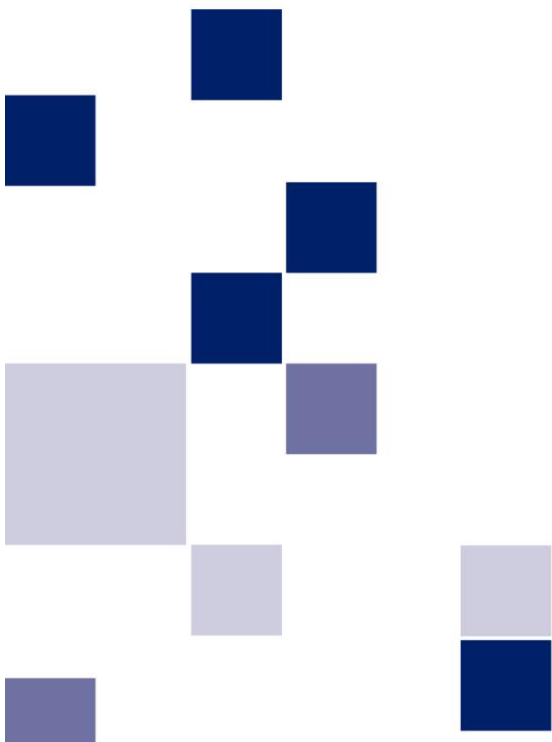# Evaluation of a pilot of 120-day practice learning contingency measure in Scotland during the COVID-19 pandemic

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The research team

The evaluation was undertaken by a team of social workers with a wide range of experience in practice learning, social work education, research, consultancy and evaluation:

Jean Gordon, a practice educator, independent social researcher and university lecturer, led the evaluation. Jean researches and writes about social work practice, education and the law.
Alistair Brown combines experience in social work governance, professional development, supervision, reflective practice and communication.
Moira Dunworth has a background in social work practice learning, social research and university education.
Susan Dumbleton, previously senior lecturer with The Open University's social work programme, is an experienced researcher and a member of SSSC's Fitness to Practice panel.

Contents

Executive summary

This report presents the findings of an independent evaluation of the 120-day practice learning opportunity (PLO) offered to final year social work undergraduate and postgraduate students from three universities in the West of Scotland. The PLO, which differed from the standard practice learning pattern in being a single, longer period of practice learning as opposed to two or more shorter placements, was a response to the challenges in sourcing PLOs accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The students, from Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU), the University of Strathclyde (UoS) and the University of the West of Scotland (UWS), had all previously undertaken a 40-day online practice learning programme, the Advanced Skills Module (ASM).

Objectives of the evaluation

The evaluation provides an opportunity to assess the extent to which the implementation of this novel ASM/120-day placement combination enables students to meet required practice standards in readiness for their eventual move into the workplace as newly qualified social workers (NQSWs). The research was undertaken by Jean Gordon Consultancy, with a team of experienced, Scotland-based social workers, educators, consultants and researchers. Its objectives were to:

- identify the key barriers and enablers to preparation for, and delivery of, the 120-day PLO

- assess the success of the 120-day PLO according to agreed learning outcomes and social work standards

- assess the sustainability of the 120-day PLO, including its potential for wider delivery post-pandemic.

Evaluation design, methodology and methods

- This longitudinal mixed methods evaluation combined outcome and process elements, drawing on qualitative and quantitative data from two surveys, nine case studies and group interviews with HEIs, practice learning providers, and representatives from SSSC, SWEP and the Scottish Government.

- The evaluation took a phased approach over the length of the 120-day PLO, collecting survey and interview data at both early and later stages of student placements.

- Two online surveys gathered data from 72/63[1] students and 90/96 practice educators (PEs) and link workers (LWs), analysed

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[1] Numbers refer to data from Survey 1/Survey 2

statistically and thematically.

- Students on placement with two local authorities (LAs) and three third sector organisations were interviewed twice, along with their PEs, LWs, team/unit managers and university tutors. Data from five group and 62 case study interviews were analysed qualitatively using analysis software (NVivo11).

- The evaluation adhered to the principles and practice of good ethical governance including the anonymisation of data to uphold participant confidentiality.

Preparedness for the 120-day PLO

- The majority of students identified prior experience in social care as the most useful preparation for their workplace-based practice learning.

- The ASM conveyed benefits in terms of supporting reflective practice and was perceived to have potential for preparing students for practice learning at an early stage of social work programmes, but in other respects was not highly valued by students as preparation for their 120-day PLO.

- At PLO start, many students were anxious and unconfident and were not thought by most PEs and LWs to be well prepared for practice learning at the start. Most transitioned well but often needed more support at the start than past final placement students.

- PEs and LWs sought ways to counter the negative impact of pandemic restrictions by maximising students' opportunities to interact with users of services and colleagues from the beginning of their placements.

Students' practice learning: enablers and barriers

- Key enablers for student learning were access to early opportunities for direct practice with users of services, PE supervision, LW support, informal 'office-based' learning, work shadowing and guided facilitation of critical analysis and reflection.

- The COVID-19 pandemic impacted negatively and in variable ways on many student PLOs. Most were able to work face to face with users of services, but some students' learning was significantly disrupted. Many students missed out on opportunities for informal learning with colleagues in their workplace.

- In addition to pandemic-related constraints, some students' learning was impeded by lack of prior social care and life experience, communication issues with HEIs, and the limitations of a single workplace PLO, especially for students in third sector PLOs.

Implementation enablers and barriers

- More advantages than disadvantages were identified for having a longer than traditional placement.

- Most participants favoured more than one placement, seeing the single PLO as 'putting all the eggs in one basket'.

- Contrast experiences were often difficult and time-consuming to set up and lack of clarity about expectations and responsibilities led to considerable variation in length, level, timing and quality.

- Although the majority of PEs and students saw some value in the contrast experience, a significant minority of students experienced difficulties with their contrast experiences, especially when they were very short, organised late in the PLO or where there was poor communication between main and contrast settings.

- Practice educators took responsibility for the organisation of most contrast experiences and were often creative in their negotiation of useful learning opportunities. However, this was time consuming, relying on their good will and that of their colleagues

- The requirement to gain experience in statutory social work was relatively straightforward for students in LA PLOs. However, no systems were in place to facilitate statutory experience for third sector students with the result that these contrasting elements were often very challenging to set up and manage.

Learning outcomes

- Despite an often slow start, students' practice skills steadily developed as the PLOs progressed. Least progress was noted in working with risk and complexity, managing conflict, use of professional authority and organisational skills.

- The great majority of students met the Standards in Social Work Education (SiSWE). Student pass rates and average grades were consistently slightly lower than those reported for the 2020/1 cohort, and markedly fewer students at one HEI completed this presentation of the PLO than during the previous year.

- Most students were thought to be prepared for qualified practice 'to an extent'. The need for post-qualification support was stressed, through the NQSW supported year pilots, mentoring, supervision, good quality induction, a protected caseload and effective communication between HEIs and employers.

Suitability, sustainability and resourcing

- The majority of respondents saw the combination of the ASM and 120-day PLO as a suitable contingency replacement for traditional

practice learning arrangements. However, very few saw it as a sustainable long-term measure for social work practice learning in Scotland in its current form.

- Highest student satisfaction with this PLO model was evident for slightly older students with social care experience who had been able to make good use of their ASM learning. The combination of a statutory area team PLO with a single substantial period of contrasting experience appeared to provide the most favourable context for students' overall learning experience.

- PEs' weekly workload varied, depending on context and student learning needs, but on average was somewhat heavier (12%) than for traditional PLOs. Individual LW workload was slightly increased, and LW numbers substantially increased in order to support the contrast experience.

- PLO planning and both external and internal negotiations reportedly increased workload for HEI staff and PL leads, but no quantitative data was available about resource implications of the model.

Conclusions

The contingency model

- The hybrid contingency model of practice learning enabled the great majority of this cohort of 250 students in the west of Scotland to meet the SiSWE at qualifying level. These students, whose qualifying learning had been significantly disrupted by the global pandemic, will now be able to move successfully into the social work workforce, in itself an immense achievement.

- It was not possible to separate out fully the operation of the contingency model from the effects of COVID-19 itself. Both the wider impact of the global pandemic and specific placement constraints adversely affected students' learning in diverse, contingent and interacting ways.

- A longer final PLO was perceived to have mostly positive outcomes and could convey future benefits, but issues of financial hardship for students, pressure on PEs and other learning team members, and the need for study breaks would have to be addressed before implementation.

- Diversity of experience in different social work settings is regarded as an important element of qualifying education, but incorporation of a contrasting experience in a longer PLO was not a successful strategy for many students. Achieving successful contrast within a single placement requires clear and consistent guidelines for students and learning teams and a supporting infrastructure of partnership working, between universities, statutory, third and private sectors.

- The model posed particular challenges for students and their learning teams in third sector PLOs who often struggled to gain statutory social work experience. These barriers highlight the importance of ensuring equal access for students to statutory experience as well as a greater emphasis on the relational, therapeutic and other benefits to be gained from third sector PLOs.

- Overall, the evaluation's findings do not provide sufficient evidence to recommend a simple repeat of the contingency model in its current form as a viable practice learning option for all students in all practice settings. However, the learning from the collaboration and creativity necessary to developing and delivering this hybrid model should not be lost. This learning will make an important contribution to ongoing discussions about the future shape and infrastructure for social work practice learning in Scotland.

Models of practice learning

- The findings suggest that students benefit from a phased approach to learning from the start of their social work qualification, enabling periods of university-based reflection and consolidation in between more than one opportunity to experience workplace-based practice through observation, shadowing and development of direct practice skills in diverse settings.

- The evaluation found support for models of practice learning that are fully integrated into social work programmes from the early stages of students' qualifying education. In this way all students, with or without prior social care experience, gain relational and other skills and a sense of what it is to practise as a social worker before they embark on direct practice.

- This evaluation's findings contribute to a growing evidence base that stresses the importance of consistent, good quality early career induction, supervision and mentoring for NQSWs.

Recommendations

Short term: delivery of the 120-day PLO

- Planning for the ASM and 120-day PLO should involve a range of key partners from the start. They should include users of services and their organisations as well as HEIs, local authorities, third sector organisations, LNW (or similar networking bodies) and both employed PEs and IPEs.

- Outcomes of student ASM learning and ongoing learning needs should be communicated timeously by HEIs to PEs as part of pre-placement planning.

- Expectations of placement providers, including responsibilities for organising contrast experiences, should be clearly articulated and agreed across PLO settings.

- Contrast PLO settings should be identified and agreed before placement start, and clear objectives identified for learning opportunities that are of sufficient length to gain experience of direct practice, and not solely observation or shadowing.

- Planning for all PLOs should start as early as possible and include identification of where and how students will gain statutory social work experience from the outset, with clarity about objectives, timescales, support, accountability and access to IT and other systems.

- The potential for using existing and planned student hubs to facilitate opportunities for varied contrast through partnership arrangements between third and statutory sectors should be explored, and, if possible, maximised. These are likely to be best placed in the statutory sector due to the more extensive infrastructure of local authorities but could potentially be situated in larger third or private sector organisations.

- HEIs' 120-day PLO planning should take account of the need for one or more study breaks, and be active in identifying the potential for, and responding to, instances of student financial hardship.

- Outcomes of the second delivery of the ASM and 120-day PLO for GCU and UWS students should be analysed and evaluated, including reasons for any student non-completion and pass rates.

Longer term: Improving practice learning quality and capacity

- Effective ways should be found to share ASM learning approaches, supported by additional resources to repurpose this national resource in a form that makes explicit its underlying pedagogy.

- The value and capacity-building potential of involving IPEs and group supervision approaches to support student learning in the academy should be further explored.

- Good practice in incorporating practice learning at early stages in social work qualifications should be shared, and promising approaches evaluated.

- Practice educator role, remuneration and career progression should be reviewed with a view to maximising PEs' potential to support student and practitioner learning within the workplace and the academy.

- A review of current sufficiency of data about practice learning should be conducted, identifying and addressing key gaps in our knowledge, for example in relation to PE numbers, student hardship and overall practice learning capacity in all sectors.

- Current discussions aimed at developing a national infrastructure for practice learning in Scotland must aim to enhance the inclusion of users of services and carers in decision-making, design and delivery of practice learning.

- The steady development of the student hub model should be supported through sharing of knowledge and evaluation of its impact on promoting student learning and increasing practice learning capacity.

- Approaches supporting prospective and first year degree students to gain social care practice experience should be explored, drawing on existing initiatives (eg, Dumfries and Galloway Council's use of 'summer placements').

- The benefits and potential implications of introducing longer periods of practice learning in the final year of social work qualifications should be evaluated. In particular, the impact of different lengths of PLO on students' personal and working lives, and financial situation should be assessed, drawing on knowledge of existing models that incorporate longer placements.

- Just as the outcomes of the ASM in respect of the social work degree were unclear until students completed their 120-day placements, progress and outcomes for this student cohort during their first year of qualified practice as NQSWs should be evaluated.

1. Introduction

This report presents the findings of an independent evaluation of the 120-day practice learning opportunity (PLO) offered to final year social work undergraduate and postgraduate students from three universities in the West of Scotland. The PLO, which differed from the standard practice learning pattern in being a single, longer period of practice learning as opposed to two or more shorter placements, was a response to the challenges in sourcing PLOs presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. The students, from Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU), the University of Strathclyde (UoS) and the University of the West of Scotland (UWS), had all previously undertaken a 40-day online practice learning programme, the Advanced Skills Module (ASM).

Qualifying social work programmes in Scotland are approved by the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC). SSSC works closely with the Social Work Education Partnership (SWEP), established to promote and sustain continuing improvement in social work education in Scotland. The evaluation was commissioned by SWEP with the objective of identifying the processes, outcomes, challenges and opportunities generated by this hybrid model of practice learning. The Scottish Government funded the research, and the evaluation contract was procured and managed by the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC).

Objectives of the evaluation

The evaluation provides an opportunity to assess the extent to which the implementation of this novel ASM/120-day placement combination enables students to meet required practice standards in readiness for their eventual move into the workplace as newly qualified social workers (NQSWs). The research was undertaken by Jean Gordon Consultancy, with a team of experienced, Scotland-based social workers, educators, consultants and researchers. Its objectives were to:

- identify the key barriers and enablers to preparation for, and delivery of, the 120-day PLO
- assess the success of the 120-day PLO according to agreed learning outcomes and social work standards
- assess the sustainability of the 120-day PLO, including its potential for wider delivery post-pandemic.

Research questions

The evaluation was designed to provide answers to the following questions identified by SWEP and SSSC.

- What were the views of practice educators (PEs) and link workers (LWs) in relation to the induction and training needs of students and the extent to which they are the same or different to those of students undertaking 'traditional' placements?
- What were the key enablers and barriers to implementation of a longer placement involving mandatory contrast and statutory opportunities?
- How were any barriers overcome (if they were)?
- To what extent has the 120-day placement been able to offer students the opportunity to meet the Standards in Social Work Education (SiSWE)?
- What do students, practice educators, employers and other stakeholders' experiences suggest about the suitability/sustainability of the 120-day PLO?
- What were the key successes/lessons learned from the delivery?
- What if any, were the unintended consequences in the piloting of the 120-day PLO?
- What are the priorities for future improvements?

