Review of Social Work Education in Scotland Phase 2

Area of Enquiry 9

Characteristics of Effective Employer/ University Partnerships in Social Work Education

February 2016

Acknowledgements

Executive Summary

High value is placed on partnership working in social work education in Scotland, and internationally. But do we all mean the same thing when we talk of a 'partnership' between employers and universities? What does effective partnership working look like in practice? T his research explored effective partnership working in qualifying social work education by talking to employers and university staff about what is working well, and what the barriers are to collaborative working. We also reviewed UK and international literature about partnership in social work education. Effective partnership working between universities and employers was found to be supported by:

- **Varied and multiple connections:** not only through practice learning opportunities, but throughout the qualifying curriculum as well as post- qualifying education, research and practice development.

- **Continuity and trusting relationships**: informal relationships were seen as vital, but may rely too heavily on the enthusiasm and goodwill of key individuals and established, but easily disrupted, networks.

- **A shared overarching vision** within which partners can voice and negotiate inevitable differences in perspective, and to establish realistic expectations of their roles and the desired outcomes of partnership.

- **Strategic and formalised approaches** to partnership were perceived as supportive of quality collaboration (e.g. employer sponsorship, locality co- ordination of practice learning).

- **Mutual benefits.** Reciprocity was seen as essential but university staff were more likely to perceive relationships as 'a two way street' than employers.

- **Time and financial resources** to support effective communication, continuing dialogue, and a reciprocal flow of expertise

- **Geographical proximity** supported partnership in most cases. Conversely, some employers at a distance from HEIs experienced less satisfactory partnership working.

- **Sharing, building on and evaluating good practice** through university and employer networks.

Characteristics of effective employer/ university partnerships in social work education

1. Introduction

The Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) review of social work education (Phase
2) has commissioned a number of strands of inquiry to inform the review process. One theme relates to partnership between social work employers and universities. Phase 1 of the Review highlighted many successful collaborations between social work employers and universities in Scotland. At the same time, opportunities to increase 'the sharing of responsibility and accountability across both sectors' (SSSC, 2015: 4) were identified.

The aims of this enquiry are to:

- Explore the characteristics of effective partnerships.
- Share good practice about effective university/employer partnerships.

The enquiry was undertaken by Jean Gordon, Research Consultant, and Roger Davis, Head of Social Work at The Open University in Scotland.

This project takes the form of a literature review and a small qualitative research study. Its focus is on how employing agencies and universities can best work together to facilitate an integrated approach to learning for practice. It links closely with other Areas of Enquiry under scrutiny, and, in particular, Area 5, which explores Curriculum and Integrated Learning, and Area 8, Practice Learning.

2. Review of the Literature

2.1 Scope of the review

The review focused on:

- Definitions and theory relating to the concept of partnership
- Partnerships between employers and universities in vocational learning.
- Partnerships between employers and universities in social work education

The review drew on grey literature and peer reviewed studies, and international research was included as well as literature relating to partnership working in Scotland and the rest of the UK ([see Appendix 1 for literature review methods].

2.2 What is 'partnership'?

The language of partnership and collaboration has been a feature of social welfare policy in the UK since the late 1990s (Dowling et al., 2004). A partnership approach, involving a range of stakeholders, including universities and employing agencies underpins the requirements for Scotland's current social work degree (Scottish Executive, 2003). This emphasis is also evident in other parts of the UK; for example the Social Work Reform Board (2010) identified better partnership working between employers and higher education institutions (HEIs) as one of the key factors required to improve social work education in England. Despite this emphasis, 'partnership' and 'collaboration' are terms that are often used loosely, with varying and contested meanings. As a result partners can have quite different understandings of just what a successful partnership might look like in practice (Dowling et al., 2004).

