

**Title of Paper: Making Changes to Assessment Methods in Social Work Education: Focusing on Process and Outcome**

**Author: Patricia Cartney**

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**Summary**

**Moving towards delivering the new social work qualification led to many social work programmes considering the ‘fitness for purpose’ of assessment methods being used to assess the competence of social work students. This article highlights how changes in assessment methods were considered on one particular social work programme. The advantages and disadvantages of three particular assessment methods in relation to professional practice are debated here. Discussions emanating from these considerations and subsequent changes made to the programme are highlighted.**

**The specific focus is on the experience of one particular social work programme which is used as a case study to illustrate issues of general relevance in social work education. It is intended that the reflections presented in this article contribute to this broader arena of learning and teaching for professional practice taking place and continuing beyond the introduction of the new qualification.**

**Key words: assessment methods, advantages, disadvantages, essays, case studies, SCREEs and LASERs**

**Introduction**

**The General Social Care Council (GSCC), the British regulatory body for the social work profession and social work education, introduced a new three year qualifying degree in social work in 2003 replacing the previous two year Diploma in Social Work. Curriculum changes required for this new social work qualification provided the impetus for many social work programmes to review curriculum content and to reflect on the appropriateness of assessment methods**

used. This article is based on the ongoing of one such programme's experience. It provides a brief overview of some commonly used assessment modes and how they relate to social work practice, but is offered primarily as a case study illustrating processes involved in changing assessment methods which may have resonance for programmes elsewhere and contribute to current debates about the use of assessment methods for social work students.

### Locating the Literature

Literature in the field of social work education has traditionally focused more on the assessment of practice based learning in field settings. There is a paucity of literature on the assessment of classroom based learning (Crisp and Lister, 2002) in social work, however a wide range of material exists in the field of adult learning. Cree (2000) acknowledges that changes to assessment in social work tend to reflect changes in higher education generally. This wider literature has been criticised, however, for its tendency to omit discussion of the social, political and economic context in which learning takes place. It has been argued that this gives it a limited applicability to professional education (Taylor, 1997). This paper therefore explicitly places it within the broader framework necessary for professional practice.

Adult learning literature emphasises the key role of assessment in students' learning. Gibbs (1999) argues that assessment is the most powerful lever teachers have to influence the way students respond to courses and subsequently behave as learners. Such perspectives appear to be cascading through other arenas, including those of professional education. An article by Wass, Van der Vleuten, Shatzer and Jones (2001: 945) published in the *Lancet*, began by arguing that 'Assessment drives learning...Pragmatically, assessment is the most appropriate engine on which to harness the curriculum'. Students tend to focus on what they need to do to successfully meet the assessment requirements for their studies.

Boud (1998: 42) argued for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to focus on developing a 'holistic conception' in relation to student assessment and to move away from a narrow pre-occupation with 'fragments of assessment'. Designing the curriculum for the new qualification offered an opportunity to consider the 'total learning environment' (Brew, 2003) and to explore the role of assessment methods in promoting effective student learning. It also provided the opportunity to reconsider the methods used in the light of an increasingly diverse body of students. The lower age limit for entry to the new social work degree and the removal of the requirement for social work experience potentially opens up social work education to a wider body of students.

### Method of Enquiry

Any enquiry involving students and faculty members must consider issues of power in the academic context. Brown and Glaser (2003: 157), argue that 'Assessment is ....an exercise of power'. Viewing assessment in this way, offers a broader framework where the loci of power is highlighted in relation to the different interests and actors involved in the process. The methodology described

below explicitly sought to consider such issues with regard to who was consulted, how and where.

As Assessment Tutor for Social Work Programmes the author conducted a literature review on the main methods pertinent to the assessment of social work students. The review explored ten different assessment methods in relation to their potential advantages and disadvantages for professional programmes and this was presented as a written report for discussion. This was distributed to staff and student representatives. Teaching teams were asked to consider the methods described in relation to the modules they taught and to give feedback initially via e-mail and subsequently in discussion within the Programme Staff Meeting. Student representatives sought feedback from their peers through informal discussion and presented this through e-mail, and in a group discussion with the author. Finally, staff and students participated in a discussion at the Programme Board of Studies meeting.

