish which elements of the Academic Advisor role were perceived as the most successful from the perspectives of the key stakeholders, rather than to begin with a prescribed set of aims and objectives, it is not surprising that a lack of clarity over the precise role of the Academic Advisor was common at the beginning of the projects. This was a common feature of the first round of interviews in all the six projects.

#### **5.5.2.1 Academic Advisors**

The Academic Advisors themselves set out with broad aims about assisting the integration of learning and practice but did not have any specific objectives in mind. However, by the end of the projects the Academic Advisors in general had much more concrete notions of what the best elements of their role had been, and what they might be in the future.



### **5.5.2.2 Practice Teachers**

Although a number of Practice Teachers felt that they had become clearer about the purpose of the Academic Advisor over time, this was more the case in the Edinburgh/Midlothian projects than those based in Glasgow. Since in Glasgow, the Academic Advisors had much more sporadic contact with the Practice Teachers this might explain the difference found.

### **5.5.2.3 Students**

Those who were perhaps the least clear about the purpose of the Academic Advisor initially were the students. However, this lack of clarity at the beginning would appear to have had no bearing on whether the students perceived the Academic Advisor to have been a supporting role over the course of the placement. By the end of the projects the majority of participants, in each student group, reported that they were clear on the role of the Academic Advisor, and on the differences between that role and that of the Practice Teacher. However, it was felt by a minority that there was some blurring between these two roles which at times led to confusion about whom to approach with which issues. This point is an important one to bear in mind when considering how or if to utilise the Academic Advisors functions in the future.

### **5.5.3 Raising expectations and ending the projects**

Three of the four Academic Advisors in the Edinburgh/Midlothian projects, and the Project Manager, all mentioned the difficulty of managing the fact that expectations of agency staff have been raised through the implementation of the Academic Advisor role. Particularly in cases where the Academic Advisor had been successful in contributing to staff training, the difficulty of knowing quite what to say about what may be offered in the future was problematic.

## **5.6 Most positive elements of the Academic Advisor role/Demonstration Projects**

### **5.6.1 Agencies' Support**

Perhaps the most significant outcome of the demonstration projects is that one of the agencies involved has subsequently negotiated an extension to the Academic Advisor's role of supporting students on placement within the agency. It would be very useful to get feedback from this participant at a later date in order to determine how the role has developed.

The support of agencies in general, however, has also been a positive element of the demonstration projects.

### **5.6.2 Proximity**

One key theme which emerged from interviews with participants in the Edinburgh/Midlothian projects was that of the proximity of the Academic Advisor, to the students and to the agencies. All four Academic Advisors mentioned this factor in follow-up interviews. Two of the advantages of being in close proximity to the students in their agencies were felt to be the ability to respond to student needs quickly, and the amount of learning that Academic Advisors themselves can do in practice settings. Two of the Academic Advisors in the Edinburgh/Midlothian projects mentioned that they would be able to incorporate their learning from being back in practice settings directly into lecture materials on campus.

### **5.6.3 Additional support for students**

Students from different groups mentioned the general supportive nature of having a member of university staff in the placement alongside them. Most felt that it was generally advantageous to have access to an Academic Advisor to help with the integration of learning and practice. Another common theme expressed by students was the peer support gained in being on group placements.

### **5.6.4 Personality factors**

Perhaps not surprisingly, the personalities of those involved in projects appear to mitigate towards either a successful or not so successful implementation of these projects. In three of the projects where the process of setting up the roles appears to have gone more smoothly, the personality and character of the Academic Advisors were mentioned very positively by Practice Teachers and in some instances by 'key' staff interviewees. In other projects, where the Academic Advisor role perhaps did not develop as extensively as might have been anticipated, the need for an Academic Advisor to be more pro-active in promoting the role within the agency was mentioned by one of the Practice Teachers.

