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Title	National Practice Teaching in Social Work Initiative: Shaping the development of social work student placements and practice teaching in Ireland
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Publication date	2023
Original Citation	Whiting, S, Dorney, L, Rose, J, O'Connor, E, Slavin, P, Kelly, E, Melaugh, B & Feeney, B 2023, 'National Practice Teaching in Social Work Initiative : Shaping the development of social work student placements and practice teaching in Ireland', Journal of Practice Teaching and Learning, vol. 20, no. 2, pp. 67-79. https://doi.org/10.1921/jpts.v20i2.2064
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	10.1921/jpts.v20i2.2064
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Download date	2026-11-15 03:26:55
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/18733

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Title: National Practice Teaching in Social Work Initiative: Shaping the development of social work student placements and practice teaching in Ireland

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Abstract: This article reflects upon the work of the National Practice Teaching in Social Work Initiative (NPTSWI), established following collaboration between the six universities in Ireland that deliver social work education. Working in partnership with social work employers and practitioners, NPTSWI aims to enhance the profile of Practice Teaching within the Social Work profession in Ireland, provide ongoing supports for practice teaches and potentially increase the supply of placements. As a multi-stakeholder collaboration and in the context of the Irish Government's commitment to increase the number of Social Work graduates, NPTSWI represents a significant innovation in the development of social work practice education in Ireland. This paper reflects on the achievements of the initiative and barriers to building a culture and context for practice teaching and learning within social work services are considered and strategies to address these challenges explored.

Keywords: practice education; practice teaching; practice learning initiatives; work-based learning; social work education; inter-university collaboration

Introduction

In recent years there has been increasing concern about the availability of sufficient numbers of social workers to meet workforce demands in Ireland (Hanafin, 2019; HSCP, 2020). Meetings of key stakeholders, including representatives from service providers and higher

education institutions (HEI's), identified the expansion of the number of social work courses, together with other retention and recruitment strategies, as being integral to addressing the shortfall of qualified social workers to take up vacant positions. However, aligned with an increase in the number of places on social work programmes is the availability of quality supervised social work placements across all sectors. This is essential to meet the CORU (Ireland's multi-profession health and social care regulator) requirement that, to be eligible to register with the Social Work Registration Board (SWRB), all students are assessed as competent across 1000 hours of practice placements, supervised by a professionally qualified social worker. In 2020 funding was secured from the Irish Government by the six HEI's involved in social work education in Ireland, led by University College Cork (UCC), to recruit a Project Coordinator to drive a National Practice Teaching in Social Work Initiative (NPTSWI). The aim was to support and resource social workers to take on the role of practice teaching with a view to increasing the number of available placements and in turn supporting an increase in the number of social work graduates. The Initiative is the collaboration of all six social work education providers in Ireland, led by university-based Practice Education Coordinators and supported by the Irish Association of Social Workers. This multi-stakeholder collaboration represents a significant innovation in the development of social work practice education in Ireland. This article will present the background and context to the establishment of the NPTSWI, outline the work undertaken within the initial phase of the initiative and reflect on progress to date. The benefits of key innovations will be discussed, and the article will conclude with a discussion about barriers to building a culture and context for practice teaching and learning within human service organisations. Strategies to address these challenges into the future will be considered.

Role of practice placements in social work education

The global definition of social work acknowledges social work as being a profession grounded in both practice and academia (IFSW, 2014). Within social work education the significant role of practice placements in progressing a student's learning is well recognised (Cleak et al, 2022; Roulston et al, 2021; Wilson et al, 2019). Recently it has been acknowledged within Ireland and internationally, that there is a crisis in relation to the procurement of good quality placements for social work students (Burns et al. 2019; Halton et al., 2019; Ayala et al., 2018). This crisis was further exacerbated in 2020 with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and the ensuing public health restrictions (Quigley et al, 2021; McLaughlin et al, 2020, Short et al. 2022). Notwithstanding, the context of a crisis in

