

Gemma Mallett, MA Social Work

Where are you working now and what are you doing?



I'm working as an **assistant social worker** for an independent therapeutic fostering agency. My role is to supervise foster carers and oversee placements of children who have been referred from local authorities, due to placement breakdown, often as a last resort before residential care. I formally supervise carers monthly, supplemented with regular telephone contact and conduct 6 weekly therapeutic care plan reviews, as well as annually looked after children reviews. The agency is evidence based and uses attachment and trauma theory to inform practice.

How has your career developed since graduating?

I applied for a supervising social worker post whilst on my final placement and was offered the position. I was given the position with the understanding that I would initially work as an assistant social worker until I had completed my degree (at UOB students placement finishes in April and then they have until September to complete dissertations) and gained full qualification (September/October 2011, graduating in December 2011).

I started working as assistant social worker, 3rd May, two weeks after completing my final placement learning opportunity. I will be working on my dissertation until the end of September - I am used to working full time hours and completing work!

What is the best thing about what you are doing now?

I hadn't ever considered working with 'looked after children', however when I saw the post advertised I realised I was equipped with all the necessary skills for the job. Particularly, the foster agency I work for is based upon attachment and trauma theories, both of which I had a good understanding of due to completing a BSc and MSc in psychology and further covering the topics in MA social work. I had work experience with young people diagnosed with autism, who were in residential care and could draw parallels from this. I feel that I really 'fit' the agency. It's nice to be able to use all the knowledge I have gained of theory, placement and work experience and life experience.

Why did you originally apply to do your course at Birmingham?

I had previous qualifications in psychology from two different universities, Swansea (BSc psychology) and Worcester (MSc psychology) and after completing my MSc I decided to change my career plan from clinical psychologist to social worker because I wanted to work with people in a more holistic way. Birmingham was my only university of choice so I was thrilled to be successful at interview. A large part of this was Birmingham's reputation but also I live in Herefordshire and Worcester and Birmingham are the closest universities to me as I planned to commute. I was also born in Birmingham so there was a sense of going back to my roots.

What did you think were the best points of the course and the University?

The service user and carer involvement was brilliant and I learned a lot from their experiences of good and bad social work practice - it sticks in your head more when someone recalls a personal account than when given a hypothetical anecdote.

The teaching team were knowledgeable and friendly.

I made a set of friends for life. The course was testing at times and I supported and was supported in return from a great bunch of people who I met on the course. We set up a page on Facebook to discuss queries with assignments and set dates for meeting to go out and celebrate successes.

What did you think of the learning experience within the University?

I think the most valuable part of the course were the **placement learning opportunities** (PLO). I had my heart set on a career in adult mental health, and I would have happily accepted two adult placements. However, my first PLO was at a Surestart Children's Centre and the second PLO was in a community mental health team (CMHT) for older adults. Such contrasting placements gave me opportunities to work in different settings, with different professionals and ultimately strengthened my application for my current post within a fostering team. Particularly, skills I learned from the children's centre were the legislative framework, supporting young parents, a greater understanding of normal child development, insight into child protection proceeding; whilst in the CMHT gave me insight into working with carers, the mental health act and mental capacity act, experience of working within a multidisciplinary team and a greater understanding of dementia and person-centred care.

Both of my placements were matched by the universities placement co-ordinator and I received excellent support from my practice tutor, practice assessors and work based supervisors.

The university offered a variety of lectures and this evidence base was used to help me understand situations I was faced with on placement.

Did you find your course at Birmingham challenging or easy?

Having done two degrees prior to the MA social work I was confident in my academic ability. However, I found the course extremely challenging!! I heard people say that it was supposed to be that way to mimic the realities of social work practice in the 'real world'. The most challenging aspects were juggling placement with portfolio work, assignments for the MA, and having a life! I saw my boyfriend on weekends only and spent most evenings after placement doing work for the course. Also, for me I commuted into lectures from Herefordshire, which was extremely draining in the winter months.

Additionally, because I had come from a background of psychology, it was alien to me when I was asked to 'reflect' in essays- suddenly it was ok to use the word 'I' and used life experience. It took me a while to adjust to this but I found my grades increased after my first placement when I began to adapt my writing style from being purely evidence based to being, evidence based, with service user/carer experiences and my own experiences and values.

Reflecting back, I have learned so much in such a short space of time, not just in terms of social work practice and theory but in terms of understanding myself and who I am, which I think is fundamental to being a good social worker. I think it is important to stretch ourselves and it feels like such an accomplishment. In a sense I think the course has made me more resilient.

What advice would you give to current students?

The first year of the MA social work is set modules. However, in the final year there is a choice of children and families, adults or mental health. Additionally, there were some 'elective module'. I chose mental health and domestic abuse. However, all students have access to all lecture slides, and I made use of these when applying for my first social work post. I chose mental health because my interest was always there and domestic abuse because I saw how common it was amongst the families I support in my first PLO, and wanted to learn more. Students should choose topics that they are interested in because there are always groups discussions and if you have an interest and strong opinion in a topic it makes for an interesting session!

Accommodation: I took advantage of the rural hosting scheme - the opportunity to have placements in Herefordshire, where I live. Therefore, I made the decision to stay living at home in Herefordshire with my parents and then commute to lectures. However, on reflection it was very tiring and restricted me with regards to handing in assignments (although these could be posted I sent them off early to ensure they got there on the deadline) and meeting up with my tutor because I had to make a special trip. Therefore I wouldn't recommend commuting unless you live close by. However, on the plus side now I have my first social work post in my home town, through the networking I did on placements I know some of the staff at work already which has helped with settling in!

Other advise: embrace any PLO you are given. I didn't like the sound of being placed in a children centre - I had indicated on my application form that I would like to be placed in a child and adolescent mental health team because of my interest in psychology. However, I think the children's centre provided many valuable experiences although not classed as a 'statutory' placement, I learned a lot about statutory procedures and worked with children who were on the child protection register. In my current job role now I am having some input in supporting a mother and baby foster care placement whilst the social worker conducts the parenting assessment - I believe the skills I learned at the children's centre will help with this.

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