‘Baptism of fire’: the first year in the life of a newly qualified social worker

Abstract

This paper describes research commissioned by Skills for Care South West to identify and track the learning and development needs of newly qualified social workers through their first year of employment. The perceptions of 22 newly qualified social workers are reported concerning the effectiveness of the social work degree in England, their induction and probationary periods and their progress towards post-qualifying social work education as part of their continuing professional development. The perspectives of line managers, people who use services and carers are also discussed. Findings from the research suggest that the social work degree has been well received by most newly qualified social workers and highlights the perceived importance of a statutory placement for social work degree students. Key social work practice skills that require further development are identified. There is also a rationale presented for greater investment in the induction and probationary periods of newly qualified social workers.

Key words: newly qualified social workers, learning and development, social work education, induction, probationary process, placements

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Introduction

The first cohort of social work students to study for the new Social Work degree in England graduated in the summer of 2006. In October 2007, the House of Lords debated the need for newly qualified social workers to have a protected year in which they consolidate learning and development as they embed into practice (Hansard, 2007). The new social work degree has been evaluated fairly positively since its inception (Sharpe, 2007; DH website), although the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) research posits the degree is inadequate in preparing social workers for post (Sellick, 2008) in concert with recent Government policy emphasis that one of the overriding purposes of universities is to prepare students for the world of work (Rickard, 2002; Leitch, 2006). The Government have announced a review into social work education as a result of the CWDC research suggesting a drive towards specialism rather than genericism. Questions as to the ideological and political rationale rather than evidence and educational reasons are raised.

In autumn 2006, we began research to identify and track the various learning and development needs of newly qualified social workers through their first year of employment, examining their perceptions of the effectiveness of the new social work degree, their induction and probationary periods, and tracked their progress towards post-qualifying (PQ) social work education. The study also captured the views of line managers, people who use services and carers on the learning and development needs of newly qualified social workers (Author's own, 2007a).

Knowledge for professional social work practice

The development of professional competence and capability of newly qualified social workers has become a wide subject for debate (refs) which needs to be situated within an understanding of the neoliberal policies of new Labour (Jones, 2001; Harris, 2008; Jordan and Jordan, 2006). In a changing world, where social organisation and regulation, human rights and justice operate in tense juxtaposition, social work itself is under scrutiny (Mohan, 2008). Social work in the UK reflects a paradox that has informed its development throughout its short history. In one respect, social work's aims have been to develop autonomy, self-direction and independence. Conversely, these aims are almost in contradistinction to social regulatory mechanisms enshrined in government through to social work as a state regulated and approved profession that prescribes and controls social behaviour, and values and moulds the individual's links with society (see Dale et al, 1986; Payne, 2005; Harris, 2008).

In practice, this simple binary distinction does not fully work and there is a much more complex relationship between the two, but it is interesting to see how concepts of regulation and control interface with those that are nurturing and empowering in the changes within social work and social care. Indeed, the move from social work in England to a wider understanding of social care is reflected in workforce

development documents such as *Options for Excellence* (DfES/DH, 2006), whilst changes in social work education, and the regulation and inspection of the profession as a whole adopt a more balanced approach encapsulated within the IFSW/IASSW definition of social work.

Radical reform of the public sector under the auspices of a 'modernising' agenda which characterises current social policy ideology and concerns striving for public service improvement through increased regulation, inspection and monitoring has had a significant impact on social work and social care (Blewitt, 2008; Jordan and Jordan, 2006; Author's own, 2007b).

Social workers now operate in contexts in which multiple factors impact on practice. There is an increasing emphasis on working together with other professionals focused on issues for change or intervention as opposed to particular profession roles (Barr, et al., 2008; Quinney, 2006). There is an axiological shift towards service-user led service provision (Beresford, 2003). There are regulatory conditions set out in the Care Standards Act 2000 to which social workers must subscribe alongside professional codes of practice (GSCC, 2002), and there are performance targets and frameworks to which employing agencies will require social workers to contribute and service inspections to promote improvements and growth (Author's own, 2008; Sinclair, 2008). These demands must be balanced and form part of the lived-experience of the contemporary social worker. Negotiating through and managing such complexities requires models that maintain the values of social work and promote practice consonant with the agreed definition of social work.