### **5.6.5 Positive feedback**

At the final interview, the Project Manager was also able to comment that the Scottish Social Services Council, who were reviewing the Social Work courses at the University

of Edinburgh, had received positive feedback from students about their experiences of being involved in the demonstration projects.

## **5.7 Perceived value of continuing the Academic Advisor role in future**

### **5.7.1 Academic Advisors**

All six Academic Advisors thought that to continue the role in the future would be worthwhile because students are better supported through the role and links between universities and agencies are strengthened. A number of potential changes or improvements to the role were mentioned:

- That the tutor and Academic Advisor role were merged so that Academic Advisors were also always the students' tutor (in order to avoid potential role confusion). Or alternatively that the traditional tutor role is broken up so that they are attached to agencies rather than student placements as such.
- That the expectations of management staff within agencies were clarified at the outset.
- That it would be useful for Academic Advisors to have been able to visit placements before students were located there.
- That consideration should be given to the possibility of Academic Advisors being involved in the assessment process in future.
- That group placements probably enhance the students' experiences of learning in the field.
- That elements of the Academic Advisor role might be easier to import on to existing tutor role in future rather than expecting to be able to adopt this whole new (resource intensive) role.
- That in future consideration could be given to the notion of employing dedicated Academic Advisors.

### **5.7.2 Practice Teachers**

All of the Practice Teachers interviewed thought that there was a future role for the Academic Advisors, even where the project had not gone as well as was hoped. In the Edinburgh/Midlothian based projects, the Practice Teachers were keen to keep the same model of support where the Academic Advisors were located within the agencies, and many could see the potential for developing this role in the future in terms of enabling Continuing Professional Development of the agency staff as well as of the Academic Advisor. It was also felt that having the Academic Advisor *in situ* was an excellent

pathway for feeding information back into the university about current practice and about potentially informing the teaching curriculum. In the Glasgow-based projects, while the Academic Advisor to the majority of students was not *in situ* within agencies, but rather had a more tangential role, the Practice Teachers also recognized the potential benefits for enabling Continuing Professional Development and expressed appreciation of the less formal inputs made by the Academic Advisors. Such input included helping access the university library and the provision of current literature and reports to Practice Teachers. This was seen as especially beneficial by less experienced Practice Teachers.

### **5.7.3 Students**

The majority opinion in all of the student groups was that the Academic Advisor role should be continued in the future if possible. A number of students from different projects said that they particularly valued exploring the links between theory and practice through case discussions. Those students who participated in projects where the meetings between Academic Advisors and students occurred more frequently, and where the purpose of the group discussion were clearest seemed to be more likely to unequivocally endorse the role of the Academic Advisor and express a wish for it to be continued. All students also thought that the Academic Advisor role would be equally helpful to them in a second placement, as much as in a first placement. One group in particular expressed an anxiety at the prospect of not having access to an Academic Advisor in their next placements, and was also concerned about going on to individual placements where they felt they would miss the peer support they had found so supportive.

Even those students who felt they possibly hadn't had the degree of support from Academic Advisors that they required, felt that they could see the potential for the role in future. For example, one student felt that more regular contact with the Academic Advisor was required, perhaps on a weekly basis rather than sporadically.

### **5.7.4 Key agency Staff**

Key agency staff from all four Edinburgh/Midlothian agencies were very positive about the Academic Advisor role, and were very strongly in favour of it continuing in the future. Three of the four key staff participants also had very clear views of how the role could be developed and perhaps used to further enhance learning opportunities for staff and students.

One key staff member expressed a hope that the Academic Advisor could, in future, input into a training and development programme for newly qualified staff as well as the training of students. She also commented that having an Academic Advisor closely connected to the agency was a very good idea, that it had helped to improve relationships between the University and the agency and that she would like to see the link continued.

A key staff member from another agency commented:

“I just think it has been a very positive experience and I hope that it is a model that they [the University] will think about using for future student placements”.

She then continued: “I would be happy to do it on a permanent basis”.

