

Enabling Professionals to Succeed in Post-Qualifying Education: Initial Concerns and Assessment Outcomes from Classroom-Based and Blended Learning Modules

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Abstract

Professional social workers in the UK, undertaking the entry module for the post-qualifying specialist child care award were surveyed at the beginning of their studies (N=90). Students were on a Classroom-Based Route (N= 40) or Blended Learning Route (N=50). A survey was used to explore students' concerns about starting post-qualifying education and their perceived barriers to study. The findings were analysed in relation to their performance in the course assessment along with their demographics to evaluate whether either the students' previous educational experience or their anxieties about the programme influenced their performance on the programme.

Results indicated that perceived barriers to study were linked to whether English is a second language and to age. English as a second language did not affect performance in assessment. Age was related to assessment outcomes. The main influence on assessment outcomes appears to be the method of teaching delivery with those on

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classroom-based programmes more likely to complete the programme and to achieve higher grades than those on blended learning programmes.

Keywords: student engagement, blended learning, predicting student success.

Introduction

Student learning is a result of an interaction between a student and the learning situation, and this is unique for every student in every different learning context.

(Bloxham & Boyd, 2007, p.69)

McDowell, Penlington and Tudorm (2010) suggest that attention should be given to understanding students' expectations since these influence their capacity to engage with the learning environment and impact on the success or failure of their studies. When considering course or programme evaluation from a scholarship of teaching and learning perspective, it can prove invaluable to be aware of the perceptions students have of their learning and to understand how these have influenced students' approaches to studying/learning." (McDowell Penlington & Tudorm, p. 81)

Where students report a high quality of learning (deep approaches to learning and perceptions of the learning environment that afford such approaches), the relationship between approaches to teaching and perceptions of the teaching context are consonant and coherent (Prosser, Ramsden, Trigwell & Martin 2003). Analysis of student satisfaction surveys suggests that underlying the reported satisfaction scores the students' 'preparedness to study' and their conceptualisation of their subject determine their capacity to make use of the learning experiences offered. Students who are not adequately prepared for study at the level undertaken find it hard to get started, quickly fall behind, become dissatisfied and demotivated (Prosser, 2006, Trigwell & Prosser, 1996) and find it hard to engage with the assessment requirements (Ramsden, 2009, Akister, Bannon & Mullender-Locke, 2000). For these students, specific interventions will be needed to enhance their engagement in learning and improve their chances of success. For successful engagement in the learning process, the preparedness of the student for the level of studies being undertaken and their interaction with the teaching paradigm offered is critical. As Ramsden reports: "Now that part-time students form a large proportion of the student body, universities and colleges are providing

progressively more courses and curricula that meet the needs of non-traditional students – part-time, foundation degrees, work-based learning, and flexible routes... Information and communications technology has become an important component of some types of flexible provision, enabling students to enter higher education that might otherwise not have been able to.” (Ramsden, 2009, p.23). While the flexibility in modes of study available gives the part-time student greater access to higher education these modes of delivery may not always be those which are most likely to enable them to successfully complete their studies (Rovai, 2002).

All health and social care professionals in the UK are now required to undertake post-qualifying education. In social work, post-qualifying education is a recent development and so workers may be returning to study after a significant period in the practice of social work and away from education. Additionally, the workforce also includes overseas qualified social workers who will not have studied in the UK before (19%; Skill for Care, 2007) and includes social workers with a range of different academic and professional qualifications. Research into social work education highlights the tension between the demands of the workplace and the demands of study (Worsley et al. 2009). The whole question of the knowledge base for social work and how this can be applied in practice remains contentious (Trevithick, 2008, Akister, Accepted for publication) although there is general agreement that post-qualifying education is critical to developing an effective workforce. There is also a suggestion that while post-qualifying education may not solve problems in social work practice it may provide a method for identifying social workers who have difficulty in maintaining their professional development and who then require further training opportunities before they can be considered as appropriately skilled to undertake complex social work (Brown & Keen, 2004).