placement procurement, it is important that the quality of placements is upheld. The hallmarks of good quality placements have been identified by Cleak et al. (2022) whose qualitative research took place with social work students across the island of Ireland. The authors concluded that there are four key pillars in practice learning: enabling relationships, 'real world' practice opportunities, structured teaching and learning and academic-practice alignment. Thus, reinforcing the view that good learning while on a practice placement is tied to both the quality of the practice opportunities available within agencies, the availability of a social worker to provide supervision and a positive learning context. Similarly, Short et al. (2022) in their study highlighted the enablers and markers of quality practice placements in Ireland. They assert that these markers include; agency support, for example training and the provision of equipment for students, regular communication between all stakeholders, pre-placement preparation, student supervision and a strengths-based approach to the challenges and barriers to placement provision. Investigating placement experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic was the focus for Quigley et al. (2022) who undertook a mixed method, interdisciplinary study in Ireland. This research was with students across a range of allied health and social work professions and identified a triad of supports that enabled learning on placement. The importance of the student's relationship with their practice supervisor and the availability of placement sites willing to support students in this crisis context were identified as key to supporting the students to successfully complete their placement, alongside support from academic staff within their university and students' own personal capacity to adapt to a changing workplace environment. Thus, across the literature the availability of good quality placement sites and the central role of good practice teaching are identified as crucial to ensuring the success of practice placements.

Social Work Practice Education in Ireland

In Ireland social work education is provided at both undergraduate and postgraduate level across six HEIs. The HEIs are Trinity College Dublin (TCD), University College Cork (UCC), University of Galway (UG), University College Dublin (UCD), Maynooth University (MU) and Atlantic Technological University, Sligo (ATU). Across these six universities there are eight social work programmes; two at undergraduate level in TCD and UCC and six at master level in TCD, UCC, UCD, UG, MU and ATU. CORU require that all students undertake 1000 supervised practice placement hours to be eligible to graduate and register with the Social Work Registration Board (CORU, 2019a). Typically, placement hours are completed across two 14-week placement cycles either from September to December or from

January to April. In the Sept 2019 and Spring 2020 placement cycles, 413 student social work placements were required across the 6 HEIs. This figure rose by 7.3% to 443 placements in Sept 2020 to Spring 2021 and again by 11% to 493 student placements in the following placement cycle of Sept 2021 to Spring 2022. The number of students on placement each cycle, is directly correlated to the number of students on social work programmes across the 6 HEIs. The expanding numbers, outlined above, were due to the addition of one new social work education programme in Maynooth University in 2019 and an increase in the numbers of students accepted on to the Masters in Social Work programmes in University of Galway and University College Dublin. While these were welcome developments, they also placed pressure on practitioners and agencies to provide additional placement opportunities.

The structure of social work placements is similar across each of the social work programmes. Students usually undertake one placement in a statutory setting (a social work service where the clients are mandated to attend and the work is governed by legislation, for example, Probation Service or Child Protection and Welfare Services) and one in a non-statutory setting (such as an interprofessional context such as a hospital or disability service or a community-based organisation, where engagement with social work services is optional). Securing of placements is devolved to the practice learning coordinators in each of the 6 HEIs. Negotiations for placements take place at the level of the individual social work practitioner, team and HEI and are duplicated for each placement cycle. This generates multiple and simultaneous placement requests to all agencies from each of the 6 HEIs and is a very inefficient use of resources. Each student on placement is allocated a CORU registered social worker or Practice Teacher who takes responsibility for coordinating the students' learning and assessing and evaluating their practice in relation to the CORU/SWRB Domains of Proficiency for Social Workers (CORU, 2019b). Guidance and support are provided by the relevant HEI through the organisation of training for practice teachers and the appointment of a tutor who liaises between the placement site and the HEI, offering advice and guidance to student and practice teacher, as well as monitoring the placement. It is a mandatory requirement that ninety minutes of supervision is provided to the student each week. This is aimed at promoting and developing reflective practice and the integration of social work knowledge and skills in practice contexts. Students must demonstrate their learning, and Practice Teachers must evidence that the students have reached the proficiencies required, as specified by CORU (CORU, 2019a).

Context and rationale for establishment of NSWPTI

In recent years, there has been increasing concern about the availability of sufficient numbers of social workers to meet workforce demands in Ireland (Burns, 2019). Meetings of key stakeholders including service providers and representatives from HEIs, identified expansion of numbers on social work courses, together with other recruitment and retention strategies, as integral to addressing the shortfall of qualified social workers to take up vacant positions. In 2018, the 'Social Work Education Group'-SWEG (a forum between HEIs and Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), now the Department Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY)), was established to explore the expansion of numbers on social work programmes in response to workforce planning needs. Through this, and other stakeholder dialogue, it became clear that one of the challenges to expanding numbers on qualifying social work courses, is a concern about availability of a sufficient number of quality social work student placements across all sectors (Hanafin, 2019).

