



Department of
**Health, Social Services
and Public Safety**

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AN ROINN

**Sláinte, Seirbhísí Sóisialta
agus Sábháilteachta Poiblí**

MÁNNYSTRIE O

**Poustie, Resydènter Heisin
an Fowk Siccar**

DEGREE IN SOCIAL WORK

**A REGIONAL STRATEGY FOR
PRACTICE LEARNING PROVISION IN NORTHERN IRELAND**

2010-2015

April 2010

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FOREWORD

Social workers provide a professional service often to some of the most vulnerable and excluded people in society. They work in partnership with others to promote and enhance, and where necessary, to protect the social wellbeing and safety of individuals, families and communities. Their work involves the discharge of statutory responsibilities and making decisions that can affect peoples' human rights and civil liberties. It is essential therefore that social workers have the appropriate knowledge, skills, experience and support to carry out these duties and responsibilities safely and effectively.

The Degree in Social Work is the professional qualification for social work. This training prepares students to work in a variety of settings, including health and social care, probation, education welfare, juvenile justice and the voluntary and private sectors.

Practice learning is a key component of professional training. It gives social work students the opportunity to apply their learning in real-life situations under the supervision of experienced practitioners. Learning 'on the job' enables students to acquire the required standard of proficiency in practice and prepares them to undertake the full range of professional activities expected of a newly qualified social worker.

Social work employers are essential in providing good quality practice learning opportunities and ensuring that students are appropriately supervised in undertaking direct work. Employers' contribution to student practice learning is an investment in the profession and ensures an ongoing supply of qualified practitioners. This Strategy promotes practice learning as a professional responsibility of every social work employer and every registered social worker, integral to service development and delivery and to workforce planning.

I commend the Strategy to you as the basis of building on the strong track record of quality practice learning in Northern Ireland to ensure that social work graduates are competent, confident and fit to practise as they enter the workforce.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sean Holland', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Sean Holland
Chief Social Services Officer (acting)

April 2010

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Practice learning is key to supporting and enabling students to develop their social work skills and practice as part of their professional training.
- 1.2 Since the introduction of the Degree in 2004, there have been changes and developments impacting on organisational arrangements for Health and Social Care in Northern Ireland and on the social work profession, such as a devolved administration, new organisational structures, modernisation and reform of children's services and outcomes from inspections and reviews. These changes do and will continue to impact on the context for practice learning
- 1.3 The changing context for social work has implications both for the provision of practice learning and the type of Practice Learning Opportunities (PLOs) required. This Strategy has been developed to secure the provision of relevant, high quality PLOs in line with new organisation arrangements, service developments and expectations of social workers.
- 1.4 The Strategy aims to ensure:
 - a consistent supply of relevant and high quality PLOs to meet regional targets and workforce and service needs; and
 - a stable supply of registered social workers who meet the NISCC requirements to support and facilitate the learning and assessment of social work students
- 1.5 The Strategy has been developed following consultations with key partners including:
 - Chair and members of the Practice Learning and Allocation Committee (PLAC) of the Northern Ireland Degree in Social Work Partnership (NIDSWP);
 - Chair and members of the Allocations Sub-committee of the PLAC;
 - Professional Officer of the NIDSWP;
 - Assistant Directors of Social Services (Training and Staff Development);
 - Practice Learning Centre Managers;
 - Director of Education (Social Work), Queen's University Belfast;
 - Head of the School of Sociology and Applied Social Studies, University of Ulster;

- Professional Advisors of the Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC);
- Designated Practice Learning Providers (DPLPs) in the voluntary sector and the Voluntary Organisations' Communication and Liaison Service (VOCALS).
- Director of Education and Training, Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC); and
- Assistant Chief Social Services Officer, Office of Social Services (OSS).

1.6 NISCC is responsible for the approval, annual monitoring, review and inspection of the Degree. Reviews of courses are conducted at least every five years after approval and enable an in-depth consideration of strengths, areas for development, and whether requirements continue to be met. The first review of the Degree since its introduction in 2004 was completed in the autumn of 2008. The findings from this review and the recommendations in respect of practice learning have informed this Strategy. In addition, statistics from NISCC's first annual monitoring of the DPLPs have also informed the development of the Strategy.

2. SCOPE, PURPOSE AND PRINCIPLES

2.1 The scope of the Strategy includes the supply of PLOs across the statutory and voluntary sectors to meet agreed student numbers studying the Degree in Social Work in Northern Ireland.

