

Staying one step ahead? The Step Up to Social Work employment based route to social work: an HEI perspective.

'Step Up to Social Work' is a controversial CWDC initiative targeted at providing an intensive 18 months employment-based, employer-delivered MA in social work. Following its announcement HEIs almost unanimously criticised this as an attack on HEIs and a potential dilution of academic influence. In 2010, CWDC commissioned MMU to design and quality assure this programme and was subsequently asked to deliver this.

This paper charts the challenges and opportunities of working with employer consortiums and CWDC to develop a practice focused programme. Learning from the first six months of delivering the programme with employers will be highlighted.

Initial consultations with employers focused on exploring perceptions of the skills and knowledge needed to practice social work. Feedback highlighted the need for interpersonal skills and confidence in the practice of assessment. The importance of 'process' was stressed as was the need for emotional intelligence and resilience in the face of resistance, complexity and uncertainty. The resulting programme emphasises these aspects, informed by knowledge and experience of both academics and practitioners.

Integrating practice and academic knowledge is a central challenge within social work education. However, this is difficult to achieve and knowledge can often be compartmentalised (Social Work Reform Board, 2010). The answer may lie in developing closer working partnerships between employers and HEIs (Social Work Taskforce, 2010).

Step up to Social Work challenges perceptions of how social work education should be shaped and by whom. Several key questions remain:

- How can HEIs work collaboratively with critical partners to create new learning opportunities?
- How might these relationships improve social work education?
- Can an effective social work qualification at Master's level be delivered in 18months?

Learning from 'Step Up to Social Work' challenges us to engage in a debate about the future of social work and the role of social work education. This paper aims to contribute to that debate.

SWTF, (2010) Building a Safe and Confident Future: implementing the proposals of the Task Force (London: DSCF)

SWRB (2010) Building a Safe and Confident Future: One Year on. Detailed proposals from the Social Work Reform Board. London: DFE