Post-qualifying, part time social work education may be offered through classroom-based or blended learning programmes. We know that between 20 and 30% of those students who begin a distance-learning course do not finish it (Kearsley, & Lynch 1996, Rovai, 2002). For professional practitioners failure to complete their studies may be preferable to the consequences, for their career, of failing the assessment. Despite this there has been sharp growth in the size of the distance and blended learning market

(Hornik, Saunders, Li, Moskal, & Dzuiban, (2008), Fry, 2001). One of the most important aspects facilitating learning is the element of interaction, including: interaction with content; interaction with the instructor and interaction with the students (Moore, 2001). A further element of the blended learning environment is *interaction with the system*, increasingly a feature with programmes available through e-learning or supported through e-mail and other electronic communication (Dupin-Bryant, 2004). In blended learning the amount of student interaction has been found to improve distance-learners' educational experience (Hornik et al., 2008, Wright, Marsh, & Miller, 2000). Therefore, it is a challenge for instructors to develop meaningful dialogue with the students in this paradigm. At the same time, there are clear advantages of blended learning for students in professional practice including: flexibility of the material and the time; accessibility to the material; visibility of the multimedia and availability of the data (Bouhnik & Marcus, 2006).

Background to the Study

In 2001, the General Social Care Council (GSCC), the first regulatory body for the social care profession in England recognised the need for a regulated and clear route of continual professional development for social workers. The GSCC reviewed the existing post-qualifying framework through a wide-ranging stakeholder consultation resulting in the introduction of a 'new' framework which came into force throughout England on 1 September 2007.

Prior to 2004 the professional social work qualification in the UK could be taken as a Diploma in Higher Education (DipHE), a bachelor's degree (BA) or master's degree (MA). From 2004, the social work qualification requirement was raised to BA or MA. As a result social workers may view post-qualifying education from several different motivational standpoints: as a means towards career progression (where some employers attach success to pay structure incentives); the furtherance of an academic qualification (achieving a degree for those with DipHE qualifications) or the furtherance of professional knowledge. Sobiechowska (2009) argues that motivation is '*driven by internal and external factors as well as a variety of life goals*'. With such a diverse student population this study sought to consider factors that may act as strengths and

barriers to successful completion of post-qualifying study and enhancing the student experience.

This paper presents research undertaken within a post-qualifying programme (Specialist Award) for social workers practising in the area of child and family social work. The Specialist Award aims to “Consolidate, extend and deepen professional competence in a specialist context – likely to be delivered at Honours level” Ruch (2009, p.11). Ruch’s last point is of interest, in that the ‘new’ post-qualifying awards combine, within a University setting, both an academic and a practice based approach to continual professional development. Further, for students at this level there are many competing demands as they try to balance full-time work (*in the majority of cases*) with part-time study requiring a heightened reliance on their own motivation to complete. Indeed, since qualified social workers may arrive to study at post-qualifying level from several different academic and/or professional experience routes there are a number of challenges to enabling them to succeed in the learning process.

In our 2008 cohort (n=52) some students felt that they were not receiving enough ‘teaching’ in the first module of the programme. These students appeared to be those with DipHE qualifications who had not previously studied at BA, level 3 and specifically had not undertaken an undergraduate dissertation which can be argued develops autonomous learners (Akister, Williams & Maynard., 2009). We considered introducing pre-course study skills for those entering with Diploma qualifications, but decided to investigate other factors that might be influencing student’s performance before changing the programme. This research was designed to look at whether Diploma or Degree qualifications affect outcomes from post-qualifying education and at what other factors may affect success in the programme including classroom-based or blended learning routes, age of students and whether English is a first language.

Method

A survey was conducted to examine the students’ expectations as they commenced the entry module for the post-qualifying specialist child care award. This module is offered in two teaching deliveries: a classroom-based programme (5 days in college) and a

blended learning route (2 half day workshops, a distance learning work-book and e-mail support). The research sought to look at the relationship between student concerns, together with their demographics and their successful completion of the programme. A questionnaire was designed to capture their previous experience of Higher Education, their concerns at the outset of the programme, how they had prepared for the course, employer support and their future aspirations (see Appendix 1).

Both teaching deliveries commenced with a classroom-based session. At the beginning of this session the research was introduced and the questionnaire were administered and retrieved before the teaching began. The response rate was very high (95%), probably due to their being no issues about either losing or remembering to return the questionnaire. Responses from the questionnaire were analysed in relation how successfully the students completed the programme of study.

Advice about the ethics of the study was sought from the university ethics committee. The ethics committee confirmed that as the study was evaluating the effectiveness of the teaching approaches for the student groups ethical approval was not required. The programmes SPSS and STATA11 were used for multivariate analysis and modeling.

