

'Why practice education research must be catalyst for tackling longstanding issues facing role'

A Social Work England-commissioned study has shone a light on the challenges facing practice educators and provides a framework for a better future for the role, says the National Organisation for Practice Teaching

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By Leanne Olivant, NOPT

In the dynamic landscape of social work, practice educators (PEs) stand as vital pillars. The role's critical importance in nurturing the next generation of social workers and retaining experienced practitioners was highlighted in a [Social Work England-commissioned review, which reported last month](#).

The National Organisation for Practice Teaching (NOPT), which represents PEs across the country, warmly welcomes the report as a long-overdue acknowledgement of the pivotal contributions they make. NOPT also agrees with the research findings, which validate discussions that have occurred throughout the profession for many years.

By drawing on a literature review and focus groups, interviews, and surveys of PEs, course providers and local authorities, the review provided a comprehensive exploration of the challenges faced by PEs.

Longstanding concerns amid passion for role

These ranged from navigating the emotional labour of supporting struggling students to grappling with institutional racism and advocating for fellow disabled and neurodivergent colleagues because of a lack of support and reasonable adjustments within organisations.

The research also echoed longstanding concerns among PEs regarding inconsistent and inadequate remuneration, as well as the need for workload relief, factors that significantly affect retention within the profession.

At the same time, it highlighted the passion many PEs have for the role and pointed to areas of good practice.

With Social Work England now considering how to take forward the findings, an evidence-based review of such practice could be a strong first step in further enhancing the PE role.

Caution over new training standards

One potential consequence of the research is the development of new education and training standards for PE courses. While NOPT acknowledges the importance of oversight to ensure consistency, members are cautious regarding the implementation of additional standards, as many social workers already feel the profession is at saturation point.

They also believe that the [practice educator professional standards \(PEPS\), overseen by the British Association of Social Workers \(BASW\)](#), are fit for purpose, as they have been developed through consultation with PEs and training providers.

However, members are open to exploring new standards that focus on the support employers and education providers should give to PEs and standardisation of how the existing PEPS are enacted.

Oversight of PE courses by Social Work England and the potential for annotation of the register with practice educator status could lead to increased recognition for this important role, placing it on an equal footing with approved mental health professionals and best interests assessors.

Recognising challenges facing independent sector

When looking at support and training standards, NOPT urges Social Work England to recognise the significant differences between local authorities and the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sector and the latter's need for tailored support and resources.

PVI organisations and independent PEs play a crucial role in providing placements for students, yet they often have limited resources and do not have the backing of large agencies in advocating for their needs.

We also strongly support increased opportunities for continuous professional development (CPD) for PEs, through specialised training that should serve as evidence for registration renewal.

'Pressing issue' of remuneration

Whilst Social Work England has acknowledged it does not govern remuneration, NOPT urges the regulator to leverage its influence to address this pressing issue. Consistent and appropriate remuneration is vital for retaining current PEs and attracting future talent, particularly independent PEs who often face funding challenges.

Looking to the future, one of the weaknesses the report identified was the lack of national oversight of the workforce, including career trajectories and demographics, and NOPT would support further research in this area.

We would welcome a cohesive approach with other agencies, with representation from diverse PEs to address the unique challenges faced by different groups. We would recommend future research addresses the training and support needs of PE mentors, recognising the additional layer of skill and specialism required for this role.

'We must capitalise on momentum'

In conclusion, while the research findings may not be surprising, they offer validation and a structured framework for addressing longstanding issues and provides a solid foundation for progress in practice education.

Moving forward, we believe it is crucial to capitalise on this momentum, ensuring timely action and continued dialogue to enhance practice education in social work.

Collaboration between stakeholders, including Social Work England, BASW, NOPT and teaching partnerships, will be pivotal in driving meaningful change and supporting the invaluable work of PEs nationwide.

NOPT will be welcoming Lara Timms and Rebecca Mulvaney from Social Work England to our PE conference on 25 June where they will be sharing further insights from the research. [Find out more about the NOPT conference here.](#)

Leeanne Olivant is treasurer of the National Organisation for Practice Teaching practice educators, social work education, Social Work England