Wilson (2014) in his exploration of university/ employer partnerships in Northern Ireland, suggests that the concept of 'collaborative advantage' (Vangen and Huxham, 2006) provides a useful way of characterising partnerships in social work education. Partnership is viewed as a means of developing 'synergy' between organisations to meet a common goal that they could not achieve alone (Ibid:3). There is an expectation of reciprocity - of a two way street in which partners derive mutual benefit from sharing their skills, knowledge and resources.

2.3 How do universities and employers collaborate in social work education?

Although expectations of partnership, with service users and carers, as well as employers, permeate social work education in the UK, this is not always the case in other countries. Shardlow et al. (2011), in a comparative study of 10 countries, found little prescription about the extent or nature of employer engagement on social work programmes. The need to set up and support practice learning during qualifying education generated the greatest need for engagement between universities and employing agencies. However, involvement in other aspects of social work education, such as admissions, teaching and curriculum development varied a great deal between different institutions and countries. Shardlow et al. identified pockets of good practice in partnership working, including the engagement of academics in practice settings. For example, The Centre of Expertise for Social Welfare in Central Finland enables academic staff to work closely with students and practitioners in a practice setting (Kuronen, 2009, cited in Shardlow et al., 2011). However, examples of partnership activity in the literature tend to focus more on the role of employers in the university than HEI staff in the workplace. Clapton and Cree (2004:12) writing around the time of introduction of the degree level social work programme in Scotland, noted a 'one way approach' to partnership whereby practitioners would be 'invited in' to tutor or attend university meetings, but HEI staff were less likely to be involved in social work practice in the field.

Good practice examples of partnership working tend to be scattered, and regional or small scale, developed by, and fostered through, individual relationships (Shardlow et al., 2011) Virolainen et al. (2011), examining partnership in relation to internships in higher education, suggest that there are limitations to models based on these kinds of personalised collaborations, especially when they are too narrowly focused on work experience. They highlight the need for a more strategic and developmental approach to partnership that incorporates 'holistic consideration of forms of learning that will combine theory and practice in the curriculum' (Ibid: 479). There are examples of a more integrated approaches in the UK. For example, in Northern Ireland a formal partnership arrangement between employers and universities takes regional responsibility for ensuring consistent approaches to planning, delivering ….

and quality assuring qualifying social work education (Wilson, 2004). Employer sponsored 'grow your own' programmes, delivered in collaboration with HEIs, such as The Open University, provide another model for partnership working (Manthorpe et al., 2012). In England, the UK Government-funded 'Step up to Social Work' programme is an example of an evaluated employer led scheme delivered with HEIs by regional partnerships (Smith et al., 2013). Although some of these approaches have been positively evaluated, it remains unclear which arrangements make for the strongest partnerships, and just what the impact on student learning and achievement might be.   We should also perhaps be cautious about over-generalising the findings of evaluations of shorter term projects, especially when supported by enhanced funding and/or atypical student selection criteria, to day to day practices in social work education in Scotland.

2.4 Why work in partnership?

The need for a partnership approach, sustained by the common goal of developing a high quality workforce, able to meet the needs of service users and carers, is often assumed in the social work literature. Wilson (2014:5) describes partnership working as a necessity, a 'moral imperative', part and parcel of the empowering value base of the social work profession. Shardlow et al. (2011), however, found insufficient evidence to assert that strong employer engagement is an essential, or even a demonstrably desirable, element of qualifying education. He highlights, for example, the potential for unintended consequences that may arise from the tension between an employer's focus on training social workers to meet agency requirements and a university's mission to support the development of critically reflexive practitioners. This tension is identified as a central challenge for partnership working in most evaluations of partnership initiatives, in health as well as social work contexts (Manthorpe, 2011, 2012; Social Work Task Force, 2009; Reeve and Gallagher, 2005, Wright et al., 2010).

Without compelling evidence of positive outcomes, the case for regarding partnership working between employers and HEIs as an unequivocally ' good thing' therefore has to be made, rather than assumed (Shardlow et al., 2011; Virolainen etal. ,2011).

