



Department
for Education

Step up to Social Work Programme Evaluation 2012: The Regional Partnerships and Employers Perspectives

Research Report

June 2013

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Acknowledgements

The evaluation team is indebted to the many staff across all the local authorities who generously contributed their time to the evaluation. In particular, we wish to acknowledge the time and support provided by all the regional partnership coordinators for the Step Up programme: Anthea Anthony, Larissa Barker, Jacky Elliott and Karen Vanner, Ray Halford and Louise Purser, David Horsler, Hannah Smith, Vicky White, Sharon Willerton and Dorothy Smith. Without their commitment to facilitating the work of the evaluation team, it would not have been possible to gain access to the wide range of staff whom we have been able to interview across the local authorities, or the extensive documentary evidence provided by some regional partnerships.

We would like to thank all the staff within local authorities who agreed to be interviewed, who completed the survey and who allowed us to visit their placement settings. The richness and depth of the findings are a testament to their positive engagement with the evaluation.

Within some regional partnerships, we were fortunate to be able to meet with groups of service users and carers, including young people who had participated in the recruitment process for Step Up. We are grateful for their time and the enthusiasm with which they contributed their own experiences of the Step Up programme.

Our gratitude is also expressed to the two lead higher education institutions (HEIs), Salford University and Manchester Metropolitan University, whose openness and support is acknowledged with much appreciation. In particular, we would like to thank the lead staff in both universities, Allison Coleman, Alison Domakin, Carole Haines, Steve Myers and Liz Pell, not only for their own time but also their willingness to provide us with access to a range of relevant staff and extensive documentation. In addition, we were welcomed by the delivery HEIs: Bedfordshire, Chester, Coventry and Hertfordshire Universities, who were generous with their time and access to information.

Although the evaluation did not focus extensively on Cohort Two, the evaluation team would like to acknowledge the willingness of local authority and HEI staff to give generously of their time and information in this respect. We would also like to thank the members of the Research Advisory Group whose advice was extremely helpful to us; and, of course, our colleagues from the Children's Workforce Development Council, and now the Department for Education, who managed the process throughout.

Glossary of Terms

CWDC	–	Children’s Workforce Development Council
DCSF	–	Department of Children, Schools and Families
DfE	–	Department for Education
DMU	–	De Montfort University
DoH	–	Department of Health
GSCC	–	General Social Care Council
GYO	–	Grow Your Own
HEI	–	Higher education institution
LA	–	Local authority
LTP	–	Learn Together Partnership
MMU	–	Manchester Metropolitan University
NQSW	–	Newly qualified social worker
PENNA	–	Appointed recruitment consultant
PIPC	–	Appointed project management consultant
QAA	–	Quality Assurance Agency
RP	–	Regional partnership
SWTF	–	Social Work Task Force
Trainee	–	Candidate/student on Step Up to Social Work programme
UCAS	–	University and College Admissions Service
WLA	–	West London Alliance

Executive Summary

Context

Step Up to Social Work began in England in 2010, as a fast-track master's level qualifying programme for social work, targeted at high-calibre recruits to the profession. The programme was government funded and was designed to be employer-led, coordinated and delivered at regional partnership level with higher education institutions (HEIs). The partnership model involved different sets of relations both between local authorities (LAs), and between HEIs and LAs than had hitherto existed within mainstream social work education programmes.

Evaluation aims

The evaluation of the programme was undertaken by De Montfort University (DMU), with the remit to 'report findings on the effectiveness of the current recruitment, selection, allocation and delivery pattern in meeting the three key objectives of the Step Up to Social Work programme which are to:

- increase the quality of social workers entering the profession;
- enable local employers to shape initial training for students to address local needs; and
- develop a new entry route into the social work profession.' (Evaluation Specification, Children's Workforce Development Council)

The evaluation was initially commissioned by the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC), and the commission subsequently transferred to the Department for Education (DfE) in April 2012.

About the evaluation project

The project adopted a mixed methods approach, given the range and nature of evaluation objectives. A quantitative analysis of recruitment and selection patterns, and outcomes was undertaken; key policy and programme documents were analysed; a programme of interviews was undertaken with a range of respondents, including regional partnership members, university (HEI) staff, commissioning body representatives, service users and external organisations commissioned to contribute to Step Up to Social Work. A supplementary survey was undertaken with a wider range of regional partnership staff contributing to the Step Up to Social Work programme.

The evaluation covered eight distinctive regional partnerships, with their associated delivery arrangements, and this enabled the evaluation team to consider variations in such factors as: structural organisation, programme content, partnership characteristics, and cohort size, in order to consider the impact of any of these features in determining the overall progress of Step Up to Social Work trainees or programme outcomes.

Overview of the findings

The evaluation obtained a range of perspectives on different aspects of the Step Up to Social Work programme and, as such, gained a broad understanding of the experiences of developing and delivering an innovative model of qualifying training for social work. In overall terms, it identified merits to the model developed, in terms of both processes and outcomes. The programme was valued by many participants and is generally believed to have generated a significant group of highly capable and committed new entrants to the social work profession. Despite concerns about specific aspects of the process, including its ability to promote diversity, the recruitment and selection criteria and accompanying resources were found to be robust and effective mechanisms for selecting high quality and resilient candidates for the programme. Partnership arrangements between local authorities were welcomed as a valued means of pooling resources and skills to support the coordination and delivery of the programme regionally. The programme frameworks and course content have been broadly recognised as fit for purpose and capable of meeting the learning needs of trainees on this demanding, fast-track, master's level programme. Programme delivery has been well-managed and -supported, with a clear sense of purpose and coherence about both the support and learning opportunities offered to Step Up to Social Work. LA representatives and HEIs alike recognised the strength of partnership arrangements and appreciated the purposeful and focused approach to partnership working which is a feature of Step Up to Social Work. Both in terms of academic results achieved and the attributes and skills perceived by employing agencies, trainee outcomes are viewed in highly positive terms.

Against this encouraging picture of a successful project must be set some reservations, though. Firstly, the evaluation raises questions about both the feasibility and desirability of achieving a truly 'generic' social work qualification, in the context of a programme deliberately and explicitly targeted at achieving improvements in children's social work. Additionally, some concerns arose about the 'targeted' nature of the programme and the importance of maintaining a number of routes to social work qualification in order to ensure a suitably diverse workforce.

The programme itself was seen to be very demanding, necessitating careful selection and effective support for trainees (as, indeed, proved to be the case).

Additionally, Step Up to Social Work was implemented at a time of widespread shortages in suitably qualified child and family social workers. This picture had changed substantially by the completion of the first iteration of the programme, potentially raising questions about the continuing willingness of employing agencies to make long term commitments to the programme. The evaluation only addressed short term outcomes of the programme, and issues of retention and the 'added value' offered by Step Up to Social Work practitioners clearly also require longer term consideration. These issues, however, should not detract from the overall conclusion that this was a successful programme which substantially achieved its initial objectives.

Summary findings

Structural arrangements

Step Up to Social Work progressed from its initial announcement by government to implementation in a little over a year, and the preparation process was multi-faceted and complex. Predictably, there were elements of confusion and uncertainty about roles and responsibilities; nonetheless, robust arrangements were put in place in the form of regional partnerships, recruitment and selection mechanisms, coordination with HEIs and the development of programme frameworks and delivery arrangements.

Structural arrangements differed, for example in terms of the size and history of partnerships, the chosen delivery model (single HEI, or split lead and delivery roles), and the designation of the regional coordinator role. In all cases, however, the programme was 'up and running' on time and with a more or less full complement of Step Up to Social Work trainees. During the delivery phase the structural arrangements proved sufficiently robust to support the achievement of programme goals, to troubleshoot where necessary and to ensure sufficient stability to proceed to a second cohort in nearly all cases.

Recruitment processes and outcomes

For the first programme cohort, management and administration of recruitment and selection were contracted to an external provider, and this enabled the development of a dedicated process, supported by specifically designed materials. Whilst the experience of delivery in a compressed period of time was sometimes uncomfortable, it was widely agreed that the criteria and tools employed were fit for

purpose and enabled regional partnerships to select high quality, resilient candidates with a proper appreciation of social work values. This was effectively validated by the very high subsequent completion rate and the achievement levels of successful candidates.

The composition of the trainee cohort was demonstrably high-caliber, although it was observed by both regional partnerships and HEIs that this approach to recruitment might risk becoming overly exclusive if applied too widely. This finding was further supported by the quantitative analysis of recruitment trends, which highlighted concerns that those successful applicants who made up the initial Step Up to Social Work cohort lacked the diversity evident across other social work qualifying programmes, particularly with regard to ethnicity.

Concerns were also raised about other aspects of the implementation of the recruitment process, including communication between the different partners, the role of service user and carer involvement in assessment centres, and local authority perceptions of loss of control over decision-making in respect of their choice of recruits.

Changes introduced for Cohort Two were largely welcomed by local authorities as resulting in a more streamlined recruitment process, over which they did feel a greater sense of control. The 'recruitment toolkit' developed by the Children's Workforce Development Council, was regarded as an effective set of selection criteria and processes, which could be applicable to social work qualifying programmes more widely.

Programme format and content

Two HEIs were commissioned to develop programme specifications for Step Up to Social Work, within the overall requirements for the programme. Whilst both covered expected elements of social work qualifying courses, and satisfactorily met both internal and external validation requirements, they were clearly different in structure and content, with one requiring a much higher quantity of written work than the other. This disparity may, in turn, have impacted on the final grades achieved by trainees.

Both programme formats provided an effective and manageable framework for the negotiation and development of local delivery arrangements across eight regional partnerships. Delivery models differed with collaborative arrangements between different 'lead' and 'delivery' HEIs operating in four regions, and arm's length provision with the lead HEI also delivering the programme in the remaining regions. Both models were associated with positive outcomes, although for the second iteration of the programme a clear preference was demonstrated by most regional partnerships for a simplified model, working with a single HEI. There did seem to be

adequate room for manoeuvre where local needs or expectations necessitated adaptation, as in one case where agreed placement lengths differed from the original programme specification.

Programme delivery

There was widespread agreement that Step Up to Social Work represented a new approach to programme delivery. For regional partnership members there was a clear sense of being more in control, and feeling empowered to determine how HEI partners should go about facilitating trainees' learning. The sense of genuine partnership was strong, enabling HEIs and agencies to work closely together throughout. Agencies felt that they had greater capacity to contribute directly to learning. Support for trainees was very thorough and seemed to be closely aligned to individual needs and progress. Practice learning in particular was more easily managed, in the sense that it could be aligned with academic elements of the programme. It was repeatedly observed that linkages between theory and practice were more easily made than had previously been experienced, both because of the structure of the programme and the abilities of the trainees. Concerns were noted, however, about the extent to which the programme delivered a truly generic curriculum, both in terms of academic- and practice-based learning, and there was considerable variation between the regional partnerships in this regard.

Outcomes and impacts

In concrete terms, there was a very high completion rate, with very few trainees leaving the programme, despite the demands on them. Local authorities reported that trainees were consistently of a high quality and had been welcomed by teams with which they were placed, sometimes as active contributors to practice development. Most went on to gain employment with their host agency and were expected to become highly capable practitioners in child and family social work. Improved relationships between agencies and HEIs were reported, and the programme had also contributed to the enhancement of partnership working. The recruitment processes and materials were recognised as very robust and fit for purpose, and it was reported that this had influenced recruitment practice for social work qualifying programmes more widely. The approach to practice learning made possible by the programme was valued, with agencies and HEIs hoping to find ways of building on the lessons learned from this aspect of the project, such as the closer alignment of practice and academic learning.

According to most evaluation participants, Step Up to Social Work made significant demands on all those involved; trainees, local authorities and HEIs. However, it was generally considered that the benefits outweighed this, in terms of the quality of new recruits to the profession, improved relationships between agencies and academic

institutions, a better understanding of effective recruitment processes and more robust teaching and learning arrangements.