Yet another key staff member from a third agency commented that the Academic Advisor had most certainly been beneficial to that agency, and that it was hoped to have that person bought back into the agency in the near future. Indeed, this has subsequently happened and can be considered a very positive outcome for that particular project.

In four out of the six projects, key staff members and Practice teachers commented that if the role were to continue in the future, they would ideally like to be allocated the same Academic Advisor since they felt it important to build on existing relationships rather than begin afresh with somebody ‘new’ at a later date.

#### **5.7.5 Project manager**

The Project Manager expressed a view that while this may be a resource intensive way to support students learning, it may also be a better way. The Project Manager felt that perhaps the time is right to examine the best way forward to approach the integration of practice and theory with students in placement.

## **6 Survey data**

Although only 13 completed questionnaires were returned out of 27 sent out, the information contained in these provided a useful cross-check for themes which had

emerged in the interviews, and gave feedback about much how link supervisors knew (or did not know) about the new approach being adopted.

## **6.1 Key results**

### **6.1.1 Awareness of Academic Advisor role and its purposes**

All but one of the 13 respondents knew that their student had access to an Academic Advisor. 12 of the 13 (92%) respondents also were able to describe at least one potential element of the Academic Advisor role, including supporting students to integrate theory and practice, supporting students more generally on placement, and facilitating the link between universities and agencies.

When asked to indicate the frequency meetings with Academic Advisors and students, the modal response was in the 1-4 range. One Practice Teacher reported having met with the Academic Advisor between 5-10 times and one reported meeting on more than ten occasions. Overall it seems that the Academic Advisor had sporadic and infrequent contact with the Practice Teachers and Link-Supervisors who oversaw students work in 'second' placement settings. This is not surprising given the lack of time that Academic Advisors themselves mentioned in the interviews. However, ten of the 13 (77%) respondents undertook three or four way meetings with the Academic Advisor and student, two of the 13 (16%) were involved in delivering joint training with the Academic Advisor, and another was involved in delivering joint training to agency staff.

### **6.1.2 Utility of the Academic Advisor role**

When asked whether they thought that the Academic Advisor role had helped students to integrate theory and practice, nine of the thirteen (69%) respondents answered in the positive. The main reason that respondents gave for believing that the integration of theory and practice was facilitated was that their students had fed this back to them.

Seven respondents (54%) perceived that the Academic Advisor role had also helped to aid students' theoretical learning and gave a variety of reasons for believing this. Two respondents suggested that the inputs the Academic Advisor had done in group sessions with students had helped to achieve this, and another cited individual work done between Academic Advisor and student. One respondent said that the Academic Advisors knowledge of prior theoretical learning done at university helped to facilitate the process of learning in and for practice.

With regard to the issue of whether Academic Advisors were able to offer support to Practice Teachers in relation to students' learning, six respondents (46%) indicated that this was the case. Four respondents (31%) felt that they were not supported in this aspect but did not elaborate on why this might be. The remaining respondents either did not answer this question or said they 'did not know'. From this data it is not possible to tell whether those who indicated in the affirmative are less experienced Practice Teachers than those who indicated in the negative. This was, of course, a theme that emerged from the qualitative data.

### **6.1.3 Perceived benefits of the role and continuation of role in future**

Seven respondents answered a question about their perceptions of the most positive aspects of the Academic Advisor role. A number of different points were raised in relation to this. Three respondents commented that the ease of access to the Academic Advisor provided a strong link between the agency and the university. Two further respondents suggested that the 3/4 way meetings involving the Academic Advisor were very useful. One respondent mentioned the value of having an experienced teacher from the university do teaching inputs over the course of the placement, and one respondent also mentioned a specific training event, which the Academic Advisor had been involved in, as being particularly positive.

