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The complexities of failing students
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The times they are a changin'

*'Come gather 'round
people
Wherever you roam
And admit that the
waters
Around you have
grown'*



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The Social Work Reform Board 2009/2010

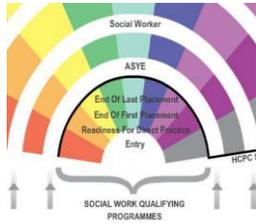
- All candidates for BA and MA courses should complete a written test, regardless of their previous qualifications;
- All those selected for the degree should have performed well in individual interviews and group exercises;
- Thresholds for entry should meet certain standards, such as a minimum of 240 UCAS points (280 at Lincoln) or equivalents for applicants for undergraduate courses;
- Candidates should have achieved GCSE grade C or above in English and Maths or certified equivalents, be competent in written and spoken English and be able to demonstrate basic IT skills;
- Employers, service users, and carers should be involved in the selection process.

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The PCF as the framework for student assessment

Establishes capability at a number of key professional stages;

- Entry
- Readiness for direct practice
- End of first placement
- End of last placement



And there's more...

- Changes to the bursary – payable to second & third year students, & Masters;
- Changes to the daily placement fee to a flat rate of £20 per day
- Changes to the requirements for final placements
- Changes to PE requirements. Eg final placement the PE must have achieved at least stage 2 of the Practice Educator Framework and be a registered social worker.



How to fix the problem of work placements for social work students
The Guardian, January 14th 2014

'The number of statutory placements provided by employers increased by just 0.9% in the three year period up to 2009/10, while the number of students studying social work courses increased by 7.2%.

And with the number of social work posts falling in two thirds of local authorities in 2013, there are an increasing number of NQSWs competing for a decreasing number of jobs, contributing to unemployment rates which are higher than those of comparable professions.'



Reports into social work education by Martin Narey, and Croisdale-Appleby

Sir Martin Narey; *'Making the education of social workers consistently effective.'*

Professor David Croisdale-Appleby, *'Re-visioning social work education'*

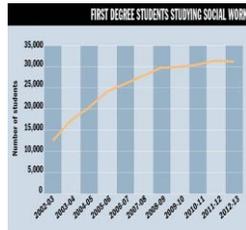
And other gems such as...



The continuing popularity of social work

According to the 'Times Higher Education', May 2014

'.. there are 10-12 students chasing every university place to study social work.'



In the midst of this confusion

- How do we ensure that standards within social work education are robust, rigorous, fair and transparent?
- How do we protect the interests of employers, the general public, and vulnerable service users/carers?
- How do we ensure that students who are not suitable do not progress?
- How do we support Practice Educators to fail those students who do not produce sufficient evidence to meet the PCF/NOS?





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What does research tell us about 'failing to fail'?

The voice of the service user

'..ultimately it is service users and carers who bear the ramifications of 'failing to fail' students.'

Malihi-Shoja et al (2013:8)

'..there is scant reference to the morality of allowing failures to exercise their profession on members of the public, yet from a user point of view, this is the most, and indeed the only consideration.'

Malihi-Shoja et al (2013:14)



A service user critique of the literature

- Academics and PE's have a moral and professional responsibility to fail which is often not recognised.
- Reasons are often offered as to why it is difficult to fail a student
- University process issues are often cited as being unhelpful.
- Little consideration is given to the diminution of the profession.
- A student who is not suitable for social work may be good at another job

Malihi-Shoja et al (2013:14)



Reasons why students should fail

- Poor communication
 - A lack of basic ability
 - Poor understanding of the social work role
 - An absence of professional boundaries
 - A lack of motivation & an unwillingness to learn
- And of course an inability to produce sufficient evidence of a good enough quality to meet the NOS/PCF!
- (Burgess et al1998)



Reasons why students should fail

- A lack of self awareness
- 'The authors noticed feelings of vulnerability when students were faced with situations that reminded them of their own past, personal pain or when an encounter with a client called for a re-examination of personal beliefs and views.'*
- Dove & Skinner (2010:61)