Evaluation conclusions

The Step up to Social Work programme was introduced in response to persistent concerns about both the quality and quantity of qualified social work practitioners in children's services, articulated by the Social Work Task Force among others. In order to ensure a better fit between the needs of practice and the capabilities developed in training, it was also felt that employers should have a more central role in determining the shape and content of initial training, and this informed the development of the programme.

The evaluation found that, as it was implemented, Step Up to Social Work did contribute to the enhancement of employing agencies' role in the design and delivery of training for social work, through the partnership and commissioning arrangements established. In particular, the programme seems to have created the basis for effective dialogue between training providers and employing agencies, promoting a greater sense of responsiveness, not just in terms of the overall construction of the programme, but in the delivery phase, too. Although agencies often felt that they were better able to contribute to delivery on an equal footing with academic partners and that their practice-based expertise was respected and properly utilised, this was not a universal conclusion. Some concerns were noted about the capacity, both in terms of expertise and resources, of local authority staff to take lead responsibility for the delivery of a robust academic master's level curriculum; and the extent of local authority engagement in direct delivery of the Step Up to Social Work programme differed across regional partnerships.

Particular strengths of the recruitment and selection processes were felt to be their focus on the practical demands of social work and on personal attributes such as resilience and social work values, although clear concerns arose about the lack of diversity amongst those recruited to the programme. Nonetheless, there was a general consensus that the quality of Step Up to Social Work trainees and their subsequent level of achievement on the programme were of a particularly high standard. Both HEIs and employing agencies recognised that they demonstrated key attributes and seemed to be 'ready for practice' in precisely the way that had sometimes been identified as lacking with conventional programmes, such as in their ability to link theory and practice. This may partly have been attributable to the capacity for the programme to link learning to its application in practice contemporaneously, but also to the way in which trainees were embedded and supported within the organisational context of the local authority from the beginning

of the programme. A note of caution, however, relates to the demands of a compressed timescale and the associated implications for diversity in recruitment.

Overall, the lessons not only appear to support the Step Up to Social Work model, but also have wider implications for the development and improvement of social work education. Clearly, the benefits of stronger partnership arrangements have been recognized, and indeed, this is already a Social Work Reform Board requirement for social work education. Other improvements, too, are indicated, including more robust and focused recruitment processes, closer integration of practice and academic learning, more active utilisation of agency (and service user) expertise in the delivery of teaching input, diversity of teaching and learning methods, and a better tailored approach to the individual learning needs of those in social work education. However, particularly with regard to this final point, the importance of the funding available to support both the local authorities and trainees cannot be underestimated.

The Step Up to Social Work model has undoubted strengths, meriting future consideration and development. Further investigation of the longer term outcomes and career trajectories for Step Up to Social Work trainees is however, warranted. Further research is also needed into the question of diversity, and how best to safeguard access to the social work profession from the widest possible pool of potential recruits. Despite positive indications, we should be wary of drawing unqualified conclusions about the efficacy of the Step Up to Social Work model in securing sufficient numbers of high quality social workers with the attributes to deliver better outcomes for children and families.

1. Introduction

1.1 Origins of Step Up to Social Work

The Step Up to Social Work programme was introduced in 2009 as a significant new initiative in social work education and training in England, and the first cohort commenced in September 2010, under the auspices of the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC). The origins of the Step Up to Social Work programme are described in more detail in chapter three, but the announcement of the programme by government in 2009 coincided with a climate of growing concern about the quality and suitability of the education and training of social workers, especially those in the children's workforce. Since 2000, evidence had emerged of a growing problem of unfilled posts in social work and the consequent difficulties in managing caseloads. These concerns were supplemented by the Social Work Task Force report (2009a), which also reported concerns about the 'practice readiness' of social workers in some cases, as well as the problematic nature of partnership arrangements between employing agencies and providers of social work education. Further substance was given to these emerging concerns by Lord Laming's (2009) report on the progress of measures to improve child protection.

The aims of the Step Up to Social Work programme thus coalesced around the objectives of: improving partnerships and strengthening employers' role in shaping social work education; attracting a broader range of highly capable and committed candidates to social work training; and the delivery of a high quality, tailored programme to enable these candidates to be ready for practice on its completion. In order to achieve these objectives an 18 month employer-led master's programme was developed, to be delivered through a series of regional partnerships in contractual arrangements with HEIs. Accrediting institutions would be responsible for ensuring that the training provision would meet existing General Social Care Council (GSCC) requirements, whilst delivery institutions would be responsible for working closely with local partnerships to implement the programme according to local need and circumstances.

1.2 Programme Organisation and Structure

The key objectives of the Step Up to Social Work programme were as follows:

- increasing the quality of social workers entering the profession;
- enabling local employers to shape initial training for students to address local needs; and
- development of a new entry route in to the social work profession.

CWDC intended to commission 10 regional partnerships (RPs) to oversee the delivery of the programme in accordance with these aims. Each partnership would be 'supported by an organisation with expertise in writing detailed course plans' and work with a 'GSCC accredited HEI' to design and run the programme. It was envisaged that a university (HEI) would take responsibility for 'advice and quality assurance', submission of 'detailed course proposals, developed by the regional partnerships to the GSCC for approval', and for awarding the master's degree in social work on 'successful completion of the programme' (CWDC, 2009). The intention was to develop a very distinctive approach to social work training which would limit the HEI role to that of quality assurance and validation of candidates' progression, while enabling employers in children's services to become more centrally involved in the organisation and delivery of social work training programmes. Existing GSCC and Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) frameworks for accreditation and approval imposed some constraints, however, and two 'lead' HEIs were contracted to work with the RPs to develop the programme, whilst CWDC gave regional partnerships responsibility for commissioning HEIs to adapt and deliver the programme locally. As negotiations developed, what emerged was a variety of delivery arrangements, dependent on the specific relationship established between regional partners and 'lead' and 'delivery' universities. As it transpired, each lead HEI was commissioned to take the role of an awarding body with four partnerships. In two cases each also acted as delivery HEI, whilst in the other cases lead and delivery functions were split, and another HEI was responsible for delivery, working in a tripartite relationship with the regional partnership and lead HEI.

It was also specified that the programme would be delivered in 18 months, and that employing agencies would retain a central role throughout in the recruitment and support of trainees, and in the organisation, content, delivery and assessment of the programme. The programme thus represented a significant innovation in social work education.

1.3 Programme Evaluation

CWDC commissioned the evaluation of the Step Up to Social Work programme in June 2011. The programme itself had commenced in September 2010 and recruitment had preceded this by several months. This therefore had some impact on the evaluation, as there was a need to rely to an extent on retrospective accounts. The employer evaluation was designed to examine how the initial programme objectives had been addressed and the extent to which this model of social work training/education offered a distinctive and potentially productive route towards social work qualification. The initial framework developed for the evaluation was based on the recognition that this was a complex and ambitious initiative, being implemented under a considerable degree of time pressure, with multiple

stakeholders and accordingly, a diverse range of expectations and individually and collectively held success criteria. It was thus important to try to construct a methodological approach which could accommodate these varying perspectives, at the same time as capturing a sense of the processes by which the programme itself was developed and delivered, and its outcomes and impact. This, in turn, necessitated an 'end to end', mixed methods approach, detailed in chapter 2.

The prime focus of this evaluation was the first cohort of Step Up to Social Work 'trainees' and the evidence within this report is therefore drawn predominantly from sources related to the first cohort. The chapter specifically relating to Cohort Two includes evidence drawn from respondents involved only with the second cohort, as well as those with experience of both cohorts, in both regional partnerships and HEIs. Throughout the report, where it is relevant to do so, the reader will be signposted to those aspects of Cohort One that were changed and developed within Cohort Two. For instance, the chapter on recruitment reports the changes in the recruitment process between the two cohorts and the regional partnership role and experiences of those changes.

CWDC had earlier commenced its own research of the experiences of the trainees (to be published in a separate DfE report), being undertaken via a questionnaire every six months, during the completion of the Step Up to Social Work programme. It was agreed that it would be unreasonable to impose any further requirements on the trainees themselves relating to the evaluation and therefore this evaluation focuses solely on the experiences and perspectives of the employers and the HEIs involved in the programme.

The body of this report is presented chronologically, after first setting out the methodological approach adopted by the evaluation team. The report examines the initiation and development of the programme; the establishment and operation of regional partnerships; the design and content of the programme itself; recruitment processes and outcomes; the delivery phase; student progression and achievement; immediate outcomes; wider impacts, so far as it is possible to identify these; and the early evidence from the second cohort. Finally, there is a discussion of the implications of the programme, conclusions, and further recommendations.

The evaluation concludes that, whilst there are inevitable issues for further consideration, there is much to commend about the way in which all involved have gone about implementing Step Up to Social Work and a number of very important positive lessons emerge for the future development and direction of social work education and training.

2. Methodological Approach

2.1 Context and Strategy

The Step Up to Social Work evaluation was intended to offer a comprehensive account of the organisation, operation and achievements of this particular innovation in social work qualifying education and training. This, in turn, indicates an interest in assessing not just the delivery and outputs of the programme itself, but also the wider infrastructure and organisational relationships which acted as the backdrop to the programme and were intended to facilitate and enhance delivery. In so far as it was possible, given the limitations of an evaluation commencing after the first cohort had been recruited and focusing only on local authority and HEI perspectives, it was also intended that the evaluation would provide some comment on the outputs and possible impact of the programme. In light of this, it made sense to approach this as a mixed methods study, based on a model developed by Knapp (1989) and subsequently further refined by Everitt and Hardiker (1996, p. 4), 'involving both the generation of evidence about ... a project and the process of making judgements about its value'.

This model necessitates an investigative strategy which is fitted to the task of generating evidence relating to each stage of a complex process, whilst also providing an overarching framework to allow the necessary connections to be made between the different elements, and to establish the basis for an integrated analysis. Previous inquiries into the impact and effectiveness of changes to social work education have adopted a similar 'process' model of evaluation (Evaluation of Social Work Degree Qualification in England Team, 2008).

Adapting the model proposed by Everitt and Hardiker (1996), the methodological approach was organised around the distinctive phases of the programme, that is to say its organisation, implementation and outputs. Our overall conclusions would also enable us to offer some observations about the possible 'impact' of the programme. For each of the phases identified, specific research questions, data sources identified and analytical approaches could thus be specified. In doing so, we were also able to clarify the practical and ethical issues associated with each element.

2.2 Structure of the Evaluation

From the outset it was clear that there were considerable variations in the approach taken to delivery of the Step Up to Social Work programme. The arrangements for coordination and implementation of the programme differed across a number of dimensions between the eight regional partnerships concerned, including:

- lead HEI;
- HEI involvement (single or separate lead and delivery HEIs);
- cohort size (varying between 6 and 38 trainees);
- nature of partnership (some long-standing and well-established, some recently formed); and
- size of partnership (between two and seven local authority members).

This suggested that it would be important to approach the fieldwork element of the evaluation in a way which enabled distinctions to be made between the organisation and delivery of the programme at regional level. This, in turn, would enable inferences to be drawn, where possible, about the relative efficacy of differing working arrangements and delivery mechanisms. Although the initial plan was to focus data collection on four regions typifying key characteristics, it became evident that it would be necessary to carry out a similar depth of inquiry across all eight partnerships to account for possible differences effectively. In order to provide a basis for comparison, the fieldwork sampling strategy was therefore designed to reflect the range of roles and perspectives reflected in each partnership, including: regional coordinators, employer representatives, practice learning coordinators, practice educators, and HEI representatives (lead and delivery). A series of interview schedules was designed appropriate to these distinctive roles, based around a common framework (mapping and understanding relationships; operations/functioning of the partnership; impact, success and effectiveness; and, moving forward). This framework, in turn, provided the basis for initial coding of the data, thereby facilitating more detailed analysis of emerging themes.

Each region was therefore treated as a distinctive entity, and the fieldwork was carried out in such a way as to generate as full a body of evidence as possible specific to that region, but also reflecting the common range of interests and perspectives to be found in every partnership. This approach was tested initially in two regions, and subsequently implemented across the other six.