When asked whether they thought that the Academic Advisor role ought to be continued in future, the majority of respondents (54%) agreed that it should. Some of the most positive aspects of the role that were thought to be worth continuing in the future were the model of partnership working that it offered the students, the direct link that it provided between agency and university, and the perceived support that it gave to students on placement. One respondent felt that it should not be continued in the future because the role lacked clarity and purpose. The remaining five respondents did not answer this question. Whether this was because they felt 'unqualified' to answer or whether it was not answered because it was asked towards the end of the questionnaire when respondents may have been fatigued is impossible to say.

A number of respondents also made suggestions about changes that ought to be considered for the role of Academic Advisor if it were continued. Among these were that the role would need to be made clearer from the outset. This accords with data gathered in the qualitative part of the study. Other suggestions made were that more regular meetings between Practice Teachers and the Academic Advisor would be useful in order

to standardise the teaching done with the student, and another was a suggestion that more focused theoretical inputs were delivered by the Academic Advisor.

On the other hand, when asked to indicate the most negative aspects of the Academic Advisor role, three respondents made comment. Two commented that the Academic Advisor had made only limited input into joint supervision or training sessions, and one said that the role clarity of the Academic Advisor and the perceived lack of communication between the Academic Advisor and the University were the most negative aspects of the role. Again, these points have been substantiated in the interviews with participants.

## **7 Discussion and Recommendations**

This study took place at a time when changes to Social Work Education were already underway. Indeed, the new Social Work degree courses began in Scotland in September 2004, when the study was nearing completion. The new degree courses will in themselves, undoubtedly, have implications for the future development of practice learning and the question of how best to integrate university learning and practice. While this state of flux and impending change has added to the complexities of carrying out this evaluation, in terms of understanding different and changing modes of working across the placement agencies, it has also been a worthwhile time to try to shed some light on student learning and professional development. Hopefully, this report has demonstrated that the location of the Academic Advisors within agencies has been greatly valued by Practice Teachers, agency staff, and students alike. The Academic Advisors themselves felt intuitively that their being *in situ* within the agencies was of great benefit to the students and to themselves, in terms of their own professional learning. Practice Teachers and Academic Advisors, on the whole, also valued opportunities to work in closer partnership with one another, and the majority of students felt very supported during their first placement experience. This was not the case for all, however, as some students felt that a lack of contact between themselves and Academic Advisors left their experience unaltered. There is also still a need for caution about generalizing findings from a small scale study such as this, and bearing in mind the uniqueness of each of the projects, a number of recommendations can be made. These are listed in the following section.



## **7.1 Recommendations**

The recommendations are the following:

- That consideration is given either to enhancing the traditional tutor role, or to employing Academic Advisors (whatever they may be entitled in future), to incorporate group supervision for students on placement.
- That consideration is given either to enhancing the traditional tutor role, or to employing Academic Advisors (whatever they may be entitled in future), to include a greater role in partnership working with agencies where students are on placement.
- That consideration is given to creating a new forum where Practice Teachers are able to work more closely with each other and with universities to develop the curriculum and generally enhance partnership working. In future, it is likely that Learning Centres may provide this forum.
- That if the Academic Advisor role is continued in the future, more time is allocated to the role, or efforts are made to alleviate the existing workloads of those who provide the Academic Advisor function.
- That consideration is given to offering students some degree of group supervision/sessions while on placement to facilitate peer support. While this does happen routinely in some agencies, it is by no means common in all.

## **7.2 Study limitations**

The evaluation of the Academic Advisor role was limited to six projects, each of which was very different, and each of which involved Social Work or Community Work agencies which had various historical relationships with the universities involved in the study. That the type of placement work, and therefore practice learning, that students undertook was so diverse meant that to single out the impact of the Academic Advisors' formal and informal teaching was not possible in this instance.

The fact that in this study all of the Social Work and Community Work agencies volunteered to be part of the study may also mean that the overall willingness of the staff to be joint partners in this venture may not necessarily be replicated in the future. This

could be considered as a form of elite bias in the present study; where those who are most interested in the study (and who therefore are not a representative sample of the population), constitute the entire sample.