Despite the technical-rational emphasis of neoliberal education, curricula for vocational and professional courses usually adopt a post-technocratic form of education that is closer to complex issues found in work contexts (Bines and Watson, 1992). Such courses emphasise the acquisition of professional competencies developed through experience of, and reflection on, practice within a practicum – the bridge between the academic institution and the world of practice which may lead to tensions between the needs of the learner, the profession or regulatory body, and the Higher Education institution (Brennan and Little, 1996 cited Cheetham and Chivers, 2001).

The literature on professional knowledge tends to focus on the interacting themes of knowledge, skills and values and is punctuated by important concepts such as lifelong learning and critical reflection (Biggs, 2003; Barnett and Coates, 2005). Knowledge is broken down into propositional knowledge (i.e. the codified understandings such as theories, procedures, rules); practical knowledge linked to skills; and experiential or practice wisdom (Cheetham and Chivers, 2001; Eraut, 2004; Payne, 2005). This debate has recently been taken up in social work (Trevithick, 2005; 2007).

Social work literature emphasises 'practice theory', where practice knowledge and wisdom is integrated with factual and theoretical knowledge to develop 'expert knowledge' which is able to take full account of the complexity and uncertainty of

practice (e.g. Fook et al., 2000; Fook and Gardner, 2007). Incorporating new knowledge for practitioners is recursive and transforming, rather than a simple straightforward transfer of factual or skills-based information from one context to another (Daley, 2001). Nixon and Murr (2006) advocate these more inductive and interpretive habits to link theory, practice and values in order to develop one's own professional knowledge. In this respect, professional knowledge becomes more concerned with 'being' a professional rather than just 'having' the requisite factual knowledge, and is thus necessarily complex and extensive. Knight (2006, p. 31) calls it 'professional knowings', recognising its plurality as well as its 'fuzzier, provisional and changeable states'.
Placements and valued bridges between the academic and practice worlds are seen as important (Department of Health, 2002), being associated with the integration of theory in practice and the application and development of skills and values (Author's own, 2006a; 2007b; Marsh and Triseliotis, 1996). The importance of practice learning extends beyond initial qualification. Post-qualifying awards are undertaken whilst 'in practice', and the integration of 'enabling the learning of others' within the requirements for specialist awards within the new framework are meant to enable candidates to be able to facilitate the work-based learning and professional development of others. The Author (2006b) indicates that quality practice learning experiences may play an important role in attracting and retaining recruits, increasing the pool of potential employees within agencies that provide a supported approach to practice learning, especially where learning is seen as a reciprocal process engaged in by the team hosting the placement, as well as by the student.

However, it is important to recognise that practice-based learning directly meets the government's HE agenda which emphasises the job-specific relevance of education over other conceptions of learning. This requires constant critique. Whilst work-based learning can help develop practice wisdom and professional 'expertise', it may also lead to, if accepted uncritically, socialisation into agency-specific practices mirroring the neoliberal modernising agenda which may not always be rooted in social work values of perceived best practice.

There are elements of professional development and learning that cannot be covered within a formal, generic programme or, indeed, by national standards. The most obvious relates to a particular workplace setting or activity system and is bound up with the systems' rules, tools, norms, objectives, divisions of labour and communities of practice (Knight, 2006). This type of knowledge tends to be of a situated nature but is one where the newly qualified worker's ignorance will immediately become apparent and possibly cause anxiety and possible dismay on behalf of employers who perceive the role of qualifying education in neoliberal terms as preparation for work rather than development of knowledge and criticality and a capacity to negotiate the tensions of social work. Inculcation into communities of practice may mirror those approaches that have adopted the new Labour, modernised vision for social welfare; dangerous to practitioners if accepted uncritically.