The evaluation of the Step Up to Social Work programme comprised several phases of research and necessitated a 'mix' of quantitative and qualitative research methods. Fieldwork was undertaken over a period of 12 months and consisted of face-to-face and telephone interviews supported by a survey undertaken with participants across the eight regional partnerships. Whilst the fieldwork with regional partnerships lay at the heart of the evaluation, these methods were supplemented by other approaches where necessary, including an online survey, analysis of a variety of documentary sources, and an analysis of programme recruitment data. Additional interviews were also carried out with 'key players' involved in policy development,

strategic development, and the management of implementation and recruitment processes.

Given the need to engage a wealth of regional partners over an extended period of time and across different geographical locations a research plan was devised that effectively divided the evaluation programme into four phases of work (see Table 2.1).

Table 2.1 Phases of the evaluation, associated activity and stakeholders involved.

Timescale	Activity	Who is involved
Phase one: September – October 2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Documentary analysis • Data gathering – RPs & HEIs • Engagement with RPs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RP leads • Lead HEIs • CWDC
Phase two: November 2011 – March 2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online survey with RPs and delivery HEIs • Cohort One recruitment analysis • Interviews: recruitment consultant • Interviews: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Lead HEI ○ RP leads • Placement observation visits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RP staff involved with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Recruitment ○ Programme design ○ Delivery ○ Administration & management of programme ○ Supervision & management of trainees ○ Placement organisation • Delivery HEI staff involved with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Teaching ○ Assessment ○ Practice learning ○ Tutoring ○ Administration ○ Coordination/management

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lead HEIs
Phase three: March – July 2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Case study site visits – 8 regions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Interviews ○ Teaching observation ○ Service user & carer focus groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delivery HEIs • RP staff involved with recruitment, delivery, support & management of trainees • Practice educators • Service users & carers
Phase four: August – October 2012	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cohort Two interviews • Cohort Two recruitment data • Analysis of Cohort One outcomes & achievement • Follow-up interviews/surveys • Analysis of CWDC trainee outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cohort Two RPs • Cohort Two delivery HEIs • RP lead • Delivery HEIs • Lead HEIs • Managers of Step Up graduates

DMU worked with CWDC and each Step Up to Social Work lead local authority to understand how each regional partnership implemented and managed the Step Up to Social Work programme and to arrange involvement in the evaluation. A range of respondents were identified in each regional partnership, which included:

- those responsible for coordinating and leading the Step Up programme within each local authority;
- practitioners and managers involved in delivering the programme;
- practice teachers/assessors within the trainees' practice placement agencies;
- team managers with responsibility for trainees within their local authority; and
- service users, including children and young people, involved in recruitment and selection of trainees.

The evaluation team also interviewed respondents from the various HEIs:

- Step Up leads from University of Salford and Manchester Metropolitan University; and
- delivery HEIs – leads and lecturers responsible for delivering the programme.

2.3 Overview of Fieldwork

As indicated above, the aim was to recruit participants from each level of involvement in the programme at regional level, specifically including: regional partnership coordinators, local authority representatives, and those responsible for practice learning. Inevitably, these roles were not always carried out by staff with the same designation in every partnership area, and in some cases, respondents held more than one such role simultaneously (as in one area, where our respondent was the local authority lead for Step Up to Social Work, practice learning coordinator and acted as a practice educator).

Table 2.2 provides an overview of interviews, supplementary visits and observations. In addition to the above, the following interviews were conducted with key stakeholders:

- CWDC staff x6: this included senior staff and members of the Step Up to Social Work project team.
- PIPC x1: the consultancy organisation (acquired by Cognizant in May 2010), commissioned by CWDC to provide project management for Step Up to Social Work.
- PENNA x1: the HR services group commissioned by CWDC as the recruitment consultant for Step Up to Social Work.

Table 2.2 Summary of regional partnership interviews.

Partnership	Dates	Interviews completed
Central Eastern C1 = 2 LAs C2 = 3 (2 existing LAs, 1 new LA)	6 December 2011 – 1 August 2012	3x lead LA (C1/2) 1x PEd (C1)/learning mentor(C2) 1x RP 2x lead LA (C2) 1x RP (C2)
CE C1 TOTAL		5 interviews
CE C2 TOTAL		3 interviews
East C1 = 5 LAs	24 January 2012 – 30 August 2012	1x RP 5x lead LA

C2 = 5 (4 existing LAs, 1 new LA)		1x lead LA (C2)
EAST C1 TOTAL		6 interviews
EAST C2 TOTAL		1 interview
East Midlands C1 = 5 LAs C2 = 8 (5 existing LAs, 3 new LAs)	14 November 2011 – 7 September 2012	1x RP 5x lead LA (C1/2) 4x PEd 2x lead LA (C2)
EM C1 TOTAL		10 interviews
EM C2 TOTAL		2 interviews
Greater Manchester C1 = 5 LAs C2 = 6 (5 existing LAs, 1 new LAs)	13 December 2011 – 7 August 2012	1x RP 2x lead LA 1x lead LA (C2) 1x lead LA
GM C1 TOTAL		4 interviews
GM C2 TOTAL		1 interviews
Learn Together Partnership C1 = 7 LAs C2 = 5 (3 existing LAs, 2 new LAs)	12 December 2011 – 2 August 2012	3x RP 3x lead LA (C1) 2x PEd 1x delivery HEI (C1) 2x lead LA (C2) 2x delivery HEI (C2)
LTP C1 TOTAL		9 interviews
LTP C2 TOTAL		4 interviews
West London Alliance C1 = 7 LAs C2 = 8 (7 existing	12 January 2012 – 5 September 2012	1x RP 7x lead LA 1x RP (chair)

LAs, 1 new LAs)		2x PEd 1x delivery HEI 1x service user focus group 1x lead LA (C2)
WLA C1 TOTAL		12 interviews 1 Service User Focus Group
WLA C2 TOTAL		1 interview
West Midlands Cohort One = 3 LAs Cohort Two = not participating	1 December 2011 – 20 March 2012	1x RP coordinator 2x lead LA 4x delivery HEI 4x PEd
WM C1 TOTAL		11 interviews
Yorkshire & Humber C1 = 8 LAs C2 = 9 (7 existing LAs, 2 new LAs)	30 January 2012 – 15 August 2012 6 September 2012	1x RP 7x LA 1x PEd 2x NQSWs 3x lead LA (C1/2) 2x PEd 1x lead LA (C2) 1x PEd (C2) 1x service user focus group
YH C1 TOTAL		16 interviews 1 service user focus group
YH C2 TOTAL		2 interviews
Higher Education Institutions		

MMU	16 November 2011 – 19 July 2012	1x lead HEI 1x strategic lead 2x delivery HEI
Salford University	9 March 2012 – 30 July 2012	1x strategic lead 2x delivery HEI
All RPs Total number of interviews		C1 = 79 C2 = 14 Combined = 93

2.4 Online Survey

The purpose of the online survey was to capture reflections and comments from regional partnership members who had not had the chance or were unable to participate and provide feedback on the programme via any of the other evaluation methods. Several online survey packages were reviewed by the evaluation team and the one chosen, Obsurvey (www.obsurvey.com), provided the greatest degree of functionality and flexibility.

The survey contained 28 questions, the majority of which were closed with potential responses provided (i.e., yes, no, maybe); others were open-ended allowing for greater explanation, and a number of Likert scales were used, specifically to address people's perceptions of specific components of the programme. For example: 'To what extent do you agree/disagree with the following statements in relation to the recruitment and assessment of candidates in Cohort One', with response options consisting of: 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree'.

Regional partnerships were invited to partake in the survey via email, and it was circulated for completion via the partnerships to colleagues who had played some role in the Step Up to Social Work programme. The strategies adopted to circulate the survey amongst each regional partnership differed (see Table 2.3) and were agreed in advance with RP coordinators.

Table 2.3 Survey completion rates.

Regional partnership	Date live	Recipients	Reminder sent	Date closed	Returns
East	3 August 2012	17	20 August 2012	28 August 2012	6
East Midlands	31 May 2012	33	14 June 2012	21 June 2012	12
Greater Manchester	2 August 2012	28	16 August 2012	23 August 2012	10
LTP	26 April 2012	28	8 May 2012	17 May 2012	5
Learn Together Partnership (re-circulated)	21 June 2012				3 8
West London Alliance	19 June 2012	87	3 July 2012	10 July 2012	5
West London Alliance (re-circulated)	10 July 2012				23 28
West Midlands	19 April 2012	24	30 April 2012	10 May 2012	6
Yorkshire & Humber	17 July 2012	35	30 July 2012	17 August 2012	5
Total		252			75

NB: In Central Eastern, the survey was not circulated by the regional partnership coordinator and no responses were received.

All surveys were live with each regional partnership for a period of two weeks prior to a reminder email being sent with the option for the survey to be extended by one week. The timing of release of the survey in each regional partnership was set to coincide with other case study fieldwork being completed in an attempt to improve response rates and raise awareness of the survey whilst in the field.

Overall, the response rate for the Step Up to Social Work online survey was 30%, although there was considerable regional variation. In light of this, it was deemed appropriate to aggregate responses and report findings on this basis rather than

attempt a comparative regional analysis of survey data (see Appendix 1 for a summary of results).

2.5 Documentary Analysis

The substantive fieldwork data detailed above were supplemented by material from documentary sources, which could be related to different aspects of the overall evaluation. The following document types were identified:

- policy and parliamentary reports
- departmental policy documents and reports (CWDC/DfE)
- partnership documentation
- recruitment documentation and guidance
- social work programme benchmark statements and standards
- programme handbooks
- module guides
- programme documentation
- programme and module evaluation reports
- external examiners' reports

Documents from these sources were initially evaluated as to their validity and relevance, applying criteria of currency, source, and reliability of content. Documents were then subject to detailed analysis in relation to the specific element of the programme with which they were associated. In this way, they were utilised to provide greater depth and, in some cases, as supplementary sources to further illuminate the findings generated through the fieldwork previously described.

2.6 Recruitment Data

In relation to the recruitment of Step Up to Social Work candidates, a statistical analysis of the relationship between initial applications and successful recruitment to the programme was undertaken. For the first cohort, the available recruitment data obtained from CWDC facilitated a detailed analysis against a number of demographic characteristics of candidates' progression through the different stages of the recruitment process, using the chi-squared test. For the second cohort, drawing on the experience of Cohort One, more detailed individual recruitment data were obtained, which enabled the application of more powerful regression techniques. It also proved possible to obtain recruitment data from the University and

College Admissions Service (UCAS), which offered some limited basis for comparison and which in fact indicated similar trends in recruitment and selection as identified with the Step Up to Social Work cohorts.

In three regions, interviews and/or focus groups were undertaken with service users, in order to ensure that some account could be taken of their involvement with and experience of Step Up to Social Work.

2.7 Ethical Considerations

In a study of this nature, the ethical considerations applying are less to do with the risk of impacting adversely on the wellbeing or safety of participants and more to do with the implications of compromising the professional or organisational roles of participants who can be readily identifiable from contextual information. That is to say, partnership arrangements are quite distinctive, so comments attributed to participants are likely to be traceable to the individual concerned. We therefore constructed our interview and questionnaire designs in recognition of this, and ensured that participants understood that although they would not be identified explicitly, their identities would be apparent in all probability. We obtained participants' consent on this basis, and offered them the option of going 'off the record' or withdrawing comments which they did not want attributed to them.

In relation to the involvement of service users and carers, we felt that, in combination, the subject matter and the fact that focus groups were the chosen method would guard against disclosures which could compromise the interests of individual participants. Nonetheless, safeguards were included along the same lines, to allow participants to withdraw comments where they wished.

In light of these considerations, we have not sought to disguise the regional partnerships, or participating HEIs, which are likely to be readily identifiable to many in any event; we have, however, avoided attributing respondents' comments to specific individuals.

In order to comply with the commissioners' and our own university ethical standards, we secured Criminal Records Bureau checks where necessary, and completed the necessary ethical approval documentation, which was approved by De Montfort University's Health and Life Sciences Faculty Ethics Committee.