Perhaps in future, now that the process of integrating universities and practice agencies, and the potential utility of the Academic Advisor role are clearer, any further research could focus on outcome orientated evaluation. Such future studies may therefore be able to shed light on the question raised above. Additionally, future studies may also concentrate on questions relating to cost-effectiveness which of course will be of interest to anyone who may be in a position to consider funding any future Academic Advisors or enhanced tutor roles. Neither of these issues formed part of the remit in this study.

## **APPENDIX 1 – Information Sheet**

### **Integration of Learning for Practice, Proposal for a Demonstration Project, University of Edinburgh**

#### **Introduction**

This proposal is part of the Learning for Effective and Ethical Practice (LEEP) initiative, funded by the Scottish Institute for Excellence in Social Work Education. The LEEP project, running from November 2003 to July 2005, is focused on finding out more about, and modelling new approaches to the Integration of Learning for Practice. The project began with a Practice Audit and Literature Review, currently being written up for publication in early March 2004.

The proposal attempts to capture the work which has been going on over the last two months since the project began; it therefore demonstrates some of the thinking emerging from the literature review and practice audit. It also, however, bears witness to the imaginative ideas which have been developing (with the support of Wendy Paterson, Practice Coordinator at the University of Edinburgh) in some practice agencies over a considerable amount of time.

I hope that readers will see this paper as a 'work in progress' – as indeed is all the work of the LEEP project – and feel able to contribute to its growing knowledge base.

#### **Integration of Learning for Practice**

Gibbons and Gray (2002) argue that integrated learning means bringing together:

- Theory and practice
- The individual and social
- Art and science
- Field and classroom

Over the last 10 years or so, social work educators have sought to achieve integration of learning in a number of ways:

- At a structural level, through the development of consortium arrangements through which social work programmes are designed and delivered by universities and agencies working together.
- At the programme level, through the invitation of practitioners to participate in teaching on various courses; through problem based learning approaches; and through skills-based teaching.
- At agency level, through teaching by practice teachers on theory and by the widespread use of student groups for group learning on placement.
- At the level of individual students, through assignments which promote integration of learning for practice, e.g. practice studies or integrated practice assignments, practice reports etc.

It remains an open question how successful these initiatives have been in fostering integration of learning for practice. Consortium arrangements have not been universally welcomed. On the contrary, there has been widespread concern that consortia may have increased bureaucratic control, but not necessarily partnership between universities and agencies. Meanwhile, the development of a competence based model for social work programmes have made it difficult at times to maintain imagination and creativity in programme delivery. At the same time, successive studies of students'

readiness to practice suggest that many feel less prepared than they would wish at the point of qualification (Marsh and Triseliotis 1996, Rae 1997, Fook et al 2000).

### **Proposal for Demonstration Projects**

What is proposed here is a fresh angle on the question of integration of learning for practice. Put simply, instead of bringing the field to the classroom, we are proposing taking the classroom to the field. This flies in the face of what can be seen as a gradual erosion of contact between university staff and students undertaking practice learning. Whilst many social work programmes (overburdened by the competing demands of the Research Assessment Exercise, Teaching Quality review and highly prescribed programme specifications) have colluded in the reduction of tutor visits from three over the course of a placement, to two, and then in some instances to one, we are suggesting that we re-visit what the university might offer students and agencies during practice learning.

It is proposed that the university appoints a number of staff to the new role of 'Academic Adviser'. Academic Advisers will spend time in a placement agency, working with groups of between six and eight students, who are all supervised and assessed by a practice teacher in that agency. The Academic Advisor will carry some conventional tutoring responsibilities for the chosen group of students on placement in the agency. This means that they will act as tutor and dissertation facilitator to the students over the length of the placement, including taking the usual tutor's role if a placement gets into difficulty. Over and above this, it is envisaged that the new role will bring a number of general opportunities:

- Help to break down barriers (real and imagined) between the 'real world' and the 'ivory tower'.
- Help to improve relationships between university and agency staff.
- Help to build a better understanding of how students integrate learning for practice.