The evaluators were also asked to consider any financial or other implications associated with offering a single final workplace-based placement longer than the 'traditional' configuration of 60 to 100 days.

Background to the evaluation

Social work practice learning in Scotland and COVID-19

Practice learning is an essential element of all qualifying social work programmes within the terms set out in the Framework for Social Work Education in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2003). Practice learning requirements for the nine Higher Education Institution (HEI) providers of social work programmes are set out in the revised SiSWE (SSSC, 2019). Social work students in Scotland are required to spend at least 200 days in practice learning, of which at least 160 must be spent in supervised, direct practice in service delivery settings. Undergraduate and postgraduate programmes are designed to enable students to demonstrate their ability to meet the SiSWE requirements including the provision of assessed practice learning opportunities (PLOs) in a range of quality assured social work and social care settings.
The COVID-19 pandemic impacted on social work education 'like a tsunami', catapulting social work programmes into rapid development of hybrid and remote approaches to academic and practice learning (McLaughlin et al, p.975). The pandemic brought pressing personal as well as professional challenges for social work students, qualified workers, educators and academic institutions as well as the communities they serve (Paceley et al, 2021). Practitioners experienced 'a paradigm shift' in

everyday working practices as they had to adapt quickly to virtual home visiting and hybrid working at the same time as coping with the impact of the pandemic on their home and family life (Mishna et al, 2020, p.487). At the start of the UK's first lockdown in March 2020, PLOs in Scotland were suspended. Subsequently mitigation plans were agreed with the Heads of Social Work Programmes to support the safe return of social work students to practice learning. Resumption plans were agreed collaboratively by SSSC, SWEP, and HEIs with the Scottish Government and included guidance to students and practice educators. The framing of the contingency arrangements offered a degree of flexibility and discretion in in the delivery of practice learning to meet the varied needs of Scotland's practice learning providers (SSSC 2020a, 2021).

A significant consequence of the pandemic was a shortfall in the provision of PLOs, especially in the West of Scotland which had experienced longstanding problems sourcing placements well before the onset of the pandemic (Gordon et al, 2009, 2021; Learning Network West, 2017). Three HEIs in the region collaborated to propose a hybrid model of practice learning for students due to commence their first practice learning opportunity in 2020/1. SSSC approved this contingency arrangement for all three HEIs, enabling them to provide a combination of 40 days online, and 120 days' workplace learning to satisfy students' overall practice learning requirements.

The Advanced Skills Module

Three universities, Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU), the University of the West of Scotland (UWS) and the University of Strathclyde (UoS) collaboratively developed an online Advanced Skills Module (ASM). Learning Network West (LNW), a learning partnership that supports the practice learning of social care professionals across the west of Scotland, recruited 30 independent practice educators (IPEs) who worked with students in small groups. This online programme was designed to provide students with opportunities for authentic, simulated learning of practice skills equivalent to 40 days of practice learning. It aimed to bridge the gap between classroom and direct practice settings with a mix of asynchronous and synchronous learning activities underpinned by principles of inquiry-based learning, a pedagogic framework that emphasised students' active exploration, reflection, and evaluation of learning (UoS, UWS and GCU, 2021). The module was offered to GCU and UWS students in February 2021 and to UoS students in a modified version in August 2021. A total of 250 students undertook the module followed by 120 days of workplace-based practice learning. PLO start dates were staggered to take account of ASM completion dates, beginning in August (UWS), September (GCU) and October (UoS) 2021.

A process and outcome evaluation of the first ASM presentation, with GCU and UWS students, conducted by the authors found that the ASM enabled students to meet the majority of the learning outcomes expected of students but provided insufficient opportunities to demonstrate some key

practice skills, especially in developing and sustaining working relationships with individuals and families. The evaluation suggested that it may be unhelpful to attempt to equate the ASM with a traditional practice placement but that it nevertheless offered learning opportunities that could be regarded as simultaneously exceeding and falling short of workplace-based practice learning.

Whilst IPEs mostly rated students' practice skill development positively, students tended to be less confident, and, though keen to experience 'live' practice learning, were anxious about their readiness for practice learning in the workplace. Like Simanovic et al (2021) we found evidence that students were concerned that insufficient first-hand experience of practice would negatively affect their skill development and the worth of their final degree. The evaluation concluded that it would not become clear whether the ASM had been effective in enabling students to meet required learning outcomes until they completed their 120-day placements – and, arguably, not until they moved into qualified practice as newly qualified social workers (Gordon et al, 2021). Two HEIs, UWS and GCU, made the decision to repeat the ASM/ 120-day PLO combination in 2022, providing opportunities for the evaluation findings to be fed into improving student experience on the ASM. UoS decided against a second delivery of the ASM and 120-day PLO and reverted to their 'traditional' model from autumn 2022.

Regulatory approval for Covid contingency measures

The three HEIs sought and gained approval from SSSC to offer the combined ASM and 120-day PLO as a temporary contingency measure for the duration of the pandemic. Key requirements relevant to the 120-day PLO offered in the west of Scotland are listed below.

- A maximum of 40 days of online practice learning is followed by a minimum of 120 days placement learning in a social work setting.

- The 120-day PLO covers clear criteria in relation to students' opportunity to learn and to evidence the SiSWE.

- At least two contrasting social work experiences are made available to the student during the PLO; these may be within the same setting.

- Practice learning is structured to allow students to gain sufficient experience of, and develop skills and competence in, undertaking statutory social work tasks, including legal interventions.

- Detailed information is provided to SSSC in respect of the assessment and support strategies for students, including outcomes relating to students failing to meet the SiSWE, placement repeat and breakdown and the staging of assessment.

(SSSC, 2021)

In addition, the Scottish Government provided a Resumption of Placement Fee of £300 per student as a contribution towards employers' additional PLO costs (Office of the Chief Social Worker, 2021).

Structure of this report

This report is designed to mirror the structure of the ASM evaluation. For full understanding of the two elements of the hybrid model offered to students in the West of Scotland, the two reports should be read together. We first set out the research methodology, the methods used to access the perspectives of participants and to analyse data, the study's ethical commitments and its strengths and limitations. The findings are presented thematically, combining qualitative and quantitative data from all evidence sources. The report ends by summarising conclusions and making recommendations about the implications of both evaluations for practice learning in Scotland. Illustrative quotes at the start of each section have been selected because they are representative of the overall views expressed during the evaluation. A Glossary of Terms is available at the end of the report.

Terminology

Contrast experience refers to learning that took place in one or more contrasting placement settings alongside the student's **'main' PLO**.
Evaluation commissioners refer to SSSC, SWEP and Scottish Government respondents.
HEI tutors refer to case study students' university tutors.
HEI managers refer to university staff who manage social work programmes and practice learning arrangements.
Placement and PLO (practice learning opportunity) are used interchangeably to describe practice learning within a social work service setting. **'Workplace' or 'direct' social work practice** refer to practice during the 120-day PLO to distinguish this from students' ASM learning. Most workplace placements incorporated some remote working practices.
PL lead refers to agency and LNW staff responsible for organising and supporting practice learning arrangements.
PL provider refers to any local authority (LA), NHS or 3rd sector agency providing opportunities for practice learning.
'Traditional' PLO arrangements refer to the pre-pandemic configuration of PLOs for most qualification routes in the three universities, with two placements of 60-100 days, sometimes referred to as Direct Practice one (DP1) and two (DP2).

2. Evaluation design, methodology and methods

> **Key points:**
>
> - This longitudinal mixed methods evaluation combined outcome and process elements, drawing on qualitative and quantitative data from two surveys, nine case studies and group interviews with HEIs, practice learning providers, and representatives from SSSC, SWEP and the Scottish Government.
>
> - The evaluation took a phased approach over the length of the 120-day PLO, collecting survey and interview data at both early and later stages of student placements.
>
> - Two online surveys gathered data from 72/63[2] students and 90/96 PEs and LWs, analysed statistically and thematically.
>
> - Students on placement with two LAs and three third sector organisations were interviewed twice, along with their PEs, LWs, team managers and HEI tutors. Data from five group and 62 case study interviews were analysed qualitatively using analysis software (NVivo11).
>
> - The evaluation adhered to the principles and practice of good ethical governance including the anonymisation of data to uphold participant confidentiality.

Evaluation methodology

The mixed methods evaluation combined process and outcome elements, paying attention to not only the extent to which an intervention has met its stated objectives, but also to what actually occurred during its development and delivery to achieve these outcomes (Robson, 2011).

The **process evaluation** sought to determine how module learning outcomes were met by seeking answers to questions about, 'what works, for whom, in what circumstances, to what extent, and in what respects, and how?' (Pawson and Tilley, 1997, p.2). Process evaluations are especially useful for gaining knowledge about interventions that address complex issues and involve a dynamic range of interacting contingencies and systems where factors such as participant feedback will inform further investigation (Moore et al, 2015). A longitudinal case study

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[2] Numbers refer to data from Survey 1/Survey 2

approach provided detailed, intensive understanding of nine students' individual experiences alongside those of their PE, workplace manager and HEI tutor as well as their LW when the PE was external to the student's workplace. Case study methodologies have particular relevance when studying phenomena in depth in their real-life context, in this case that of day to day social work practice (Yin, 2009).

The **outcome evaluation** aimed to measure to what extent the 120-day PLO met its stated learning outcomes. It collected and analysed quantitative data including information about participant characteristics, student outcomes and PE, LW and students' ratings of progress in learning. Combined with the qualitative data, this contributed to a nuanced understanding of students' learning and development. An iterative approach mirroring the progressive enquiry method outlined by Robson (2011) was taken to design of survey and topic guide questions. This allowed the second phase of data collection to focus on interrogating questions that required further exploration and filling gaps in our data collection.

Evaluation methods

Surveys

Surveys were distributed to students, PEs and LWs at two points during the 120-day PLO. Survey distribution was staggered to take account of students' differing start dates, between August and October 2021.

- Two surveys in November-December 2021 before the PLO midpoint, one for students and a combined survey for LWs and PEs.

- Three surveys in March-May 2022 close to the end of the PLO, designed separately for students, LWs and PEs.

The surveys were developed in consultation with SSSC and SWEP, with whom the researchers met on a regular basis for monitoring purposes. Surveys used a cloud-based survey tool, Momentive (see Appendix 1). The evaluation sought to mirror the SiSWE-informed outcome measures already developed for the ASM evaluation (Gordon et al, 2021). This enabled more integrated mapping of student progress across both practice components.

The survey links were distributed by LNW, UoS and Dumfries and Galloway Council to 250 students, 105 PEs and 112 LWs. Consent for LNW to distribute surveys was sought from and provided by UWS, GCU and all 12 relevant LAs. Completion rates for both surveys are summarised in Table 1. Participant and PLO characteristics are summarised below drawing on demographic and other information from the first survey which were comparable with second survey data.

Student characteristics: The majority of student respondents identified as female (88%) and white Scottish (81%). Students aged between 25 and 34 formed the largest group of respondents (36%) and a quarter were aged under 25. Most of the students (83%) had worked, or were working, in health and social care settings. Some students had also volunteered or had experience as a user of services. Only 6 (8%) of surveyed students had no previous experience of the sector. Students came from all three universities in similar proportions to HEI cohort numbers, and two thirds of respondents were undergraduate students.

PLO characteristics: All but four students were on placement in the 12 LA areas within the LNW partnership or in the Dumfries and Galloway Council area. Three quarters of student PLOs were in LAs, and about a quarter in the third sector, with just one student in a private sector placement. One third of the students had their main PLO in a children and families setting, a quarter in adult care and 14% in community justice settings. The majority of students (80%) were in area or community teams and the remaining fifth in mostly third sector residential, supported accommodation, day services and health settings. Six students were based in a practice learning hub (where a group of students and their practice educators share a single placement work base).

PLO role	Survey 1 No. (% of participant cohort)	Survey 2 No. (% of participant cohort)	Total no. of cohort participants
Students	72 (29%)	63 (25%)	250
Practice educators	90 (50%) LWs and PEs	56 (53%)	105
Link workers		40 (36%)	112
Total participants	162	159	467

Table 1: No. of survey 1 and 2 participants by role, and % of each participant cohort

Practice educators and link workers: Overall, both groups usually had longstanding health and social work experience averaging 20 years. Most PEs had been qualified for some time, with considerable past experience of supervising students. Three quarters of the PEs were employed by LAs and nearly all others were self-employed IPEs supervising students in third sector PLOs. Seven PEs were based in a practice learning hub. The majority of LWs were based in LAs and supported a single student.

The case studies

A purposive sample of nine students was interviewed early and late in the PLO, together with their respective PEs, LWs, HEI tutors and team managers. The semi-structured interviews were recorded with participants' written consent. Apart from the pandemic-related necessity

for use of this method, recent research suggests that videoconferencing platforms provide viable means of collecting qualitative data due to their ease of use, cost effectiveness, data management features and security options (Archibald et al, 2019). The audio recordings were transcribed in NVivo 11[3] or Otter AI transcription software.

Sampling was guided by the wish to explore a range of PLO experiences in diverse social work settings and sectors. The nine case studies comprised three from a smaller LA, three from a larger LA and three drawn from different third sector agencies. They specifically included some settings in which students had more limited day to day contact with qualified social workers. These settings, together with third sector and criminal justice social work practice learning, were highlighted during the ASM evaluation as potentially problematic in terms of the sufficiency of students' preparation for the 120-day PLO (Gordon et al, 2021).

Three students from each involved HEI were included, eight undergraduates and one postgraduate student. Of the nine students, two identified as men and seven as women. Seven students had LWs in their main PLO, and three had LWs in their contrast placement. The case studies spanned three social work specialisms: criminal/community justice, children and families social work and adult care with three students based in each type of setting for their main PLO. Attrition rates were low. Two of the nine students did not respond to a second interview invitation. One HEI tutor and three workplace managers were not available for interview.

Group and individual interviews

We also facilitated five group and individual interviews with key PLO stakeholders. Two took place near the start of the PLOs with:

- LNW, HEI, and PL providers (13), members of a Practice Learning Strategy Group that collaborated to support preparations for the 120-day PLO

- Dumfries and Galloway Council learning and development staff (2) to hear their experiences of preparing for the PLO.

As placements finished, we also interviewed:

- three evaluation commissioners from SWEP and SSSC

- university social work degree programme and PL managers (4) from the three HEIs

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[3] A software programme used for qualitative and mixed methods data analysis.

- a representative from the Office of the Chief Social Work Advisor (OCSWA) with experience of social work education and practice learning.

Researchers also sat in on and gathered data from two end of PLO evaluation meetings with Dumfries and Galloway Council PEs and LWs.

Data analysis

Data analysis combined basic statistical analysis of quantitative data from the surveys, and thematic analysis of qualitative data from the surveys, and interviews. Braun and Clarke's six step approach (2006) to thematic analysis was used to inform the coding of transcribed interview data in NVivo. Identified themes were clustered to create a thematic map of the evaluation findings cross-referenced with the research questions.