The development of expertise is a gradual transition from a rigid adherence to taught rules and procedures through to a largely intuitive mode of operation in which learning from experience is the main force of transition (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1986). Fook et al. (2000) extend the model for social workers, allowing for the development of creativity, transferability, flexibility, as well the openness necessary to deal with ill-formed and uncertain or new situations. This approach is concerned with approaches and processes rather than fixed knowledge and outcomes. It places importance on an 'expert' practitioner being able to identify the multifaceted nature of situations whilst considering a range of alternative options. In this respect, such 'expert' developed professional practice cannot be defined in prescriptive terms.

Formal and informal learning

Formal and semi-formal on-the-job training, e.g. induction, supervision, in-house or local specialist courses, have been shown to meet immediate technical learning and development needs (Knight et al. 2006), and to complement rather than displace the informal and situated social learning associated with general professional formation (see also Cheetham and Chivers, 2001).

An induction is usually the first formal training that newly qualified social workers experience in the workplace. Despite the recent introduction of the Common Induction Standards for adult and children's social care (CWDC, 2006; Skills for Care, 2006), the extent to which an induction follows a formal structure varies between employers. Bradley's (2006) research into the induction and supervision of new staff in two children's services teams in the UK found that few participants recalled having an induction that followed clear guidance or procedures. The study concludes that a good induction should aim to meet an individual's personal and professional needs and that person-centred supervision should be a central component. Lord Laming (2003) specifically emphasises the necessity for staff in children's services teams to complete a thorough induction in line with local procedures and asserts that practice should be kept up to date via regular training opportunities. Induction should be seen as part of a structured continuum beyond the first year of employment, and suggests adapting national situations to local situations.

The National Social Work Qualifications Board (NSWQB, 2004) in the Republic of Ireland developed a practical framework for the induction of newly qualified social workers to provide a standard structure, flexible enough to incorporate regional policies and practice (NSWQB, 2004). The content covers pre-induction, induction and post-induction phases, sustaining the view that newly qualified social workers should be supported in their professional development beyond the initial induction period. This is also supported by Maher et al. (2003) who found that most managers believed that a structured induction increased the confidence and competence of newly qualified social workers and helped them to form networks.

Marsh and Triseliotis (1996) also found that in-service training was appreciated by social workers because it provided practical information on procedures and was

usually closely linked to the job they were doing. In this respect, acquiring practical skills, details and specialist knowledge was high on their agenda.

Informal learning is largely invisible because much of it is either taken for granted or not recognised as learning. Practitioners may therefore lack awareness of their own learning. Any resulting new knowing or understanding is either tacit or regarded as part of a person's general capability, rather than as something 'learnt'. However, informal learning is a key area for professional development (Becher, 1999: Eraut, 2004). In Knight et al.'s (2006) study, learning on the job is the main influence on the general professional formation of teachers, with non-formal and social learning practices dominating professional formation.

Much of the learning required to develop professional competence and capability takes place after the completion of formal education, and aligns with the concept of professional development as 'being' rather than just 'knowing'; it enables new staff to deal more effectively with the uncertainty and complexity of social work practice. Within the first year of practice, specific role training and informal learning appear to be of critical importance, as does the inherent learning culture of the workplace. In this respect, newly qualified practitioners who are already lifelong learners will be best able to maximise the learning potential in their work situations. However, a critical and questioning stance is also necessary to negotiate the political site in which social work is practised.

Study design

The study aimed to track the learning and development needs of newly qualified social workers through their first year in employment. Given time and funding restrictions, a longitudinal collection of data over nine months was chosen as the most effective method of monitoring any significant changes in the newly qualified social workers' perceptions of their learning and development needs during this period. Participants were asked to complete three questionnaires that used Likert scale questions for quantifiable responses and reflective questions for more in-depth and individual responses. The first questionnaire captured data when the social workers were relatively new to their posts and had not long completed their social work degree. The second and third questionnaires were administered six and nine months later respectively to see if perceptions changed once participants were more embedded in employment.