In 2018, one of the current authors joined UCC as a Practice Education Coordinator. Coming from a social work practice background where use of ICT to support practice was increasing, she identified the potential to use online platforms to provide learning resources for practice teachers who were geographically distant from the HEI. It was envisioned that an online resource would support Practice Teacher learning, promote connection to the HEI and in turn support practitioners to facilitate student placements. Following a review of social work practice placements (Hanafin, 2019) the DCYA made funding available for projects aimed at supporting developments within practice education. Building on the earlier idea of providing online supports, a series of meetings of HEI Practice Education Coordinators were held to collaborate on a proposal for funding to create this resource. The proposal from the six HEIs, to create an online resource to support social work practice learning and placement development, was supported by Irish Association of Social Workers (IASW). This application for funding was successful and from this the National Practice Teaching in Social Work Initiative (NPTSWI) was established.

Aims of NPTSWI in Year One

NPTSWI was initially funded for one year and the funding allowed for the employment of a part time Project Coordinator to drive the development of the initiative. The primary aim was to support the six HEIs to work together to increase support and availability of resources for social workers in practice, enabling them to take on the role of practice teaching. It was envisioned that this coordinated approach would lead to an increase in the number of practice placements available across all sectors. The aims of the initiative in the first year were:

1. Provide support to social workers across sectors to increase their capacity to engage in practice teaching. The ultimate aim being incremental expansion of placement availability, facilitating a parallel growth in student numbers and bringing more graduates into the workforce.
2. Develop Memorandum of Understanding or Service Level Agreements with placement providers
3. Establish creative and diverse placement experiences that are aligned with CORU requirements. Ideas included the development of practice units and student units within practice sites, development of long-arm supervision, peripatetic placements and community-based placements
4. Develop an online learning resource for practice teachers
5. Establish a Social Work Practice Teaching and Education Network in Ireland

These aims were ambitious and not all could be addressed within the first year. However, the areas where progress has been made have led to the development of shared resources that support practice teaching and reflect the collaborative approach of the initiative.

Achievements of NPTSWI to date

Since the receipt of funding the Practice Education Coordinators of the constituent HEIs formed the advisory board of NPTSWI and have met with the project coordinator on a monthly basis, to support, review and progress the aims of the initiative. The group also liaises with a wider group of social work educators under the auspices of the Social Work Education and Practice Teaching group (SWEPT)which was initially set up to respond to the impact of the pandemic on social work education, including placements, in Ireland.

In order to inform prioritisation of areas for development the NPTSWI conducted a survey of practice teachers to find out more about their experiences. One hundred and four practitioners responded to the survey, across Ireland with ninety-four per cent saying that they would recommend practice teaching to their colleagues – which suggests a largely positive experience of practice teaching from the respondents. In this anonymous survey a key question asked was *'Please explain what does/does not make you feel supported in your role as a practice teacher'*. Responses outlined supports such as:

'The contact from the college is very supportive and reassurance is a phonecall/ email away. The CPD and peer support sessions are inclusive and very informative.'

'The structure in our organisation supports students, culture of learning in our organisation and coordination of placements'

And barriers identified included:

'Lack of obligation on social workers, organisations to take students'

'Should difficulties arise with a student I feel there can be gaps and huge pressure put on the practice teacher to pass someone who may not be a right fit for the profession.'

'College was very supportive, however, the placement meetings were difficult to organise and this may have had negative implications if there were difficulties in the placement.'

While some of the barriers were not within the control of the HEIs, the advisory board to the NPTSWI agreed that together they could respond by providing support in the form of resources and training for Practice Teachers.
The most significant achievement in year one was the establishment of a collaborative approach to supporting practice teaching between the placement coordinators in the six universities. The employment of the project coordinator has ensured that this collaboration has been focused, structured and consistent. Outputs included the facilitation of online events for students on placement from all HEIs as well as the provision of online CPD seminars for practice teachers. Following a review of the achievements of the NPTSWI in year one, funding was secured for a second year and thus the work has continued into year 2. The specific events organised by NPTSWI in year one and into year two were:

- The provision of online CPD events, readily available to current and prospective practice teachers and practitioners. These events were run in collaboration with the Irish Association of Social Workers, the professional body advocating for social work in Ireland. Each event was 1-2 hours in duration, delivered online and free of charge. Topics include strategies for working with a student who is struggling on placement, providing feedback and, assessment and evaluation of the student's practice. The times and dates of these events were carefully selected to ensure that they provided timely support to the practice teachers who had students on placement.