Reasons why students should fail

- Immaturity, inexperience, lack of commitment
- '... this students' attainment has been varied-she quickly became bored and disinterested with the areas she found more challenging. She has lost motivation to succeed – hampered by personal problems.'*
- Dove & Skinner (2010:69)
- 'Students should be encouraged, and if necessary required to defer if their personal difficulties and or health are their current priority'*
- Dove & Skinner (2010:73)



Reasons why PE's fail to fail

- A view that weak students can pass PP1 as PP2 'will sort them out'.
- 'The rule of optimism' where small signs of progress are over emphasised and poor practice denied.
- 'Fixed view' – once a PE has made their decision, contrary evidence is ignored.
- The emotional cost of failing a student
- The PE 'gets too close' to the student

(Milner & O'Byrne 2002; Duffy, 2004; Shapton, 2006; Schaub & Dalrymple 2013).



Reasons why PE's fail to fail

- PE's are 'too nice' and don't like to fail students!
- Fear of complaint/litigation.
- Lack of support from the university
- PE isolation and anxiety
- Concern that failing a student will reflect badly on them as a PE/practitioner

(Milner & O'Byrne 2002; Duffy, 2004; Shapton, 2006; Schaub & Dalrymple 2013).



A 'Good' fail

Reconstructing failure;

- 'Failure' should be seen as part of a learning and transformative process
- The student accepts responsibility for their part in failure and learns from their mistakes
- Just because you are not fit to practice as this point in time, does not necessarily mean that you never will be.
- Repeat placements should build on what has been achieved in the first placement and should have clear goals.

Eno & Kerr (2013:146)





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Evidencing concerns – key messages

Key message 1

'Concerns regarding 'failing' or 'marginal' students do not usually occur in isolation but often present themselves within the context of a range of other factors'.

- PE/OSS need to
- Be open in discussing & addressing these difficulties;
 - Remove any blocks or barriers that may exist to impede or hold back the student;
 - Be careful not to 'pathologise' the student.

Field et al (2014:126)



Key message 2

It is better to 'nip things in the bud' rather than letting an unsatisfactory situation drift.

- PE/OSS need to
- Be proactive;
 - Liaise with colleagues who may have similar misgivings;
 - Use supervision to accurately record issues so that there is a clear 'evidence trail.'
 - Use the concerns process in a timely and proactive way



Key message 3

Ensure that the evidence you provide in your report supports your decision, and that you make an unambiguous recommendation.

- PE/OSS need to
- Rigorously collate evidence across the placement – it is never too early or too late.
 - Make full use of a range of appropriate sources
 - Present the evidence in a clear and logical way
 - Ensure that a recommendation is supported by appropriate evidence.



Key message 4

Ensure that you provide a balanced, objective and fair assessment

- PE/OSS need to
- Take care not to get too close to the student;
 - Be aware of any of your own views or values which might impact on your objectivity;
 - Pay attention to the views of others who may hold a different view of the students' progress.
 - Reflect on whether you are reducing or increasing your assessment threshold in response to an individual student.
 - Be clear about your expectations;
 - Develop a comprehensive understanding of the PCF/NOS;
 - Know the difference between a marginal pass and a failed placement



Key message 5

Be clear in your own mind where the border lies between a 'good' pass, a 'marginal' pass and a 'failed placement'.

- PE/OSS need to
- Have a clear understanding of what it is that they are looking for in terms of student performance!
 - Be brave when making judgements;
 - Recognise that making assessment decisions is an emotive experience.



Key message 6

Remember that the process of evidence collation and presentation is the same for both a fail and a pass recommendation.

- PE/OSS need to
- Carefully collate evidence;
- Logically and thoughtfully present it in your report



Key message 7

Don't panic!

The overwhelming majority of our students are fantastic.



- Remember that the University is here to support you in your task;
- Please do make good use of us as we are aware of the importance of the task that you do
- Thank you



References

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