To gain a richer perspective, semi-structured audio-recorded telephone interviews with the newly qualified social workers were carried out to follow up answers from the first two questionnaires. The interviews explored the participants' learning in the workplace in greater depth and considered what helped, hindered or extended their needs. The initial findings from the questionnaires and telephone interviews were presented to three of the participants at a group meeting with members of the project's steering group. This opportunity for discussion was provided in order to increase understanding of the results.

The study also scoped the opinion of line managers, carers and people who use services. Line managers were asked to complete a questionnaire that examined their perceptions of the learning and development needs of their staff member. The questionnaires paralleled those completed by newly qualified workers. Line managers were asked about their staff member's social work qualifying programme, induction and probationary period and their learning and development needs. Opinion on the employer as a 'learning organisation' was also examined.

The experiences of carers and people who use services were sought to complement other stakeholders' perspectives (Department of Health, 2006) and to ensure participation and voice to those who may experience the services of newly qualified social workers (see Molyneux and Irvine, 2004). A semi-structured group interview was conducted with two carers and two people who use services who are all members of the University's Service User and Carer Partnership Group. The group was provided with a report on the project ten days prior to the group interview and were asked to consider what learning and development needs they believed newly qualified social workers have and how those needs could be met. The group were also asked their opinion on what makes a newly qualified social worker prepared for practice and what an induction package should look like. All participating carers and people who use services were paid fees and expenses for their involvement in the project.

Questionnaires and topic guides involved newly qualified social workers, managers and the project's Steering Group in their conception, design and piloting. The Steering Group had representation from two local service managers (one left during the course of the project owing to relocation), one carer, one person who uses services, five university staff members, and the Skills for Care project manager. The steering group met on five occasions between October 2006 and September 2007 to review the progress of the project.

The project was approved by the School's Research Committee, and endorsed by the research group of the then Association of Directors of Social Services. Following ethical approval, 13 out of 16 South West region local authorities were contacted to invite a sample of newly qualified social workers to participate in the project. Three South West authorities were not contacted owing to a similar project being carried out in these areas at the time. Positive replies were initially received from eight of the local authorities, one gave a negative response, and the remainder did not reply. The final sample was taken from seven local authorities and ethical permission was sought through their local research governance procedures prior to contacting their newly qualified social workers.

Thirty-five newly qualified social workers were identified and 22 of these, from seven local authorities, along with their line managers, agreed to take part. Contact was made with over 50 voluntary, independent and private sector organisations in order to recruit newly qualified social workers to the study, however, this was without success. All 22 newly qualified social workers completed the first and second

questionnaires, and 20 completed the third. Twenty-one newly qualified social workers were interviewed, and 15 of their line managers completed a questionnaire.

Findings

Sample

Participants were aged between 36 and 55 and slightly older in comparison with national data (GSCC, 2006). The ratio of women to men was predominantly female and almost identical to General Social Care Council data (GSCC, 2006). Participants were appointed to posts in either adult (n=10) or children's services (n=12), and gained their undergraduate social work degrees from a range of five South West England based universities.

The perceived effectiveness of the degree in preparing social workers for employment

Overall, the new social work degree was well received by newly qualified social workers and their line managers, with about three-quarters (16) agreeing or strongly agreeing that the degree provides workers with the right knowledge, understanding and skills for their current post and only two disagreeing (see Table 1). This was similar for line managers also. Interestingly, regarding pedagogical methods, lectures, tutorials, guided reading, self-directed study, informal peer discussion, supervision and assessment methods were favoured over workshops, seminars and e-learning.

INSERT TABLE 1

In all three questionnaires, newly qualified social workers were asked how well their degree programme had prepared them for 20 skills and processes, ranging from 'the roles and responsibilities of a social worker' to 'dealing with conflict' and 'report writing' (see Table 2). Over three-quarters of the newly qualified social workers agreed or strongly agreed that they had been well prepared in areas such as communication skills, social work methods, responding to cultural differences, social work law, critical perspectives, evidence and research-based practice, social work values, working in an organisation, inter-professional working, and the role and responsibilities of a social worker. However, about a quarter did not feel prepared in such instrumental areas as assessment, report writing, record keeping, time management, case management, dealing with conflict, and care management and contracting; and over half did not feel prepared in the use of court skills – a finding reinforced by nearly a third of their managers and emphasised in the following comments from newly qualified participants:

It would have been useful to cover assessment, report writing and record keeping in lessons. It would have been helpful to have templates or past reports.