And a number of more specific opportunities:

- Try out new ways of tutor-practice teacher-student interaction, by removing routine placement visits by tutors, often experienced on all sides as at best 'rubber stamping' practice learning, and at worst, intrusive.
- Create opportunities for shared teaching and learning with practice teacher and/or practitioner working with students on placement, and perhaps working towards the development of a curriculum for practice.
- An exploration of CPD needs of agency practitioners.
- Direct teaching of students by a university staff member.
- Improved knowledge and information about current debates and developments in practice for university staff.
- Improvements in practice teachers and practitioners' knowledge about the new social work degrees.

It should be noted that the term 'Academic Advisor' was chosen in preference to the more familiar term of 'tutor' because we wished to forefront the separation between the new role and the traditional one. This was felt to be less confusing for all concerned, and at the same time, provide a title which might express the wider nature of the new position.

### **Methodology**

Exact details are being worked out now, but it seems likely that the demonstration projects will be based at the following agencies:

The first group of students will go out in early February; others in Edinburgh will go out in early March. The Glasgow project will operate from August to December.

The Academic Adviser will spend one-day or two half-days in the placement agency, working with students, practice teachers and other staff members where appropriate. It is acknowledged that there can be no 'blue-print' for the role (or indeed for the demonstration projects, since so much will have to evolve in an organic way as the placement progresses.

The Academic Adviser will be asked to keep a reflective diary of their experiences in the placement. S/he will expect to spend time with students on an individual basis looking at how they are integrating their learning, in the early and later stages of placement. This is likely to take the form of working through Critical Incident Analysis examples with students, and then charting their developmental stage, drawing on Secker's (1996) typology of approaches. We anticipate that this ongoing work will not only encourage students to integrate their learning but also act as a useful standard for measuring the development of integrated learning over the course of the placement, and hence helping us to better understand how students integrate their learning for practice. (Note that information from these exercises will not form part of the assessment of the student's work at any time.)

### **Evaluation of the demonstration projects**

It is vital that the experience of all those involved in the new arrangements (students, Academic Advisers and practice teachers/ practitioners) is evaluated so that lessons can be learned for the future. For this reason, we have engaged the services of Alison Munro, Glasgow Caledonian University, to carry out a process evaluation of the demonstration projects. She will interview students, practice teachers, other agency staff where advised to do so (including managers if applicable), and key members of staff from the University of Edinburgh. Alison's task is to review the planning, organisation and delivery of the demonstration projects, with a view to making recommendations for good practice in the future.

It should be clarified that the demonstration projects should be seen as part of a case-study. This means that we will be keen to analyse and evaluate the experiences of all those involved in the demonstration projects. We will not, however, be seeking to set up a 'control group' of those not on demonstration projects. This is because there are so many different variables in how placements are run and the learning which students gain on placement that there can be no simple point of comparison in this.

The evaluation will address the following broad research questions:

1. What was it like for all those concerned (students, practice teachers, academic advisers, managers in agencies and universities, LEEP project manager) to be part of a LEEP demonstration project?
2. What were their expectations and how far were these realised?
3. How do they feel that integration of learning for practice might be improved?

Beyond this, some more detailed questions will be asked about:

- the preparation, planning and implementation of the projects
- the role of the academic adviser – their work with students; within agencies; and beyond

- the impact of the projects on other aspects of university and agency life, if any

It is still being decided exactly how many interviews will be conducted and with whom. For example, it is suggested that it may be enough to interview students once towards the end of placement, asking them to review their experiences as a whole. In contrast, two interviews may be needed with academic advisers and practice teachers, once towards the beginning and secondly towards the end of the placements.