Evaluating collaborative outcomes also presents considerable methodological challenges, helping to explain why the evidence base remains so slim (El Ansari et al., 2001, Wilson, 2014). There is also a dearth of research from an employer, rather than HEI, perspective (Virolainan et al., 2011).

Whilst acknowledging the limitations of the available evidence, a review of the social work research literature nevertheless finds reasonable agreement over a number of studies in the UK and elsewhere that employer/ university partnership practices can:

- Improve the quality, consistency and relevance of social work education
- Support the integration of learning for practice
- Improve recruitment and selection to social work programmes
- Facilitate transition of qualified social workers into the workplace, and effective recruitment to the sector
- Identify, support and manage high quality practice learning opportunities
- Have a positive impact on workforce planning and continuing professional development
- Promote sharing of resources and skills, and the continuing professional development of staff in universities and practice settings.

2.5 What promotes partnership working?

We know quite a lot more about the processes than the outcomes of partnership working (Dowling et al., 2004). Summarising the literature, key characteristics of partnership working are said to include:

- Good working relationships (e.g. Smith et al., 2013; Vangen and Huxham, 2006; Wilson, 2014).
- A shared and realistic commitment to working together. There is some evidence of the benefits of a collaborative framework although, without a comparative analysis, the evidence remains equivocal (Wilson, 2014).
- Partners' ability to acknowledge, negotiate, and manage differing and sometimes conflicting, priorities and aspirations (Manthorpe et al., 2011; Wilson and Campbell, 2013).

- Sufficient resources, including administrative support
- Skilful leadership and co-ordination
- The embedding of partnership relations in communities of practice (Vangen and Huxham, 2006; Virolainen et al., 2011), sometimes within a particular locality (Smith et al., 2013; Wilson and Campbell, 2013).

2.6 The challenges of partnership

It is evident that 'partnership' is tricky to pin down, and incorporates a number of central tensions. On the one hand, effective partnership by definition requires good working relationships. At the same time, reliance on the personal commitment to partnership working of a few strong personalities and proactive individuals, without a wider, framework for collaboration, may make it difficult to embed and sustain a partnership approach in the longer term (Shardlow et al., 2011, Vironlainen et al., 2011). Different stakeholders may vary in the time or expertise they are able and willing to offer to the partnership (Vlaar et al, 2006). We also lack evidence about how best to draw on practitioner skills and experience in the classroom (Moriarty et al., 2010). The more formal collaborative relationships supporting 'grow your own' schemes for social work training have been positively evaluated in relation to student learning, and found to support robust employer/ university relationships' (Manthorpe et al., 2011:882). Manthorpe (2012:637) warns, however, that these more structured partnerships come at a price, requiring a 'sizeable investment' to develop and maintain so that sustaining them in the longer term can be problematic.

Another key dimension of any partnership is that of power. Although the social work literature has much to say about power in relation to partnerships with service users and carers, it is surprisingly silent about power dynamics in employer/ university relations. Partners, Wilson (2014:16) suggests, will often bring 'different priorities, ideologies and cultures and in consequence agreeing joint aims, sharing power and developing trust can present significant obstacles to collaboration and progressing a partnership'. Garraway (2006) also emphasises the importance of breaking down barriers between partner institutions to create a shared language.

It seems clear that, despite the positive rhetoric, 'partnership' is by no means a straightforward route to improving learning programmes. Improving our understanding of how HEIs and employers relate, and the factors that promote effective partnership working, is an important first step to negotiating these and other challenges (Reeve and Gallagher, 2005). The small scale research reported on in the second half of this report aims to make a contribution to that understanding in relation to social work education in Scotland by examining the key characteristics of effective partnership working.

3. Research study

This part of the enquiry builds on the literature review, exploring the research questions through a small scale qualitative study.