2.2 Its purpose is to:

- secure a sustainable supply of relevant, high quality PLOs that enable social work students, through real-life practice, to develop the practice skills and competence required to graduate as qualified and accountable practitioners, eligible to register on the social work part of the NISCC register and fit to practise;
- ensure that each social work student has access to a social worker who can facilitate her/his learning and be responsible for assessment in line with NISCC standards; and
- build a culture within social work employing organisations that promotes practice learning as a professional responsibility integral to service development, delivery and workforce planning;

2.3 The principles of practice learning which guide all practice learning experience are as follows.¹

Practice learning must:

- promote student learning while safeguarding the rights of service users;
- support the development of confident and competent practitioners who can take responsibility for their own practice and their continuing professional development; and
- promote good social work practice.

¹ Practice Learning Requirements for the Degree in Social Work, NISCC June 2003

3. OVERVIEW OF CURRENT ARRANGEMENTS

Practice learning provision as part of the Degree in Social Work

- 3.1 It is the responsibility of course providers to ensure sufficient academic and practice learning resources to meet student learning and assessment. Course providers who deliver the Degree are required to do so as a partnership between academic institutions and social work employers.² Good collaborative arrangements between all members of the course provider partnership is key to ensuring quality PLOs to enable students to attain the required learning outcomes specified by NISCC in the Framework Specification and the Practice Learning Requirements for the Degree in Social Work. Course provider partnership arrangements have an essential role in planning and securing the practice learning component of the curriculum.
- 3.2 It is the responsibility of the course providers, both academic and employer partners to ensure adequate, quality practice experience are available to each student. Practice learning is an integral and core element of the Degree comprising 50% of the curriculum. Currently, students undertake two PLOs during the course of their training. A first PLO (85 days at level 2) takes place in year 2 and the second PLO (100 days at level 3) in the final year.³ The NISCC Standards for Practice Learning (Revised June 2009) ensure that practice learning is subject to organisational quality processes.
- 3.3 The Northern Ireland Degree in Social Work Partnership (NIDSWP) is a regional partnership, charged with the responsibility for regional planning and advising on such aspects of course provision which have been agreed by the NISCC. Its membership is comprised of agency and academic representatives from each of the course providers. The NIDSWP has played an important role in encouraging the development of a sufficient supply of PLOs to meet the increased demand since the introduction of the Degree. The NIDSWP is responsible for the planning, co-ordination and allocation of PLOs regionally.
- 3.4 PLOs are provided by the main social work employers in the statutory and independent sectors, including Health and Social Care Trusts (Trusts), Probation Board for Northern Ireland (PBNI), Youth Justice, Education Welfare, a range of voluntary and community organisations and three Practice Learning Centres within the voluntary sector. The most recently available statistics⁴ indicate that collectively, the Trusts are the largest providers of practice learning.

² Rules for the Approval of the Degree in Social Work (May 2003)

³ Practice Learning Requirements for the Degree in Social Work.(NISCC 2003)

⁴ Designated Practice Learning Providers: Statistical Returns Report 2007/2008 (NISCC, January 2009)

- 3.5 Since the commencement of the Degree in 2004, the supply of PLOs has met the demand in terms of student numbers in Northern Ireland.
- 3.6 All social work students are offered both academic and agency support during practice learning to facilitate the integration of theory and practice.
- 3.7 Practice learning is an essential part of preparing students to be eligible to register and work as qualified and accountable social workers. It is labour intensive and involves a significant number of staff in different capacities and at different levels within organisations. The DHSSPS makes funding available annually to support practice learning in the workplace. This is in addition to dedicated resources already in the baselines of the Trusts.
- 3.8 The Degree is a generic qualification. The first employment destination of the majority of new social work graduates within Trusts is in children's services. An estimated 40% of PLO provision is in children's services (statutory and voluntary) in any academic year which means not all students will have direct experience of statutory childcare and may graduate without such experience. Employers and students consider this a disadvantage for newly qualified social workers when entering employment.⁵
- 3.9 The recent report of the Periodic Review of the Degree in Social Work (March 2009) (the Review) concluded that while there has been an adequate supply of PLOs to meet student demand, the quality of those opportunities has varied. The Review recommended that the Northern Ireland Social Care Council should address a range of issues concerning the supply, quality and sequencing of practice learning. The Review highlighted challenges in relation to securing the required number of high quality PLOs particularly in children's services for all students, an area where the majority of graduates have traditionally taken up initial employment. Recent enquiries have also raised concerns about the initial training of social workers particularly for child protection.