### **Ethical issues**

The demonstration projects (and their evaluation) raise some fundamental ethical issues. Most centrally, it is important that no student is disadvantaged by taking part in the projects; and that care is taken to consult with students about their participation in the projects. This means that we must ensure that all students who take part in the projects have adequate knowledge about what is being planned, and are happy to agree with the new arrangements. It is clear that any student who does not wish to relinquish contact with their personal tutor during a demonstration project should not have to do so. In the situation where a student wishes to maintain contact with their tutor over and above the academic advisor, then this will be acceptable to all concerned.

We also need to ensure that the students feel fully informed and able to decline if they wish to take part in the evaluation of the projects. Students will be asked to give written consent to participate, and it will be clearly stated that nothing said in the evaluation will be passed on to their practice teacher or form any part of the assessment of their learning.

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17<sup>th</sup> February 2004

## APPENDIX 2 Examples of qualitative interview schedules

### Interview Schedule – Academic Advisor

#### Follow-up Interview

1. One of the aspects of the Academic Advisor role was that to a large extent you had a free rein to develop and shape the role over the course of the placement. Can you say a bit about how the role has developed over the last 12 weeks?
2. Another of the main aims of having an academic advisor in the placement agency was to improve student's integration of learning and practice, can you say whether you think that has been successful? If yes – in what ways? If not – what barriers have there been to achieving this?

Use prompts

- group supervision/group discussion of cases
- critical incident analysis
- direct teaching on SW theories
- direct teaching on SW skills
- direct teaching on SW research
- direct teaching on assessed tasks
- providing informal support
- providing formal input to assessment of students' work

3. How often did you meet with the students over the course of their placements and what sorts of inputs did you provide for them over the course of the placement?
4. Do you feel that the 3 way meetings with Practice Teachers, students and yourself worked well? If yes, in what ways? If not, can you say why not?
5. Do you feel that the role has been successful in terms of helping to improve relationships between the university and the practice agency? If so, how? If not, how not?
6. Were you able to build a working relationship with the relevant Practice Teachers within the placement? Did you find that any issues arose over role boundaries with Practice Teachers?
7. Do you feel that being an Academic Advisor role has helped you to build a better understanding of how students integrate learning for practice? If yes, ask to expand on what has been learned.
8. Another of the aims of the Academic Advisor role was hoped to be one of acting as a resource for other staff within the agency, i.e. in terms of facilitating with CPD – is that something that has happened? If yes, how has that happened and what has been done? If not, explore why not.



9. Can you say a bit about your experience of the processes of fitting into your role within the placement agency? How has that worked out, and what challenges if any do you feel that presented for you?
10. What would you say have been the main challenges of having this role?
11. What would you say have been the main positive features of having this role? Benefits to self, to university, to students or to agency.
12. If you were to undertake such a role in the future, what changes would you make, if any, to the way the role has been implemented this time around.
13. What would you say you have learned over the course of the project about the potential role for an Academic Advisor in future placement agencies?
14. In our first meeting, you said that x would count as a success for the demonstration project. Do you feel that it has been successful now that it has come to an end?
15. In your placement your students were dispersed across different agencies, what impact if any do you think that had on your role as Academic Advisor?
16. Do you feel at the end of the project that you were able to provide support to students that was in any different from what a traditional tutor would have provided?
17. Do you have any thoughts about whether this model is best suited to a 1st placement, or whether it might be equally applicable to both placements?
18. And finally, do you have any other comments to make at all regarding your experiences of the Demonstration Project?