3.1 Methods

The aim of this enquiry, to 'explore' characteristics of effective partnership working, lent itself to a qualitative approach. This allows access to the ways in which actors understand and interpret social phenomena (Mason, 2002), in this case the idea and practice of 'partnership'. Given the tendency of previous research to focus more on university than employer perspectives, the perspectives of representatives from both sectors were accessed, drawing on a critical approach that was open to different understandings of partnership practice.

Sixteen participants took part in semi-structured interviews:

- A representative from each of the eight HEI social work degree programme providers in Scotland
- Staff from five local authority and three third sector agencies that are involved in social work qualifying education in Scotland

Sampling of participants was purposive. The HEI participants were nominated by their institutions. The employing agencies were situated in rural and urban locations, provided a range of services to adults and/or children, and included one smaller regional and two large national third sector employers.

The interviews were conducted by telephone and a written record was made. The findings from the literature review were used to inform the design of a topic guide that addressed the following aspects of partnership working:

- The types and extent of existing working relationships between employers and HEIs in different parts of Scotland
- What makes for effective partnership working
- The extent to which existing relationships can be described as 'partnerships'
- Examples of good and emerging practice in partnership working

[See Appendix 2]

Interview records were coded and then analysed using a thematic framework derived from Punch (1998:208).

3.2 Research ethics

The research proposal was reviewed and agreed by The Open University's Human Research Ethics Committee on 4.12.15. Participants were given written information about the project and provided written consent. They were informed that all records, including the final report of the findings, would be anonymised. All data relating to the research was stored securely, in a password protected computer folder, to be destroyed within six months of production of the final report. In the findings below universities are only identified by name when it is otherwise self-evident which social work programmes are being referred to (e.g. The Open University's (OU's) sponsorship programme, The Robert Gordon University's (RGU's) distance learning route.

3.3 Findings

3.3.1 Mapping employer/ university relations

The primary locus for interaction was described as practice learning. HEI participants described a complex web of inter-relationships generated by requirement for students to undertake up to 200 days of practice learning in varied settings. Most HEIs reported interacting on a regular basis with anything from 9 to 25 practice learning providing organisations at a time. Some universities offer practice placements at a considerable distance. For example, RGU's distance learning programme has links with over 300 employers and some universities offer international placements. In the west of Scotland *Learning Network West*'s[1] role insupporting and co-ordinating practice learning, makes for a different kind of interface since it mediates and supports employer/HEI practice learning interactions. Thirteen

[1] http://www.westlearningnetwork.org.uk/

local authorities and five HEIs contribute funding to *Learning Network West*, and representatives of its stakeholders are involved in decision-making through its Board and Steering Group.

Local authorities were regularly in contact with between 2 and 4 HEIs, usually those closest geographically to them, although the nearest HEI for some rural authorities could be over 100 miles away. These geographical considerations were less relevant to the OU's sponsorship and RGU's distance learning programmes. The two national third sector organisations worked with all eight HEIs, and the smaller, regional agency had links with two HEIs, both as a sponsor and work-based learning provider.

In addition to the many connections made through practice learning, there were numerous other links between HEIs and Universities across the breadth of degree programmes. Leaving The OU aside, most of these arrangements were between HEIs and employing organisations - often local authorities - that were in closest geographical proximity. Some key points of collaboration directly related to qualifying social work programmes involved social work practitioners in different aspects of qualifying programmes, notably:

- Admissions processes, including selection (paper-based and by interview)
- Staff interviewing
- Lecturing, role plays, presentations about research and practice and other direct arrangements to support student learning
- Assessment e.g. marking of practice portfolios, attending Practice Assessment Panels, Fitness to Practice assessments
- Programme review
- Research conducted for degree dissertations
- Employer /HEI meetings, forums and boards
- Practice teaching workshops

Most of these activities were built into the OU's partnership agreements with sponsoring employers. However, unlike some other HEIs, dissertation research did not provide a medium for OU/ employer collaboration.