Research ethics

Jean Gordon Consulting and its associates adhere to the Ethical Guidelines of the Social Research Association (Social Research Association, 2021) in relation to its obligations to research participants, colleagues, funders and society. Research design and conduct were compliant with the terms of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

- All participants were provided with information about the research and completed a consent form before taking part. Participants were informed that they were free to withdraw at any stage of the research.

- All information provided by individuals to the survey and during interviews has been anonymised.

- All records made in the course of the research, whether written or audio recorded, were held securely in password protected locations, to be destroyed on acceptance by SSSC and SWEP of the final report.

Strengths and limitations

The evaluation design has a number of strengths. Its systematic mixed methods approach, drawing on case studies and a combination of outcome and process elements add strength and depth to its findings. The involvement and goodwill of participants generated relatively high levels of survey responses and low interview attrition rates despite the ongoing stress and context of the Covid pandemic. However, a number of limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings.

- The lack of input from users of services and carers to the evaluation. Our original intention was to involve a number of service user and carer groups with an interest in social work education. However, we were not able to engage with current groups, partly for pandemic-related reasons that meant that some established groups had not been meeting regularly. We also had indications that some groups did not feel well placed to comment on these contingency measures because they had not been involved in their development. This will be an important gap to address in any future consultations about alternative models of practice learning in line with the aims of the social work profession (IFSW, 2018; SSSC, 2019, 2020b).

- The impact of the pandemic itself on the research, both in relation to the continuing influence of COVID-19 on all participants' lives and the limitations this has placed on students' learning on placement. These effects were integral to participants' experience of the 120-day model and cannot be easily separated out from the evaluation's focus on the operation of the model itself (see also 4.1).

- Our purposive sample included just one postgraduate student, limiting our ability to look in greater depth at differences between the trajectories of Masters and BA social work students. However, since survey data did not throw up any major differences in student experience, it may be possible to generalise across the experiences of both student groups.

- There is a dearth of recent research into experiences of PEs, LWs, Managers and HEI tutors' views of the current PLO model as a comparison or baseline. Similarly, we lacked sufficient data about the resourcing of previous practice learning models or the ASM/120-day PLO combination to make comparisons between the two.

3. Process findings: Preparedness for the PLO

> **Key findings:**
>
> - Most students identified prior experience in social care as the most useful preparation for workplace practice learning.
>
> - The ASM conveyed benefits in terms of supporting reflective practice and was perceived to have potential for preparing students for practice learning at an early stage of social work programmes, but in other respects was not highly valued by students or many PEs as preparation for their 120-day PLO.
>
> - Initially, many students were anxious and unconfident and were not thought by most PEs and LWs to be well prepared for practice learning at the start. Most transitioned well but often needed more support at the start than past final placement students.
>
> - PEs and LWs sought ways to counter the negative impact of pandemic restrictions by maximising students' opportunities to interact with users of services and colleagues from the beginning of their placements.

3.1 What prepared students for workplace practice learning?

'I'm in a fortunate position where I have experience - life experience and work experiences and that that definitely benefits me in situations and discussions and I've got plenty to offer and talk about.'

(Student, local authority PLO, case study interview)

'I think the Advanced Skills Module should not be one-off.. but could be done in both years of the Masters programme.'

(Postgraduate student, survey response)

'They're absolutely busting to go out there and actually meet service users…no matter how good a simulated module is, people know that they're not real service users, there aren't real consequences.'

(Practice educator, local authority PLO, case study interview)

'I feel that the materials and learning that happened in the virtual placement were not adequate, and the student wasn't as well prepared for practice as they would if they had a previous live PLO.'

(Practice educator, third sector PLO, case study interview)

At the end of their 40-day ASM module, most students were cautious, and many anxious, about their readiness to move into workplace learning (Gordon et al, 2021, p.47). We explored how well students subsequently adapted to workplace learning, including the induction and training needs identified in their early days of placement.

The researchers asked surveyed students what prepared them for workplace practice learning. Most identified their previous experience of working in health or social care as the most significant preparation for their PLO. Nearly two thirds rated this as 'very' helpful to their progress on placement, in contrast to 28% in relation to their academic study during their degree and 19% for the ASM (see Chart 1). Postgraduates tended to be more positive about the value of the ASM than undergraduate students, nearly one third finding the module 'very helpful'. They were also markedly more likely than undergraduates to value prior experience, perhaps because rather more postgraduates had substantial experience in social care. Dumfries and Galloway Council PEs and LWs also highlighted the value of 'summer placements' for some students as a preparation for practice. Practice educators and LWs also indicated that a positive orientation to learning was one of the most significant enabling factors, irrespective of past experience, age, qualification route or other factors.
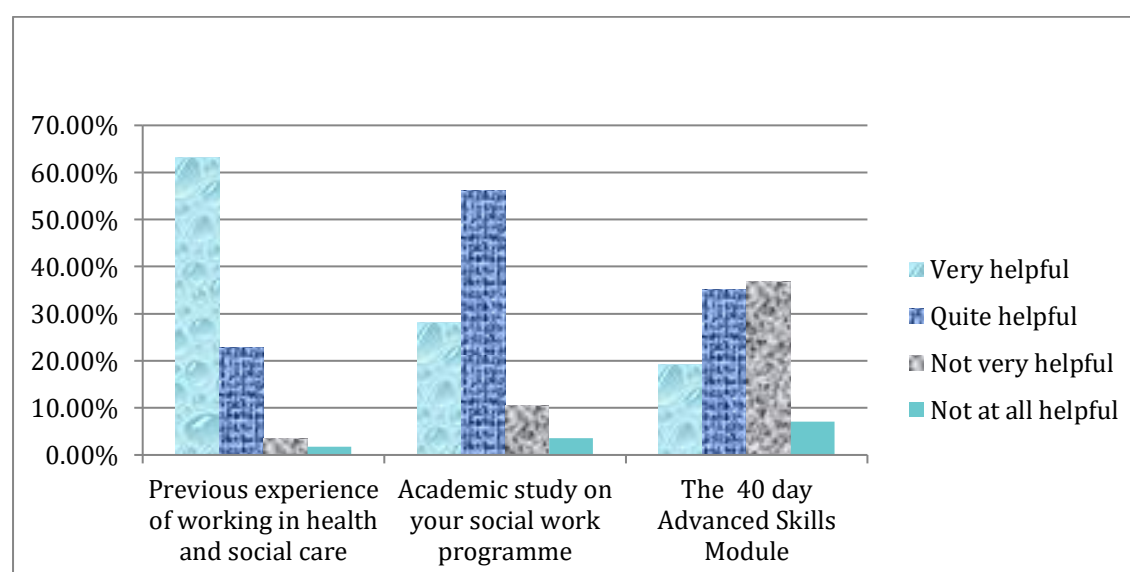
Chart 1: Students' perceptions of experiences that supported their workplace practice learning (by % of survey respondents; n=57)

Second survey students were asked to reflect on and rate the value of different elements of the ASM to their PLO learning. Learning about reflective practice was considered most important by 70% of students. The module's group supervision model facilitated by IPEs, where much of this learning took place, was also highly valued by 60% of respondents, findings congruent with PE and HEI assessments as well as the ASM

evaluation (Gordon et al, 2021). The survey response below is representative of students' overall reservations and recommendations about the value of the ASM,

'I don't think the ASM should replace any direct placement. It simply cannot offer the same experience. To improve there needs to be less pre-recorded materials, more live group sessions, more group activities where we can work through case studies…'

Overall, the module's case study simulations were more highly valued by surveyed students than online lectures. However, during case study interviews just one student cited important learning from a simulation, whilst the other eight found the 'scripted, artificial' nature of the simulated activities difficult to relate to workplace practice. Although most students (61%) did not think that the ASM had prepared them sufficiently for their PLO, many thought that it could usefully be offered at an earlier stage in their qualifications. Link workers mostly concurred with students about the value of previous experience, whilst PEs regarded prior academic study as being of highest value, perhaps a reflection of their differing roles in relation to student practice learning. A small number of PEs and LWs (11%) considered that the ASM had provided equivalence to 40 days of practice learning, but the majority did not think, or were unsure that, it had.

3.2 The transition to workplace learning

> 'I find it difficult to evaluate how much student anxiety is caused by the 120-day placement and how much by the peripheral issues around the pandemic, for example not being on site at university, not going out much in society prior to placement.'
>
> (Practice learning lead, group interview)
>
> 'I would definitely say that ...there is a higher demand on me as a practice teacher for emotional support… which has been quite challenging'
>
> (Practice educator, local authority PLO, case study interview)
>
> 'Some students felt they needed [a high] level of support from the university as well as the practice teacher. Whether that is because some in this particular cohort have had higher levels of anxiety and a greater need for support, or they didn't … expect to be so practice-facing on placement, or [that] the pandemic has us all in need of that extra bit of support…is unclear.'
>
> (HEI tutor, third sector PLO, case study interview)

Practice educators and LWs identified student anxiety and lack of confidence about the PLO as the major initial barriers to learning. These were described as the biggest differences between the 120-day PLO and educators' experience of previous placements. Even students with prior

social care experience (83% of surveyed students) frequently struggled with engaging with users of service users at first,

'I feel that this cohort of students is far more anxious than other students I have supported in the past. Three fifths of my students are anxious or very anxious that this is their first and final placement. Some students do not appear to have much confidence when interacting with service users face to face due to not having much experience of this. Some interactions are awkward, and it is clear that they would have benefited from spending time speaking with service users in a social work setting.'

(Practice educator, survey response)

'I was quite nervous because I'd never spoken to service users or service users, families on the phone …I was quite apprehensive about it.'

(Student, local authority PLO, case study interview)

The students who had previous social care experience were regarded by surveyed and most PEs and LWs to be at a clear advantage at the PLO start. Nevertheless, the majority reported that their students were prepared well (37%) or in part (37%) for embarking on the 120-day PLO, summed up in this quote from a surveyed PE,

'I feel they have been somewhat disadvantaged; however they have made the most out of it.'

Another important source of anxiety arose for students in third sector and residential LA PLOs who were anxious about their opportunity to engage in statutory social work tasks (see Chapter 5).

Most case study accounts described students as requiring higher levels of emotional support during the early weeks of placement than PEs and LWs anticipated. Some of this support was about confidence building and changing perceptions, as described by a LA PL lead,

'I think there was almost a rhetoric that developed that had to be corrected …"This is our first and final placement and we can't succeed" – that becomes a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy.'

Students' early anxieties were compounded by their continuing experiences during the pandemic. Practice educators in one local authority described how difficult, and sometimes traumatic, it was for some students to adapt to face to face working and to what one PE described as 'the kind of sensory overload' of a busy social work office after 18 months of lockdowns and remote learning (see also Chapter 4).

Case study interviews suggested that the extent to which students were able to transfer skills and knowledge into practice settings related to a range of contingent individual and contextual factors. Comparing the differing trajectories of two case study students who lacked previous social care experience, it was evident that other enablers, such as students' motivation, personal support systems and prior academic success helped to counteract lack of experience. For one less confident student with no prior social care experience, pandemic-related home circumstances and lack of informal contact with colleagues in their children and families team exacerbated the student's lack of confidence. For another, in a busy criminal justice practice setting, good quality induction, early exposure to practice opportunities and informal support from colleagues enabled a smooth transition and, ultimately, a very successful PLO (see Chapter 4).

3.3. What supported students at the PLO start?

'All of our staff team have been trained as link workers and recognise that the student is a full member or our team. We have an ethos with new staff/ students of them playing a key role in inducting a new person, being open to being shadowed and "buddying".'

(Practice educator, survey response)

'For this particular student, she had a really robust induction process. And actually, that's a really smart organisation, isn't it? That's an organisation that says, "OK, we've taken on board that you've not had a placement before."'

(HEI tutor, third sector PLO, case study interview)

'I thought about the student as a first placement student … in terms of the induction we maybe started from scratch in terms of linking them with other organisations, the things that you do during the induction period.'

(Practice educator, local authority PLO, case study interview)

The early days of placement saw PEs and LWs putting in additional supports for student learning, frequently over and above those usually provided during a final year induction period. These included extra supervision and time to settle into the workplace, supporting students to, for example:

- familiarise themselves with the organisational context for social work practice and managing their time and caseload

- develop confidence and skill in engagement and relationship-building skills by accompanying students on visits

- make approaches to colleagues and other services to seek shadowing and other opportunities

- develop resilience and steadily become more proactive in taking responsibility for their own learning.

As the PLO continued, in order to counter the challenges of pandemic working, the majority of PEs and LWs found ways to maximise students' opportunities to meet colleagues face to face and access opportunities for informal learning. Practice educators also took a prominent role in organising contrast arrangements designed to complement students' learning experiences in their 'main' placement. This was especially important for those students in third sector placements without access to statutory social work opportunities (see Chapter 5). Some PL providers also described how they proactively extended the range of learning opportunities available to students. For example, one PL lead described how their LA had trained and supported additional LWs and had chosen to place student social workers in duty teams to maximise their opportunities for shadowing and co-working.

3.4 What supported PLO providers?

'Learning Network West was the keystone because they hold the relationships of esteem and respect across sectors and settings.'

(PL lead, group interview)

'The overall communication I find with the universities is absolutely spot on. And if I need to get a hold of them for anything, or any guidance or anything, they all get back in contact with me as soon as possible.'

'I was quite surprised because she hadn't any written feedback from the Advanced Skills module…I had to ask for that and got it three months into the placement, and it highlighted that reflective practice was an important developmental area for the student and I would have benefited from knowing that from the start.'

(Practice educators, local authority PLOs, case study interviews)

This different, hybrid, model of practice learning also required a significant adjustment for PEs, LWs and social work teams accustomed to final year students arriving for shorter second PLOs. LNW's Practice Learning Strategy Group took a leading role in preparations for the 120-day PLOs, linking their partners and disseminating information about the hybrid practice learning model to LAs and the third sector. In Dumfries and Galloway, which is not part of the LNW practice learning consortium, this support, and liaison with the third sector, was provided by the LA's practice learning team.

The PEs and LWs who felt best informed were often those who had attended briefings organised by members of the Practice Learning Strategy Group. However, despite the considerable work put into disseminating information, the evaluation found quite widespread confusion and lack of understanding about the nature of preparation the ASM had provided students. To what extent this was because this

information had not been clearly communicated by the HEIs, SWEP and SSSC and/or sufficiently disseminated within agencies, is unclear. There was significant variation between PL providers in relation to prior knowledge of the ASM. For example, one LA had organised monthly student groups to help reinforce links and transfer learning between the ASM and PLO and others had introduced regular drop in sessions for students, PEs and LWs. In contrast, some social workers at another LA said that they and students colloquially referred to the ASM as a 'pseudoplacement' and were surprised to hear about some of the module's key features, such as the involvement of IPEs and weekly group supervision.