## Interview Schedule – Practice Teacher

### Follow-up Interview

19. At our initial meeting we talked about the idea that the precise role(s) of Academic Advisor would become clearer as the project evolved. How did that role evolve over time and would you say that you are now clearer on what the role is?
20. Were you able to build a working relationship with the Academic Advisor during the course of the placement? Did you find that any issues arose over role boundaries? If so, what were they, and were they resolved?
21. What impact would you say that having an Academic Advisor attached to your agency has had in relation to:
  - A Your own role(s) as Practice Teachers
  - B Other agency staff
  - C Student Learning
22. One of the main aspirations of having an Academic Advisor in the placement agency was to improve student's integration of learning and practice, are you able to say anything about whether you think that has been successful? If yes – in what ways? If not – what barriers have there been to achieving this?
23. Over the course of the placement, did you undertake 3 way meetings with students, the Academic Advisor and yourselves? If yes, do you feel that they worked well? If yes, in what ways? If not, can you say why not?
24. Another anticipated role for the Academic Advisor was one of acting as a resource for other staff within the agency, i.e. in terms of facilitating with CPD – is that something that has happened? If yes, how has that happened and what has been done? If not, explore why not.
25. What would you say have been the main positive features of having the Academic Advisor attached to the students' placements here?
26. What main challenges or constraints, if any, have you experienced in terms of co-working within the Academic Advisor model of assisting the integration of learning for practice?
27. Do you feel at the end of the project that having the Academic Advisor available had any advantage over what a traditional tutor could have provided?
28. What impact do you feel that having an Academic Advisor attached to your agency has had in regard to the overall relationship between the University and this agency?

If improved - how? If stayed the same, or worsened, how?

29. Do you have any thoughts about whether this model is best suited to a 1st placement, or whether it might be equally applicable to later stage placements?
30. If you were to be involved in a similar project in the future, what changes would you make, if any, to the way the role has been implemented this time around.
31. And finally, do you have any other comments to make at all regarding your experiences of, or any other aspect of, the Demonstration Project?

### APPENDIX 3 SURVEY INSTRUMENT

Please indicate your responses to the following questions by  the appropriate answer.

- 1 Which of the following describes your role?      Link-Supervisor        
Practice Teacher

- 2 Did you supervise/teach students involved in the LEEP demonstration project?

Yes     

No     

- 3 Are you aware that the students involved with the LEEP demonstration project also had access to an Academic Advisor?

Yes     

No     

- 4 Could you please describe in the space below what your understanding of the purpose of the Academic Advisors role is?

- 5 Could you please indicate the approximate number of times that you met with the Academic Advisor in regard to students' learning/progress during the course of the students' placements?

0     

1-4     

5-10     

More than 10

6 From the following list could you please indicate what the purpose(s) of your meetings were. **Please tick all responses that apply.**

Three/four way meetings with yourself, student and Academic Advisor

To deliver joint workshops to students

To deliver training to staff

To discuss issues relating to Continuing Professional Development for yourself or other staff members

To discuss specifically any issues around the integration of university and practice learning

Any other business (please specify in box below)

7 In your opinion did the Academic Advisor help to facilitate students' learning for practice?

Yes

No

Don't Know

Could you please expand on your answer.

8 In your opinion did the Academic Advisor help to facilitate students' theoretical learning?

Yes

No

Don't Know

Could you please expand on your answer.

9 In your opinion did the Academic Advisor help to facilitate your own or colleagues' Continuing Professional Development?

Yes

No

Don't Know

Could you please expand on your answer.

10 In your opinion did the Academic Advisor help to facilitate your role with regard to student learning at all?

Yes

No

Don't Know

If Yes, could you please give details.

11 Were you able to contact the Academic Advisor if and when you needed to over the course of the students' placement?

- Yes   
No

12 Can you identify any organisational issues that impeded/restricted the role of the Academic Advisor?

- Yes   
No   
Don't Know

If yes, could you please expand on your answer.

13 In your opinion is the Academic Advisor role one that you would wish to see being continued in the future?

- Yes   
No   
Don't Know

Could you please expand on your answer.

14 If the role were to continue in the future what changes could be made to improve it?

15 In your opinion what has been the most positive aspects of the Academic Advisor role?

16 In your opinion what has been the most negative aspects of the Academic Advisor role?

17 Overall, how would you describe the impact of the Academic Advisor on student learning for the LEEP Demonstration Project students?

**THANK YOU FOR TAKING THE TIME TO COMPLETE THIS QUESTIONNAIRE.**



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