3. The Origins and Establishment of Step Up to Social Work

3.1 The Starting Point

It is difficult to pinpoint exactly when the seeds for the Step Up to Social Work programme were sown, although the Langlands report (2005, p. 62) had an important role in drawing attention to a shortage of ‘good quality social workers’. The Options for Excellence report (DfES/DoH, 2006) also set the tone with its commitment to a vision for a ‘highly skilled, valued and accountable workforce’ across all domains of social care by 2020 (p. 6). Subsequent developments brought this aspiration into sharper focus, especially in relation to social work with children and families. These took the form of both ‘trigger events’ and an emerging sense in the policy domain that new initiatives were needed in social work education and training.

The death of Peter Connelly in Haringey in 2007 led to a specific focus on children’s services and the training and education of children’s social workers. Following an inspection of children’s services in Haringey, Ed Balls, then Secretary of State at the Department of Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) asked Lord Laming to provide a progress report on child protection across the country. The Secretary of State also announced that his department would be spending an additional £73 million on developing children’s social workers over the period 2008–11; thereby enabling CWDC to meet its stated commitment to prioritising training for children’s social workers (Community Care, 3 April 2008; 15 April, 2008).

Drawing on evidence of the potential value of ‘Grow Your Own’ (GYO) type schemes (Harris et al., 2008), and prompted by the Department of Children, Schools and Families to promote recruitment of high quality candidates, CWDC initiated a graduate recruitment scheme in 2008

to allow high-calibre candidates without a background in social care, but with experience of working in some capacity with children or young people, to complete a master’s degree in social work over two years whilst receiving a bursary. (CWDC, 2011b, p. 3)

Over the two cohorts of this programme, 342 graduates were recruited by at least 56 local authorities to the scheme (CWDC, 2011a; 2012).

Lord Laming endorsed this approach, whilst expressing the view that social work training should be further improved as a matter of urgency:

... the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families must immediately address the inadequacy of the training and supply of frontline social workers. The message of this report is clear: without the necessary specialist knowledge and skills social workers must not be allowed to practise in child protection. (Laming, 2009, p. 46)

Concerns about the 'readiness' of qualified social workers for practice, especially in highly demanding areas of work such as child protection, were further fuelled by evidence emerging from the field. A wide-ranging survey of newly qualified social workers (NQSWs), agency managers and higher education institutions (HEIs) commissioned by the Children's Workforce Development Council also found considerable misgivings about how prepared new recruits were for the job (CWDC senior representative, interview). Baginsky (2009) reported that only a third of newly qualified children's social workers believed that their degree courses prepared them fully or largely for the job. In parallel with Lord Laming's inquiry, the Department of Health (DoH) and the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) also set up the Social Work Task Force (SWTF), with a remit to

undertake a comprehensive review of frontline social work practice and to make recommendations for improvement and reform of the whole profession, across adult and children's services. (SWTF, 2009a, p. 13)

Early consultations with local authority interests undertaken by the Social Work Task Force revealed the continuing frustration of employers with the level and suitability of qualifying training. In their view social workers were often simply not 'practice ready':

Current arrangements for education and training are not producing enough social workers fully suited to the challenges of frontline practice. Readiness for practice of newly qualified staff, and the provision of practice placements within the degree course are causing particular concern. (SWTF, 2009a, p. 12)

Although further evidence of the 'mismatch' between training for social work and the expectations of employers continued to emerge (Baginsky et al., 2010, p. 110) as the Social Work Task Force undertook its deliberations, government and CWDC had already acted to address the concerns initially identified.

In part, the SWTF took the view that the 'calibre of entrants' to social work programmes might be an issue, with 'some courses ... accepting people not suited to the degree or to social work', and that this might be associated with a lack of academic skills, such as the capacity to analyse and conceptualise complex material

(SWTF, 2009b, p. 17). This mirrored other perceptions, as well as the reported comments of a senior CWDC representative, that entry requirements for undergraduate social work degrees might be contributing to this problem (Community Care, 28 September 2009). He did qualify these earlier comments, in an interview for this evaluation, by saying that Step Up to Social Work was conceived as 'an additional way of training' social workers rather than a substitute for other routes, and that the option of an employer-led postgraduate route would similarly complement the existing Grow Your Own social work qualifying model at undergraduate level, albeit delivering quicker results.

The SWTF did not simply attribute the difficulties facing social work education to a lack of ability or suitability amongst those being educated and trained as social work practitioners, it also identified systemic problems to do with a lack of shared understanding and purpose amongst those primarily concerned with the delivery of capable and effective qualified practitioners:

Current arrangements for education, training and career progression are not producing – or retaining – enough social workers suited to the full demands of frontline practice. There is simply not enough shared understanding about the division of responsibilities in education and training among higher education institutions, employers and social workers themselves. (SWTF, 2009b, p. 63)

The implications of this finding were felt by the Social Work Task Force to point towards much closer employer involvement in the pre- (and post-) qualification training and development of children's social workers. The SWTF placed heavy emphasis on the development of effective and sustainable 'partnerships' as central to future improvement across the breadth of the profession's institutional arrangements and practices. These conclusions were paralleled by the findings of a parliamentary select committee inquiry into the training of social workers (House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Select Committee, 2009). The committee similarly acknowledged concerns about the breadth and depth of skills available to the social work profession, whilst drawing attention to the lessons learned from the earlier Grow Your Own initiative (Harris et al., 2008).

The experience of Grow Your Own certainly appeared to support the argument for a more central role for employers in the structural and delivery arrangements for social work training. This, it was argued, would help to ensure that learning would be closely attuned to the realities of practice, the nature of organisational requirements, and what might be thought of as 'practice wisdom':

Employers value the acquisition of staff members familiar with the realities of social work practice and loyal to the organisation, and also value the wider potential benefits of GYO for organisational culture and workforce planning. (Harris et al., 2008, p. 5)

This perception clearly seems to have informed the thinking of CWDC in the initial preparations for Step Up to Social Work. In an evaluation interview, a senior CWDC representative expressed the view that a sense of 'belonging' would benefit both qualifying social work candidates and employers, giving the former a greater sense of operational knowledge and certainty about her/his place in the organisation, and probably a better chance of future employment. At the same time, employers would be provided with the opportunity to prepare potential future employees for the realities of the specific workplace; this would also potentially ease the recruitment process.

The House of Commons Select Committee (House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Select Committee, 2009) took note of CWDC's intentions, and in particular the development of options for a 'fast-track to social work' to try and broaden the pool of potential recruits to the profession. Whilst reporting fairly widespread concern about the proposal amongst the 'academic community', the committee expressed its support for the idea, specifically for 'students with relevant experience, a clear idea of what sort of social work they wish to specialise in, or prior qualifications incorporating clearly relevant content'. In particular, this option would serve to enhance the possibility of attracting 'applicants through non-traditional routes' (House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Select Committee, 2009, p. 33).

In response to the suggestions of the select committee, Ed Balls, then Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, announced in July 2009 the government's intention to commission a new 'on the job' training route. Announcing that candidates would be offered £15,000 per year to retrain as social workers, he expressed the hope that this would help to attract recruits from other professions such as law and teaching. Social work could be a

rewarding change for many people mid-career. I'm not pretending it will be an easy job; social workers I talk to tell me of the huge challenges they face, but nearly all of them talk about the incredibly rewarding role they play. (Ed Balls, quoted in Community Care, 9 July 2009)

CWDC welcomed the Secretary of State's announcement, highlighting the consistency of the proposal with its own commitment to 'widening entry routes to the profession' and attracting 'more talented and committed people to social work with children and families' (CWDC Director of Strategy, CWDC News, 9 July 2009). It was

announced that the programme would be an 'on the job' training pathway, to become operational from 2010, 'providing a more flexible route for high quality graduates to complete their master's degree and qualify as a social worker' (CWDC Director of Strategy, CWDC News, 9 July 2009). It would provide places for 200 'high-calibre mid-career-changers such as teachers and lawyers' who would be paid 'around £15,000 a year while training' (CWDC Director of Strategy, CWDC News, 9 July 2009). Further incentives were offered to local authorities with the announcement that the scheme would be 'fully funded'. Importantly, this announcement stipulated that the pilot programme would 'seek to identify:

- regional partnerships of local authorities to be at the centre of providing new routes into social work with children and families; [and]
 - higher education institutions to support innovation in social work training'.
- (CWDC News, 9 July 2009)

In parallel with these developments, at the beginning of September 2009, the government launched a major TV campaign to attract new recruits to social work and to promote a more positive image for the profession. Although this was not explicitly linked to the Step Up to Social Work initiative, CWDC indicated in an evaluation interview that the very significant number of expressions of interest stimulated by the campaign offered a useful pool of potential recruits. Step Up to Social Work was clearly conceptualised as a further development of previous initiatives, seeking to recruit from a much wider range of sources than Grow Your Own approaches. At this point it seemed that there were different perceptions as to the proposed length of the programme. When interviewed for the evaluation a senior CWDC representative stated there had been no firm view of the optimum length of Step Up to Social Work in the initial stages of development, while another CWDC representative stated that it had originally been financed as a two year programme. Both lead HEIs reported however, that the initial information provided by CWDC during the HEI appointment process indicated the intention to have a 12 month fast-track master's programme. The HEIs highlighted concerns about the proposed timescale in respect of retaining the required curriculum content and academic rigour of a master's programme and the impact of integrating 200 days of practice learning. Both lead HEIs reported that subsequent dialogue with CWDC resulted in the notional timescale of 18 months, with the possibility of reducing that period through the use of Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) processes where applicable. Interestingly though, both lead HEIs reported little use of APL as trainees generally did not have sufficient prior work or academic experience that would enable them to meet the specific social work learning outcomes at master's level.

The influences and considerations outlined below effectively set the parameters for the design and organisation of Step Up to Social Work following the announcement of the programme:

- concerns about the exclusion of agency partners from social work education, and the subsequent loss of 'relevance', prompted a desire for more active and integrated 'partnerships' to oversee preparation for professional practice;
- problems of recruitment and retention encouraged an approach which would create more robust relationships between future practitioners and employing agencies;
- the perception that the 'calibre' of social work students qualifying by traditional routes was sometimes lacking determined that highly-qualified graduates should be targeted for recruitment;
- the prevailing shortage of social workers led to the aspiration to recruit from a wider range of sources;
- a desire to provide quicker routes into the profession, to boost the number of qualified staff, and to provide quicker access to qualified status for trainees lay behind the aim of putting a 'fast-track' qualifying route in place.

The vision of a new type of employment-based learning experience was perhaps captured more fully with the stated intention to contract with higher education providers to 'deliver support and quality assurance' to the new programme, with responsibility for managing and delivering the programme resting with the regional partnerships. This expectation, however, perhaps overestimated the room for flexibility under the existing requirements of the regulatory bodies for social work education. During interviews both lead HEIs expressed the view that CWDC initially had rather unrealistic expectations as to the 'capacity and capability' (lead HEI, interview) of LAs to deliver a social work education programme. As noted elsewhere in the report, regional partnerships very much welcomed the opportunity to take a lead role in shaping and influencing the content of social work training. They were understandably less familiar with the procedural requirements in place for the approval and validation of social work qualifying programmes. Once HEI and Quality Assurance Agency requirements were understood, under pressure of time, it was apparent that the HEI also had to take formal responsibility for the content and validation of the programme. Although regional partners were able to take a lead role in developing and delivering the programme, this aspect of the process could not be managed solely by them. As a consequence, the nature of the CWDC contract with the lead HEIs shifted to include responsibility to 'design and quality assure delivery' (lead HEI, interview) of the programme, whilst regional partnerships focused on the

task of determining the best arrangements for local delivery of the programme and the process of contracting with delivery HEIs.