The point was strongly made that relationships were also forged and strengthened outwith degree programmes. So, for example, research activity, including practitioner research, a small number of secondments between HEIs and employing agencies, HEI presence on agency boards and in CPD activity, such as the Mental Health Officer (MHO) and Practice Learning Qualification (PLQ (SS)) awards all contributed to strengthening relationships. Participants saw these opportunities as integral to developing and growing positive and effective working relationships between HEIs and employing agencies. For example, one HEI participant described how the University's involvement in a knowledge exchange research project had supported the development of practice learning opportunities with involved agencies. In most interviews fewer examples of HEI involvement in practice settings were described than employer participation in university-based processes. Again, the OU's model was rather different, since the taught curriculum is delivered all over Scotland, and many of its part-time tutors were said to be practising social workers.

As one HEI respondent pointed out, there are *'a huge number of different kinds of connections that make up the partnership arrangements we have'*. The range, number and complexity of these connections was described as *'both a strength and a challenge'* for effective partnership working. Employing agencies' links with universities outwith practice learning varied considerably between HEI programmes. They were often described as weaker and/or less numerous for employing organisations in rural areas.

3.3.2 Is it partnership?

All but one of the HEI participants described their relationship with some of the employers they worked with as a 'partnership'. An alternative view was that these relationships constituted more of a 'network', 'partnership' being seen as conveying too much exclusivity. Partnership working was described as *'essential'* and *'crucial'*. Current partnerships were variously characterised as:

- *'A joint endeavour'* and *'A shared commitment to high quality practice and enhanced service and service outcomes'*
- *'Mutually beneficial'* and '*reciprocal*'

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- Involving *'exchange of knowledge, skills and values'*
- *'Respectful, appreciative and robust'*

Two HEI staff described partnership working with employers as variable, dependant on geography, or because sometimes *'relationships don't really gel'*. Two HEI participants also thought partnership working could be '*patchy*', and that there was '*always room for improvement*'.

Similar perspectives of current relationships between HEIs and employers were echoed in interviews with two large third sector organisations. They definitely saw themselves in partnership with HEIs. These partnerships were focused around practice learning, with, it was perceived, mutual benefits for both parties. The relationship between sponsoring employers and the OU was also seen as an effective partnership by the four employing organisations (three local authorities and one third sector employer) that sponsored students on the OU programme.

'This is true partnership working', one sponsoring employer said, involving *''understanding what we are both working to, what our roles and responsibilities are, so we can make decisions together based on open dialogue'*

However, views of local authority participants were much more mixed than the third sector interviewees. One respondent said,

'There are peaks and troughs - sometimes it is [partnership] and sometimes it's not. Our partnerships [with different HEIs] *range between being excellent and sustainable on the one hand and disjointed on the other'*

There was a view expressed by four of the five local authority employers that some relationships with HEIs were relatively one sided, with limited benefits for employers. In these cases the relationship was seen as more akin to a service-based than a reciprocal relationship:

'They [HEIs] would like us to come into the university. But there need to be benefits on both sides ....it needs to be a two way street.'

'We give quite a lot - but we don't get very much back.'

3.3.3 What supports effective partnerships?

Some consistent messages about what supports effective partnerships (and, conversely, impedes partnership working) emerged during the research:

1. Strong working relationships

It is no surprise that partnership working was supported by positive and often very longstanding working relationships between individuals at the interface of the partnership arrangements. Changes in key personnel, in universities or employing agencies, it was said, could benefit working relationships, *'putting the relationship on a different footing, redefining what is meant by partnership'*. Conversely, loss of significant actors could undermine partnerships quite rapidly. Outwith practice learning, many inter organisational contacts were described as informal, based on prior working relationships or geographical proximity, and, when they worked well, were underpinned by goodwill on both sides.