We didn't look much at the day-to-day practicalities of being a social worker. I wasn't prepared for the amount of work we had to do, we didn't talk about caseloads. I wasn't aware of the very heavy bureaucracy.

INSERT TABLE 2

Managers, with the exception of court skills, were very positive about the degree programme, although one commented:

The worker has found it difficult to cope with the volume of paperwork and the frustration at not being able to use social work skills obtained through training due to care management style.

In general, line managers' responses to their questionnaire were more positive than those from newly qualified social workers, with line managers also being more optimistic about the extent to which their organisation has the features of a learning organisation. Some line managers made a distinction between the practices of the team and the wider organisation – the implication being that team practices are somehow more progressive than in the overall organisation.

The majority of newly qualified social workers and their line managers agreed or strongly agreed that the placements undertaken as part of the degree programme prepared them for their current post. During the interviews, newly qualified social workers also stressed how important they believe it is to undertake at least one placement within the statutory sector in order to understand the processes involved. As one social worker commented, '*…I would have liked a statutory placement. It was very difficult coming to long-term assessment work with no grounding from my placements*'. Another stated that '*a statutory placement should be mandatory. It is so different: the paperwork, the procedures, the guidelines, multi-agency settings, which you don't get in the voluntary sector*'. A line manager reported that, '*as the worker had not completed a statutory child care placement in years two and three, they had little practical knowledge*'. The group interview with carers and people who use services echoes the importance of a statutory placement. The importance of placements in the voluntary sector was also acknowledged.

The effectiveness of the induction/probationary period

Just under three-quarters (16) of the newly qualified social workers had a workplace-based induction. Those saying they had no induction had either been seconded from their authority to complete the degree or had completed a previous placement with their employer. Participants responded that their induction had given them a clear idea of their organisation's structure, values and objectives, plans and priorities, processes and procedures, and people and roles (see Table 3).

INSERT TABLE 3

Few had been given a structured induction, however, to help them move into their role in a planned and organised way. Most were given a few specific things to do and

then told to organise for themselves anything that they felt would be of use. One social worker highlighted the reality of the workplace: '*I was supposed to have a slow, gentle introduction, but basically there were a number of crises, so it was a baptism of fire*'. The lack of structure in induction may be because over half the line managers had not received support or training in managing the induction period and/or had limited resources. As one line manager commented: '*I strongly support our induction policy, but I don't feel that I can follow it as well as I would like to due to a lack of resources*'.

Over half (12 out of 22) of the newly qualified social workers stated that they found the probationary process a useful learning experience in the first questionnaire but, by the third questionnaire, this dropped to five (out of 20) (see Table 4). Indeed, findings from the interviews suggest that there is some confusion as to the length and purpose of the probationary period. One social worker comments: '*I'm not clear how long my probation was'*. Another says, '*I am supposed to have eight weeks, twenty weeks and six months assessments. I have not had any of these*'. The majority of line managers (12 out of 14) answered that the probationary process was a useful learning experience although half commented that the process could have been improved if more time had been made available.

INSERT TABLE 4

There was a wide range in the number of training days (including induction training) undertaken by newly qualified social workers (Table 5). In the first questionnaire, respondents had been on an average of four training days, although answers ranged from 0 to 12 days. By the time respondents filled out the second questionnaire they had received an average of nine training days, with answers ranging from 2 to 35 days; and for the final questionnaire, the average was 12 training days, with answers ranging from 3 to 36 days.

INSERT TABLE 5

People who use services and carers were surprised at the lack of a standard structured induction. They commented that both local and national policies are needed as they believe it to be important that newly qualified social workers are able to provide accurate, up-to-date local knowledge as well as the national knowledge which they bring from their degree programme (see also Laming, 2003). They highlighted the importance of the induction process in encouraging communication between the statutory sector and independent, voluntary and private sectors with the use of networking events. They also recognised the key role of supervision for newly qualified social workers, particularly in their first year of employment, and that it is important for time to be made to discuss professional development as well as caseload.