Subsequently, the recommended assessment changes were discussed and cascaded through relevant programme channels, including the Board of Studies, programmes meetings and the validation event for the new programme, where staff, students and external members were present. The e mails from staff and students and material from the discussion forums outlined provided material for this paper.

The aim here is not to explore all ten methods described in the initial literature review. Rather it is to present three of these methods and the responses to them in some detail as a vehicle for describing aspects of the process of change in assessment methods which many social work programmes will undertake either as part of their general evolution or in response to particular changes in professional body requirements. The three methods chosen for discussion here are essays, case studies and SCREEs/LASERs. Essays were chosen as the programme began its review with a large proportion of modules being assessed via this mode. Case studies were chosen as several modules subsequently incorporated the use of case studies as an assessment method following the assessment review. SCREEs/LASERs, focusing on self-assessment techniques, were chosen as innovative assessment methods whose proposal generated considerable debate within the programme.

It is not possible to address all issues raised, however the key points in relation to each assessment method will be described and their observed impact on the change process discussed.

### **Initial Review of Assessment Methods**

The initial review of all assessment methods being used on the programme pointed to a marked bias in favour of essays. The implications of this for the development of reflective practitioners was explored and teaching teams and students were presented with a range of alternative assessment methods as described above, outlining their advantages and disadvantages to a professional social work programme. The material presented was not exhaustive but was

intended to act as a springboard for discussion and debate. The subsequent consideration of potential alternative assessment methods challenged some deeply held views about the notion of what constitutes education for professional practice and how this is effectively assessed on a professional programme located within higher education. Three out of the initial ten methods are considered below and the main points arising from subsequent discussion of them with the programme team and with student representatives are incorporated in the analysis.

## Essays

Whilst essays are often dismissed as rather conventional and limited as an assessment method this enquiry found much positive comment on them. Firstly, essay questions are comparatively easy to set, testing content and substance, alongside the ability to organise, evaluate and synthesize. They can test 'higher order' learning, including critical thinking and evidence of advanced understanding of key arguments in the field. Questions can be constructed to test different levels of intellectual processes and can vary in conceptual complexity (Knight, 2001). The production of written language to convey expression of thought is a scholarly activity well placed in an institution of higher education and a core skill for social work practice. These skills can be transferred to written tasks required within practice agencies.

Furthermore, students tend to prepare more fully for essay questions, thus enhancing their educational value (Cox, 1994). Students acknowledged the value they gained from the process of reading around the literature to prepare to answer an essay question. Essays do provide opportunity for reflection and preparation and can reflect depth of understanding. They have the potential to encourage 'deep' as opposed to 'surface' learning. Students commented that essays enable them to 'get to grips' with a topic. Furthermore, they do not penalise students who may be too anxious to perform at their best under alternative conditions e.g. in examination situations. Staff commented that in the context of encouraging widening participation in higher education some non-traditional students may not have the experience of undertaking written examinations successfully in the past, potentially leading to high levels of uncertainty and subsequent under performance. Essays may also be fairer to students who are dyslexic as the additional time element present may reduce anxiety by allowing for proof-reading. Students particularly commented on the importance of having time to correct work and reflect on its content prior to its assessment. Such opportunities appear in line with the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (2001) which makes it illegal for HEIs to treat disabled students less fairly.

Feedback sheets commenting on strengths and weaknesses can encourage assessment to be seen as a process as well as an outcome. Staff noted this as an important learning opportunity provided to influence future learning by identifying areas for improvement alongside achievements demonstrated.

Feedback here is also in the 'public' domain and available for internal and external moderation. Marking sheets are individualised and focused on the specific work of one student where detailed and individual feedback can be given. Student difficulties with written work can also be identified and help can be offered allowing a diagnostic function to the assessment process where students can be guided to seek additional learning support.