Support and communication networks within and between social work employers and university programmes played a significant role in preparing for the 120-day PLO. Within social work teams, PEs and LWs provided highly valued support for each other (62% of participants for both groups). Other important PE supports came from university tutors, line managers and PL leads. The LNW was mentioned as a key source of support and guidance by 29% of LW and PE respondents. Overall, more than half the surveyed PEs reported that their communication with students' universities at the PLO start was 'excellent' (17%) or 'good' (41%), whilst a small proportion found the communication 'poor' (11%). Where there were communication difficulties, these often related to concerns about information about students' learning needs not being passed on timeously to PEs. Again, the reasons for this are unclear since all three HEIs reported that systems to share this information had been in place. Lack of clarity about the expectations of the contrast experience, and, for third sector PEs and LWs, how statutory experience was to be sourced, were also highlighted and will be discussed in Chapter 5.

4. Process findings: Enablers and barriers for student learning

> **Key Findings**
>
> - Key enablers for student learning were access to early opportunities for direct practice with users of services, PE supervision, LW support, informal 'office-based' learning, work shadowing and guided facilitation of critical analysis and reflection.
>
> - The COVID-19 pandemic impacted negatively and in variable ways on many student PLOs. Most were able to work face to face with users of services, but some students' learning was significantly disrupted. Many students missed out on opportunities for informal learning with colleagues in their workplace.
>
> - In addition to pandemic-related constraints, some students' learning was impeded by lack of prior social care and life experience, communication issues with HEIs, and the limitations of a single workplace PLO, especially for students in third sector PLOs.

Respondents provided commentaries on what supported and inhibited student learning in survey and interview responses. Issues related to contrast and statutory experience are mainly explored in Chapter 5. Since pandemic constraints and impacts played such a significant role in student and other participant experiences during the 120-day PLO, this chapter starts with a summary of how COVID-19 influenced different PLO settings and activities.

4.1 Practice learning during the pandemic

> 'Naturally, I believe there is more to gain from interactions that are face to face because of the human element, and it is more relaxed, particularly undertaking reviews or having direct observations. However, remote working does work and has its place.'
>
> 'I felt completely disadvantaged as the agency was working remotely for about five out of the six months I have been here. From meeting service users just once I felt a better connection than I have been able to build online.'
>
> (Student survey responses)

'How do you give the student enough learning opportunities when 50% of the staff are working from home? …So, you've got 25% of the team in and then 25% out on a visit. There is nobody left and, even then, maybe they are under the hammer working on a report.'

(Team manager, local authority PLO, case study interview)

'Remote working worked surprisingly well with the students – largely because we already had a reasonable amount of experience of it as a staff team during Covid…it allowed us not only to meet with students 1:1 for private discussions but also in small group work and daily meetings with the whole team.'

(Practice educator, third sector PLO, survey response)

The 120-day PLO took place during a time of changing COVID-19 restrictions. Since the first UK national lockdown in March 2020, social work practice had, as for many other professions, shifted towards increasing use of online and phone interactions with colleagues and service users. Although, as students started their 120-day placements, restrictions on social activity in Scotland had begun to ease, with the upsurge in the Omicron variant, many restrictions were temporarily re-instated from December 2021 to March 2022. This often meant that student opportunities to work directly with users of services and families fluctuated in unanticipated ways as their placements progressed.

We found considerable variations in students' experience of hybrid working arrangements depending on the nature of PLO and location. Case study students in, for example, two LA criminal justice PLOs, an addictions service, and a 3rd sector residential placement were able to spend as much time in their workplace as possible and most or all practice was face to face. Students in residential settings were also, again because of the nature of the work, able to interact with adults and young people directly throughout their PLOs. In contrast, a student in a third sector mental health setting conducted much of their practice and collaboration with colleagues remotely from home until pandemic restrictions eased towards the end of the PLO. Students with limited access to the physical setting were often described as 'lost' and 'adrift' in group interviews. Considerable variation was also noted between geographical areas, and even sometimes between social work teams in the same LA in relation to the amount of time workers were able to spend in the office with colleagues and the learning opportunities available to work directly, rather than remotely, with users of services.

A further source of variability in learning experiences related to the extent to which decision-making about remote working rested with the students themselves. To some extent this flexibility reflected the reality of the differing home circumstances, with some students home-schooling children at the height of the Omicron variant wave, for example, and the variable access of students to suitable home working conditions. In two

case studies, however, students' preference for home working began to negatively impact on their learning, making it necessary for PEs to be more prescriptive about the necessity of spending at least part of the week in the practice setting alongside colleagues,

'I suppose it's hard because as a student, you know, you probably could work from home a lot, but actually what we're trying to get is experience of being around other workers and the learning opportunities that offers.'

(Practice educator, local authority PLO, case study interview)

Survey responses found that students were fairly evenly divided as to the extent the learning opportunities available to them were affected by the pandemic. Responses varied between those who found their learning unaffected, or relatively unaffected, by the pandemic (32%), and those whose learning was perceived as severely or quite severely impacted (40%). The most marked disruption arose from missing out on opportunities for informal learning, linked to insufficient day to day contact with their PLO and other colleagues (75% of students). In contrast, nearly all students (94%) had been able to engage face to face with most users of services during their PLOs. These findings were almost entirely replicated when LWs and PEs were asked the same questions.

4.2 Enablers for student learning

'I think in the job, it's got to be your practice educator. Everybody else is really helpful as well. And you're always trying to ask them your 100 questions that you've got. But I think you always feel more comfortable just going straight to the PE.'

(Student, local authority PLO, case study interview)

'I don't think it would have been possible had the student had any less than half the time with the team. Students need to get a real experience of the working environment, processes and learn from colleagues around them.

(Practice educator, survey response)

Significant enablers for practice learning identified by case study and survey participants are summarised below.

Early opportunities for direct practice

Getting started with 'live' practice early on in the PLO was seen as crucial by many students, especially those with little or no prior social care experience,

'I've just found being able to go out and see my service users has really, really emphasised the importance of all these skills because before it was just like these skills in my head…'

(Student, local authority PLO, case study interview)

Surveyed PEs and LWs described the facilitation of these early opportunities, alongside informal contact with colleagues, as the most important enablers for student learning.

Practice educator support and supervision

Engagement with, and, in particular supervision by, PEs were highly valued, 81% of surveyed students finding this 'very supportive'. In singling out the excellent support and guidance offered by their PEs, the case study interviews underlined how vital this role was for these often initially unconfident students, as they absorbed and responded to student anxieties and doubts,

'… ever since I set foot in the door for placement, I felt really, really supported… my PE offers support all the time. I feel as if I message her all the time. I always think things through and think, "what would I do?"... and she's always there to help out.'

(Student, local authority PLO, case study interview)

Individual supervision appeared to be the norm, with less than half (46%) of PEs offering group supervision, although when this was available, it was often commented on positively by case study and survey respondents.

A further key source of student learning arose from direct observations with the PE, 88% of second survey students finding these developmental opportunities to be 'very supportive' to their learning. The great majority of direct observations took place face to face, whilst PE supervision was most likely to be conducted remotely, though usually in conjunction with some face to face sessions. Mostly these arrangements seemed to be convenient and to work well for both PE and student, although one long-arm PE with several students commented on the additional time it could take to build a relationship with a student by remote means.

Link worker support and guidance

Where a LW was in place, their guidance were found to be very supportive. Survey data about the value of the LW role were difficult to interpret because some contrast experience LWs were only engaged with student learning briefly, but this role was nevertheless described as a key one by most students in the case studies, 70% of second survey students also finding this 'very supportive'. Commentaries

about the LW role in some contrast PLOs were, however, less positive, as a surveyed student explained,

'Contrasting link workers were not always engaged or sufficiently appraised of the needs of the students and the expectations of them.'

Practice learning leads and educators in group and individual interviews also emphasised the importance of the 'often unseen' role of the LW 'overseeing and guiding the practice of the students and being their 'go to person' as required'.

Informal learning and support from team colleagues

Learning from engagement with social work and non-social work colleagues was also positively rated (70%), although there were differing student responses related to the extent of office/unit working possible, and, in some cases, desired. Although, as identified earlier, many students felt that they missed out on informal working opportunities, 62% of students surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that they had benefited from the opportunity to work from home, only 12% finding any significant problems associated with remote working at home. Nearly all students (84%) were also satisfied with the equipment provided to enable remote working, despite some early difficulties in sourcing sufficient laptops and required software in some LAs. An interviewed manager, reflecting on the difficulties experienced in equipping social workers for remote working in the early stages of the pandemic, highlighted the important role of LNW in co-ordinating supply of necessary equipment to more recent students on PLOs. However, there were some substantial difficulties gaining access to IT systems and equipment for students' contrast experiences, especially in LAs (see Chapter 5).

Work shadowing opportunities

The importance of opportunities to shadow established workers was identified in early interviews and the first survey. Given that for many of these students, now in their final year of university study, this was a first experience of undertaking a social work role, varied opportunities to witness and rehearse live social work in practice took on special significance. These opportunities continued to be referred to positively during the second half of the PLO, both in relation to development of more complex skills and to practise in the contrast setting.

Self-directed reading and research

During the first half of the PLO 44% of students found their own reading and research activities very supportive to their learning. This proportion had risen to 64% of survey respondents by the second half of the PLO, suggesting a shift in the extent that students were taking responsibility for their own learning and development. This conclusion is congruent with findings about most students' steadily increasing autonomy and sense of professional identity noted by PEs and LWs in second interviews (see Chapter 6).

Reflection and critical analysis

The importance to taking time to reflect on and critique practice in supervision and with colleagues was regularly identified by students. PEs and PL leads saw the ASM as having a particularly helpful grounding in these skills.

'My student was probably the best example I had of somebody that benefited really from doing [the ASM]. They came really prepared with a really high standard of reflective writing.'

(Practice educator, local authority PLO, case study interview)

' …it has been helpful to look at your practice and then, because sometimes you tend to just go in and 'do' – especially if you've got a lot of work experience behind you because you're not thinking about why and connecting it to theory…'

(Student, third sector PLO, case study interview)

4.3 Barriers to students' learning

'I think on placement, one of the clear benefits is having the support and experience of people sitting next to you, people talking about and sharing difficult cases, people inviting students to interview rooms on an ad hoc basis, or perhaps inviting them on home visits... So, I think that's probably the primary difficulty or challenge that students working remotely have really faced.'

(HEI tutor, third sector and statutory PLOs, case study interview)

'Covid restrictions have meant teams are not fully back in the office. It is usually duty workers there, and they sometimes have limited time to provide the support the student requires, or the student doesn't like to ask because they are so busy.'

(Practice educator, survey response)

Overall, 30% of students surveyed at PLO end reported difficulties in relation to support for their practice learning during the PLO. The case study interviews helped to tease out some of the key barriers, described below (see also Chapter 5 in relation to PLO contrast).

Pandemic-related barriers

The Covid-related barriers to learning briefly highlighted in 4.1 were the most frequently cited challenges described by case study participants. Lack of sufficient opportunities for informal learning was an issue for most students but was considerably more challenging for those with little or no prior experience of working in organisations and/or social care and low confidence levels. Apart from the loss of shadowing and informal

participation in day to day discussions with colleagues, these constraints could inhibit students' willingness to take responsibility for their own learning,

'The hybrid model is not leading to students to be building up the same working relationships that they would pre-Covid, and students, being adult learners, are always required to be proactive in their learning. But I'm definitely not seeing the same level of proactiveness from students.'

(Practice educator, local authority, case study interview)

Whilst nearly all students were gaining opportunities to work face to face with users of services, pandemic restrictions significantly reduced the diversity of learning opportunities available. Face to face group work, visits to institutions such as prisons and attendance at multidisciplinary meetings were cited as examples of activities that were less widely available than they were before the pandemic. In addition, some potentially valuable shadowing opportunities could not be offered, sometimes because social work and other teams were under-staffed due to COVID-19. Some PEs and PL leads also raised concerns about potential accountability and support issues associated with home working, especially for less confident students,

'The most obvious difficulty was that it is easy for a struggling student to make themselves invisible.'

(Practice educator, survey response)

Lack of readiness for practice

The diversity of students' prior experience and PLO settings makes it difficult to generalise about students' readiness for practice. However, it appeared that persistent difficulties in adjustment to role were most evident for students without social care experience and may often have been further aggravated by personal and professional impacts of COVID-19. These factors contributed to students feeling 'overwhelmed', a word repeatedly used in interviews about some students' response to their PLOs, as explained by a PE and a LW in their survey responses,

'Some students are finding it difficult to cope with the pace and role in statutory teams. They have had little or no previous experience of working directly with people. Although the ASM has enabled better reflection, working directly with service users and families, and managing the evolving complexity in pieces of work has been difficult for students.'

'Many learning opportunities were lost and I don't think (for some) students they were able to observe/understand the complexities and pressure of the role of a social worker and, most importantly, observe different strategies to manage these pressures.'

In most instances, however, it seemed that eventually, even if it took some time, the great majority of students were able to develop sufficient skills and confidence to make good use of the learning opportunities on offer (see Chapter 6: Learning outcomes).

Constraints of a single PLO

Some surveyed students, and two case study students, one in a third sector PLO, and one in a LA residential care setting perceived the placement setting in itself to act as a barrier to their learning and future employment possibilities. Perceptions that third sector PLOs, for example, are somehow 'second best' in comparison to 'statutory' social work learning opportunities are long-standing and have frequently been challenged by research findings about the value of such placements (for example, McLaughlin et al, 2015). However, some important issues related to the single PLO and problems accessing necessary statutory experience are relevant to this evaluation (see Chapter 5).

University-related issues

Support from their universities scored low on both student surveys, only 16% of second survey students finding this 'very supportive'. However, PEs usually took a more positive view of the HEI role (see 3.3). A range of individual issues were highlighted by students relating to communication problems, dissertation arrangements, changes of tutor, and lack of support during their PLO. Some reasons for this dissatisfaction are identified below.

- Perhaps primarily, although many students were appreciative of their ability to progress to qualification during the pandemic, there seemed to be an undercurrent of frustration, and general sense of loss associated with the hybrid model. These feelings appeared to negatively influence some student perceptions of their entire university experience.

- Students from UWS and GCU were undertaking dissertations alongside the second half of their PLOs. There was general unhappiness about the additional pressure this generated, also expressed by some PEs who found that students were tending to disengage from practice during a crucial period for consolidation of key social work skills near the PLO end.

- Unavailability of HEI tutors due to sickness and staff vacancies, for some students, several changes of tutor, or unsureness about who they should contact at the university created additional PLO challenges for some students.

More generally it was evident that the switch from the traditional two placement model, as well as to remote learning, had served to disrupt some students' connections with named HEI tutors. In contrast, other students had experienced continuity of personal tutor throughout their

qualification with a resultant positive impact on working relationships and their perceptions of the quality of support and guidance offered. Two case study students experienced some difficulties during the PLO and their respective HEI tutors were found by PEs to be supportive and fully engaged in the development of action plans to address outstanding learning needs.

5. Process findings: Implementation enablers and barriers

Key Findings

- More advantages than disadvantages were identified for having a longer than traditional placement.

- Most participants favoured more than one placement, seeing the single PLO as 'putting all the eggs in one basket'.

- Contrast experiences were often difficult and time-consuming to set up and lack of clarity about expectations and responsibilities led to considerable variation in length, level, timing and quality.

- Although the majority of PEs and students saw some value in the contrast experience, a significant minority of students experienced difficulties with their contrast experiences, especially when they were very short, organised late in the PLO or where there was poor communication between main and contrast settings.