Sample

95 students commenced the programmes. Of these, 90 students completed the questionnaire (84% female, 16% male; 5% of the cohort had a disability; 5% special needs; 15% English was a second language and 9% were overseas social work qualified). Candidates ranged in age from, 20-29 (18%), 30-39 (29%), 40-49 (37%) and 50+ (16%). Of the British students 51% had degree level qualifications as contrasted with 71% of the Non-British students, indicating the higher academic level of qualification achieved overseas. The sample includes two groups of students, one group on a classroom-based programme (n= 40) and the other on a blended learning route (n= 50).

Analysis and Findings

In this paper we only present findings where there are between group differences. So for example, although we noted that BA qualified social workers return to study sooner

than DipHE qualified social workers there were no significant differences in their outcomes to report.

Candidates' initial concerns on commencing their studies are presented in Tables 1-3. The areas where there are statistically significant differences in their concerns about returning to study relate to their age, the academic level of their professional social work qualification and to whether or not English is a first language. All candidates were concerned about balancing their studies with their other commitments (see Table 1 below).

Table 1. Initial Concerns I - Candidates analysed by age group

Concerns	Age Group			Fishers Exact Test
	21-30 (n=15) -----	31-45 (n=38) -----	45+ (n=30) -----	(df=2) p -----
Getting Started *	3 (20%)	20 (53%)	8 (27%)	0.023 *
Finding Materials	2(13%)	9(24%)	4(13%)	0.203
Gaining support (time) from employer	4 (27%)	15 (39%)	16 (53%)	0.189
Balancing other commitments	10 (67%)	29 (76%)	24 (80%)	0.717
How will I get it all done *	1 (7%)	12 (32%)	13 (43%)	0.024 *

(*significant differences, $p < 0.05$)

Candidates in the younger age group (21-30 years) express less concern, in all categories, than candidates in the older age groups. They had less concern about getting started or getting it all done with statistically significant differences here (see Table 1). The younger candidates also report less concern about gaining time or support from their employer although these differences are not statistically significant. Younger candidates are more likely to have qualified through completing a degree than a diploma. This raises the question of whether the confidence of younger candidates relates to their experience of studying at degree level or to their age.

Next we analysed the responses by whether the candidates had degree or diploma qualifications (see Table 2).

Table 2. Initial Concerns II- Candidates analysed by Degree or Diploma Qualification

Concerns	Qualification		Fishers Exact Test (Df=1) p
	Degree (n=49)	Diploma (n=38)	
Getting started	18(37%)	14(37%)	0.58
Finding Materials	12(25%)	4(11%)	0.08
Gaining support (time) from employer	22(45%)	17(45%)	0.58
Balancing other commitments	38(77%)	29(76%)	0.54
How will I get it all done?*	12 (24.5%)	17(44.7%)	0.04*

(* significant differences, $p < 0.05$)

Candidates with a degree had significantly less concerns about how they would get the work done and complete the course (See Table 2). The question of finding materials approaches significance ($p=0.08$) reflecting again confidence about studying probably related to the short amount of time since they completed their degrees (since the degree has only been the social work qualification level for 6 years), and to their familiarity with accessing on-line materials.

We also found differences between the student concerns depending on whether or not English was their first language (see Table 3).

Table 3. Initial Concerns III - Candidates analysed by whether English is a First Language

Concerns	English 1 st Language (n=74)	English NOT 1 st Language (n=13)	Fishers Exact Test (df=1) p
Getting Started *	23 (31.1%)	9(69.2%)	0.01*
Finding Materials *	10(13.5%)	6(46.2%)	0.01*
Gaining Support (time) from Employer	35(47.3%)	4(30.8%)	0.21
Balancing Other Commitments	57(77%)	10(76.9%)	0.62
How will I get it all done?	25(34%)	4(31%)	0.55

(* significant differences, $p < 0.01$)

Those candidates for whom English was not their first language had significantly more concerns about how they were going to get started on the programme and about finding appropriate materials. All candidates, whether English was their first language or not, were concerned about balancing study with their other commitments, and worried about how they would get all the work done and whether they would get support from their employer (see Table 3). The questions raised here are whether their concerns are related to studying in a different culture/country, whether it is dealing with unfamiliar systems or if there is a concern about language skills?

Comments written by candidates on their questionnaires reflect for some the difficulty of facing unfamiliar systems for the delivery of education and they also reflect the tension of trying to study and work at the same time. For example:

I finished University outside the UK and this system is not very familiar to me.

Finding time is a big issue as working full time takes over.

Although my employers are supportive, getting enough time off for studying is difficult.