Interestingly, however, none of the students commented on the use of essays in terms of providing feedback for future work. This may be because as the work is summatively assessed and students move on to the next module, they do not look retrospectively at assessments they perceive as completed previously. This point echoes the findings of Maclellan's research (2004) where University staff saw the developmental aspects of feedback as an important aspect of essay feedback, but the students primarily perceived assessment to be about judging levels of achievement rather than enabling learning. This raises questions about whether feedback is more effectively given during the course of study, as a formative process, rather than reserved for summative feedback when students may not perceive its benefit as they cannot change the contents of the work marked at this stage.

The use of essays as an assessment method was not considered to be unproblematic and many potential disadvantages were identified.

Whilst essay questions are easy to set, essays themselves are notoriously difficult, time consuming and potentially arduous to mark. Staff commented on the length of time it takes to mark essays well and to devise feedback to aid learning given the limited time available for marking to take place. Tension between providing high quality feedback and managing the volume of scripts to mark in a short timescale was identified. Such issues are also noted in the literature, highlighting the pressure of time in which scripts need to be marked as a factor increasing the danger of the assessment not being reliable (Race 2003).

The question of subjectivity and equity is also important. There is a wealth of evidence that different people marking the same essay can produce widely varying results (Cox, 1994; Gibelman et al, 1999). Some studies also show that even the same marker sometimes gives different marks on the same essay at a slightly later date (Newble and Cannon, 1995). Differences in marks can owe more to variations in markers than to the performance of students (Brown, Bull and Pendlebury, 1997). Several studies have also suggested the potential for a gender (Archer and McCarthy, 1998) and ethnic bias (Howell et al, 1993) in marking written work. Scott (1995) argues that teachers knowingly or unknowingly use grades to reward and punish students for their behaviour, attitude, appearance, family background and lifestyles as well as their writing ability.

The over use of written forms of assessment may also work to the disadvantage of some non-traditional students in other ways. This group, who include adult-returners, women, people from lower socio-economic groups and black and minority ethnic students, may experience particular difficulties (Lea and Stierer, 2000; Lillis, 2001).

Earlier educational experiences regarding written work may impact negatively on current performance and confidence. This may permeate a student's experience in a myriad of ways. Lillis (2001) refers to the lack of having an 'apprenticeship' into university life and academic conventions as an important factor in a student's experience of higher education and links this particularly to his concept of developing 'essayist literacy' which may not have been experienced previously. Rai's (2004) research found that some non-traditional students she interviewed highlighted painful, negative feedback they had experienced regarding their use of language in school and how this impacted on their current studies as adults. Respondents here also spoke about having to separate who they were in relation to how they write and issues of identity construction and alienation from academic modes of discourse were also highlighted.

Answering one essay question as the sole assessment method for evaluating learning on a module may also encourage students to take a reductionist view of learning e.g. by not attending lectures on topics outside the essay question they intend to answer. It is difficult therefore to assess broader learning. Even attempting composite titles, drawing upon a range of topics does not eliminate this entirely. This was a concern of staff where the holistic nature of learning in relation to social work practice was emphasised alongside the anxiety that unnecessary compartmentalisation of knowledge may obscure links across both topics and modules. There were concerns here that given time pressures on students and other demands on their energies, allowing the choice of one essay question as the assessment task may encourage students to become 'strategic learners' (Entwistle, 1997) where the focus is on meeting the assessment requirements and passing the essay rather than engaging in seeking to understand the content of the learning overall.

Additionally, essays measure cognitive knowledge and it is difficult to assess the emotional and behavioural aspects of learning via this method. This appears particularly important for modules where not only knowledge ('knowing what') but also values and skills ('knowing how') are being assessed. Whilst knowing *what* may be effectively assessed via an essay, the values and skills contained in knowing *how* are not adequately addressed. Differing levels of debate took place here depending on the specific content and focus of the module involved. In a module focusing on social policy, for example, the emotional and behavioural aspects of learning were not hotly debated as an understanding of the relevant knowledge base and its application to social work practice was a key focus and could be effectively demonstrated via a well constructed essay. A fuller debate, however, took place in relation to the assessment of communication skills as outlined below.