The majority of newly qualified social workers were keen to start the consolidation unit of the revised PQ social work education framework, though a few found it hard to get up-to-date information on the programme: '*We were lacking in information on post-*

qualifying education, we were left with a lot of myths'. By September 2007, three were registered for the consolidation unit but another three claimed not to know anything about PQ education – not surprisingly, this was not confirmed by their line managers!

Discussion

A criticism of social work education evaluation is the lack of rigorous, longitudinal studies (Carpenter, 2005). This study uses a longitudinal design allowing the learning and development needs of a newly qualified social worker to be tracked using three questionnaires completed towards the beginning, middle and end of the first year, thus enabling the data to be compared. At the end of the study we shared the initial findings with three of the newly qualified social workers who took part in the study, in order to help understand and refine the results. The mixed method design, utilising qualitative and quantitative approaches, allows for triangulation between the different methods to check the integrity of inferences drawn from the findings, and to guard against social desirability responses (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003).

There are limitations to the study, however. Owing to time and budget constraints, a sample of just 22 newly qualified social workers was recruited, with no-one from the independent, private or voluntary sectors. This small sample size has limitations for drawing hard conclusions because it is representative of only a small number of newly qualified social workers in the statutory sector of a specific region. It is therefore problematic to generalise the findings to the experiences of newly qualified social workers in other UK locations. The small sample size also increased the importance of retaining the participants throughout the study period.

Fifteen questionnaires were returned by line managers with common themes identified. One of the main reasons for not receiving more questionnaires might be that the line managers were too busy, with competing priorities. There is no direct evidence of this, but if this was the case then it would strengthen the argument that managers are restricted by severe time constraints when it comes to aiding personal development. This conclusion is similarly reflected in the nursing profession (Alderman, 1999).

The newly qualified social workers who volunteered to participate in the study were a self-selecting sample. They were probably already aware, or became aware very quickly due to the questions in the first questionnaire, of learning and development issues in their first year, and this would in itself influence any further study responses. Indeed, as a cohort they described themselves as motivated, self-directed, organised, critical and lifelong learners and so would be more likely to be proactive in their professional development, as can be seen by their choosing to take part in this study. In addition, the managers of the newly qualified social workers may have put a positive spin on their answers because, as line managers of the newly qualified social workers, they played a leading role in their learning and development.

The positive view of the degree in preparing social workers for practice presents a useful corrective to challenges to its efficacy (Sellick, 2008). However, it may also indicate increased acceptance of the vocational purpose of higher education; perhaps confirmed by the preference expressed for didactic pedagogical methods. Social work educators need to ensure that critical thinking, questioning and analytic skills are promoted to allow social workers to negotiate the sometimes uncomfortable tensions between Government diktat, employer responsibilities and the social justice needs of those who use services. There is also an academic responsibility to facilitate understanding of the impact of changing policy context for all involved, educators, social workers, agencies and those receiving social work.

Placements are an important and valued way to bridge the academic and practice world. Doel et al. (2007) in their discussion of the new social work degree, show that there is no typical pattern for the arrangements of practice learning placements. However, they do suggest that in the final year of full-time programmes, many practice learning sites are in the statutory sector. Whilst many of the newly qualified social workers in the present study thought that a statutory placement was very important, not all had this learning opportunity. Perhaps the call for such experiences indicates the predominance of 'state social work' (Harris, 2008), but it is not surprising given that respondents came from local authority settings, although this, too, may present further confirmation of the ascendancy of state social work. If statutory placements are to be encouraged, incentives and coordination of activity is needed if the potential damage done by the removal of the mandatory reporting mechanism, the performance indicator for practice learning, is to be offset.