2. Mutual benefits

In some cases the 'collaborative advantage' (Vangen and Huxham, 2006) for both employer and university was very evident. So one third sector organisation described how it was able to fund a learning and development team from the practice learning fee paid for each student. Meanwhile, in turn, HEIs benefited from high quality practice placements for their students. On the whole it was easier to identify reciprocity in relation to practice learning, with employers citing a range of benefits accruing from offering practice placements, including the recruitment of high calibre employees and the contribution of students to organisational learning cultures. The identified benefits varied from one employer to another. Variation in how the practice learning fee for each student placement was used by the employer, differing perceptions of the level of HEI support for practice learning and the extent to which employers had a need to recruit new staff all contributed to these differing perceptions.

Outwith practice learning, partnership arrangements were frequently informal, and benefits less tangible. CPD opportunities, *'a free lunch'* and *'the opportunity for contributing employees to remain closely connected'* with up to date theory and research, were given as examples of benefits to practitioners supporting learning on

social work programmes. Two HEIs also pay a small number of practitioners to teach and assess students. Rather more formal *'quid pro quo'* arrangements were also reported whereby university staff, for example, offered staff training to local authority staff, who, in turn offered to come into the university to support student learning in mock child protection conferences. This in turn enabled *'students and university staff to keep in touch with the contemporary social work practice environment'*.

More broad-based university/ employer relations that went beyond practice learning tended to provide a greater sense of reciprocity and mutual benefit:

'Our relationship with [HEI] *is progressive, about the whole programme, not just practice learning, But with other HEIs it's more responsive - fine up to a point but the demand comes from them, and we respond*.'

(Local authority employer)

Whilst acknowledging resource and time constraints, local authority participants were positive about less tangible benefits of partnership, such as opportunities for informal exchange of ideas, with university colleagues, and were interested in identifying new ways to connect with HEI partners.

3. Frameworks for partnership

Although many partnership arrangements were informal, there were also some well established frameworks for partnership. Most evident was the OU's sponsorship programme which involves a formal partnership between employer and university. This was consistently perceived by employers as an effective partnership arrangement. Two HEIs were also reported to have service level agreements with employers in respect of practice learning opportunities, although the impact of these is not known.

Learning Network West's role in practice learning, was highly valued, and sometimes envied by employers in other areas. One HEI, however, would have preferred to forge partnerships more directly with employers in the west of Scotland. Whilst it was acknowledged that partnership *'cannot just be a contractual arrangement, but must be based on dialogue and relationships'* , there was some enthusiasm expressed by some employers and HEIs for establishing more *'formalised processes'* or agreed expectations to guide and support the relationships of employers and universities.

4. Investment of time and other resources

Most participants stressed that effective partnership working takes time, and resources such as administrative support were regularly highlighted as essential. The OU model of sponsorship was perceived to be effective partly because both partners commit to a high level of joint working, with associated time implications for the OU and employers. Workplace pressures in both HEIs and employing organisations were perceived as unhelpful to creating and sustaining partnership arrangements. Rural employers described particular barriers to engagement related to long and expensive trips to meetings. Video Conferencing was cited as a useful means of enabling meeting attendance in one case.

5. Good communication

The importance of good lines of communication and accurate information was mentioned many times in interviews. Administrative staff played a key role in effective relationships between partners, and lack of information about, for example, changing staff roles, was cited regularly as a threat to good partnership practice.

6. Geography and history

For all HEIs but the OU, stronger partnerships were frequently with employers on their doorstep. Geographical proximity facilitated the building of close, reciprocal working relationships, although this was not always said to be the case. Historical ties were also important, including those generated in past employment and through working relationships mediated by the now disbanded regional learning networks. Conversely, organisations at a distance from linked HEIs reported more difficulties in maintaining partnerships with HEIs.

7. Managing difference

The point was regularly made in interviews that, although HEIs and employers may have in common broad aspirations for social work education, their priorities may differ. So relationships between the organisations have to enable partners to express, debate and negotiate differing perspectives. This can be challenging, especially when there are multiple partners and little time for quality communication. Realism about the purpose and desired outcomes of collaboration was identified as an important precursor to partnership.