Finally - the problem of plagiarism is increasingly being acknowledged in higher education, ensuring authenticity of results is virtually impossible in relation to essay submission. There is no foolproof way of knowing that the student number on the front of the essay is actually the author of the work submitted, in whole or part. This is of crucial importance in social work where the award of the professional qualification often provides access to work with many of the most

vulnerable people within our society and where professional integrity is required by the Codes of Practice for Social Care Workers and Employers (GSCC 2002).

### **The Process of Making Changes and Initial Outcomes**

Issues of bias in the assessment of written work were discussed by the programme and although this discussion was primarily focused around the marking of essays it was noted that the potential for bias exists in relation to *all* methods of assessment. The programme has a system of anonymous marking for essays. Staff and students both commented on the usefulness of this system as it appears to remove any obvious bias in assessment. Double marking and internal and external moderation systems are also in place, alongside the use of explicit marking criteria.

Whether *all* bias is eliminated by such a procedure appears debatable, however, particularly as some studies suggest that bias, including unconscious bias, may operate in response to cues, for example sentence structure may be an indicator of ethnicity (Oliver, 1995), the use of language considered as ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ (Golberg, 1968) and even presentational issues in terms of folders used, particular binding etc. (Fleming 2003) may influence the subsequent grade given. Fleming (2003) argues that it is unlikely that bias in assessment could be entirely eliminated but urges assessors to strive for this. In the social work profession where working positively with diversity and challenging discrimination are key values, such a statement appears to be of particular relevance.

One outcome of such considerations in our programme team was to review internal moderation procedures ensuring that more staff are involved in these processes and to engage in a ‘blind-marking’ exercise as a staff team where several essays were assessed by all and grades subsequently compared. Grades allocated in this exercise were fairly consistent across the staff group, although interesting issues were raised in relation to how different markers penalised grammatical errors or simply fed back comment on differences in written expression. If equity of assessment across the student cohort is to be worked towards, the problematic nature of assessment bias needs to be openly acknowledged, debated and deconstructed as a cornerstone of the assessment process. Group marking exercises may be a useful starting point here and the programme team agreed to engage in this process on an ongoing basis.

A second key area of discussion was the validity of essays for judging emotional and behavioural components of student learning. The assessment of communication skills was a particularly important focus here. At the time of the review communication skills were taught under the old social work programme (DipSW) as one part of a broader module – Social Work Knowledge and Skills – incorporating lectures and seminars focusing on theoretical models of practice alongside communication skills workshops. Whilst the teaching of this module worked well as an integrated experience for students, the assessment of this module was revisited in the assessment review. Students were being assessed in relation to the demonstration of both their knowledge and their skills via one written essay. Staff considered that this assessment method did not adequately

address their communication skills in toto. Students also commented that individuals may have good written communication skills, for example, but poor verbal and non-verbal communication skills and vice versa. Preparing for the new degree encouraged a review of the assessment method used in relation to communication skills and led to key changes being implemented in this area. Communication Skills became a separate module on the new degree and is now assessed via a video recording of an interview students conduct with a professional actor alongside their own written reflective account of their performance in this interview. Students are now asked to reflect on what they consider they did well and what they would do differently. They are also asked to illustrate how they used theoretical ideas to inform their practice in the interview.

Contextualising the impact of assessment changes within a broader framework, however, sensitises us to consider that essays enjoy something of an educational hegemony in education. They remain the most commonly used assessment method in the arts and sciences with their academic worth often assumed and unquestioned. Suggestions of alternative assessment methods may initially be feared as implying a reduction in academic standards and may raise anxiety because of the loss of certainty in relation to the new expectations and processes introduced. On our programme this was noted in relation to the initial response of both staff and students. Academics expect to be required to mark essays and many of our students came to the programme via access routes and had spent considerable time preparing to answer essay questions when they arrived. Anticipating such initial resistance appears a helpful aspect of understanding the change process.

