

Practice learning: an introductory guide for organisations

Learning in practice enables social work students to develop knowledge, skills and experience of working in different social service contexts. It also helps them to apply the learning they have gained at university to the work they are doing in practice.

During their social work course, students will work with lots of different people in both formal and informal contexts and will be placed in a range of statutory, third sector and independent organisations. For example, a student may have one period of assessed practice learning in a day care setting or a community project working with adults and another in a statutory team working with children and families. These contrasting experiences help students gain a wide range of knowledge, help them identify their strengths and interests and enable them to consider where they want to work once qualified.

If you are thinking of having a social work student placed in your team or organisation it's important to consider both the learning opportunities you can offer the student and also what the student might bring to your organisation.

What are the benefits for us in having a social work student in our team?

There are lots of benefits, here are a few.

- Students often ask the question 'why'? This can prompt reflection for workers in the team and encourage sharing of new ideas.
- Students undertake direct work with people receiving services and in addition can undertake specific projects or evaluations. This can be very helpful to busy teams and students can become valuable assets.
- Students are studying while learning and often share theories and research with the team. This can support workers to keep up to date with current knowledge and research.
- Workers have the opportunity to learn new skills when facilitating the learning of a student, whether this be as a team member, link worker/supervisor or practice educator.
- For workers registered with the Scottish Social Services Council this learning can contribute to workers' post registration training and learning (PRTL) records.

What experiences can we offer a social work student?

During assessed periods of practice learning students will have a wide range of roles and experiences, a few of which are noted below.

- Working as a social worker in a statutory team (eg with adults, children or in community justice).
- Working in a specialist project (eg intensively supporting children or families on a voluntary basis).
- Working as a key worker (eg in day or residential care settings with children or adults).
- Working in communities (eg project development).
- Working in group settings (eg structured or informal groups, day or residential centres).

Every team will have a different range of learning experiences to offer a student and it can be helpful to make a list of them. Learning experiences include not only direct work with people receiving services from your organisation but also opportunities for attending meetings or networks, shadowing different professionals, supporting development of new initiatives, undertaking a small project, seeking resources on behalf of the team or evaluating some of the team's work.

Some universities ask for an organisational profile to be completed, which has essential information about the context and range of work available for a student. The university can use this to help match individual students to the organisations or teams which can best meet their learning needs and are appropriate for their stage in training.

You will need to consider how the work available in your team will enable the student to meet the Standards in Social Work Education (SiSWE) which all students in Scotland are assessed against. Some work may be suitable for students at the early stages of their training and other work more suitable for the final stages, for example working in more complex situations.

Who is involved in practice learning?

As well as the student several people are usually involved in supporting the student's practice learning experience. A brief summary of those people is below.

The practice educator. This is the person who provides the overall assessment of the student and should have the required qualifications and experience for this role. The practice educator has overall responsibility for ensuring that learning opportunities are in place for the student to enable them to meet the SiSWE in your organisation. The practice educator meets the student for supervision and observes the student working directly with people receiving services. They gather feedback from a range of people who worked with the student, compile a report on the student's progress and how they have met the SiSWE and make a pass or fail recommendation to the university. If you don't

have a practice educator based in your team or organisation, social work programmes may be able to provide information about practice educators who work with their programme.

A link worker/ practice supervisor. If you don't have a practice educator in your team or organisation, you will need to appoint a team member to act as a link worker. This person works closely with the student, offers day to day support and supervision and is the student's first point of contact. Link workers are ideally people with experience of working in your team who can offer advice, information, guidance and feedback to the student and who are motivated and interested in supporting the learning of others. The link worker will work alongside the practice educator and provide feedback on the student's progress.

Team managers and teams. Team managers may be involved in supporting or supervising the link worker or practice educator or directly involved in the allocation of the student's work. Team members can offer support and mentoring to the student and provide feedback to both the student and the link worker or practice educator. Some team members have particular areas of experience or expertise and may offer shadowing or co-work for the student.

People receiving services. People receiving a service from your organisation will be able to contribute to the student's learning in different ways, depending on the organisational context. This might range from providing feedback on their experience of working with a student, being involved in a project with a student or being part of the student's induction.