- Practice educators took responsibility for the organisation of most contrast experiences and were often creative in their negotiation of useful learning opportunities. However, this was time consuming, relying on their good will and that of their colleagues

- The requirement to gain experience in statutory social work was relatively straightforward for students in LA PLOs. However, no systems were in place to facilitate statutory experience for third sector students with the result that these contrasting elements were often very challenging to set up and manage.

The evaluation aimed to gain an understanding of the enablers and barriers to implementation of a longer than traditional placement involving contrast and statutory learning opportunities. Evaluation evidence relating to these three interacting requirements is summarised below. The focus in this section is on implementation enablers and barriers that relate to this particular model of practice learning rather than practice learning in general.

5.1 120 days of placement

'It has been beneficial to have the extra time with the student on placement to carry out a broader range of tasks and learning. The student has been able to take a person from referral to the case closing again which has been really positive for their learning.'
(Practice educator, survey response)

'As a team, we did see the benefit of having a longer placement and we felt from our service user perspective that it would give more consistency to our service users having those extra days.'
(Practice educator/manager, third sector PLO, case study interview)

'As a practice teacher, I actually feel quite drained with it because it is a long period of time. ' I would probably say for the students, if their home lives are fine, and they haven't got financial stresses, then I think the 120-day Placement is spot on.'
(Practice educator, local authority PLO, case study interview)

'I think an enabler is that actually students are getting a good run at it in terms of this is what it's like to be a social worker. And actually, I think that's probably quite helpful for people to have a longer period in practice.'
(Evaluation commissioner, group interview)

'120 days is a lot and doesn't take into account any life changes or a good life balance. Most jobs are now flexible - why can't a placement be too?'
(Student, survey response)

At 120 days, this PLO was longer than 'traditional' placements in Scotland, although not markedly longer than, for example, an Open University PLO of 100 days. Since the PLO involved a contrast experience of variable length (see 5.2), students were not based at their main PLO site for the duration of this period. Nevertheless, 120 days represented an extended period of workplace practice learning, seen by evaluation participants as conveying both advantages and disadvantages in comparison to shorter PLOs.

PLO length enablers

More advantages than disadvantages to a longer PLO were identified by most PEs and LWs and many students. However, most still thought students should have more than one PLO (see 5.2). Answering questions about length of PLO was complicated by the frequent observation that that students needed the full 120 days to complete the required learning, since this was their first workplace-based PLO. Further reasons for positivity about a longer PLO identified by PEs and LWs are listed below.

- Greater opportunities for consistency and purposeful relationship-building with users of services and their families.

- Enhanced skill development including the time to develop relationships and trust, and to undertake more complex work, seeing work with users of services and their families through to managing endings.

- Taking pressure off students to complete work rapidly and enabling PEs and LWs to identify longer-term pieces of work with the kind of diverse and challenging learning opportunities appropriate for students near qualification.

- The student is more able to embed themselves in the organisation and understand their role and its purpose, perhaps a particularly important consideration during the pandemic when students experienced many obstacles to integration within the workplace.

Some PEs also expressed a view that a longer PLO was most suitable for more confident students with life and work experience,

'When you've got very capable students, 120 days allows them to really get their feet under the table and get a flavour of what's happening **-** as opposed to 70 days when some are getting in the door and then you're already at the midpoint.'
(Practice learning co-ordinator, group interview)

Many students also identified advantages to the longer PLO because of the time it gave them to consolidate their learning,

'.. it gives you that length of time to actually get to know the processes and the legislation, and to shadow social workers before you take on your own cases. And then eventually, you're managing your own caseload. So it's quite similar to what it'll be when you're actually qualified.'

(Student, local authority PLO, case study interview)

PLO length barriers

Most concerns about length of PLO expressed by PEs were less about length per se and more a general unhappiness about the ASM + 120-day combination. However, along with other respondents, PEs identified a number of disadvantages to a longer PLO.

- Financial hardship for students, many of whom rely on paid work when not on placement. This issue posed acute problems for one case study student and was raised by PL co-ordinators in relation to heightened awareness of financial concerns for students and by HEI managers who noted increased numbers of hardship applications during the PLO, although the evaluation does not have associated quantitative data. These difficulties almost certainly interacted with

other financial pressures at play due to the COVID-19 pandemic and cost of living increases at the time.

- Related to the above, a lack of breaks, apart from seasonal ones, for most students, although some HEIs' students had a week's study break that was valued by case study students.

- A reported sense that 'everyone's exhausted' at the end the 120-day PLO, particularly emphasised by PL leads and HEI managers. This was also highlighted by several case study HEI tutors though, interestingly only by one of the case study PEs and not in our second survey responses. Again, it was difficult to separate the impacts of the PLO from that of two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, well summarised in the quote below,

'Everybody's exhausted. I'm exhausted. I think students are exhausted. When I speak to practice teachers, they say the same. And I find it difficult to tease apart what that is, how much of that is the 120-day placement? I think a lot of it is being attributed to that. And that might be quite valid. But … we're all exhausted by living through a pandemic … teams are exhausted because they're short staffed, and there are periods of time when they've got loads of staff off or isolating that puts pressure on the rest of the team, so supporting a student feels even more onerous in the midst of all that.' (HEI manager, group interview)

5.2 One vs. two workplace PLOs: 'all eggs in one basket'?

'There are some students who really need a gentle first placement, and then a more intensive second placement.'
(Practice educator, local authority PLO, case study interview)

'I think if they have that gap between the two, it gives them time to consolidate what they've learned and reflect on what has happened to them in the last placement, and also gives them preparation for that next step.'

(Link worker, local authority PLO, group interview)

'I don't think you can really underestimate the importance of that first placement. The 120-day PLO is too much all in one go.'
(HEI tutor, local authority PLO, case study interview)

The most frequently used phrase about the value of a single workplace PLO was that it was akin to 'putting all eggs in one basket'. Doubts about provision of a single opportunity to demonstrate practice skills within a 'live' social work setting were regularly raised by PEs and some LWs in case study and group interviews with PEs, PL leads and LWs. The main reasons are listed below.

- The importance of a pause between PLOs to enable time for students to reflect on their first practice experiences, review their learning and identify learning needs for a second PLO.

- A single PLO places too much pressure on students to succeed, creating unhelpful anxiety and stress.

- Too much reliance is placed on a single workplace assessment opportunity, potentially jeopardising student learning if, for example, the PLO turns out to be sub-standard or there are personality clashes or other difficulties between PE and student.

- The benefits of a phased approach to learning with an emphasis on communication, relationship-building and assessment in a first PLO, and the development of skills in, for example, working with risk and complexity in a second placement.

- The value of the more rounded experience provided by two substantial contrasting PLOs, an issue particularly relevant to students with third sector PLOs (see also 5.3 and 5.4).

- An opportunity for students early in their qualification to decide whether they wish to pursue a career in social work rather than risking discovering that this is not the case at a later stage.

These considerations were sometimes also linked to concerns that students were having their first direct experience of social work practice very late in their social work qualification.

5.3 Contrasting experience

'The ASM was intended originally to provide the contrast. So effectively smuggling two placements into one was always a bad idea and put appalling pressure on agencies. And it's quite remarkable that they rose to the challenge. But that's clearly been at a cost - quite a considerable cost - to the individuals who had to deliver that.'
(HEI manager, group interview)

'I found the contrasting experiences really unhelpful for the student. I felt as if they were beginning to piece together one service then had to learn to navigate a new service and new legislation. It wasn't cohesive or holistic.'
'It appears practice teachers have each approached this experience differently with some offering purely an observation placement while I was advised it was a participative placement experience during which one direct observation must be undertaken.'
(Practice educators, survey responses)

One of the SSSC requirements for the 120-day PLO was that contrasting social work experiences were made available to students. Since early

evaluation findings identified this requirement as frequently problematic, the second phase of data collection placed particular emphasis on understanding the implications and value of this requirement.

Setting up contrasting experiences

The decision-making and organisational processes involved in setting up contrasting experiences were highlighted by almost all respondent groups as problematic.

- There was doubt about the nature, level and length of contrast required. A lack of consistency between SSSC, HEI and individual agency expectations was evident so that students had widely differing experiences of contrast. Whilst this was viewed positively by some PL co-ordinators in terms of the flexibility it gave to meeting individual learning needs, most respondents found the lack of clear guidance unhelpful. HEI managers also agreed that contrast probably had, 'far too broad a definition. And I think we would all have liked much more guidance from the regulator about that.'

- Lack of clarity about who should take responsibility for arranging the contrasting experience was widely reported. The second survey found that most contrasting experiences (75%) were arranged by PEs, often alongside LWs, practice learning leads and team colleagues. In nine instances (17%) students themselves arranged the contrast, whilst few university tutors (4%) were said to have been involved in setting up contrast experiences.

- For third sector PEs, LWs and students, difficulties in sourcing contrasting experiences were frequently reported, though these were sometimes mitigated by an experienced PE or HEI tutor's knowledge of local networks. These were usually in statutory settings in order to meet the requirement to undertake statutory work (see 5.4). Arranging contrasting experience was somewhat more straightforward in LA PLOs.

- Great variation in contrast length which varied from more than 30 days (26% of students) to 1-5 days (19%). About two thirds of students spent more than 10 days in a contrast setting, but four students (7%) did not expect to have a contrast experience at all.

- Varied timing of contrast. For most case study students contrasts were organised late in the PLO, impacting negatively on their opportunities to consolidate learning during the later stages their main PLO, especially if they were simultaneously working on dissertations. Most respondents thought that contrast experiences should be arranged at the start of a PLO.

The value of contrasting experiences

Despite these difficulties, most surveyed respondents saw some value in contrast experiences. Three quarters of students and the majority (83%) of PEs reported the contrasting experience to have been, 'extremely' or 'somewhat' valuable. Concerningly, however, a significant proportion (20%) of students did not value their contrast experience. Over half of surveyed students (57%) reported no difficulties with the contrasting experience, but 43% identified constraints on their learning, which were mainly attributed to:

- lack of awareness on the part of the contrast LW or team about the expectations and objectives of the learning opportunity

- considerable stress for those students who had to take an active role in finding their own contrasting experience or whose contrast experience took a long time to set up

- disrupted learning and additional pressure for students who undertook more than one contrast experience

- shorter contrasts limited the amount of work a student could undertake, being 'too long to be shadowing and too short for most team leaders to allocate meaningful work', as one surveyed PE commented

- lack of clarity and co-ordination in some instances about management responsibilities for a student working over two or more different sites, sometimes with different employers.

As with so many other practice experiences, COVID-19 restrictions further disadvantaged some students who, for example, undertook short contrast experiences in very busy offices where staff were too stretched to offer support. Access to offices and to IT systems were also highlighted as problematic for some surveyed and case study students, especially in the third sector (see 5.3).

'I was not able to access the systems in my contrasting placement. I wasn't able to go to the work office and didn't have a name badge or pass.'

However, some students, often thanks to the creativity and networking abilities of their PEs, had some valuable contrasting experiences, especially where there was good articulation between the main and contrast sites, as explained by a surveyed student,

'I was extremely lucky to be placed in an office where I could do both placement experiences alongside each other as the office has multiple teams within it. This meant I could work cases from both teams and have time to familiarise myself with the service and build good relationships.'

5.4 Statutory social work

'There are no actual protocols for [the statutory contrast experience]. It's just been a case of working creatively and figuring out what we could do to give the student the best experience.'

(Independent practice educator, third sector PLO, case study interview)

'If someone is in a third sector for the main placement, getting that statutory experience is beneficial. But it needs to be meaningful, it needs to be more than just, "I'm just doing this to pass".'

(Link worker, local authority PLO, case study interview)

'I think even a student in most statutory placements would benefit from exposure to a range of different social work roles. But definitely the students who don't have any exposure to anyone with a social work role are the ones that really worry me.'.

(HEI tutor, third sector PLO, case study interview)

One of the requirements of the 120-day PLO was that students gained statutory social work experience. A majority of students (70%) reported that they had sufficient opportunity to develop skills and competence in statutory social work. These included a large proportion (63%) of students in LA teams where they would have had straightforward access to statutory opportunities. Another fifth of students surveyed towards the end of their PLOs had also been offered opportunities but did not believe themselves to have gained sufficient skills and competence in statutory work. A small, but concerning, number of students (5, 9%) had either not been offered these opportunities or were unsure if they would be as they approached the end of their PLOs. However, case study interviews did not find such gaps having any consistent impact about PEs' pass or fail recommendations. Three case study students were based in third sector settings and their experiences, and those of their PEs help to illustrate the variability of their experiences.

- One student was able to take on sufficient statutory work by undertaking joint work with statutory colleagues from their PLO work base.

- A second student was eventually able to undertake sufficient statutory experience, although this disrupted their learning at the end of their main PLO. However, this contrast experience in a LA team took many weeks to set up and was only eventually obtained through the determined persistence of the PE who came up against numerous obstacles, including identification of a LW and restricted access to Council systems.

- A third student's statutory experience also took a long time to set up, partly due to conflicting guidance about requirements. At the point of the second interview, very close to the PLO end this had still not taken place.

Overall, the statutory requirement was often very difficult to fulfil for many third sector students, frequently involving considerable additional work for PEs and sometimes other members of the learning team. This surveyed IPE explained the kind of difficulties that arose in one third sector PLO,

'It is not clear who facilitates the stated aim of the 120-day placement to provide a contrasting placement experience for the student, particularly one that provides a statutory experience or overview. A request for this is met with bafflement by voluntary sector PLOs, and the universities and Learning Network pass the issue around but can't seem to resolve it. It will therefore be left to me to negotiate this, which is almost impossible, as I have no authority to ask people to accommodate such requests.'

Difficulties and delays could also arise in LAs for students in residential care PLOs requiring contrasting experiences with a statutory element. The persistence of this highly motivated case study student and their PE meant that a valuable contrasting statutory experience was eventually obtained, although with some ultimately unresolved questions about the student's dual accountability to two practice settings in different sectors,

'I am now doing dual. I'm doing community work and I'm doing residential alongside each other, which is conflicting…I've really enjoyed it [but] I really don't feel that I should have to have waited four and a half months into my placement to experience that.'

Two case study students had main PLOs where all or most their colleagues were not in social work roles. In both cases their PEs successfully organised contrasting opportunities where they could work alongside other social workers. However, both contrasts were late on in their placements and one student's contrast experience was quite brief.

6. Outcome findings: Students' learning and achievement of the SiSWE

Key findings

- Despite an often slow start, students' practice skills steadily developed as the PLOs progressed. Least progress was noted in working with risk and complexity, managing conflict, use of professional authority and organisational skills.

- The great majority of students met the Standards in Social Work Education (SiSWE). Student pass rates and average grades were consistently slightly lower than those reported for the 2020/1 cohort, and markedly fewer students at one HEI completed this presentation of the PLO than during the previous year.

- Most students were thought to be prepared for qualified practice 'to an extent'. The need for post-qualification support was stressed, through the NQSW supported year pilots, mentoring, supervision, good quality induction, a protected caseload and effective communication between HEIs and employers.