### Case Studies in Context

Moving from essay assessment to the use of case studies was, however, considered fully by our programme in relation to most modules. Utilising case studies as an assessment method offers many potential advantages for social work programmes. Firstly, case studies offer an excellent way of assessing how far understandings can be directly applied to practice situations. They offer a clear way of integrating theory and practice, where academic and practice curricula can be simultaneously assessed. If students bring case studies from their practice placements, this can be a positive way of validating their practice experience and explicitly linking academic and practice learning. Given the tensions in linking theory and practice in social work (Parton, 2000; Sheppard et al, 2000) making explicit connections between academic knowledge and practice learning may be a particularly important strategy. Badger and MacNeil (1998) point to the use of social work staff from partner agencies providing cases from practice for consideration by students.

A key point raised by staff here is that case studies offer opportunities to demonstrate in tangible terms how 'Practice is central to the new degree, with academic learning supporting practice' (DH :2002:1). The application of knowledge and problem-solving skills to a realistic practice based scenario does offer the opportunity to stress the centrality of practice. Students stated that they found using case studies 'realistic' and they could see the connection between



what they were doing in the University and their practice placements. This supports the argument of Jones and Cearley (2002) who noted that utilising case studies resulted in students responding very positively to the learning undertaken. Furthermore, they can cover a range of curriculum content and encourage a holistic understanding of topics as opposed to a partial or fragmented approach to the material studied. It is also possible to devise staged case studies where students are presented with scenarios and asked to write about each stage of the social work process.

There are, however, several potential disadvantages in using case studies as a summative assessment method. Firstly, the content of comprehensive case studies can be difficult to devise and lack of standardisation in responses may make them potentially difficult to mark. If students bring their own case studies for assessment this may not be equitable across the student group. Some students may have practice assessors who are able and willing to help them consider a range of issues, for example, how they utilise various theoretical models and what key professional issues are raised. Other students might not have such high quality supervision and this may work to their disadvantage. Case studies from placement as a major assignment may be testing the skills and knowledge of the practice assessor and the learning opportunities available in the placement agency as much as the student's own abilities here. The students were keen that this point was considered on the grounds of equitable assessment. Furthermore, authenticity of authorship cannot be guaranteed, although practice assessors could be asked to confirm that case studies derived from practice placement experiences were based on the student's own practice.

Contextualising the use of case studies in a broader framework sensitises us to questions concerning whether they adequately test the scholarly skills of developing a coherent argument and critiquing the relevant literature from a wider perspective. Their academic worth may be more open to debate from this perspective. This may be particularly pertinent for social work programmes striving to maintain their academic profile within HEIs. Debates within the programme team highlighted such concerns. Whilst all staff were in favour of using case studies as a way of teaching about practice some staff were concerned about their use as a summative assessment method, arguing that they may not effectively test academic skills. Students were receptive to the idea of using case studies to summatively assess on the programme, however, stating this would link assessment clearly with the realities of practice.

In several arenas of professional practice, including health care programmes, problem based learning has emerged partly as a way of responding to criticisms of the 'academicisation' of practice learning (Kamin et al, 2004). Case studies and other forms of teaching and assessment drawing directly on material from practice have been used to ensure relevance of the curriculum for future practice. The enhanced practice focus of the new degree in social work is in line with a political acceptance of the need to ensure that academic knowledge is supporting practice learning (DH: 2002). In this context utilising case studies to test fitness for practice appears an increasingly pertinent response to calls from government and practice agencies.

Following discussion with the programme team it was decided to change the mode of assessment for Social Work Law from essay assignments to a staged case study. The teaching team was concerned that answering a single essay question did not adequately test a comprehensive knowledge base. A composite case study was devised, therefore, to cover all areas of law teaching and to assess the application of this to practice via a staged case study. The new module Systems in Practice also chose to utilise a case study format for its assessment. This module uses what Bourner et al (2000) refer to as a 'hi-fidelity case study' where students offer real experiences/dilemmas from practice to other students who act as consultants in a group work setting. The case study itself is then worked upon further, theoretical frameworks are sharpened and the written case study is presented as the final assessment. These changes took place in response to the assessment review and the impact of these changes on student learning is being analysed currently.

### **Evaluating Self -Assessment: Reflecting on Process and Outcome**

Discussions regarding how students work on their own practice material led to considerations regarding the role of student self-assessment as part of the assessment experience. If students are working on and presenting their own material how could we involve students more fully in making judgements themselves on the work they submit for assessment? The advantages and disadvantages of moving in this direction were explored.