The university tutor. The tutor is a point of contact for the student and practice educator and will visit the student during practice learning. The tutor ensures that learning opportunities are in place for the student to meet the SiSWE and that the student will be supported and supervised. If difficulties arise during practice learning, the tutor will usually meet with the student, practice educator and link worker to agree a plan of action.

Practice learning coordinator. The coordinator is the person who arranges practice learning and is the link between the university social work course and the organisation offering practice learning.

The roles and expectations of all those involved in practice learning are identified in the social work programme handbooks.

Planning for practice learning

Here are some questions to get you started.

Health and safety

- Are students covered by your organisation's insurance?
- How are PVG checks managed and, if students have a conviction, how will this be managed?
- What essential training or learning does a student need to do to ensure safe practice?

- Are there any tasks which are not appropriate for student to do (eg types of personal care, managing particular risk situations?)

Student requirements

- Is the building accessible for all students? (eg lifts, ramps, accessible parking etc). If not, how might that restrict learning opportunities for a student?
- Is a driving licence or car required for the student to have a range of work or to work in a rural area? If so, will they need to carry passengers?
- What will be the hours of work and how will shifts be managed?

The team and people receiving services

- Where will the student be located?
- Who will be the practice educator and, if needed, the link worker? Who will cover in their absence?
- Who else in the team can support the student and what skills and knowledge can they bring?
- How can people receiving services contribute to student learning?
- What opportunities are there for shadowing workers and for co-work?

Workload

- Is the work undertaken by your team suitable for a student with little or no pre-course experience in your area of work, or is some experience desirable or essential?
- Is there any work which isn't suitable for a student (due to complexity or additional training required)?
- What kind of work might a student undertake and will the work enable them to meet all the SiSWE?
- What links do you have with other teams and can a student either visit, shadow or co-work in another team to widen learning opportunities?

Planning induction

Many organisations already have induction processes for staff which can be adapted for students. When a student is being placed, the university will provide a student profile which will help you tailor induction to the individual student, although of course there will be common areas for all students coming to your organisation.

If your organisation doesn't have an induction pack for students some areas you might like to include are:

- the organisation and the team's work (who's who, team plans, annual reports, website information)
- services in the local area (with contact numbers)
- key contacts (other professionals)
- copies of proformas (assessments, contracts, forms)
- information about systems (computers, how to guides, funding etc)

- literature on models of practice used in your organisation/team.

Students will be assessed on the SiSWE during practice learning and to demonstrate their competence they will need to fully understand their role and responsibilities as a social work student in your organisation. A good induction enables students to develop the essential knowledge to practice safely and effectively in your organisation, makes sure expectations of students are clear and provides the foundation for a fair assessment. Some examples of how induction can support students to begin to meet the SiSWE are below.

Induction area	How this might link to the SiSWE
Facilitating students' introduction to the organisation (organisational aims, introduction to team members, overview of team remit, clarity about student role).	This helps students understand the organisation, their role and the limits of it and supports planning for practice (Standard 1).
Managing practicalities (eg hours of work, flexi, home working, absences, access, admin, equipment).	This helps students settle into the organisation, know what is expected of them and supports accountable practice (Standard 5).
Learning about policies, processes and procedures (eg personal safety, lone working policy, assessment processes, confidentiality, data protection, recording systems).	This helps students prepare for working with people receiving services (Standard 1) and to work safely and competently (Standards 3 and 4).
Undertaking visits to other organisations which have links to your service.	This helps students learn about support and resources available so they can discuss options with people receiving services (Standards 1, 2 and 5).
Introducing students to other professionals to facilitate inter-professional working.	This helps students understand the role of others, develop professional networks and work in partnership with others (Standards 2 and 5).
Enabling the student to shadow other workers and co-work.	This helps students understand the work of the team, observe the skills of other workers and identify knowledge and skills they need to develop (Standard 5).
Enabling the student to read good quality assessments, reports and notes.	This helps students understand ethical and accountable recording, manage risk situations and learn about decision making processes (Standards 3 and 5).
Providing literature relevant to the organisation's work (eg national policy and guidance, research).	The helps students learn about what underpins 'best practice', the practice standards they should be aiming to achieve and evidence informed practice (Standards 4 and 5).