The evaluation examined the extent to which the 120-day PLO offered students opportunities to meet the SiSWE. The case study interviews and surveys asked respondents about students' developing practice skills, knowledge, values and areas requiring further development. The final section considers the extent to which this cohort of students was believed to be prepared for qualified practice, and the potential workforce development implications of these findings.

6.1 Practice development and continuing learning needs

'The 120 day placement has allowed a greater development of practice and allowed cases to throw on more demands that have been really akin to working in long term teams. The depth of relationship and seeing cases through has been a real benefit to students and clients.'

'Skills such as managing conflict, professional authority, meeting deadlines and exercising professional judgements are areas where a significant amount of work will be required post qualification.'

(Survey responses, practice educators)

Overall, despite a slow and uncertain start for some students, by the second half of placement PEs and LWs were generally reporting good progress in students' ability to put their knowledge, skills and values into practice. Progress across a range of domains that mirror those reported by the ASM evaluation is summarised in Chart 2. Most progress was made in relation to the development of communication and relationship-building skills, collaborating with colleagues, gathering and analysing information, and assessment. PEs also noted the quality of students' digital skills and ability to use relational skills to interact effectively online, skills already demonstrated to have been supported by their learning during the ASM (Gordon et al, 2021).
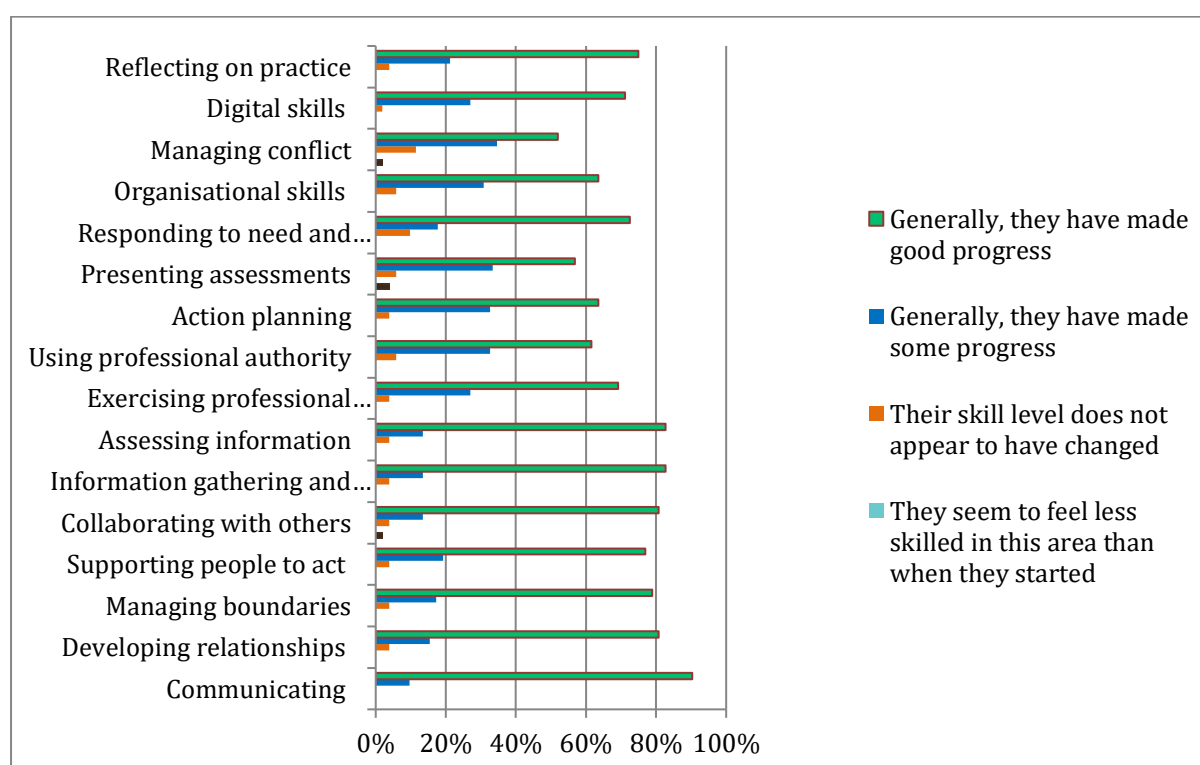

Chart 2: Student progress in development of a range of practice skills as % of second practice educator survey responses (n=52)

Areas where students were identified to have made less progress included managing conflict and the use of professional authority, both involving skill sets that the ASM was not easily able to address (Gordon et al, 2021) and that are typically developed during the later stages of practice learning in the 'traditional' model. Other outstanding learning needs, such as those related to organisational skills, presenting assessments and time management seem more closely related to gaps in students' prior experiences of generic workplace skills as well as pandemic-related loss of informal and collaborative learning opportunities. Students' own assessment of their skill development and outstanding learning needs broadly matched that of PEs, although the PEs were less positive about the development of students' organisational skills, exercising professional judgement and planning and writing action plans.

Case study interviews provided a similar picture of students' developing capabilities, with working with risk and complexity highlighted in many interviews as areas for further development. It was noted that pandemic constraints sometimes made it more difficult than was usual for students to shadow or take an active role in work with more vulnerable, at risk individuals. Other areas for development were report-writing and recording skills, critical analysis, legal knowledge and, for third sector PLOs, statutory experience. Considerable development in understanding of the ethical principles underpinning practice was noted in all the case studies, with particular emphasis on growing understanding about diversity, inequality and the importance of anti-oppressive practice.

6.2 Qualification outcomes

'There are ways you can mitigate for most of it, and you can you do your best and obviously extra shadowing experiences, the extra time, it all helps. But I think whatever we do, we're still going to have students who have to play catch up when they're qualified. And I think there are students who won't quite make the grade at the end of this placement who possibly would have done if they had had two placements.'

(Practice educator, third sector PLO, case study interview)

'I think that they will go out competently into the workforce, as every other graduating year does. They have met the SiSWE, demonstrated their competence, and should be able to bring that into their first role… The other bits are things that have really been outwith their control: the impact of COVID, not working in the office, lockdown periods, restrictions, things like that.'

'We'll see some very resilient students coming out of this experience, but I really hope that we're not facing a short turnaround in terms of burnout for them in terms of how they move forward.'

(HEI managers, group interview)

Meeting the SiSWE

All but one PE respondent to the second survey, towards the PLO end, reported that the placement had enabled them to gather sufficient evidence of students' capabilities in respect of practice skill, knowledge and value requirements to meet the SiSWE. On the whole, the assessment process seemed in itself to generate few challenges, although a few PEs described the additional direct observations required by HEIs as onerous. Opinion was divided about the impact of remote working on assessment; some PEs found remote direct observations were effective and less intrusive for users of services, whilst others thought that face to face observations were needed to pick up more subtle and non-verbal interactions. The case studies provide a more nuanced understanding of

students' placement trajectories. During the first half of the PLO, some respondents were expressing misgivings about students' capacity to meet the SiSWE, as this PL lead explained,

'… I'm sort of racking my brains at the moment thinking how can we make sure that they have every opportunity to get up to speed? Because at the moment you couldn't really put your hand on your heart and say they are going to pass… '

Ultimately, all nine case study students completed their PLOs successfully, two students with the support of additional learning team meetings with HEI tutors and the formulation of learning action plans.

Final outcomes

Data provided by the three universities after their Exam Boards summarises the final outcomes for each social work programme (see Table 2). Each figure is compared with results for 2020/1 students. Since the pandemic will, it is assumed, have had adverse impacts on both cohorts, the key difference between the years seems likely to be due to introduction of the contingency ASM and 120-day PLO arrangements. However, it should also be noted that the 20/21 cohort were subject to even greater disruption to their PLOs due to the stringent lockdown arrangements during that phase of the pandemic, making any direct comparison less straightforward.

HEI	Pass % 22	Pass % 21	Fail nos. 22	Fail nos.21	Mean grade 22	Mean grade 21
GCU BA	83%	96%	3	2	56	64
GCU MA	90%	96%	3	1	60	68
UoS BA and MA	90%	94%	6	4	-	-
UWS BA and MA	95%	99%	3	1	55	59

Table 2: Outcomes for 2021 and 2022 student cohorts [Pass/ fail percentages and numbers refer to PLO pass at first attempt. Numbers based on HEI figures]

Overall, the figures demonstrate a slight but consistent decrease in pass rate and, where the information was available, average grades. The pass rate for GCU BA students shows the greatest drop from 2021 to 2022, this mainly caused by the non-progression of ten students through the 120-day PLO. All UoS students finished their placements but we do not have this data from UWS. Judging from 4-year statistics provided by one HEI, which demonstrated fluctuation in pass rates from year to year, it is important not to read too much into these differences from previous years. However, the high levels of non-progression for some undergraduate students are concerning, though without more data, they cannot be reliably attributed to the impact of the practice learning model itself. Were these levels of non-progression, as well as a consistent drop in overall standards and pass rates, to be repeated for those GCU and

UWS final year students currently undertaking the ASM/ 120-day PLO combination, it could suggest a more significant and concerning effect of the practice model itself on student qualification numbers.

6.3 Preparedness for qualified practice

'They will quite confidently settle into the role of a qualified social worker… they're obviously going to have to do what any NQSW will have to do in terms of learning about that role and policies and all the rest of it.'

'If you knew [the NQSW year] was going to be mandatory, you might be a bit more comfortable saying that the student is ready, but they still have developmental needs … they might finish up … and get a job somewhere where they just throw them in at the deep end.'

(Practice educators, local authority PLOs, case study interviews)

'We have students who are going to have to do a lot of catch up when qualified because they haven't had as rounded a learning experience as they would normally have.'
(Practice educator, third sector PLO, case study interview)

'I think in the longer term, yes, students will need probably more support, perhaps more training, perhaps more shadowing opportunities, so they're going to be less prepared, I think, for the realities of the social work profession.'
(HEI tutor, third sector PLO, case study interview)

Practice educators, LWs and tutors were more likely to consider that students were 'prepared to an extent' for qualified practice, than that they were 'fully' prepared. No students were thought to be wholly unprepared. When asked about what kind of support requirements respondents thought would assist this student cohort as NQSWs the main suggestions were:

- employment in an LA implementing the NQSW supported year
- regular supervision and cohesive team support
- mentoring and peer support
- a well-rounded induction period
- a protected caseload
- articulation between HEIs and students' new workplaces to ensure that further learning needs are shared with employing agencies.
- specific support to meet learning needs for individual workers, most frequently in report writing and time management.

7. Findings: Suitability, sustainability and resourcing

Key findings

- The majority of respondents saw the combination of the ASM and 120-day PLO as a suitable contingency replacement for traditional practice learning arrangements. However, very few saw it as a sustainable long term measure for social work practice learning in Scotland in its current form.

- Highest student satisfaction with this PLO model was evident for slightly older students with social care experience who had been able to make good use of their ASM learning. The combination of a statutory area team PLO with a single substantial period of contrasting experience appeared to provide the most favourable context for students' overall learning experience.

- PEs' weekly workload varied, depending on context and student learning needs, but on average was somewhat heavier (12%) than for traditional PLOs. Setting up and supporting the contrast experience generated additional work for teams and PL leads.

- PLO planning and external and internal negotiations reportedly increased workload for HEI staff and PL leads, but no quantitative data was available about resource implications of the model.

7.1 Suitability and sustainability

'I was quite positive about it, I thought it could really give a robust learning experience for students, getting to have more sustained pieces of work. But I do hope that we do go back to the two different placements.'
(Practice educator, local authority PLO, case study interview)

'This has been a solution for an extreme situation.'

'This has been detrimental to students and to placements. We would actively consider rejecting placements from universities that continued with the model.'

(Practice educators, survey responses)

All evaluation participants were asked for their views on the suitability and future sustainability of this practice learning model. Second survey

LW and PE responses, summarised in Table 3, indicate that about two thirds of LWs and nearly half of PEs found this hybrid model a suitable contingency replacement for traditional practice learning arrangements. However, few saw it as a sustainable long term measure for social work education in Scotland in its current form. About a quarter of both groups thought the model potentially suitable if further developed, and 15% were in favour of its use as a long term measure in social work education. A small proportion of PEs (12%) did not find the model a suitable replacement in any circumstances. The volume of related survey comments (62% of respondents) suggested that many practice educators felt strongly this model should not be mainstreamed with or without changes made.

Would you now see the 40-day online +120-day PLO model as a direct replacement for 2-3 assessed and supervised PLOs in a workplace setting?	Link Workers	Practice Educators
Yes, as a long term measure in social work education in Scotland	9%	15%
Yes, but only as a contingency during the pandemic	65%	46%
Yes, but only if changes were made to this model of practice learning	26%	27%
No, not under any circumstances	0%	12%

Table 3: PE and LW perceptions of equivalence of the pandemic and pre-pandemic models of practice learning

While surveyed students indicated their understanding of why this model had been provided, more than three quarters thought that it should either only be used in the pandemic (42%) or not under any circumstances (35%). Explanatory comments mainly referred to the PLO being over-long, with too few breaks and associated funding problems, and students' preference for two workplace-based PLOs. A small minority (15%) thought it could be used as a long term measure, citing the value of a longer placement that allowed more in depth learning.

Of the nine case study PEs, seven expressed a preference for the pre-pandemic model of practice learning, a view almost entirely supported by PEs and LWs in two group interviews. Overall, all evaluation sources found that the great majority of PEs and LWs did not support the retention of the model introduced in the pandemic in its current form in the longer term. These conclusions were broadly supported by HEI respondents, team managers and the evaluation commissioners themselves. The LWs, PEs and students who saw potential for future delivery of an updated contingency model made suggestions ranging from minor adjustments to more radical overhaul:

- more substantial ASM preparation for third sector and criminal justice social work practice

- full involvement of practice teachers in the design and delivery of any future online module

- ensuring that PEs are fully informed about what students have learned during the ASM, and what their ongoing learning needs are

- delivering the ASM early in the social work programme, and preparing students for a longer PLO with observational placements near the start of their qualification

- consistent and clear guidance and support with identifying, setting up and managing contrasting experiences

- only offering this type of hybrid model to students with substantial prior social care experience

- if there is only to be one PLO, then it should be a statutory one.

7.2 What works, for whom, and in what circumstances?

'I strongly believe that everyone should have time within a local authority, completing statutory social work in order to learn the role. Having been in three different settings I can say I would be entirely unprepared to go into the council as a NQSW without statutory experience behind me. Being in residential would not have been enough.'

(Student survey response, third sector residential PLO)

'I enjoyed supervision and collaboration being blended. However, there was no time where I saw service users virtually mainly due to the fact that they were on licence and face to face was necessary.'

(Student survey response, local authority criminal justice PLO)

'For some students who lack life experience and work experience one placement is not enough for them to learn and understand what is required. I feel it may just cover the basics but if they get a job in a local authority team they will 'drown' and burn out. This is also not fair on vulnerable service users who are reliant on us to give them a competent service – and other social workers who will have to pick up the pieces.'
(Link worker, survey response)

This model of hybrid learning appeared to work better for some students than others. The surveys found that students who were more positive about their learning from the model were likely to:

- have highly valued their past social care experience and the 40-day ASM to an equal extent (both 70%)

- have had their main PLOs in LA area teams (80%)

- have had substantial, single and valued contrast experiences, typically 21-30 days

- be over 25 (although this was a slight effect)

- be less likely to have experienced financial hardship or other personal challenges due to COVID-19 and/or PLO length.