### ***SCREEs***

The educational literature provided many examples of tools of self-assessment. One example explored was Sequential Criterion Referenced Educational Evaluation Systems (SCREEs) that provide students with a self-administered, self-scored test enabling them to assess their progress over time. In essence, learning outcomes for the module are identified at the start of teaching and students are provided with a questionnaire they complete during and on completion of the module, where they detail whether they are achieving the required outcomes and, if not, which areas they need to develop further upon. The students themselves assess their own level of competence. If SCREEs are clearly linked with learning outcomes as an assessment method then the connection between the two is established i.e. the very purpose of this assessment method is explicitly to test how far learning outcomes are being met. Learning here also is conceived of as a process rather than focused on a single snapshot of experience, offering the opportunity to bridge potential divides between outcome focused curricula and a profession requiring attention to process. Progress over time can be chartered if the questionnaire is completed over the course of the module and developmental goals can be explicitly focused on the student's individual learning needs.

In relation to the requirements that social work programmes assess whether students are fit to practice, staff and students were not in favour, however, of using SCREEs as a summative assessment method. All responded that staff needed to have the ultimate judgement here and that it would be professionally irresponsible to leave the final judgement of competence in the students' hands

alone and would not be in line with the Department of Health requirements for social work training. Consideration of using SCREEs, however, led the programme into a much broader debate concerning the role of self-assessment.

There are several potential advantages to increasing self-assessment of students on social work programmes. The use of self-assessment is encouraged by much of the educational literature (Boud, 1998; Light and Cox, 2004; Newble and Cannon, 1995). Brown et al (1997:178) argue that 'Self -assessment is central to effective lifelong learning and the development of professional competence....If one wishes to lay the foundations of effective lifelong learning then self-assessment is a *sine qua non* of course design and delivery'. Given that assessment practices may or may not precipitate powerful learning, it is important to appreciate the central involvement of students themselves in the assessment process (Maclellan, 2004).

Increasingly, some of the literature in social work education appears to be moving in this direction too. 'In education for the professions self-assessment should be central; the ability to assess oneself might be said to be a defining characteristic of professional work' (Burgess et al, 1999: 134). If the mark of professional training is considered to be that of promoting students who can critically reflect on their own practice and alter it where necessary, then self-assessment of learning appears a key component (Ellison, 1996). Light and Cox (2004) argue that the use of self-assessment addresses the paradox of highly dependent education leading to the development of independent, responsible professionals. In the context of social work education, assessment methods encouraging the development of autonomously functioning professionals are worthy of serious consideration. Boud (1999) argues that the concept of self-assessment emerged from the tradition of the autonomous self-monitoring professional. Professional independence is itself founded on the self-regulatory assumption that professionals have the ability to accurately assess their strengths and weaknesses and to take appropriate action as a result.

There are, however, many arguments against the increased use of self-assessment, whether via SCREEs or alternative methods. The process of self-assessment is often time consuming for students and the level of independent reflection required to engage in this process and then produce resulting evidence as a product for assessment can be at best challenging and at worst confusing and over-demanding.

Requiring students to engage in the process of meta – cognition in this respect is a difficult task that many students may not have engaged with in a formal manner previously. The ability to critically and effectively self-evaluate and then to be able to name one's knowledge in this context is a skilled activity. Some students report that they are unaccustomed to placing themselves in the role of assessor and this led to their experiencing the process of self -assessment as difficult to engage with (Sambell and McDowell, 1998). Tensions between the demands of reflection and the requirements of competency based education assessment may also emerge. The reflective component of self- assessment may sit uneasily with the outcome, competency base framework currently operating. As Smith (1999: 52) argues, in an educational world increasingly dominated by

**‘competences’ and ‘national standards’ it takes considerable confidence to reflect critically and acknowledge one’s ‘incompetences’.**