These results show that there are differing concerns which relate to age of the candidate, their previous educational achievements and to whether English is their first language. It might be possible to consider remedial steps to counter these concerns but that would not establish whether these concerns are anticipatory or have a real basis in the student's success or failure in their post-qualifying studies.

The next section looks at whether students' are successful in their studies and at the grades that they achieve and gives an indicator of how to develop the post-qualifying programme to maximize the outcomes for students.

Outcomes for the students

This section reports on the analysis of the students' final grades in relation to their social work qualifications, their ages, whether English is their first or second language, the length of time since they qualified and whether they were on classroom-based or blended learning programmes. The mean grades achieved by the group were 62% (s.d.=8.1) for classroom-based teaching and 55.6% (s.d.=10.7) for blended learning programmes

There were no direct, statistically significant relationships between grades achieved and the type of social work qualification that the students had or the length of time since they had achieved their social work qualification or whether English was their first language. This suggests that social work professionals, who are currently practising social work, are able to successfully undertake continuing professional development in a higher education environment. Their success in their post-qualifying studies is not mediated by their previous level of study, nor how long ago they studied, their age or whether English is their first language or not.

However, students who were taught through blended learning programmes supported by workshops and e-mail contact were significantly less likely to submit any work at all (see Table 4). This is a key finding since these students did not complete any assessments and effectively withdrew from the course.

Table 4. Submission of Assignment by Method of Teaching

	Classroom-Based Teaching *	Blended Learning	Total(n=71)^a
Submit Assignment	33 92%	26 74%	59 83%
Non Submission of Assignment	3 8%	9 26%	12 17%

(*Fishers Exact Test= 3.8, df =2, p=0.5; ^an=71 due to anonymity of some questionnaires which could not be matched with results)

For the students who did submit assignments, regression analysis allows us to model the variables that may be contributing to the final outcomes for students and to see what variables help to explain these. Modelling individual variables against the grades they achieved, the only variable that is statistically significant, on its own is the method of teaching. Students who are taught by blended learning achieve lower grades than those receiving classroom-based teaching with the teaching method explaining 12% of the variance (see Table 5, Model 1). Adding other variables, age of candidate and whether English is a second language, can increase the explanatory power to explain 25% of the variance (see Table 5, Model 2).

Table5. Regression Models of Grades Achieved related to Methods of Teaching, Age of Candidates and English as a Second Language

Models of Grades Achieved	Coefficient (β)	Standard Error (S.E)	Probability (p)	Confidence Interval (95%)	(R²)
Model 1 (Unadjusted) Blended Learning	-6.37	2.45	0.012	-11.3 to -1.45	11.9%
Model 2 (Adjusted) Blended Learning Age > 45 years English 2 nd Language	-8.87 -9.2 4.6	2.94 4.26 4.44	0.005 0.04 0.30	-14.8 to -2.9 -17.9 to -0.6 -4.4 to 13.6	25.2%

(R² = % variance explained by the model)

Discussion

Dupin-Bryant (2004) in a study of pre-entry variables in online learning found that prior education and Information Technology skills were the most important determinants of student retention. When the research began we expected to find that diploma qualified social workers experienced more difficulty in engaging with post-qualifying studies than students who had qualified at degree level.

What we actually found was that the reasons for difficulty in engaging with post-qualifying studies is more complex and relates to age, method of delivery and whether English is a first language as well as to previous levels of educational experience. Candidates under 30 years of age and over 45 years of age express less concern about the return to study than those in the age range 30 – 45 years. Parker (1999) examined reasons for non-completion of distance learning programmes and found that age alone did not predict non-completion. Parker did find that job pressures and family concerns took precedence over the importance of completing studies. In our study age also only contributes to predictions about completing the programme when combined with other variables. Candidates in the age range 30-45 years may be at a particular point in their career where failing could adversely affect their career trajectory (Brown & Keen, 2004). They may also be in a phase of life with high personal commitments relating to family.

The method of delivery appears to be pivotal in determining outcomes (see Table 4). There is a move in higher education towards increased use of both distance and blended learning due to its flexibility and ease of access, and possibly because it costs less to deliver (Fry, 2001). Research into distance learning and blended learning approaches has reported issues with retention (Nash, 2005) and with lower levels of achievement in terms of grades (Carr, 2000). Although it has also been suggested that engagement with different forms of delivery is related to the student's personality and individual profile rather than being a consequence of the delivery mode alone (Hall, 2008). Our findings highlight the potential risk of part-time students failing when studying at a distance, with the attendant risks to their career prospects. Simpson (2006) and Hall (2008) investigate the use of surveys to ascertain whether online learning is right for the particular students and concludes that these surveys are very limited in predicting which students will succeed. In the absence of effective predictive surveys he proposes that institutions should provide orientation sessions for students seeking to enrol in distance or blended education courses (Hall, 2008). Further to this,

Wojciechowski and Louann (2005) found that students who participated in an optional orientation session prior to taking an online class had the second highest relationship to the final grade received in that class.