Again this takes time, and trusting working relationships. For example, the OU's formal agreements with employers were only established after *'a lot of talking, thinking and discussion'*.

3.3.4 d practice in partnership

A range of examples of good practice in partnership working was gathered during this research. There is not space in this report for detailed examples of current and evolving practices, but the list below gives a flavour of some current developments in Scotland:

- Opportunities for individual practitioners to develop longer term connections with HEIs, and benefit from university facilities e.g. as 'Practice Fellows', 'Practice Academics'.
- HEI support of reflective learning groups in practice settings
- Posts that combine practice and university tutoring, and long-standing associations between organisations such as Circle Scotland[2] and PAMIS[3] with local HEIs *'which support a more fluid and blurred boundary between practice and academia'.*
- Learning Network West's role in bringing partners in the west of Scotland together to develop shared strategies for practice learning.
- Evidence that some HEIs were moving to take a more holistic, strategic approach to partnership with employers, working towards formalising *'more permeable'* boundaries between practice and academia.
- Recognition of the contribution of practitioners to university teaching through, for example, payment and structured CPD opportunities.
- A collaboration between the OU and a local authority whereby employees who meet the university's selection criteria are recruited by the employer as Associate Lecturers to deliver the teaching programme to sponsored student employees, drawing on the university's learning curriculum and support.
- Partnerships between employers and local authorities that encourage final year students to research topics of relevance to employing agencies.

[2] http://www.circle.scot/home.aspx
[3] http://www.pamis.org.uk/

Students benefit from access to meaningful research opportunities, and employing agencies are able to use student research findings to improve practice.

- Regular events that bring practitioners, students, managers and university staff together, such as employer forums, recruitment days and evening or lunchtime reading or discussion groups.

- Social Work Scotland, though a relatively new organisation, was perceived to be having a positive impact on the ability of employers and universities to work together at a strategic level.

Conclusions

Partnership working between universities and employing agencies appears to be highly valued in social work education in Scotland, and there is evidence of collaboration right across social work programmes. This is most obvious during practice learning opportunities in employing agencies, but partnership practices run throughout degree programmes and beyond, into continuing professional development and research activity. Many examples of high quality partnership practice all over Scotland were highlighted during this enquiry. These were seen to support the learning and development of HEI staff and practitioners as well as social work students.

At the same time, much of this practice, outwith the structure of practice learning arrangements, is often uncharted and reliant on the efforts of committed individuals and local networks. These relationships are of course strengths, as are the very varied pockets of creative partnership practice in different parts of the country. However, their informality, individuality and apparent tendency to arise more through serendipity than strategic planning, is also a weakness, leaving partnership practice susceptible to disruption when a key individual leaves or retires, or a project runs out of funding.   This reliance on informal links may also help to explain the considerable variations in the accounts of the extent and nature of partnership arrangements between different HEIs and employers. Another important variable is geography, with distance from an HEI making it harder to sustain partnerships. At the same time, the

complexity and number of current connections between HEIs and employers creates considerable challenges. In the absence of more formal national or regional mechanisms for partnership practice, it is probably unrealistic to expect universities and employers to be able to invest sufficient time and resources to sustain close working relations with so many different partners simultaneously. Learning Network West provides an example of more structured regional approach which was mostly perceived as an effective means of not only co-ordinating practice learning and aspects of continuing professional development, but also bringing multiple partners together in a time efficient way.

Employer sponsorship routes offer a more formal and structured approach, and, in common with Manthorpe (2011, 2012), this research found the model to support very positive perceptions of employer/ university partnership. Sustaining this level of partnership does, however, demand a considerable investment of time and money from both partners to make it work well, and is less likely to be the preferred option in times of austerity or when recruitment levels are low. There is a need to establish whether different models of partnership work better than others in different contexts, depending on, for example, rurality, or the needs of younger or more mature students. Taking a more strategic national and/or regional approach to partnership may enable the development of a more consistent approach to making partnership working a reality.