No relationship was found between qualification route and PLO positivity in the qualitative or quantitative data. The case study interviews also underlined the benefits of placement settings that supported higher levels of face to face practice and informal office-based learning. These enablers were most evident in residential and criminal justice PLOs. However, students' anxieties about future employability following residential and/or third sector placements countered some of these positive effects

7.3 Resourcing the 120-day PLO

'The [workload] largely depends on the student. And this student was very competent, and she utilised the support and the team very well … I think there was a real kind of sense of kind of shared responsibility for them as a student.'

'I think the length of time is quite difficult, especially if [students] are just sort of zapped and you haven't got that energy and you're having to motivate them.'

(Practice educators, local authority PLOs, case study interviews)

'Two [main PLO] students became four, five, six, seven, eight, nine [with contrast students]. That's nine people you have to find shadowing work for. You're not necessarily the practice teacher, you've not got the sole responsibility for them, but you have a responsibility to the learning experience.'

(Team manager, local authority PLO, case study interview)

The evaluation team was asked by SSSC and SWEP to assess the financial implications of the introduction of contingency practice learning arrangements. Without a baseline for pre-pandemic practice learning delivery, nor estimates of the resources required to plan for and deliver the ASM and 120-day PLO, we were unable to make an overall comparison of the two models. However, we were able to ask survey and interview participants about their workloads and how these compare with their past experience of practice learning delivery, and these quantitative and qualitative findings are summarised below.

Workplace resources

Resumption monies of £300/student were made available to PLO providers by the Scottish Government. Although, reportedly, not all these

funds have been claimed by agencies, they were said to have enabled some providers to buy laptops, phones and other equipment required by students. Additional resource issues highlighted by PL leads, LNW and team managers often related to setting up and resourcing students' contrast experiences. These arrangements were time-consuming to organise, added to the workload of team members and managers and required the recruitment and training of additional LWs.

Practice educators reported spending rather more time (12%) supporting each student than with the traditional PLO model. The average reported time spent near the start was 6.8 hours/week, and 4.5 hours/week towards the end of placement. Some LWs reported a slight uplift to time spent supporting students but most found their workload to be similar to earlier PLOs. Some advantages to a single, rather than two shorter placements, were cited, such as an overall reduction in time on student induction for the main PLO. However, the reverse applied in the contrast setting where students required proportionally higher levels of induction in relation to the length of practice experience.

Case study interviews gave greater insight into the variability of workload associated with supervising and supporting students in different settings. When students settled into their PLO workplace quickly and confidently, especially when there were high levels of informal support, PEs' weekly workloads were described as similar to those of pre-pandemic placements. Higher than usual workloads were likely to be associated with supporting less confident students, especially at the PLO start, third sector PLOs and the complexities of negotiating contrast arrangements.

University resources

In addition to their shared responsibilities, with LNW and PLO providers, for PLO preparation university managers reported

- higher than usual levels of interaction with students, both for pastoral support and to address progression difficulties
- sometimes protracted and complex negotiations within the universities and with SSSC to effect the curriculum changes required to introduce the contingency arrangements.

8. Successes, lessons learned and unintended consequences

In this chapter we draw together some of the findings of the evaluation, briefly highlighting what appear to be the main successes, lessons learned and unintended consequences of planning and delivering the 120-day PLO.

8.1 Successes

> 'There are some students that have just done so well, and you know that they're going to go into the workforce with that kind of resilience and a huge chunk of experience.'
>
> 'For all the extra work, for all the extra effort, and strain and stress, it's bought us all time, it's bought the students time to keep progressing through the programme.'
>
> (HEI managers, group interview)
>
> 'I think what we have all tried to do ...... universities, local authorities, practice educators, third sector agencies … was to endeavour to limit the impact of a worldwide pandemic ... so these students were not disadvantaged significantly - or become known as the "Covid students".'
>
> (PL lead, group interview)
>
> 'The 120 day placement has allowed a greater development of practice and allowed cases to throw on more demands that have been really akin to working in long term teams. The depth of relationship and seeing cases through has been a real benefit to students and clients.'
>
> (Practice educator, survey response)

Key successes are listed below.

- Notably, that the great majority of undergraduate and postgraduate students have met the SiSWE, qualified as social workers and will be able to enter the workforce at the time they were due to complete their social work training.

- Many students, especially those with health and social care experience, and whose personal circumstances during the pandemic did not substantially disrupt their learning, had very successful PLOs and were predicted to be likely to move confidently into the NQSW workforce.

- The approach, especially preparations for the PLO and management of the contrast arrangements, generated enhanced levels of partnership working between the third sector, LAs and HEIs offering potential for future collaborative approaches.

- The 120-day length of the PLO was mostly seen as a benefit in terms of the continuity it gave to users of services. Students also gained opportunities to undertake longer term and more complex work than usually available on a shorter placement.

- Whilst overall perceptions of the ASM were mixed, feedback from PEs and HEIs suggested that students had benefited from the module's focus on reflection and the development of criticality.

- A small number of surveyed students on placement in student hubs where they had potential to gain experience of a wide range of practice, supervised by hub-based practice educators. Although there were not sufficient student responses to assess the impact of a hub placement on learning processes and outcomes, reports from one LA found students benefitting from the ability to gain varied, contrasting experiences in diverse practice settings. Some other LAs were now considering introducing the hub model into their area as a result.

8.2 Lessons learnt

'The 120-day placement puts all the eggs in one basket. For those students that would have maybe filtered themselves out when they first tasted practice, or who might have failed their first placement, I think this is enormous for them… there is a kind of inequality for those students, those who were a bit more vulnerable, those that are coming in with a bit less experience, and those that really may be needing to have two or three placements in order to meet the standards and be equipped for practice'.

(HEI manager, group interview)

'I think that [the student] would definitely benefit from another placement. They would benefit from a chance to consolidate and build on what they've learned. And I think you'd have other students who would take to [the contingency model] and would be fine. But I still think that there is a wee bit of a loss in not getting the chance to do another type of PLO and develop one's skills. But I don't know if I'm just old school - because you just think about what you did and perhaps we have to be more adaptable.'

(Team manager, local authority PLO, case study interview)

Throughout this evaluation, as through the student placements, it has been difficult, and sometimes impossible, to tease out which impacts relate to the PLO model and which were caused by the immediate and

long term impact of COVID-19. Nevertheless, although every facet of both the ASM and 120-day PLO was subject to adverse pandemic effects, some of the lessons learnt can be attributed to the operation of this particular model. Key lessons are listed below.

- Many students started the module with very high levels of anxiety and a lack of confidence about their preparedness for workplace practice learning. Whilst for some these impacts steadily receded as they gained experience, some students continued to struggle. It appeared that these problems were most acute for students who lacked experience of working in organisations, and, in particular, social care experience. For these students, a single, longer PLO was perceived by HEI managers and PL leads as a disadvantage, with implications for their ability to complete their degree and move successfully into, and remain in, qualified practice.

- Despite many reported benefits, there were downsides to a longer PLO, including financial hardship for some students, many being reliant on paid work, often in the health and care sector, in between periods of practice learning. Additional workload for HEI and practice learning staff was also highlighted, raising concerns that PEs, in particular, might be unlikely to want to supervise a student for some time after the completion of this longer PLO. We have not been able to evaluate whether this has happened in practice.

- The perceived benefits of more than a single workplace PLO are well-evidenced in the evaluation findings. Reasons include the importance of time for students to reflect on and consolidate learning between placements, gaining a more rounded appreciation of varied social work roles in different sectors and avoidance of over-reliance on a single practice learning assessment opportunity.

- Like the earlier ASM evaluation (Gordon et al, 2021), this evaluation suggests the importance of early, phased exposure to practice opportunities in the social work degree.

8.3 Unintended consequences

'It's raised the ante. The pressure has been on at a national level, and some of the elite organisations and funders and governmental bodies have actually started to think, "Well, practice learning has hobbled along for years in terms of goodwill and favours and personalities…and that's really not a strategic workforce planning model."'

'The university has agreed to the quite significant changes in our curriculum delivery as part of our degree. And that's no small undertaking… So, to do that, alongside also achieving that with our regulators, it wasn't without its challenges.'

(HEI managers, group interview)

'It's a double edged sword, isn't it? Because they came in, and we have an expectation of students in the past. And that isn't what came in. They weren't prepared, we weren't prepared.'

'What COVID has done is to highlight the structural problems in providing student placements that have been bobbing about for many years.'

(PL leads, group interviews)

- The introduction of a contrast requirement in the 120-day PLO, though intended to introduce a more rounded, diverse experience for students, was mostly perceived as unhelpful. Whilst some students gained value from the experience, contrast arrangements were often difficult to set up and learning experiences frequently too short to be of significant value and/or arranged so late in the placement that they impacted negatively on students' ability to make the most of their final weeks of practice learning.

- Many students in third sector PLOs were disadvantaged by lack of opportunities to experience statutory social work practice. Although this was a requirement for the 120-day PLO, it proved difficult to negotiate these contrasting opportunities with local authorities, and, even when provided, these experiences tended to fall short due to the shortness of exposure to practice, and difficulties obtaining access to IT and other systems

- Changes to HEI curriculum delivery and the timetabling of PLOs often required extended and time-consuming negotiations between HEIs, PLO providers, SSSC and SWEP. Potential disruptions to PLO arrangements for universities in other parts of Scotland were also reported, although we did not gather any evidence that this happened in practice. Since practice learning requires the articulation of a number of complex systems and relationships, any change in one part of the system inevitably gives rise to multiple, and sometimes unforeseen, effects.

We heard from all levels that the COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the chronic shortage of PLOs in Scotland, and the structural and financial issues underpinning these problems. These issues, also identified by the previous ASM evaluation, are explored in greater depth in the final chapter.

9. Conclusions and recommendations

In this final chapter we summarise key elements of student learning and outcomes, consider the contingency model's sustainability in the longer term and relate learning from this evaluation to wider issues about practice learning sufficiency and capacity. Recommendations are made in relation to the delivery of the 120-day PLO and future developments in practice learning in Scotland.

9.1 Student progress and outcomes

The 120-day PLO, like the ASM, was developed in response to a crisis situation caused by chronic placement shortages and the continuing damaging effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Its evaluation found students embarking on online practice learning were disappointed, and sometimes frustrated, that they were not on a 'real' practice placement (Gordon et al, 2021). Some of these feelings persisted into the 120-day PLO, though were frequently tempered by students' evident motivation to finally experience and learn from 'live' social work practice. Both PLOs took place with a backdrop of Covid-related economic, employment and home pressures that inevitably impacted on the experiences of students, PEs, LWs, HEIs and the organisations that hosted their placements (Simanovic et al, 2021).

Separating learning about the operation of the contingency model from the effects of COVID-19 itself is not straightforward. Both the wider impact of the global pandemic and specific placement constraints, especially limitations on face to face practice and loss of informal learning opportunities, adversely affected perceptions of the PLO's value. McCulloch et al (2022, p.12), researching NQSWs' experiences of practice in Scotland during 2019, have highlighted the 'plural, contingent and temporal' nature of these pandemic-related effects. Social work is a diverse profession, and the student population no less so. Factors such as students' family commitments, economic circumstances and the extent to which their particular PLO settings were operating remotely affected students' experiences of practice learning in differing and sometimes profound ways. Many social work students rely on paid work to finance their studies, so that long, challenging unpaid placements could also pose particular challenges (Cox et al, 2022). Focusing on the operation of the contingency model itself, it was found that prior work, and, in particular, social care experience and PLOs in LA social work teams that could provide statutory learning opportunities were key enablers for student learning using this model. Those lacking reasonably substantial prior social care experience often needed considerable additional support,

especially from PEs and LWs. For those in third sector PLOs, challenges setting up contrast experiences often impacted on the quality of the learning experience and, at worst, meant that they could qualify with only limited exposure to statutory social work.

Despite these constraints, most students did progress through their 120-day placements. Progress in relation to all SiSWE learning outcomes was evidenced, and the great majority of students from all three universities passed their placements. This progress was often uneven, taking time and requiring enhanced levels of early support, especially from their PEs. Nevertheless, the majority of students steadily gained in confidence and competence. For some, the development of more complex social work skills, such as working with risk and complexity, in addition to more basic learning outcomes related to time management and working in organisations proved more challenging. These were amongst the outstanding needs that PEs and LWs identified as students moved into their first year of practice. The importance of good early career induction, supervision and mentoring for this new practitioner cohort was emphasised during the evaluation, as in the NQSW study (McCulloch et al, 2022). Such support was noted to vary greatly between employers, emphasising the importance of implementation of a supported year for NQSWs in Scotland (Scottish Social Services Council, 2022).

9.2 The contingency model's sustainability

This evaluation has been able to take a longitudinal perspective, surveying and interviewing students and their learning teams over the course of the 120 days. In some respects, it has come to what may appear to be contradictory findings. On the one hand, purely taking into account final learning outcomes, the model can be regarded as a success, enabling this student cohort to complete and move successfully into the social work workforce, in itself an immense achievement. On the other, the great majority of evaluation respondents came to the conclusion that, whilst the model provided a good enough response to pandemic conditions, it was not in its current form a sustainable option for social work education in the longer term. The reasons for this perception are not uniform, and, like other findings, the long term effects of COVID-19 exhaustion on individuals, organisations and services were almost certainly contributing factors. However, it was possible to extract some consistent themes informing these conclusions, that:

- the online ASM had conveyed benefits, especially in relation to digital upskilling and reflective practice, but would be better placed as preparation for practice early in the social work degree

- students benefit from a phased approach to learning that begins near the start of their degree and enables periods of university-based reflection and consolidation in between more than one opportunity to experience 'live' practice

- diversity of experience in different social work settings is important, but the incorporation of a contrasting experience in a longer PLO had not been a successful strategy for many students

- it is possible to combine contrasting practice learning experiences in a single PLO, but this only works well if there is a supporting infrastructure of partnership working, between universities, statutory, third and private sectors

- a longer final PLO has a number of positive outcomes and could convey future benefits, but issues of financial hardship for students, pressure on PEs and lack of breaks for students would have to be addressed before implementation.

An enhanced version of a similar model of practice learning is being offered to UWS and GCU students in 2022/3. However, reflecting some of the reservations about the contingency model identified in this evaluation, the three HEIs, West of Scotland PL leads, SWEP and SSSC itself have decided against a further repeat of the ASM/120-day combination.

9.3 Going forward with practice learning

Dual aftermaths of the first two years of pandemic are an acceptance that many aspects of people's working lives have fundamentally changed set against a desire to get 'back to normal' (Birkinshaw, 2021). While many PEs, LWs and HEI tutors are understandably looking to a return to more familiar PLO configurations, there is simultaneous acknowledgement that pre-existing severe placement shortages have not gone away. Indeed, it was this 'monster coming over the hill' that prompted the decision to develop a hybrid model in the first place (Gordon et al, 2021, p.64). As one of the evaluation commissioners commented, the ASM/ 120-day PLO, 'got us over a bump, but it moves the blip further down the line in terms of capacity and how that's going be managed'. It is evident that solely reverting to the status quo will not fix these capacity issues.