**A more fundamental concern was expressed about the reliability of self-assessment as providing a credible judgement of competence and fitness for practice. A study by Falchikov and Boud (1989) found that in higher education high achievers tend to underestimate their abilities and low achievers tend to over-estimate. Other studies also suggest that where self-assessment is used for summative purposes most students tend to overrate their performance (Boud, 1995). In such a contested context, it was agreed that a key challenge for social work is how to utilise the positive contributions self-assessment can make to student learning whilst not compromising professional standards and the need to certify a student’s fitness for practice.**

**The assessment of professional social work practice serves many different purposes and tensions between these are evident in relation to the promotion of self-assessment as a formal method of student assessment. Black (1998) argues that assessments have three major purposes. Firstly, to support learning, secondly, to report achievements and finally to satisfy demands for public accountability. Whilst self-assessment may be particularly advantageous for the first purpose, whether the second and third are met here is more questionable. Such tensions may be eased if self-assessment processes are incorporated as part of formative rather than summative assessment outcomes or if initial self-assessment tasks are subsequently joint marked or overseen by staff, with academics holding ultimate responsibility for assigning the grade. Boud (1999: 123) helpfully separates the issue of self-assessment as a learning activity in its own right, from its use as a formal assessment method. In social work education, he suggests that self- assessment might be more effectively located as contributing to learning and teaching processes rather than as a replacement for other types of assessment.**

**Teaching teams in this case study favoured the use of self-assessment as a formative learning activity as many were concerned about the use of self-assessment as a summative judgement on a student’s competence to practice. The student representatives also argued strongly *against* the use of self-assessment as a self-regulatory summative exercise. They argued that such a judgement should be located with the staff rather than the student body, fearing that such assessment would not adequately regulate fitness for practice and may allow students who were not competent to achieve the professional award.**

### ***LASERs***

**As a result of these discussions the process of encouraging self -assessment has been enhanced on the social work programmes but summative judgements on work presented still rests with staff. In the psychology module in the new degree, for example, students are asked to complete five Learning Achievement Self-Evaluative Records (LASERs) where they are required to make systematic records of their learning achievements, take a critical approach to the material presented and relate psychological theory to social work practice. Students are presented with set questions which they need to reflect on and provide written**

answers to. Four of the LASERs are focused around the evaluation of psychological theoretical ideas and their application to social work practice. Students are encouraged to reflect on the learning they achieve in this process. The fifth LASER focuses on self-assessment of the student's role in an ungraded group presentation delivered to the student group and incorporates elements of peer assessment too. The student is asked to evaluate their own performance and to identify what they could have done differently, make anonymous comments on the contribution of other group members and link their own role and roles adopted by others to group work theory. The use of LASERs enhances the role of self-assessment undertaken by the students in relation to their learning but the ultimate responsibility for allocating grades to this work rests with staff.

## **Conclusion**

This article began by reviewing assessment methods for social work practice. Considerations of the advantages and disadvantages of three specific assessment methods were offered here from the perspective of one particular social work programme. Issues raised by teaching staff and students were presented as a case study of how assessment changes were considered and the arguments for change evaluated - the process- and subsequent changes made in light of this-the outcome. Arguments raised here have a broader remit and are offered with the aim of contributing to the wider debate about the role of assessment in professional practice and the applicability of assessment methods utilised.

Reviewing assessment methods was a helpful process for our social work programme, not only in relation to the practicalities of discussing the assessment methods involved but also in furthering a dialogue about how students best acquire knowledge required for professional practice. Tensions between professional outcomes and academic requirements also surfaced throughout for example, the weight given to the ability to demonstrate practice skills and the need to evidence academic ability. Debates concerning the role of the teacher in assessing learning and maintaining standards were also key aspects of this dialogue.

Such discussions appear most fruitfully engaged with if they are effectively contextualised and the process and practice of assessment is viewed as a contested arena. If we seek to educate reflective social work practitioners of the future it appears pertinent to engage in discussions around how we assess this with a level of 'sceptical questioning' (Brookfield, 2000) in relation to our assessment practices. Such debates were accentuated by preparations for the new social work qualification but engaging with them continues to be crucial for the social work profession.

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**Word count**

**Summary: 167**

**Main body: 6034**