Questions about reciprocity and 'collaborative advantage' (Vangen and Huxham, 2006) also arose in this enquiry. That the local authority employers in this study were less convinced than HEIs that they were engaged in 'partnership' working is an important finding which merits further exploration, particularly given the dearth of research on employer perceptions. There are also questions to be asked about partnerships between HEIs and more rural employers that may be perceived as 'out of range' for many universities, and whether, for example, smarter use of technology could help to move to a more inclusive approach.

As Shardlow et al. (2011) stress, we cannot simply assume that partnership equates to better outcomes for students, social workers or service users. Greater clarity may be required about desired outcomes for university/employer partnerships. For example, should the main focus of partnership working be on the student experience

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and supporting the development of effective practitioners? Or are our aspirations in Scotland broader, visualising partnership as an active and two way flow of expertise, new ideas and learning between universities and the workplace that extends into all aspects of learning and practice? This research generally suggests the latter, but how achievable is this ambition, given the kinds of constraints on partnership discussed in this research? It is vital, Wilson (2014:3), suggests, to 'ground collaborations in realistic expectations of what can be achieved'. The good practice examples collected to inform this report give a flavour of what is achievable, providing an opportunity to identify and build on current strengths in partnership working.

The small scale nature of this research inevitably limits the extent to which its findings can be generalised to wider university/ employer relations. The individual and unrecorded nature of many interactions also meant that it was sometimes difficult to get a full picture of partnership working, so there may be many other examples of good practice in Scotland that have not been captured by this enquiry. Notwithstanding the challenges posed by defining and measuring partnership, the literature and this study come to similar conclusions about the key characteristics of effective partnerships. This understanding, with the findings of parallel enquiries for Phase 2 of the Social Work Degree Review, will, it is hoped contribute to greater clarity about the kinds of partnerships we want, why we want them, and how best to make them work.

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Appendix 1: Literature Review methods

Search strategy

Four sources were used:

- The Open University's online library
- The ISI Web of Science
- Google Scholar
- The World Wide Web, to identify unpublished work

The following search terms were used in a variety of combinations: 'Partnership' and 'Collaboration' with 'Social Work', 'Education', 'Vocational', 'Employer' and 'University'.

Selection criteria

Identified literature was excluded if it did not relate to partnership in the context of either social work education, or other forms of education in which employers are involved in some aspect of the qualification process.

Due to time constraints, only literature that could be readily accessed online was included in the review.

International as well as UK literature was included, but only English language literature was accessed.

Appendix 2: Topic Guide

Review of Social Work Education in Scotland: University/ employer partnerships

1. Can you describe the current social work education (SWE) arrangements you have with universities/employers?

- With which universities/employers, and where?
- In relation to which aspects of SWE?
- Who is involved in these arrangements?
- Do any of these arrangements involve exchange of some kind - and, if so, what is exchanged (e.g. money, skills, knowledge, people)?

2. Are there aspects of your arrangements with universities/employers that you think are working well?

- What makes these arrangements work well?
- To what extent are the arrangements sustainable?

3. Are there aspects of your arrangements with universities/employers that you think are working less well?

- What are the problems/issues/concerns?
- (How) can they be addressed? What might need to happen to remove any perceived barriers?

5. If you had to summarise the nature of your current arrangements with employers/ universities in relation to social work education in 3 words or sentences, what would they be?

6. To what extent would you describe some or all of the current arrangements you have with universities/ employers as 'a partnership'?

- Are there some aspects of social work education in which 'partnership' working is stronger than others? What are they?
- Are there any examples of good practice in partnership working that you would like to share? And, if so, please describe one or two of these?
- Is there a need to strengthen partnership working between employers and universities? If so, how might this be achieved in Scotland?

7. Is there anything else you would like to say about effective partnership working between universities and employing agencies in social work education?