- A website of teaching and learning resources was developed for practice teachers. This website was designed to provide practice teachers with easy access to up-to-date research and teaching and learning resources to support them in supervising social work students. The website also includes pre-recorded presentations delivered by social work educators and testimonials from experienced practice teachers.
- A Conference in March 2023 titled 'Educating together for practice teaching in social work in the 21st century'. This conference had over seventy attendees from across the country representing both social work practice teachers and social work educators.

An important feature of this initiative is the collaboration of the HEIs providing social work education while retaining the individuality of each institution. The key focus now is engaging with a broad range of service providers to ensure security and increase the supply of quality placements. The future objective of the NPTSWI are aimed at achieving this.

Future objectives for the NPTSWI

The following objectives have been prioritised for the next phase of work:

- Continued development of the website with additional teaching and learning resources for practice teachers.
- Engage in research. Potential areas for research include investigating barriers to practice teaching for social work practitioners and reviewing the potential of approaches utilised as part of the response to the Covid 19 pandemic, to ensuring placement delivery as part of an ongoing response to placement provision. Such approaches include long-arm practice teaching and peripatetic placements,
- Investigate how other collaborative models between social work educators and placement providers, such as, The Northern Ireland Degree in Social Work Partnership (NIDSWP) could inform the collaboration between social work educators and placement providers in Republic of Ireland.

Reflections on the work of NPTSWI to date

The establishment of NPTSWI was driven by the urgent need to increase the availability of social work placements and in turn ensure an increase in the number of qualified social workers available to fill vacant positions in the workforce. That the need to increase the supply of placements was shared across all six Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) involved in the provision of social work education meant that working together on this initiative was both an efficient and effective way of approaching the task. This was further supported by the

fact that social work employers were keenly interested in increasing the number of social worker qualifications each year. The anticipated benefits of a formalised partnership between employers, HEIs and other key stakeholders would enable every student social worker to have access to placement security in line with CORU requirements from day one, and for the duration of their studies. It would also contribute to future proofing of the profession and ultimately to uphold quality standards for the public

Workforce planning requirements highlight the need for additional social workers to meet the health and social care needs of the population and a significant increase in graduating social workers placements are essential to meet this requirement. However, the current system for sourcing and allocating placements needs to be revised to ensure a more secure and strategic approach to enhance already well-established partnerships with agencies and with practice teachers. The commitment of placement providers to improving availability of quality placements has been seen in the development of social work posts aimed at changing the culture and promoting practice teaching within organisations. Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, is one such agency that provide an example of this positive development, proactively promoting practice teaching among their social work staff. Tusla have developed a Student Placement Coordinators role within each geographic area. This person acts as a liaison between the social work staff and the university-based placement coordinators, facilitating placement requests and providing support including ensuring the provision of ICT equipment, the payment of expenses to students and, in addition, Tusla also provide a structured induction programme for students. The Health Service Executive has also begun addressing this issue initially by engaging in a range of stakeholder consultations and making plans for service wide innovations in 2023.

Conclusion

The establishment of NPTSWI has allowed for strong collaboration between all social work educators including those on new programmes supporting partnership in the development of a support network for practice teaching. With this initiative the HEIs have been proactive and progressive in meeting the external challenges related to placement availability both during the COVID-19 pandemic and afterwards. The collaboration between the six social work education providers was commended by the SWRB and CORU. Specifically, the Practice Learning Coordinators and their teams received commendation for their work. While there has been an increase in the number of students undertaking social work training since the development of NPTSWI this cannot be attributed to the work of this group. Instead, it is as a

result of decisions about increasing numbers on some programmes and the establishment of new social work education programmes that pre-date the establishment of NPTSWI. However, NPTSWI has clearly demonstrated the value and capacity of collaborative practice. The coming together of the six HEI's was of benefit to the HEIs, the placement coordinators and to practice teachers who valued seeing the shared approach to social work practice teaching.

In many ways, NPTSWI reflects the thinking of the 'learning organisation' (Senge, 1990) with the premise that to remain current organisations need to learn how to develop innovative ways to respond to problems. Learning organisation approaches highlight that by employing team learning, developing shared visions and involving all stakeholders' organisations can develop knowledge and ways (structures and processes) to solve problems and manage change. The NPTSWI's capacity to foster collaborative practice, team learning, and knowledge development to support social work practice is clearly aligned to learning organisation perspectives. Indeed, the process adopted by NPTSWI offers a model for support practice teaching going forward. However, ultimately despite the common goal to support practice teaching, there are wider issues around changes in agency resourcing, culture and attitude toward the provision of essential student placements before the full value of the NPTSWI will be seen in terms of its original goal of increasing the numbers of social work graduates.

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