The model developed by CWDC sought to extend the pool of potential applicants, by opening up the programme to non-employees of provider agencies, and by building in guaranteed financial incentives. In addition, by stipulating a particular mix of prior qualifications (2:1 degree or above) and experience (of significant work with children), it also sought to guarantee the standard and suitability of potential applicants. This, in turn, would ensure that the programme could justifiably be pitched at master's level and qualifying standards could be achievable within 18 months, in comparison to the two year duration of existing postgraduate social work qualifying programmes. CWDC summarised the aims of the Step Up initiative in terms of putting the employer at the centre of social work training, promoting collaboration and recruiting more widely from a better-prepared pool of potential practitioners. The programme would:

- provide employers with the opportunity to shape the training to address their requirements;
- put the employer in the driving seat for the full process of recruitment, selection and training;
- help to attract people from other professions who had not previously thought about a career as a social worker;
- promote partnership working between local authorities;
- increase the quality of social workers entering the profession; and
- enable local employers to shape initial training for students, to address local needs. (CWDC, 2010, p. 5)

3.2 Creating the Infrastructure

With the clear intention of putting employers in the driving seat, CWDC began the task of putting the programme into effect. This was to be completed within a highly compressed timescale, involving a complex range of stakeholders. Four discrete elements of the implementation exercise were identified: the selection of local authorities to deliver the programme; commissioning a management support team; selection of one or more HEIs to provide strategic advice and quality assurance to support the work-based training model envisaged; and choosing a recruitment agency to develop tools and processes for the selection of suitable candidates for the programme. Much of the work within these four strands occurred in parallel rather than sequentially, and as a consequence there were perceptions across the

regional partnerships and HEIs of different project plans with their own, at times competing, timescales and priorities.

CWDC at first planned to commission 10 regional partnerships to oversee the delivery of the programme, each 'supported by an organisation with expertise in writing detailed course plans' and working with a 'GSCC accredited HEI' to design and run the programme. It was also envisaged that an HEI would take responsibility for 'advice and quality assurance', submission of 'detailed course proposals, developed by the regional partnerships to the GSCC for approval', and for awarding the master's degree in social work on 'successful completion of the programme' (CWDC, 2009). As indicated above, although the intention was to develop a very distinctive approach to social work training which would limit the HEI role to that of quality assurance and validation of candidates' progression, dialogue with the two lead HEIs contracted to undertake this role resulted in a recognition that HEIs were also central to the design and delivery of the Cohort One programme. As a consequence, the lead HEIs were contracted to work with the RPs to develop the programme and CWDC gave the RPs responsibility for commissioning HEIs to deliver the programme.

The task of commissioning HEIs to undertake the various roles envisaged for them was itself made rather more problematic by apparent suspicion of the aims and integrity of the proposed programme amongst the academic community. This led to some reluctance on the part of HEIs to participate in the programme and in the end only two applied (Salford and Manchester Metropolitan) to undertake the 'lead' HEI role. In a CWDC interview, it was acknowledged that the HEI tendering process may have been affected by the fact that 'there was not enough information or clarity about Step Up'. It was originally stated that 'at least one' HEI would act in this capacity, and the final decision to commission two may have been related to both a question of capacity and a desire to avoid relying exclusively on one provider, with the risks that might entail.

The allocation of lead HEI to individual RP was undertaken by CWDC, outlined in Table 3.1. The RPs then embarked upon the process of commissioning HEIs to deliver the programme, described by several RPs as challenging, with issues relating to LA procurement processes and timescales particularly highlighted. The lead HEIs felt that 'RPs expected local HEIs to deliver (but) didn't get much interest' (lead HEI, interview). This may in part have related to the concern about Step Up within the academic community, as noted above, and the resultant reluctance on the part of many HEIs to engage with the programme at that stage. Four RPs (Central Eastern, the Learn Together Partnership, the West Midlands and the West London Alliance (WLA)) all succeeded in commissioning local HEIs as their delivery provider, with Salford and Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) each delivering two of the remaining four RPs. One RP acknowledged that they had no response from local

HEIs interested in acting as the delivery institution and it was therefore a pragmatic decision to commission their lead HEI. However, other RPs indicated that the constructive relationship they had developed with their lead HEI meant that they were happy to expand that relationship to include the delivery role. Interestingly, this view was not restricted to RPs working with a lead HEI who was local, and two RPs working with a distant lead HEI retained them as their delivery HEI.

Table 3.1 Regional partnership arrangements in Cohort One.

Regional partnership	Local authorities (lead LA in bold)	Lead HEI	Delivery HEI
Central Eastern	Central Bedfordshire , Luton	Salford	University of Bedfordshire
East	Cambridgeshire, Norfolk , Southend, Suffolk, Thurrock	MMU	MMU
East Midlands	Derby, Leicester , Northamptonshire, Nottingham, Nottinghamshire	MMU	MMU
Greater Manchester	Bolton, Bury, Manchester, Salford (Wigan – not full partner)	Salford	Salford
Learn Together Partnership	Halton, Knowsley, Liverpool, St Helens, Sefton, Warrington, Wirral	MMU	University of Chester
West London Alliance	Brent, Ealing, Hammersmith & Fulham , Harrow, Hillingdon, Hounslow, Westminster	Salford	University of Hertfordshire
West Midlands	Coventry , Solihull, Warwickshire	MMU	Coventry
Yorkshire & Humber	Calderdale, East Riding, Kirklees, Leeds, North Lincolnshire, North Yorkshire, Rotherham, Sheffield	Salford	Salford

Complexity was an inevitable feature of this phase of activity, given the need to commission providers for four distinct but linked streams of work in parallel within a limited timescale. A CWDC representative noted in an evaluation interview that pressure of time was the greatest challenge throughout, but established relationships already in place were of considerable value in helping to move the process forward quickly. As highlighted in chapter 4, several long-standing regional partnerships featured in the final line up of Step Up to Social Work delivery partnerships, and the potential value of working with these was recognised very early on. Respondents from these partnerships (such as the West London Alliance, and the Learn Together

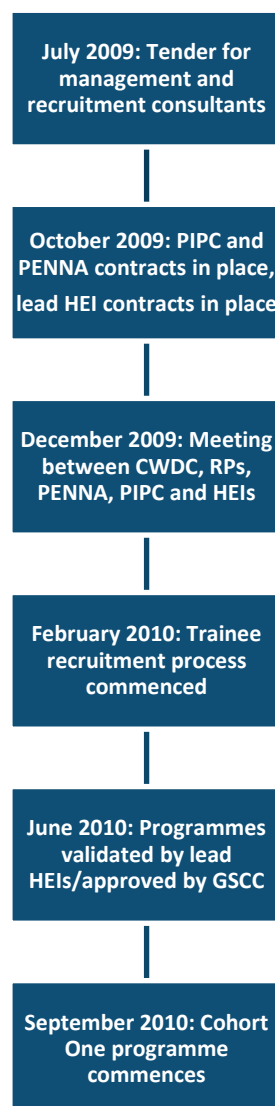
Partnership (LTP) in the North West) certainly acknowledged that their well-established relationships and prior history of collaborating on social work training and career development meant that they were well-placed to respond to the Step Up to Social Work initiative. In the end, eight partnerships were able to meet the criteria for involvement in the programme, although their varying sizes and capacities meant that they were unable to offer the same level of engagement and CWDC's hope that each would offer a similar number of training places (20 notionally) was quickly modified. Each partnership then had to agree on a lead authority in order to simplify working arrangements and provide a 'host' setting for any dedicated resources or staff for the programme.

3.3 Management and Facilitation

Alongside commissioning of the lead HEIs and securing interest from LAs wishing to form regional partnerships, CWDC also commissioned a management consultancy PIPC and a recruitment consultancy PENNA. As outlined in chapter 5, PENNA was commissioned to design and deliver the recruitment and selection process in collaboration with CWDC which included managing the assessment centres and liaising with the RPs. As can be seen from Figure 3.2, PENNA had a very short timescale in which to plan, prepare and organise all aspects of the recruitment and selection process. During an evaluation interview PENNA indicated that they had initially been unaware of the PIPC contract and found the additional timescales and reporting requirements introduced by PIPC challenging, particularly as they (PENNA) were used to doing their own project management. The role of PENNA and relationships with the RPs is explored further in chapter 5; suffice to say that evaluation interviews with both PENNA and PIPC highlighted some tensions in those working relationships, particularly in the early stages, exacerbated by a perceived 'lack of clarity from the CWDC'.

PIPC was appointed to facilitate development of the RPs, manage relations between the HEIs and RPs, 'coordinate all the partners and PENNA [and] undertake overall project management on behalf of the CWDC' (PIPC, interview). As PIPC's contract commenced, the formation of all the regional partnerships had not been concluded and part of PIPC's role involved working with the LAs to facilitate development of the RPs. PIPC also noted that the timescale shifted between their interview and awarding of the contract as CWDC brought the start date of Cohort One forward from January 2011 to September 2010. As a consequence, this 'required more effort to deliver against the timescales' (PIPC, interview). The programmes had to be developed by the end of March 2010 in order to meet HEI and GSCC timescales for validation and approval, which allowed three months for the development work with the RPs and HEIs.

Figure 3.2 Timescale for project planning.



A team of PIPC regional advisors worked with the RPs to facilitate liaison with the HEIs and support RP engagement in developing the programme. PIPC's perception, as expressed during interview, was that relationships with the RPs generally worked well, although there were some tensions where the RPs were less well-developed. PIPC noted the significance of 'motivation [and] levels of internal support' and, in particular, the importance of whether the coordinator was doing that role 'on top of the day job'. This theme of having a dedicated, or not, RP coordinator role is one that emerged throughout the evaluation, with an overwhelming consensus among respondents as to the impact on the success of the Step Up to Social Work programme. RPs, however, offered different perspectives as to the value of the PIPC role, with comments such as 'created confusion regarding the project plan',

'excessive demands', 'constant meetings', 'created difficulties ... worked on a business model way of doing things', 'too many project plans', 'didn't find them helpful at all ... employer's voice was being diluted by middleman'. One RP also expressed concern that PIPC appeared unaware of LA procurement and HR processes and timescales, and felt that they were being told to 'forget what your internal processes are, just do it like this'. In some respects, PIPC shared RP concerns and noted that 'the numbers of people involved made it complicated' and felt that the 'CWDC decision-making process was not always clear ... timely' (PIPC, interview). PIPC also acknowledged that it would have been helpful to have had greater clarity 'about roles and responsibilities earlier'.

Although most regional partnership interviews highlighted varying levels of discontent regarding the role of PIPC, one RP did specifically state that they had been 'extremely useful ... helped project manage the process' and another stated that PIPC 'was quite useful in advice terms, but I was never sure quite what they were doing or being paid for'. Overall, the consensus across RP interview respondents was that the PIPC role added a layer of complexity, introduced additional project plans and timescales and diluted their direct engagement with CWDC. Evaluation responses from the lead HEIs reiterated concerns about the 'extra layer [and] complicating factor' created by the PIPC role. Indeed, the lead HEIs reported that they met with CWDC to provide feedback on their experience of working with a management consultant in addition to their contractual responsibilities to CWDC and the requirement to work collaboratively with the RPs. It should be noted however, that PIPC also recognised that time was wasted 'trying to uncover contractual issues and challenges' and 'a more central coordinating role by CWDC or delegated to PIPC' was needed. PIPC felt it was also important to 'give local authorities more responsibility and financial authority to end up with the social workers they need' and in that respect, some of the Cohort One experiences clearly informed the Cohort Two planning.

According to CWDC, the original PIPC contract was until June 2012 but the change of government, spending review and resultant change in the financial environment meant that they needed to renegotiate a 'call-off' contract. This in effect meant the contract was concluded sooner than originally intended, in October 2010. Whilst understanding the reasons behind this decision, PIPC noted in an evaluation interview that it happened very quickly, and expressed some frustration that there 'should have been a more consolidated effort to harvest the knowledge to inform design going forward'. PIPC expressed some disappointment that they were not then able to contribute to the planning for Cohort Two and felt that CWDC 'lost their knowledge to transform the new programme', although this view may not have been shared elsewhere, and it seems that contractual issues were the main obstacle here.

