Practice–Based Research on the Post Graduate Diploma in Social Work

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Research-Based: *Learning real-world research skills and undertaking research to tackle practical challenges on a social work placement.*

The Post Graduate Diploma in Social Work (Step Up) is a Department for Education (DfE) initiative, established to increase the number of child and family social workers in English local authorities. Students receive full funding through the provision of a DfE bursary. This fourteen-month social work qualifying programme is an employer led, partnership-based programme; local authorities form a regional partnership, commissioning a university partner to deliver the academic element of the course.

The professional and regulatory requirements underpinning social work curricula include an emphasis on ensuring students develop a critical understanding and application of research evidence in social work and are able to engage in student-led research where appropriate. The programme therefore places an early emphasis on the development of knowledge and skills in using evidence to inform and evaluate practice (Beddoe, 2011)[23].

Students spend half of their programme completing two practice placements, 'hosted' by one of the local authorities and completing both placements in the same agency; most secure employment in the same authority. Social work 'practice wisdom' develops from the student's first experience of practice and through their time on the programme (Samson, 2015)[24]. Through a cycle of critical reflection and 'encounters with the social world' (Cheung, 2016, p26)[25], students develop awareness of gaps in local knowledge, and identify potential areas for their own research. This resonates with the UoB emphasis on students engaging with these 'real-world issues'.

On qualifying and registering with the regulatory body, students are required to complete an Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE). This first qualifying year enables students to develop a critical appreciation of current issues and priorities for their host authority. In designing the Step Up programme, I based the timetable around this ASYE period; on completion of the Postgraduate Diploma, students are able to return to complete a stand-alone Dissertation module, and the award of MA in social work. Following their initial introduction to research on the qualifying programme, the dissertation module provides the opportunity for students to develop a more in-depth critical understanding of the practical application of research within social work practice contexts. Students develop a Research Proposal outlining their research plans and receive regular support and feedback through dissertation supervision.

The cycle of research informed practice, and practice informed research facilitates the translation of learning back into the social work agency context. It also ensures an investment in researchers of the future and enhances the knowledge base of the profession (Cheung, 2016), 'leaving something of value behind for the future' (Greeff and Rennie 2016 p178)[26].

23   Beddoe, L., (2011) Investing in the Future: Social Workers Talk about Research. *British Journal of Social Work* (2011) 41, 557–575 doi:10.1093/bjsw/bcq138
24   Samson, P.L., (2015) Practice wisdom: the art and science of social work, *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 29:2, 119-131, DOI: 10.1080/02650533.2014.922058
25   Cheung, J.C.-S., (2016) Researching Practice Wisdom in Social Work. *Journal of Social Intervention: Theory and Practice*, 25(3), pp.24–38. DOI: http://doi.org/10.18352/jsi.472
26   Greeff, M., and Rennie, S., (2016) Phronesis: Beyond the Research Ethics Committee—A Crucial Decision-Making Skill for Health Researchers During Community Research. *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics: An International Journal, 11*(2), 170-179. doi:10.2307/90012