Practice learning as part of workforce planning and development

- 3.10 Social work students are a valuable resource to the host organisation working as part of a team and undertaking practice appropriate to their level and stage of training. Students are also able to share their learning and knowledge with team colleagues thereby helping keep social workers up-to-date with the research and evidence base for practice.
- 3.11 Recent research⁶ has shown that there is a positive link between a student's practice learning experience and their subsequent recruitment into specific areas of social work. The Review found that both employers and recently qualified

⁵ Report of the Periodic Review of the Degree in Social Work (March 2009) and DHSSPS Review of the Assessed Year in Employment (AYE) Overview of Outcomes of Monitoring 2007/08 (February 2010)

⁶ Community Care (July 2009)

graduates felt that experience of working in children's services was crucially important prior to working in this sector. As such, practice learning plays a vital part in service planning and in recruitment and retention strategies for social work employers.

- 3.12 Practice learning allows employers to take a lead role in facilitating the integration of learning in practice, the development of social work skills and the assessment of student competence in practice and thus contribute to shaping the next generation of the social work profession by ensuring and confirming that students can practice to the required standards.
- 3.13 Involvement in practice learning also assists employers in supporting their existing social work workforce to engage in continuous professional development and supports social workers' ongoing registration with the NISCC.

4. STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

4.1 STRATEGIC PRIORITY 1 – A sufficient supply of relevant, high quality Practice Learning Opportunities to meet agreed targets.

Rationale

A sustainable supply of relevant, high quality PLOs needs to be secured to enable social work students, through real-life practice, to develop the practice skills and competence required to graduate as qualified and accountable practitioners, eligible to register on the social work part of the NISCC register and fit to practise. There must be sufficient capacity and flexibility in supply to meet student demand on approved courses in Northern Ireland. The NISCC's approval of DPLPs will require agreement on the numbers of PLOs to be provided. The Health and Social Care Board (HSC Board) will commission against these targets in the statutory sector.

Supply of quality Practice Learning Opportunities

Strategic targets

All partners⁷ in course provision and NISCC will have an agreed regional plan to ensure supply meets demand for relevant, high quality PLOs across the statutory and voluntary sectors.

The NISCC will work with the NIDSWP to establish a regional database for the collation and analysis of accurate and timely data from course providers which will ensure information about quantitative and qualitative aspects of practice learning provision.

Course providers will ensure every social work student will have at least one PLO in children's services in a Trust or national organisation undertaking statutory social work where social workers are employed.⁸

There will be improved geographic distribution of practice learning across Northern Ireland to meet the needs of students studying at different locations.

Course providers will ensure every social work student at level 3 will have a PLO with a social work practitioner based on site.

Course providers will ensure every social work student at Level 2 will have experience of working alongside other social work practitioners during their PLO.

⁷ This includes statutory and voluntary

⁸ This can also include practice in voluntary agencies

Actions

Course providers and NIDSWP will put in place a planning model which ensures that there is sufficient capacity and flexibility in the supply of PLOs to match student demand and meet the strategic targets set by the Practice Learning Strategy year on year.

All employer partners in course provision will offer PLOs to meet agreed targets and the quality indicators set by NISCC.

All employer partners in course provision will ensure that the supply of PLOs meets demand and takes account of geographical distribution to meet the needs of students studying in different locations.

The NISCC will work with the NIDSWP to carry out an audit of all PLOs annually to inform a development plan which will ensure all social work students have experience of statutory work in children's services by the end of their course.

The NISCC will work with the NIDSWP to have in place a regional database of practice learning sites, profiles (including quality indicators) and profiles of social workers qualified to support and assess student learning. This will be updated annually.

4.2 STRATEGIC PRIORITY 2 – Practice learning is an integral and core part of social work service provision in the statutory sector

Rationale

Practice learning plays a crucial part in workforce planning and in recruitment and retention strategies for social work employers. Employers play a key role in integrating the application of learning into practice, the development of social work skills and the assessment of student competence. Employers have a duty to help shape the next generation of the social work profession by ensuring and confirming that students can practice to the required standards.

Practice learning is a core part of social work service provision

Strategic targets

Statutory sector employers' service planning and commissioning processes will incorporate plans/targets for practice learning provision based on quotas agreed by NISCC and the HSC Board in accordance with Departmental targets.

Statutory sector employer partners in course provision will have in place a range of models of practice learning to facilitate access by social work students to the full range of frontline and specialist social work practice.

Actions

The HSC Board will include practice learning targets in the commissioning arrangements with Trusts.

Employer partners in course provision will ensure that quality PLOs are routinely available across the full range of social work services within the statutory sector and match the targets set.

The NISCC will work with statutory sector employers to ensure provision of practice learning is a core part of social work service provision.

The NISCC, course providers and statutory sector employers will consider a range of models of student support and assessment to include consideration of how to optimise the expertise and experience of practising social workers at all levels and access to practice learning in Children's Services.