In summary, the contractual arrangements for Cohort One were as follows:

- Lead HEI:contracted by CWDC
- Delivery HEI:contracted by RPs
- PIPC:contracted by CWDC
- PENNA:contracted by CWDC

The contrast with Cohort Two is that the regional partnerships were responsible for commissioning the lead/delivery HEI and, in all but one partnership, these roles were performed by the same HEI. In Cohort Two, contractual arrangements were simplified, and there were no other consultancy organisations involved. Cohort Two thus presents a more streamlined model of management and accountability – changes which have been commented on positively by those regional partnerships involved in both Cohort One and Two.

3.4 Validation

Once commissioned, the lead HEIs took on responsibility for both internal validation and GSCC accreditation for the programmes. At the same time however, they were expected to incorporate the needs and wishes of employers into the initial design and specification for delivery. MMU reported that the ‘course was designed to stimulate the integration of practice and academic knowledge from the course design and structure, right through to the specific content and assessment of each unit’ (Domakin, 2011). Employers were therefore encouraged to contribute to the detailed development of programme content and, for example, online materials (which would be used extensively in MMU’s programme) were the product of collaborations between academics and practitioners. In Salford’s case, the programme handbook stated that the programme design had been inspired by recent encouragement from the Social Work Task Force to include employers more fully, and that the ‘programme has been developed in partnership with employers from four regional partnerships and in consultation with service users’ (University of Salford, 2010, p. 3).

It is clear however, that the restricted timescale available for programme development created challenges for both the HEIs and RPs in relation to the extent of effective collaboration possible. For most RPs the challenges related to practicalities such as time, other work priorities and coordinating involvement across all the LAs. Some RPs noted a strong commitment by the HEI to promote effective LA engagement in the development process, summed up by one RP interview respondent stating that ‘if anything, we were drowning in opportunities (to contribute)’. However, the perspective from other regional partners was rather different, with HEIs described as being inaccessible or not consulting during the

process of programme development. The HEIs were under immense pressure to meet internal validation deadlines, GSCC accreditation and CWDC timescales, and acknowledged that, at times, this impacted upon the time available for RP feedback and contribution to the development process. The HEIs also acknowledged some pressures arising from the need to meet individual RP requirements in terms of curriculum content and delivery, in the context of developing one overarching programme specification. There was also a sense that some RPs 'struggled to articulate what they wanted; they liked the principle but lacked the knowledge' (lead HEI, interview). Although RPs were experienced in providing 'on the job' training for their workforce, they were not all able to draw upon experience of contributing to social work education.

The experience of working with the RPs highlighted for the HEIs the necessity of combining LA views on programme content with HEI expertise in respect of programme development and delivery alongside a broader understanding of the principles of social work education as opposed to the training model more familiar to LAs. The expectation that the programme would meet the specific needs of each RP also meant that the model developed by each HEI had to be sufficiently flexible to embrace the requirements of the different RPs, including different delivery models. For both of the lead HEIs, this included development of distance learning provision for RPs at a geographical distance as well as programmes to be delivered by two other HEIs.

However, it is clear that the two lead universities were able to draw on extensive prior experience of developing and delivering social work education, including involvement in arranging and supporting practice learning and expertise in work-based learning, as indeed were some regional partnerships. They were thus able to incorporate existing elements of their own social work qualifying programmes into the Step Up to Social Work curriculum (see discussion of programme content in chapter 6). This, of course, assisted in speeding up the process, and both programme teams were able to 'fast-track' the validation and accreditation processes, with support from their own universities and GSCC. Interestingly, this also meant approval being granted for APL arrangements which might previously have been problematic under the existing regulations for qualifying social work programmes in England, although GSCC (2008) had previously indicated an interest in allowing greater flexibility in this respect. This development may signal a readiness to extend such flexibility to social work education more widely.

3.5 Recruitment

The final piece of the jigsaw was the arrangements for recruiting trainees to the Step Up to Social Work programme. As with other aspects of the programme, there was

clearly a sense of urgency about establishing suitable structures to enable a full complement of trainees to be recruited for September 2010, bearing in mind that delivery mechanisms were being developed in parallel with the selection process, and that the programme itself was only 'launched' the previous year. As a national programme, expected to attract a very large number of applications, the scale of the operation was inevitably going to be substantial. Arrangements could therefore not easily be put in place to ensure a consistent and effective selection process to operate at partnership level, even though CWDC ensured that the latter stages of the process were coordinated through regional assessment centres involving regional partnership interests fully at this point.

The aim of recruiting 'non-traditional' and high-calibre candidates capable of withstanding the rigours of a very intensive programme on a national basis necessitated a distinctive approach to recruitment and selection. In addition, consistent with the wider aims of the programme, the intention was to put in place a framework for selection which ensured that regional partnerships, rather than HEIs, played a central part. This represented a distinct departure from conventional arrangements for recruiting social work students. The decision was made to contract out the recruitment process to a specialist organisation with the capacity to establish mechanisms to implement robust recruitment processes and manage the intensive demands and complex organisational relationships involved.

CWDC therefore sought to engage recruitment consultants capable of meeting this range of requirements specific to Step Up to Social Work. As a minimum, recruitment consultants would be required to:

- work with CWDC to advertise and signpost the 'on the job' training;
- undertake a role analysis and map key competencies;
- assess online applications to select candidates to participate in assessment centres;
- facilitate participants' involvement in assessment centres;
- manage up to 10 assessment centres, including the design of activities and facilitated sessions to enable regional partnerships and HEIs to determine candidates' suitability for a career in social work;
- assess applicants to select participants in the 'on the job' programme;
- evaluate the success of these approaches to recruitment and share lessons with CWDC; and
- participate in CWDC's evaluation of this approach to training provision.

(CWDC invitation to tender: Organisation to support recruitment for national employment-based social work training programme)

The successful tenderer was PENNA, an established recruitment consultancy. Alongside PIPC, connections were made immediately with the regional partnerships and PENNA's role in collaborative arrangements was established. It is clear that, as with PIPC, working relationships were not always straightforward, and although PENNA's responsibilities were relatively clear cut, there may have been some tension due to their taking on a role which other partnership members felt should be their responsibility. Nonetheless, as will be explored in more detail in chapter 5, the arrangements put in place were clearly effective to the extent that a substantial response was received to initial advertising and the recruitment process itself achieved the desired number of highly-rated candidates to fill the programme (200+), with an additional number of 'reserves' should allocated places not be taken up.

Key Findings

- Step Up to Social Work was a government response to a range of concerns about the readiness for practice of newly qualified social workers in children's services, the quality of social work education, and the need for a more effective employer role in training social workers.
- Step Up to Social Work was designed as an 18 month masters' level programme, aimed at 'high-calibre' entrants to social work and designed to attract career-changers from other professions.
- The programme was designed to be employer led and was based on eight regional partnerships of local authorities, with variations in terms of trainee numbers, contractual arrangements, RP structure and management arrangements, and previous experience of partnership working.
- A lead and delivery HEI model was developed, with two lead HEIs, Salford and Manchester Metropolitan Universities, each working with four RPs and two delivery HEIs.
- The programme development phase was extremely compressed, and involved a range of stakeholders including recruitment and project management consultants, leading to different views about the effectiveness of communication between all stakeholders.
- Subsequent changes in contractual arrangements and simplification of partnership arrangements for Cohort Two have generally been welcomed by both HEIs and RPs.

4. The Structure and Organisation of Regional Partnerships

As identified previously, Step Up to Social Work involved eight regional partnerships located in different parts of England. Each regional partnership varied in size and structure and this chapter outlines the different models and approaches to partnership working adopted in each region.

4.1 Development of Partnerships

Whilst it is clear from the final line up of regional partnerships engaged in Step Up to Social Work that several long-standing partnerships responded to the initiative (such as the West London Alliance and the Learn Together Partnership), several new combinations of local authorities were also brought together to engage specifically with the programme. Within the East Midlands region, the well-established Regional Social Work Network provided a collaborative forum, both for local authorities (LAs) and higher education institutions (HEIs), and enabled discussion about LA interest in forming a Step Up regional partnership. A number of LAs within this region had previous experience of working together on projects such as Grow Your Own and the Graduate Recruitment Scheme, but the Step Up to Social Work partnership enabled new combinations of LAs to work together. In Yorkshire and Humber, there was experience of LAs working together largely on a sub-regional basis and the Step Up to Social Work regional partnership was noted to provide an opportunity for a more 'regional' level approach. Within the East region, LAs also had experience of working together on projects such as the Graduate Recruitment Scheme and had an established collaborative approach to post-qualifying social work programmes. As can be seen from Table 4.1, even in those regions where there was no existing formal partnership, there was generally a foundation of collaborative working, at least between some LAs, on which to build a formal Step Up to Social Work partnership.

As may be expected, those partnerships with extensive prior experience of working together were at an advantage initially, in terms of having a shared basis for participation. Some differences, however, were apparent in the structures and roles developed across the RPs and the ease with which they assumed their Step Up to Social Work responsibilities. In the WLA for instance, there was a well-established partnership management and administrative structure in place, with experience of coordinating a range of other projects across the different LA members of the WLA. Building upon experiences of managing other projects, a full time Step Up to Social Work coordinator was identified as crucial to the success of the project and this role was in place from the outset of the Step Up to Social Work programme. Evaluation interviews and survey responses from WLA respondents overwhelmingly acknowledged the importance of the coordinator role in enabling effective

management of information and relationships, both between LAs and with the lead and delivery HEIs, particularly at the beginning of the project. In the East region the importance of the coordinator role was also highlighted as a conduit between the LAs as well as between the HEI and CWDC. In the East Midlands, the coordinator role was identified at the beginning of Step Up to Social Work but this was not a full time role and was undertaken in addition to existing roles and responsibilities. This latter point about the lack of dedicated time for the Step Up to Social Work coordinator role emerged across several RPs, with a number of interview respondents unclear as to how CWDC funding obtained by the LA was then utilised by the authority. Allocation of the funding was at the discretion of the RP and it appears that this was not always utilised in ways that were transparent to RP coordinators. There were also differences across the RPs regarding the background and role of the person allocated or appointed to the RP coordinator role. In most RPs, the coordinator role was held by someone with a social work background, often coming from the workforce development team. In Yorkshire and Humber, and Greater Manchester, however, this was more of a corporate services role, with the coordinator not having a social work background. Interviews within these two RPs highlighted some challenges relating to the coordinator role but this appears to have had more to do with personnel changes and resultant confusion regarding information sharing and clarity of roles and responsibilities than the specific professional background of the coordinator. This was particularly evident within the Yorkshire and Humber RP as interview respondents indicated that coordination and information was initially good but difficulties emerged during a period of change and then improved again when new coordinator arrangements were initiated. Likewise, in Greater Manchester, interview respondents associated difficulties with the coordination of the RP with a time of change and uncertainty regarding who was undertaking the RP coordinator role.

In most RPs, key aspects of the coordinator role related to managing relationships and information exchange between the LAs and with the lead/delivery HEI(s). One RP coordinator summed up a view commonly expressed, that initially, the role involved 'lots of fixing', with problem solving and negotiation skills identified as central in responding to issues and queries with the trainees, within the LAs and with the range of stakeholders. Most RP coordinators also managed the financial arrangements, organising the payment of invoices to the individual LAs, bursary payments to the trainees and liaison with CWDC regarding the contractual arrangements. This often involved extensive negotiation not only with CWDC but also within the LAs to ensure that 'robust systems were in place to handle large funds'. There were however, some exceptions to this, such as in the East Midlands, where the financial management arrangements were separate from the RP coordinator role. Across several RPs, particularly those with a social work coordinator, the RP coordinator also engaged directly with the trainees in a support

role, often acting as the key point of contact for any bursary or contractual queries. In the WLA, for instance, the RP coordinator was also directly involved in training those LA staff with key roles in relation to the trainees, such as host teams and learner guides. In addition to the overall support role with the trainees, the RP coordinator in the West Midlands also undertook the tutor role, carrying out the placement visits for the trainees.

Table 4.1 Regional partnership organisational arrangements: Cohort One.