Our findings suggest that it is the thinking skills and ability to deal with issues of diversity, and to a lesser extent complexity, that social workers gained from the degree. Whether or not degree programmes should be focusing on the development of practical skills such as court skills is, perhaps, a matter for discussion. A quarter of newly qualified social workers identify their current development needs to include assessment, report writing, record keeping, time management, case management, dealing with conflict and care management and contracting. These findings raise questions about the nature and content of social work education at qualifying level. In feeling less equipped to manage some of the instrumental aspects of the role, social workers are identifying locally situated issues that, perhaps cannot or should not constitute part of degree-level education; rather it should be a necessary component of learning in the first year of qualified practice. Stakeholders need to work together to bridge undergraduate education and induction provision or first year consolidation to ensure that sufficient input is provided on the key areas mentioned, and dialogue and partnership between practice agency and academe needs to be emphasised.

With regard to induction standards, the 2005 Adult, Children and Young People Local Authority Social Care Workforce Survey (Local Authority Workforce Intelligence Group, 2005) indicates that just over 80% of authorities report using the Skills for Care common induction standards, with just under 80% also intending to use the new standards for adult

social care being introduced in 2006/07. However, few line managers in our study responded that they had used the standards, and some were not even aware of them. Investment in management training is part of the Options for Excellence vision for the year 2020 which should in turn improve the learning and development experience for newly qualified social workers (DfES and Department of Health, 2006).

In Marsh and Triseliotis' (1996) study of newly qualified workers, the majority of workers did not experience any organised form of induction; what was offered was patchy, improvised and minimal. Bradley (2006), too, found little evidence of induction being shaped by guidance, procedures or an induction pack. Maher et al. (2003), in their evaluation of an induction programme, note the importance of induction in supporting and motivating staff and in improving retention rates, as does NSWQB (2004) in their study on induction in the Republic of Ireland.

The results from this study show a wide variation in induction and probation processes, and a large range in training days undertaken, which suggest a need to invest in the management of both induction and probationary transitions. Perhaps the PQ consolidation unit, as an integral part of the specialist award, could be used by stakeholders to support and enhance personal development planning practice and offer some type of assessment of newly qualified social workers for their first year in practice, as part of the induction package. This would ensure that practitioners engage with PQ continuing professional development in a structured way. Indeed, experience in providing PQ social work education indicates that some employers have already begun linking induction processes and other training to the consolidation unit.

Conclusion

As with many similar studies, this research throws up more areas which are in need of further study. At present, there is little baseline data published on the profile of a social worker and the pattern of their career (Moriarty and Murray, 2007). More information is needed on where social workers start their career and to where they progress. It is important to build up pictures of social workers' careers, and the differing learning and development needs as workers progress, so that policy and management decisions are well informed and not 'short-termist'. The evaluation of the new degree by the Evaluation of Social Work Degree Qualification in England Team (2008) provides an evidence-base for the review of the degree. It is important that research continues to be carried out in a wide range of settings by a range of interested parties to gain full benefit from it.

In our study, a follow-up study of the cohort of newly qualified social workers in two to three years' time could provide valuable longitudinal data, and could consider again their perceptions of their education, and post-qualifying learning and development needs, their promotional prospects, and PQ education. However, to summarise the current findings, most newly qualified social workers and their line managers were positive about the new social work degree, whilst believing that a statutory placement is important for all students.

Several key skills such as assessment, report writing, record keeping and court skills were identified as needing further development. Induction and probation periods of newly qualified workers need much greater investment, perhaps in the form of specific training for line managers and in the design of a structured induction package that incorporates the PQ consolidation and preparation for specialist practice unit.

On a final note, the need for Newly Qualified Social Worker status, as proposed in 'Options for Excellence' (DfES and Department of Health, 2006) is clear. Investment in training and support for newly qualified social workers is a positive step towards retaining staff and improving quality of care, and further research into the transition between qualifying and the workplace is necessary if we are to have a competent workforce in the future. The social work educator's role continues to be one in which questions, critical thinking and analytic skills are developed so that tomorrow's social workers can ask uncomfortable questions, challenge and develop services that are appropriate and best for those receiving them.

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