4.3 STRATEGIC PRIORITY 3 – The voluntary sector is supported to provide relevant, high quality Practice Learning Opportunities.

Rationale

While the majority of PLOs are provided by statutory sector organisations⁹, the voluntary sector has traditionally played a significant role in offering PLOs to social work students, providing approximately sixteen per cent of provision annually.¹⁰ In the voluntary sector, practice learning affords students opportunities to practice in a range of settings which complement those in the statutory sector. These are highly valued as learning opportunities for social work students. Many voluntary organisations are small which presents particular challenges in developing and providing PLOs that can fully meet the NISCC requirements for DPLPs. It is important that the voluntary sector is supported to contribute to student practice learning and that the supply of such PLOs continues.

⁹ The statutory sector in this context includes HSC Trusts, Probation Board for Northern Ireland, Youth Justice Agency and Education Welfare Service

¹⁰ Designated Practice Learning Providers: Statistical Returns Report 2007/2008 (NISCC, January 2009)

Provision of quality Practice Learning Opportunities in the Voluntary Sector

Strategic Targets

The Voluntary Sector will be supported to offer relevant, high quality PLOs.

There will be appropriate distribution of PLO provision across Northern Ireland to meet the needs of students studying at different locations.

The NISCC will explore the potential of the voluntary sector to provide additional experience of practice skills development in children's services.

Action

The NIDSWP will carry out an audit of voluntary sector PLOs annually to inform a development plan for practice learning.

The NISCC, in collaboration with the NIDSWP, will put in place a Practice Learning Development Plan to support the voluntary sector contribution to the Practice Learning Strategy.

The NISCC and NIDSWP will continue to work with the Voluntary Sector, including the Practice Learning Centres, to ensure a more even distribution of relevant PLOs.

The NISCC and NIDSWP will work with voluntary sector employers to explore the potential for practice skills development in Children's Services.

4.4 STRATEGIC PRIORITY 4 – To ensure an appropriate supply of registered social workers to support student learning and assessment to the NISCC standards.

Rationale

There must be arrangements in place to ensure that each social work student has access to professional supervision and a range of support and guidance including that of a registered social worker. There must be a sufficient number of social workers to provide effective workplace learning, development, supervision and assessment for all students in line with NISCC standards. Employer partners must promote and support student learning support and assessment as a professional responsibility.

Available supply of registered social workers to support student learning in the workplace

Strategic Targets

The NISCC PQ Partnership will have in place an education and training pathway to enable the contribution of social workers to student practice learning support including assessment of student competence.

NISCC, in partnership with the NIDSWP will review the roles and responsibilities of staff involved in supporting and/or assessing student learning in the workplace and their associated learning and development needs.

Employers will promote and facilitate all registered social workers including Senior Practitioners and Principal Practitioners to support student learning.

Actions

The NISCC and the NIDSWP will carry out an audit of social workers trained and qualified to support and assess practice learning in DPLPs. This will include the numbers of social workers, their designation,¹¹ their current involvement in practice learning and their evaluation against the NISCC Practice Learning Standards

Employers will have training and development strategies in place for registered social workers to be trained annually across the statutory, voluntary and independent sectors to meet Practice Learning demand.

The NISCC will review the role and associated support of academic tutors in practice learning to ensure that the transfer and application of academic learning is maximised through the PLOs provided.

The NISCC will promote a range of models of Practice Learning support, education and assessment in the workplace.

¹¹ Designation means social worker, team leader, senior practitioner, principle practitioner, trainer

5. SECURING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE STRATEGY

- 5.1 The DHSSPS will task the NISCC to set up an implementation group to plan, oversee and co-ordinate the implementation of this Strategy. The implementation plan will set timescales for the achievement of the strategic targets. The NISCC will report to the DHSSPS annually on progress against the agreed implementation plan and associated timescales.

Planning and Commissioning Arrangements for Practice Learning

- 5.2 The NIDSWP, along with course providers, will assess and plan the projected volume of practice learning required annually. They will also negotiate and recommend targets for statutory and voluntary sector providers.
- 5.3 The HSCB will commission the agreed volume of PLOs from the HSC Trusts. The NISCC will agree PLO targets with the voluntary sector, PBNI, Youth Justice and Education Welfare and manage and administer the associated funding.