Overall, this evaluation's findings, as summarised in 9.1 and 9.2, do not provide sufficient evidence to recommend a simple repeat of the contingency model in its current form as a viable practice learning option for all students in all practice settings. Lack of available data about current learning models has also prevented us from making predictions about whether introducing such a model has potential to increase much-needed practice learning capacity. However, the experience of developing and delivering a hybrid model during COVID-19 provides a not-to-be-missed learning opportunity that has important potential to contribute to ongoing discussions about the future shape and infrastructure for practice learning in Scotland. The pandemic has shone a light on some long-standing inadequacies in social work practice and practice learning structures but also has potential to offer insights into ways to better preparing for the future (Nissen and Scheyett, 2022).

Alongside all the disruption to learning identified in this evaluation, there has also been much evidence of the creativity and improvisation of students, PEs, university tutors and other members of students' practice learning teams. Ferguson et al (2022) have emphasised the importance of learning from these creative developments in ways that improve the lives of users of social work services. The pandemic affords opportunities 'not only to imagine new models of field education that are more suitable for contemporary contexts but to implement and trial them in ways that have not been possible until now' (Clarke and Morley, 2020, p.1048). To take full advantage of these opportunities will require a willingness to contemplate change in well-established, if creaking, systems and practices in practice learning. Shifts towards technical solutions have traditionally been regarded with some suspicion in social work education (Egonsdotter and Bengtsson, 2022). The global pandemic has seen rapid change in social workers' openness to use of technology and the development of creative hybrid practice approaches (Pink et al, 2022). Nevertheless, anxiety and doubt about change, and, in particular, use of technology to support practice learning, was evident in this evaluation, and that of the ASM (Gordon et al, 2021). If practice learning is to take full advantage of the profession's learning during the pandemic, an effective change management strategy that involves all stakeholders, including users of services and carers, will be necessary. This should draw on the growing body of international research about, for example, effective digital curriculum design and the benefits and challenges of case-based simulated learning (see eg Asakura and Bogo, 2021; Taylor-Beswick, 2022).

The evidence gained from this evaluation suggests the value of models of practice learning that are fully integrated into programmes from the early stages of students' qualifying education. In this way all students, not only those with sufficient previous social care experience, gain relational and other skills and a sense of what it is to practice in a social work context before they embark on direct work with users of services. This understanding, despite HEI programmes' undoubted commitment to university-based preparation for practice, appeared lacking for many students at the start of the 120 days. Such scaffolding has potential to enable incremental and experiential development through, for example skills rehearsal, observation and simulation, building up to workplace-based learning (Bruner, 1978, in Meredith et al, 2022).

A more structured, well-scaffolded approach might, for example combine early use of online resources, including some of the more successful elements of the ASM, that enable the safe rehearsal of practice skills with short opportunities to observe and shadow workplace practice more

directly[4]. This incremental start to practice learning could also provide some buffering against the effects of future unexpected disruptions to student learning due to pandemics or other disasters. Such an approach could usefully have the function of bringing workplace and 'academic' learning closer together by drawing on the expertise and experience of PEs, one of the evident benefits for student learning during the ASM. Shorter periods of supported practice learning might also provide a solid basis for a longer than typical final student PLO, as favoured by many evaluation contributors. However, such developments cannot take place in isolation. Without a re-examination of the wider infrastructure and resourcing of social work practice learning is unlikely to move on from an approach that is predominantly based on the goodwill of PEs, LWs and their employers. Key considerations include:

- the pivotal PE role, evident during students' learning on the ASM as well as workplace learning, one which is usually poorly (or not) remunerated or well recognised, and often performed alongside a full-time practice role (Gordon et al, 2019)

- the importance of fostering working partnerships across the sector, and especially between statutory and third sectors, to open up more diverse, integrated learning opportunities for students

- the very limited role users of services and carers have played in the design and delivery of the contingency model and the need to find ways to address this deficit in the future

- the roles of SSSC, IRISS, SWEP and the Scottish Government in supporting and enabling the evaluation and dissemination of local and international developments that have potential to improve the quality of and capacity for practice learning.

In conclusion, as O'Rourke et al (2021) have stressed in relation to Northern Ireland's Covid response, it is essential that we capture and learn from all the thought and hard work put into responding creatively and collaboratively to the urgent challenges posed by the global pandemic. Our recommendations, below, are first structured around the specifics of the 120-day PLO and, secondly, address wider questions about the future of practice learning in Scotland.

9.4 Recommendations

Short term: delivery of the 120-day PLO

Key recommendations relating to the 120-day PLO as delivered in 2021/22 are listed below, some overlapping with those made following the ASM evaluation. Although these are described as short term recommendations, they do not preclude adoption of aspects of the

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[4] The University of Strathclyde has a 10 day observational placement for undergraduate students in year 2. This was suspended at the pandemic start but has recently been re-instated.

contingency practice learning approach in the future. They should also be regarded as a form of future-proofing, bearing in mind the need for strategies capable of responding to further pandemics or other disasters that might impact on practice learning.

- Planning for the ASM and 120-day PLO should involve a range of key partners from the start. They should include users of services and their organisations as well as HEIs, local authorities, third sector organisations, LNW (or similar networking bodies) and both employed PEs and IPEs.

- Outcomes of student ASM learning and ongoing learning needs should be communicated timeously by HEIs to PEs as part of pre-placement planning.

- Expectations of placement providers, including responsibilities for organising contrast experiences, should be clearly articulated and agreed across PLO settings.

- Contrast PLO settings should be identified and agreed before placement start, and clear objectives identified for learning opportunities that are of sufficient length to gain experience of direct practice, and not solely observation or shadowing.

- Planning for all PLOs should start as early as possible and include identification of where and how students will gain statutory social work experience from the outset, with clarity about objectives, timescales, support, accountability and access to IT and other systems.

- The potential for using existing and planned student hubs to facilitate opportunities for varied contrast through partnership arrangements between third and statutory sectors should be explored, and, if possible, maximised. These are likely to be best placed in the statutory sector due to the more extensive infrastructure of local authorities, but could potentially be situated in larger third or private sector organisations.

- HEIs' 120-day PLO planning should take account of the need for one or more study breaks, and be active in identifying the potential for, and responding to, instances of student financial hardship.

- Outcomes of the second delivery of the ASM and 120-day PLO for GCU and UWS students should be analysed and evaluated, including reasons for any student non-completion and pass rates.

Longer term: improving practice learning quality and capacity

- Effective ways should be found to share ASM learning approaches, supported by additional resources to repurpose this national resource in a form that makes explicit its underlying pedagogy.

- The value and capacity-building potential of involving IPEs and group supervision approaches to support student learning in the academy should be further explored.

- Good practice in incorporating practice learning at early stages in social work qualifications should be shared, and promising approaches evaluated.

- Practice educator role, remuneration and career progression should be reviewed with a view to maximising PEs' potential to support student and practitioner learning within the workplace and the academy.

- A review of current sufficiency of data about practice learning should be conducted, identifying and addressing key gaps in our knowledge, for example in relation to PE numbers and overall practice learning capacity in all sectors.

- Current discussions aimed at developing a National Infrastructure for practice learning in Scotland should aim to enhance the inclusion of users of services and carers in decision-making, design and delivery of practice learning.

- The steady development of the student hub model should be supported through sharing of knowledge and evaluation of its impact on promoting student learning and increasing practice learning capacity.

- Approaches supporting prospective and first year degree students to gain social care practice experience should be explored, drawing on existing initiatives (eg Dumfries and Galloway's use of 'summer placements')

- The benefits and potential implications of introducing longer periods of practice learning in the final year of social work qualifications should be evaluated. In particular, the impact of different lengths of PLO on students' personal and working lives, and financial situation should be assessed, drawing on evidence from social work programmes that already include longer placements.

- Just as the outcomes of the ASM in respect of the social work degree were unclear until students completed their 120-day placements, progress and outcomes for this student cohort during their first year of qualified practice as NQSWs should be evaluated.

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Glossary of terms

Advanced Skills Module (ASM): Undergraduate and Masters student practice skills module, developed by Glasgow Caledonian University, and the Universities of Strathclyde and the West of Scotland in response to the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic to practice learning opportunities in the west of Scotland.

Contrast(ing) (experience/requirement): A required element of the practice learning opportunity involving learning opportunities that provide experiences of social work practice that differ from the student's substantive or 'main' placement. A contrast experience might, for example, involve work with a different group of users of services, or in a different setting from the 'main' PLO.

General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR): European Union directive, enforced in May 2018, that has replaced previous data protection legislation, harmonising data privacy laws across Europe.

Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU): University provider of social work education in the west of Scotland.

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs): Organisations providing higher, post-secondary, tertiary, and/or third-level education.

Learning Network West (LNW): A learning partnership funded by 12 local authorities and five higher education institutes to support the practice learning and development of social and health care professionals across the west of Scotland.

Independent Practice Educator (IPE): A suitably qualified self-employed practice educator, responsible for supporting the learning and undertaking assessment of students on placement.

Main placement: The student's substantive practice learning opportunity setting during the 120-day PLO.

Placement and PLO (practice learning opportunity) are used interchangeably to describe practice learning within a social work service setting.

Postgraduate (PG): In this report, students undertaking a Masters qualification in social work.

Practice learning hub refers to a practice learning setting where a group of students and their practice educators share a single placement work base.

Practice learning (PL) provider refers to any LA (local authority), NHS or 3rd sector agency providing opportunities for practice learning.

Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC): Governmental organisation based in Scotland that registers, regulates and promotes the learning of the social services workforce in Scotland.

Social Work Education Partnership (SWEP): a national strategic partnership group established in 2019 by the Scottish Government and key stakeholders to ensure the continued improvement in the quality of social work education in Scotland.

Social Work Services Strategic Forum: A partnership forum of key stakeholders from across the social services sector in Scotland, chaired by the Scottish Government https://www.gov.scot/groups/social-work-services-strategic-forum/.

Standards in Social Work Education (SiSWE): Learning requirements that each programme of qualifying social work education in Scotland must meet.

'Traditional' practice learning arrangements refer to the pre-pandemic configuration of PLOs for most qualification routes in the three universities, with two placements of usually 60-100 days, sometimes referred to as Direct Practice one (DP1) and two (DP2).

Undergraduate (UG): In this report, students undertaking a BA qualification in social work.

University of Strathclyde: University provider of social work education in the west of Scotland.

University of the West of Scotland (UWS): University provider of social work education in the west of Scotland.

'Workplace' or 'direct' social work practice are used to refer to practice during the 120-day PLO to distinguish this from their ASM learning, bearing in mind that most placements incorporated remote working practices.

Appendix 1: Survey topics

Students' surveys

- University, social work programme, PLO location and specialism, experience of health and social care, contrast setting (surveys 1 and 2)

- What has enabled/ been a barrier to supporting your practice learning on so far? (1 and 2)

- Have you had sufficient opportunity to develop skills in statutory social work? (2)

- What is the configuration and value of contrast arrangements for your PLO? Do you have recommendations for improving these arrangements? (2)

- What has been the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on your practice learning? (2)

- How have your practice skills and application of social work values progressed during the PLO? Are there unmet practice learning needs? (1 and 2)

- Are the learning opportunities you have been offered been sufficient to enable you to (begin to) meet the SiSWE? What additional learning opportunities would support your further learning? (1 and 2)

- How helpful have the ASM and other prior learning experiences been to your learning during your PLO? (1 and 2)

- Can you suggest any improvements to the ASM + 120-day PLO combination? What would be your priority improvement? (1)

- Can you suggest any improvements to your PLO experience? What would be your priority improvement? (1 and 2)

- What are your overall views about the suitability of the 40 days online ASM and 120 day PLO as preparation for qualified social work practice? (2)

Practice educators' and link workers' surveys

- Current employment, location, experience and qualifications (surveys 1 and 2)

- PE and LW support arrangements and workload (1 and 2)

- Student(s') characteristics, university route, location and specialism (1 and 2) Knowledge about students' learning needs before the PLO? (2)

- Did the ASM provide students with sufficient learning opportunities to prepare them for the PLO? (1)

- What has enabled/ been a barrier to supporting students' practice learning during the PLO (1 and 2)

- What has enabled/ been a barrier to students' development of digital skills and confidence in working during a pandemic? (1)

- Have student(s) had sufficient opportunity to develop skills in statutory social work? (2)

- What is the configuration and value of contrast arrangements for student(s)' PLOs? Who made these arrangements?; any recommendations for their improvement? (2)

- What has been the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on student learning? (1 and 2)

- How have students' practice skills and application of social work values progressed during the PLO? Are there unmet practice learning needs? (1 and 2)

- Overall, have you been able to gather sufficient evidence of students' capabilities to meet the SiSWE, and the ethical principles on which these are based? (1 and 2, PEs)

- Should the ASM + 120-day PLO be considered as a direct replacement for practice learning – and in what circumstances (as a contingency/in the long term)?

- What has worked well? Less well? Can you suggest any improvements to the ASM + 120-day PLO combination? What would be your priority improvement? (1 and 2)

- What are your overall views about the suitability and sustainability of the ASM + 120-day PLO combination as preparation for qualified social work practice? (1 and 2)

Appendix 2: Case study interview questions

Interviews were semi-structured, with a similar framework of questions guiding each interview.

Practice educator, link worker, tutor and manager interview questions

- What worked well? Is there anything that worked less well? Why was this?
- What enabled student learning during the PLO; were there any barriers to learning that require(d) to be addressed?
- To what extent has the PLO enabled students to meet the SiSWE? What gaps, if any, remain?
- How well prepared do you think this student is now for social work practice? What kinds of support might the student require during their NQSW year?
- How well have you felt supported? What are your observations about resourcing the PLO, workload and communication with other stakeholders in comparison with your previous experiences of supporting student practice learning?
- Your views about potential improvements to, and sustainability of, this combination of ASM and 120-day PLO.

Students' interview questions

- Your experience of progressing through the PLO: what worked well? Is there anything that worked less well? Why was this?
- How has your practice developed since you started the PLO? Have there been any barriers to your learning, and (how) were these resolved?
- To what extent has the 120-day PLO has enabled you to meet the SiSWE? What gaps, if any, remain?
- How well prepared do you feel for qualified social work practice? What kinds of support might you require in your NQSW year?
- Your views about how this combination of ASM and 120-day PLO could be further improved or developed.

Stakeholder, HEI and employer interview questions

- What worked well? Is there anything that worked less well? Why was this?
- What has enabled student learning during the PLO? Have there been any barriers to learning that require(d) to be addressed?
- To what extent have the 120-day PLO and ASM enabled students to meet the SiSWE? What assessment issues have arisen? Impact on pass rates/deferrals/retention?
- What resourcing issues (financial, workload) have arisen as a result of the COVID-19 contingency arrangements?
- Your views about potential or agreed improvements to, and sustainability of, the ASM and 120-day PLO contingency arrangements.

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