Regional partnership	Coordinator location/role changes	Extent of existing local authority collaboration	Established relationship with HEI
Central Eastern	Lead LA, changing responsibilities of personnel	Previous collaboration (work on joint training/development projects)	Not with lead HEI but with delivery HEI
East	Lead LA, in place from beginning and consistent throughout	Experience of collaborative working	No
East Midlands	Lead LA, workforce development, not sole role, consistent for Cohort One	Experience of collaborative working	No
Greater Manchester	Lead LA, not social work role, personnel changed, period of uncertainty regarding role	Established regional partnership (routine collaboration on training/development, shared resources)	Yes
Learn Together Partnership	Lead LA, full time, personnel changed	Established regional partnership	No
West London Alliance	Full time, partnership appointment, in place from beginning, consistent throughout Step Up	Established regional partnership	Not with lead HEI but with delivery HEI
West Midlands	Lead LA, social work role, other responsibilities, not in place at the start, personnel changed	Experience of collaborative working	No

Yorkshire & Humber	Lead LA, HR role, not sole role, personnel changed & gap when no identified coordinator	Experience of collaborative working, mainly at sub-regional level	No
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What was clear though, across all the RPs, was a sense of how important the coordinator role was to the effective management of the partnership and the flow of information between its constituent parts. Dialogue with the Directors of Children's Services was recognised by coordinators as a crucial part of their role, particularly in the initial stages of Step Up to Social Work, when senior management 'buy-in' was essential. Regional partnerships were supported by steering groups representing the participating agencies and attended by the HEIs. Effective liaison with the steering group was recognised as an important mechanism for maintaining momentum and ensuring implementation of the Step Up to Social Work plans, such as securing good relationships with practice educators (the East Midlands). However, there appears to have been some variation across the RPs regarding the extent to which the steering group retained the ongoing involvement of senior, strategic managers. In the WLA, for instance, it is clear that the steering group consisted of workforce development leads and a curriculum group of senior managers, whereas in the East Midlands, ongoing involvement in the steering group was by predominantly workforce development staff (see Table 4.1).

The range of stakeholders with whom the regional partnerships had to engage was identified as challenging, particularly during the set up phase of the programme, and the perception of there being 'too many people involved' was a commonly expressed view during the evaluation. In that respect, the overwhelming view of respondents was that the management arrangements for Cohort Two were more streamlined and manageable. The two consultancy organisations involved in Cohort One were not involved in Cohort Two and the RPs were responsible for managing the contractual arrangements with the HEI which, in all RPs other than the North West Midlands, operated on the basis of a single HEI commissioned to deliver the programme, rather than the separate lead/delivery model in place for Cohort One.

4.2 Local Authority Expectations

The political origins of the programme and the social work context in which Step Up to Social Work was initiated have been outlined in the previous chapter. Nevertheless, the ways in which these principles were understood by regional partnership members was of interest to the evaluation team in order to understand 'why' local authorities had engaged and 'what' they expected to achieve from participation in the programme.

In general, regional partnership representatives were clear about CWDC's aspirations for the Step Up to Social Work programme. It was universally understood to be a programme designed to attract high quality graduates in to the social work profession providing them with a fast-track programme that would be delivered by a partnership between local authorities and higher education institutions:

It [Step Up to Social Work] will provide a fast route for high-calibre graduates into social work. (East, interview)

[It will] get top quality professionals into social work quicker. (Yorkshire and Humber, interview)

It's [Step Up to Social Work] about raising the bar on social work, they [CWDC] wanted people with life experience in child-related disciplines ... hand-picked in order to qualify quickly. (East, interview)

Further to the explicit CWDC programme aspirations, respondents from the East Midlands, Yorkshire and Humber, and WLA partnerships also reflected on the potential of the Step Up to Social Work programme to address gaps and fulfill their own regional needs in terms of qualifying social workers:

It's [Step Up to Social Work] about employers being in the driving seat, meeting employers' needs, these were CWDC aspirations, and then we brought it in to the regional partnership and said we wanted linking of theory and practice, service user involvement and so on. (East Midlands, interview)

The extent of prior collaborative working on key social work projects appears to have also impacted upon the manner and speed with which the RPs embraced the ethos and expectations of Step Up to Social Work. The West London Alliance partnership, for instance, had previously undertaken a scoping exercise regarding LA expectations and needs, which had highlighted recruitment and retention issues and perceived skills gaps with existing students and NQSWs.

It was well-timed for the WLA ... We realised student experience was so varied in training and across universities hence the problems we were experiencing with NQSWs. (WLA, interview)

Whilst the majority of respondents in regional partnerships were positive about the aspirations of the programme, most acknowledged distinct concerns, specifically related to the 18-month timescale of the programme. There was a general sense that 'it was a tall order in 18 months' (Central Eastern, interview)

and there were concerns about the extent to which this compressed timescale might exacerbate shortfalls already present in the skills acquisition of some graduates completing two-year courses, where people are not hitting the ground running in their final placement ... they're not as advanced as we would have liked them to have been. Our concern was with a squeezed programme would they be further back on Step Up? (Greater Manchester, interview)

Although the evaluation overwhelmingly heard the view that the 18 month timescale was extremely challenging, initial fears about the impact on quality were to some extent allayed through the experience of programme delivery.

The extent to which recruitment and retention was an issue for local authorities differed across the country at the time of inception of the programme. Whilst overall social work demonstrated particularly high vacancy rates compared with other professions, regional variations in this picture were significant (Jones, 2009). Most regional representatives acknowledged that recruitment and retention of children's social workers was an issue at that time (e.g., East, the East Midlands), although others questioned the need for a fast-track qualification simply to boost recruitment (e.g., the Learn Together Partnership, Central East). Leading on from this, some were sceptical about the extent to which career-changers would be persuaded to consider social work, particularly with reference to the CWDC 'Be the Difference' TV advert campaign:

The idea of attracting career-changers tied in with adverts at the time which were nebulous (kettle boiling), they gave a false picture of what social work was like. (Yorkshire and Humber, interview)

Was Ed Balls right in who he identified as queuing up to become social workers? (Greater Manchester, interview)

Another concern raised by representatives from at least three regional partnerships was the focus on academic qualifications and high calibre individuals and the necessity for prospective candidates to hold at least a 2:1 undergraduate qualification in order to be eligible for the programme. At the heart of this concern was the question of whether academic skill equated to and aligned with the personal skills that social work requires:

Is this [Step Up to Social Work] really going to be the right way to recruit social workers, obviously they are going to be more academic than previous social work students. (Central East, interview)

I was sceptical at the start – high flyers don't always equate to good practitioners. (Yorkshire and Humber, interview)

So strong were some of these concerns that across at least four RPs, interview respondents referred to the programme as potentially being 'elitist' and there was a concern that trainees regarded themselves as 'something special' (Central Eastern, interview) or 'super students' (WLA, interview). Step Up to Social Work was described as 'elitist, it was about escalating the supply of social workers with high quality academic graduates' (Yorkshire and Humber, interview). This was not, however, universally highlighted as a concern and several respondents acknowledged that it was the promise of getting high calibre trainees into the workforce in shorter timeframes that attracted them to the programme.

With regards to the reasons why local authorities joined regional partnerships, the provision of funding was clearly a strong motivating factor and acknowledgement that these trainees were effectively 'free of charge'. This was against the context of fewer and fewer local authorities still supporting Grow Your Own (GYO) schemes or sponsoring existing staff to qualify as social workers; 'we saw it as a national opportunity given that GYO is limited and in jeopardy from tuition fees' (Yorkshire and Humber, interview). The WLA was persuaded by the employment-based nature of Step Up to Social Work and the opportunity to be involved with all aspects of the programme: 'there were no limits on how we could be involved' (WLA, interview).

4.3 Places Offered

CWDC had initially envisaged each RP offering approximately 20 training places but, in the end, numbers differed across partnerships due to the varying sizes and capacities of the local authorities involved. Within each regional partnership all local authorities indicated how many trainees they could host and the final number was agreed at regional partnership level and with CWDC. The recruitment process is discussed within chapter 5, but details of the offers and allocations made are in Table 4.2.

As can be seen, not all regional partnerships filled their allocations. During the recruitment process candidates were required to choose a first and second choice regional partnership – some regional partnerships were over-subscribed and after the assessment days had their full allocation as well as several prospective candidates placed on reserve lists. In some instances, partnerships were able to negotiate alternative arrangements and these candidates were offered the chance to relocate and take unfilled places in other regions, for example in the East and Central Eastern regions. There were, however, some local authorities who had fewer trainees than they had originally envisaged hosting, and this was reportedly caused by a number of issues.

- Checks after places were offered revealed discrepancies in application information and evidence, leading to the withdrawal of offers.
- The period of time between offers made and contract paperwork being issued led to some candidates not being able to give sufficient periods of notice to their current employers prior to the start of the programme. Delays were apparently due to complex contractual negotiations at regional and local authority levels in the absence of any central contract templates.
- Some trainees realised in the first couple of weeks that they were unsuited to the programme. With it being a pilot it was not possible to offer prospective candidates a complete account of what the programme would be like as it was still in development at the point of recruitment.

Table 4.2 Regional partnership allocation of programme places.

Region	Recruitment target	Actual numbers recruited	Local Authority Allocations (Lead LA in bold)
Central Eastern	6	6	Central Bedfordshire (4) , Luton (2)
East	25	25	Norfolk (7) , Cambridgeshire (7), Suffolk (6), Southend (3), Thurrock (2)
East Midlands	30	26	Leicester (6) , Nottinghamshire (2), Nottingham (5), Derby (5), Northamptonshire (5)
Greater Manchester	15	15	Salford (6) , Bury (1), Bolton (3), Manchester (4), Wigan (1)
Learn Together Partnership	40	38	Wirral (8) , Halton (2), Knowsley (4), Liverpool (8), Sefton (6), Warrington (5), St Helens (5)
West London Alliance	35	34	Ealing (4), Brent (6), Hammersmith & Fulham (5) , Harrow (7), Hillingdon (2), Hounslow (5), Westminster (5)
West Midlands	12	9	Solihull (2), Coventry (3) , Warwickshire (4)
Yorkshire & Humber	37	31	Sheffield (8) , Rotherham (2), Leeds (6), Calderdale (2), East Riding (4), North Lincolnshire (2), Kirklees (2), North Yorkshire (5)
Totals	Target = 200 Offers made = 202	189 offers accepted, 185 started	

4.4 Organisation of Regional Partnerships

As expected given the differing geographies, numbers of local authority partners involved, and the extent to which partners had previously worked together, regional partnerships formed and functioned in different ways in order to meet the demands of Step Up to Social Work. Whilst mandated to identify a lead local authority within each regional partnership and to work with the appointed consultants of PIPC and PENNA, the nature of the procedures adopted to run the Step Up to Social Work programme was left to the discretion of each individual partnership by CWDC.

It appears from interviewees that the predominant approach to regional partnership management was that each local authority was responsible for their own trainees. Regional partnerships decided whether trainees were placed on training or employment contracts. In the majority of cases, partnerships adopted a training bursary contract model adapted where necessary to suit local circumstances and fit with existing local authority legal requirements. The exception to this was in the Learn Together Partnership and the West Midlands Partnership where trainees were placed on employment contracts in the first cohort, and the West London Alliance, whose model was equivalent to a 'golden handcuffs' arrangement, whereby trainees were guaranteed employment upon successful completion of the course, a positive outcome to an interview and registration with HCPC. As such, various approaches were taken to setting up Step Up to Social Work contracts, outlined in detail in Table 6.1 in chapter 6, but highlighted in the following three indicative examples.