Resources

- 5.4 Current budgetary pressures and the closer scrutiny of the expenditure of public monies and outcomes require that the resources available for practice learning provision are used effectively and efficiently and represent value for money. There is considerable financial, human and physical investment in planning, commissioning, providing and quality assuring practice learning for social work students annually. Some of the resources are invested in staffing baselines or organisational baseline budgets. There is significant additional funding provided through the DHSSPS on an annual basis to support this activity in both the statutory and voluntary sectors. Arrangements for the planning, commissioning, co-ordination, provision and quality assurance of practice learning must maximise the use of financial, human and physical resources.

Governance of Practice Learning

- 5.5 Good social care governance should ensure that primarily service users are safe and that students are inducted and have a supportive practice learning experience. To achieve this outcome, there must be systems in place to deal with instances of poor practice or misconduct, including an effective communication system. DPLPs and course providers should have effective governance systems in place to ensure safe practice for service users and students. The NISCC will regulate practice learning through the Quality Assurance Framework.

6. DELIVERING THE STRATEGY

6.1 The Key Stakeholders Responsible For Securing the Practice Learning Strategy

Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety

The social services workforce delivers public statutory services, whether employed in the HSC or in the voluntary or private sectors. The DHSSPS has responsibility through its policy function for workforce planning, qualification requirements and specifically for the numbers of new social workers to be trained each year to meet projected regional workforce and service needs. The DHSSPS also agrees training priorities and targets for the statutory HSC Sector.

Health & Social Care Board

The Commissioning of PLOs in the statutory HSC sector ensures that the supply of PLOs in Trusts is in line with Departmental targets, service and workforce needs and agreed student numbers.

Course Providers

There are currently 2 approved course providers. These are education and agency partnerships delivering the Degree in Social Work. Course providers, work collaboratively and are responsible for ensuring the resources required to deliver on all aspects of course provision including practice learning.

Designated Practice Learning Providers

Practice learning providers include the Trusts, social services organisations in the voluntary sector, criminal justice and education welfare sectors. These organisations are also partners in course provision and are responsible for providing PLOs to meet agreed student numbers.

Northern Ireland Social Care Council

As the regulator of social work education and training, the NISCC is responsible for setting standards for social work education, and for the approval, annual monitoring, review and inspection of the Degree in Social Work. The NISCC also administers funding to support practice learning in the voluntary, criminal justice and education welfare sectors.

Northern Ireland Degree in Social Work Partnership

NIDSWP is a regional partnership with responsibility for planning and advising on such aspects of course provision which have been agreed by the NISCC. The NIDSWP, in collaboration with course providers, plans, co-ordinates and allocates PLOs regionally for social work students across Northern Ireland.

7. SUMMARY OF STRATEGIC TARGETS

7.1 Supply of quality Practice Learning Opportunities

Strategic targets

All partners¹² in course provision and NISCC will have an agreed regional plan to ensure supply meets demand for relevant, high quality PLOs across the statutory and voluntary sectors.

The NISCC will work with the NIDSWP to establish a regional database for the collation and analysis of accurate and timely data from course providers which will ensure information about quantitative and qualitative aspects of practice learning provision.

Course providers will ensure every social work student will have at least one PLO in children's services in a Trust or national organisation undertaking statutory social work where social workers are employed.¹³

There will be improved geographic distribution of practice learning across Northern Ireland to meet the needs of students studying at different locations.

Course providers will ensure every social work student will, at level 3, have a PLO with a social work practitioner based on site.

Course providers will ensure every social work student at Level 2 will have experience of working with a social work practitioner on a regular basis throughout their PLO.

7.2 Practice learning is a core part of social work service provision

Strategic targets

Statutory sector employers' service planning and commissioning processes will incorporate plans/targets for practice learning provision based on quotas agreed by NISCC and the HSC Board in accordance with Departmental targets.

Statutory sector employer partners in course provision will have in place a range of models of practice learning to facilitate access by social work students to the full range of frontline and specialist social work practice.

¹² This includes statutory and voluntary

¹³ This can also include practice in voluntary agencies

7.3 Provision of quality Practice Learning Opportunities in the Voluntary Sector

Strategic Targets

The Voluntary Sector will be supported to offer relevant, quality PLOs.

There will be appropriate distribution of PLO provision across Northern Ireland to meet the needs of students studying at different locations.

The NISCC will explore the potential of the voluntary sector to provide additional experience of practice skills development in children's services.

7.4 Available supply of registered social workers who support student learning

Strategic Targets

The NISCC PQ Partnership will have in place an education and training pathway to enable the engagement of social workers at different levels in practice learning support and assessment.

NISCC, in partnership with the NIDSWP will review the roles and responsibilities of staff involved in supporting and/or assessing student learning in the workplace and their associated learning and development needs.

All employers will promote and facilitate all registered social workers including Senior Practitioners and Principal Practitioners to support student learning.