Interestingly, the reason we were offering classroom-based routes as well as blended learning options for this module was that two of the local authorities who were sending their social workers on the programme believed that their employees needed more face-to-face contact with tutors than is offered by blended learning. It seems that they may have been correct, and that more students do drop out of blended learning and that those who complete the programme, achieve poorer results. Since the entire point of post-qualifying professional education is to improve the skills of the workforce, this is an important finding and we need to be concerned about those students who withdraw from the entry module to post-qualifying education as this may also simply reflect a lack of competence in the workplace (Brown & Keen, 2004).

If our understanding of the data is correct it could be helpful to offer pre-course 'return to study' or 'balancing study with employment' opportunities to promote confident engagement with post-qualifying education both classroom-based and blended learning routes. Such programmes could also engage with the anxieties of those for whom English is a second language and those who have not previously undertaken studies at BA Level 3 which develops autonomous learning.

Conclusions

In this exploratory study, the method of delivery for post-qualifying programmes was the most important factor in determining outcomes for students. Classroom-based delivery resulted in higher completion rates and higher achievement in assessments for the students

There is a place for all systems of delivery and we should be mindful of improving each of these and as Bounnik and Marcus (2006) suggest in relation to e-learning (essentially a mode of distance learning), "Educators must pay attention to what the system itself has to offer, and use it to influence, in a positive and constructive manner, the three

types of interaction identified by Moore— interaction between the student and the content, interaction between the student and the lecturer, and interaction among the students—so that the apparent weaknesses of the e-learning system will become its strengths” (p. 304).

We suggest that social workers will drop out of a programme rather than risk failure and all that implies for their career. To maximize successful learning from post-qualifying education, a pre-course workshop that fosters engagement in a return to study, through familiarisation with the learning environment and up-to-date study skills is proposed (Wojciechowski & Louann, 2005). This is particularly critical when the learning environment is a form of blended learning.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire

PQ SPECIALIST AWARD PROJECT

Age: 21-25 26-30 31-35 36-40 41-45 46-50 51-55 over 55

Gender: Male female

Ethnic origin: (please specify).....

Do you have a diagnosed Disability? yes no

If yes, please elaborate.....

Do you have a Special Need? yes no

If yes, please elaborate.....

Is English your first language? yes no

If no, have you ever studied in the UK before?

1. When did you last do any formal study that involved writing assessed assignments? Please answer as fully as possible.....

2. What is your social work qualification?

CSS CQSW DipSW BA Social Work

Other (please specify)

3. When and where did you complete your social work qualification?.....

4. Do you have a degree? yes no

5. Have you completed any other courses (including in-house) prior to commencing the Specialist award?.....

6. Can you identify any initial fears or barriers to commencing your Specialist award study? Please tick as many as apply.

Getting started	<input type="checkbox"/>
Finding materials	<input type="checkbox"/>
Structuring my time	<input type="checkbox"/>
Understanding what is required	<input type="checkbox"/>
Will I be able to do this?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Gaining support (time) from my employer	<input type="checkbox"/>
Balancing other commitments	<input type="checkbox"/>

7. Do you have any further concerns not listed above? Please elaborate

8. What best describes your view as you start the PQ specialist award ?

Excited to be studying at post qualifying level	
Looking forward to studying independently	
How will I get it all done?	
It will enhance my professional development	
Meeting social workers from other Agencies	
I am confident I can do it	

9. What skills do you think will help you do your specialist award ?

Time Management skills	
Library Skills	
Ability to structure work	
IT skills	
Writing skills	
Applying theory to practice	

10. What do you think will help you to successfully complete the Specialist award?

Peer Group support	
Family / friend support	
Workshops run by the University	
Support from employer	
On-line (e mail) support from programme leader	
Confidence building	

11. What areas of knowledge do you hope to develop as part of the Specialist award ? Please elaborate as fully as possible.....

Are there any further comments that you would like make regarding the Specialist award which are not included in the above questions?