- East Midlands – All trainees were placed on training bursaries (learning from Derby's experience of the Graduate Recruitment Scheme, treating trainees as employees and being obliged to offer them jobs on satisfactory completion). Contracts differed between local authorities, but all agreed to a training bursary contract for the duration of the programme as this was most tax efficient for trainees. An additional £3,000 tie-in was agreed which trainees would be liable to pay back if they did not apply for a job with the host authority within six months of completing the programme. Trainees had to apply via normal recruitment procedures and would be liable to pay back the tie-in if they declined an offer of a post;
- Greater Manchester – Trainees were on a bursary. Each trainee had two contracts; the first with Salford University which stated that they did not pay tuition fees, and the second with Salford City Council on behalf of the partnership. The latter confirmed that the regional partnership would pay tuition fees as long as the trainee attended and successfully completed the programme, as well as identifying the trainee's host authority, but it did not make any commitment to providing a job at the end of the programme;

- West Midlands Partnership – Trainees were placed on employment contracts with one of the three local authorities involved in the partnership. Each trainee had a designated line manager and whilst technically staff, trainees were treated as students. Being on an employment contract meant that the funding of £15,000 was subject to deductions. There was no explicit guarantee of a job at the end of the programme and each authority made their own arrangements for job interviews.

Contract design and negotiation was, according to respondents, a complicated and drawn out process due to a number of factors:

- local authority legal and HR requirements, policies and procedures;
- the extent to which regional partnerships wanted to place trainees on like for like contracts and any decisions with regards to special measures such as ‘tie-ins’ or standard provisions for mileage, subsistence etc.;
- the tax implications for trainees; and
- options regarding long term commitments and job offers to trainees at the end of the programme.

Contractual arrangements and checking of applicants’ details were some of the activities which led to partners confirming that the initial phases of setting up the Step Up to Social Work programme were extremely time and resource intensive. During these periods of intense activity, it appears most regional partnerships operated a programme of monthly steering group meetings comprising all the main local authority lead personnel. Once the inception phase was complete, several partnerships resorted to either six-weekly or quarterly steering group committee meetings with some of the larger partnerships employing sub-committees to consider specific elements of the programme, for example programme design and liaison with the university in respect of trainee feedback.

With regards to working arrangements and time dedicated to regional partnership working, the consensus amongst respondents was that Step Up to Social Work operated in ‘waves’ of activity. There were periods, such as during trainee recruitment, contract negotiation and set up when local authority staff reported working between two and three days a week on Step Up to Social Work. Even though regional partnerships received funding to cover these extra duties, for those concerned this activity was often in addition to their existing workloads, resulting in many having to take work home in order to remain on track. However, once the organisational phases of work had passed and the programme had commenced, the overwhelming view was that Step Up to Social Work was relatively easy to manage

and demanded on average just a few hours a week, with the exception of those weeks involving steering group meetings.

The seniority and role descriptions of staff involved differed across the regions. Senior managerial staff had frequently engaged with the programme from the outset and the extent of their 'buy-in' was reported to be influential. However, the ongoing management of the programme was frequently passed to workforce development staff or others with lead training roles. It was noted that the range of titles and roles utilised across local authorities varied extensively and it was thus difficult to make accurate comparisons across RPs in respect of the status of steering group members. However, typical membership of regional partnerships included:

- social worker/service managers
- social work consultants
- learning and development consultants
- professional development coordinators/leads
- training and development/workforce development managers/leads
- practice learning coordinators

Changes to personnel were noted by some to have brought about additional pressures and anxieties within partnership working (Central East, Greater Manchester, the Learn Together Partnership and Yorkshire and Humber, for instance). However this was often in relation to corporate change programmes and pressures within local authorities on resources. The impact of these factors will be considered in greater detail in later sections of this chapter which focus on relationships within regional partnerships.

4.5 Local Authority Perspectives on Relationships

Relationships are evidently multi-faceted and can be influenced and informed by a variety of factors. Nevertheless, this section of the report shall attempt to reflect on the various relationships which were central to the operation of the Step Up to Social Work programme. Clearly, there is some element of generalisation within this analysis and aspects may not necessarily represent all partnerships engaged in the Step Up to Social Work programme. As has been highlighted above, Step Up to Social Work involved RPs engaging in a complex range of relationships, both within the RP itself and with external parties, including HEIs, consultants and CWDC.

Respondents were generally of the opinion that Step Up to Social Work had been well-received within their own local authorities. This is not to say that it was without

issues and challenges, especially where specific phases of the programme were taking local authority staff engaged in Step Up to Social Work away from their day to day responsibilities and duties. Furthermore, there were concerns within some agencies that would adversely impact upon placement provision for local HEIs. Undoubtedly, there was a period of adjustment for all involved and uncertainty around roles and responsibilities at the outset had not assisted in embedding the programme into local authority practice. However, respondents consistently commented that overall, Step Up to Social Work was viewed positively and seen as a means of deriving other opportunities:

There's also knock-on effects of having these materials in the local authority ... (East Midlands, interview)

Step Up has been positively received, it's seen as a useful way of challenging our own practices and it's shown us how to tailor placements to learning needs. (LTP, interview)

It was important to be part of a programme to promote raising professional standards from the beginning and provided an opportunity to see how the programme was taking shape. (West Midlands, survey)

Maintaining local authority buy-in was a key focus for several local authority lead personnel who reported spending significant time and energy on liaising with senior managers and providing updates and feedback. Notably, it appeared to be members of the less established regional partnerships who commented most frequently on this aspect of their roles. Within existing partnerships such as the WLA and the LTP and in specific local authorities such as North Yorkshire, it appears that senior level buy-in was already established and Step Up to Social Work was readily integrated into local authority strategy. As highlighted above, the extent of senior level engagement also impacted positively on the ease with which the steering group was able to implement the Step Up to Social Work plans, for example the differences reported between the WLA and the East Midlands. In the East Midlands, it was noted that despite a generally positive response, a change of personnel at senior levels meant having to start making the case all over again. Sustaining senior level commitment also proved challenging in Central Eastern:

Cohort One wasn't part of a vision or strategy, it was a pragmatic decision based on funding; subsequently I spent a lot of time talking to heads [of service] trying to build it [Step Up to Social Work] in to workforce planning – rather than it being seen as a bolt-on project. (Central East, interview)

However, it was also reported that Step Up to Social Work had impacted on 'corporate' thinking and practice (Greater Manchester, interview) and in the

East region it was the developing experience of the programme itself which was persuasive. Managers

have all said what a dream they've [trainees] been ... [They] would rather have a trickle of Step Up students than the mediocre from other courses ... (East, interview)

Partnerships were aided and assisted by 'strong personalities' and authoritative leadership, be this in the sense of having a central focal point (coordinator or lead LA person) or having a group of individuals with clear ideas about how Step Up to Social Work should be delivered in their region: 'it's been a strong partnership because of strong driving forces and the strong personalities at each local authority' (Central East, interview). Similarly, tensions were caused in partnerships where partners were deemed not to have the same level of commitment to the programme or to have strongly held views which diverged from the group consensus. Some of the representatives from smaller local authorities also commented on the benefits to their authorities of being involved in a programme alongside larger authorities, where they could benefit from the larger authority pool of resources: 'the coordinator role being done by Norfolk was hugely beneficial to us' (East, interview).

Similarly, in those areas where partnerships had previously been less well-established, the opportunity afforded to them by Step Up to Social Work to form new relationships also provided the chance to 'see how things are done elsewhere' (Yorkshire and Humber, interview). A further aspect of this was partners being able to expand their own networks across authority borders. Whilst joint working is likely in any case to improve relationships, some respondents felt that it was Step Up to Social Work in particular which promoted closer ties:

I feel like some of the relationships I have with Step Up to Social Work partners are stronger than some of the relationships that I have with partners for other schemes in my locality ... a lot closer, a lot more connected ... I can contact one person and if they do not know the answer they will find someone who does. (East Midlands, interview)

Whilst views on the whole were positive about working in regional partnerships, there were some reflections on aspects of Step Up to Social Work that effectively brought about 'unusual relationships', namely with HEIs (which will be discussed in turn) but also between local authorities. One issue appeared to relate to implications of the recruitment process in respect of shared 'ownership' of trainees. The assessment centre process had effectively involved local authority staff interviewing trainees to be hosted in partner authorities, not necessarily within their own authority and, on occasions, not even within their own regional partnership. This led some to consider that they had lost control over whom their authority would host resulting in a 'mixed

bag of ownership' (Yorkshire and Humber, interview). Despite the complications though, it seems that there was a high degree of goodwill and trust between regional partners, when having to rely on decisions made by colleagues from other areas. Generally, respondents remarked that this had been resolved in Cohort Two as regional partnerships felt more responsible for key elements of the recruitment process.

In much the same way that relationships within regional partnerships differed, the same can be said for the partnerships formed between local authorities and the HEIs. What they had in common was that the nature of the collaboration was new, even where local authorities had prior experience of working with the two lead HEIs, such as in the North West. As indicated in the previous chapter, the procurement process relating to HEIs was bespoke to Step Up to Social Work and initiated originally by CWDC who appointed the two lead universities, Salford and Manchester Metropolitan. Beyond this, some regional partnerships engaged in the procurement of local universities to deliver the programme. The process has been outlined previously, but it was at this point that relationships began to forge between regional partnerships, local authorities and various HEI staff.

At least three respondents viewed the HEI/regional partnership model associated with the Step Up to Social Work programme as a really positive aspect of the programme, giving people new perspectives on how social work education is delivered in other parts of the country: 'it's been a breath of fresh air' (Greater Manchester, interview). The opportunity to move local authorities beyond their usual networks was identified by East region respondents as particularly beneficial. Enthusiasm was expressed elsewhere, too:

I certainly have a preference for this programme over conventional ones, as a result of the relationships we've built with the HEI ... (East Midlands, interview)

No distinct pattern was evident with regard to the success or otherwise of RP relationships with the lead HEI. Some RPs found relations with a geographically distant HEI challenging, while others compared that relationship favourably to existing relationships with local HEIs. Likewise, while one RP noted some areas of concern with regard to their HEI relationship, other RPs described a positive relationship with the same HEI. For some RPs, however, the lack of prior links with the lead HEI created challenges when having to adhere to the demands of several stakeholders within a compressed timescale. Not having an established relationship to build upon left some RPs feeling that they lacked the security of knowing how the HEI would work collaboratively with their partners.

Where relationships worked well, respondents highlighted a number of factors, not least the approach of the HEI in terms of being open, approachable and committed to partnership working:

Since the word go they [the HEI] have worked with us – it's been a true partnership. (East, interview)

Because we do meet so regularly and everyone is approachable it feels safe and you can be honest. They [the HEI] are part of this partnership. (East Midlands, interview)

The university are negotiating on content ... demonstrating what value they add (to the partnership). (Greater Manchester, interview)

Inevitably though, there were also more critical perspectives in respect of approaches to partnership working, particularly in the early stages of programme development:

It didn't feel like partnership working at the beginning, it was all being imposed. (West Midlands, interview)

They [HEI] were saying this is your programme, and we were saying yes, but you're not listening to us when we tell you what we want. (WLA, interview)

Much of the complexity and difficulties associated with relationships between HEIs and local authorities appear to have resulted from some of the structural elements of the Step Up to Social Work programme. For example, where a duty of care was owed to trainees, the roles and responsibilities of the host local authorities and HEIs had perhaps not been distinguished effectively, leading to confusion and overlap:

Some things about student progression were not known about by the local authority until it was too late ... yet it was supposed to be a partnership ... the model diluted responsibilities. (Yorkshire and Humber, interview)

Others commented on the arrangements in Cohort One, with CWDC contracting the lead HEIs, as having caused difficulties when local authorities were eager to influence programme design or delivery and yet only had contractual relationships with the delivery HEI:

Salford were answerable to the CWDC and not us [the regional partnership] in Cohort One ... I got the impression that the contract was quite wide and open. (WLA, interview)

Although views were mixed across the RPs as to their experiences of working with the delivery HEI where that was different from the lead HEI, there was a general sense that the lead/delivery model adopted in Cohort One of Step Up to Social Work added an unnecessary layer of complexity:

The process initially with two universities was difficult; it was a learning experience ... Just in terms of roles, for students there is a need to have one message. For example there were students with learning needs and the support for these students was difficult. (WLA, interview)

The experiences of Cohort Two demonstrate no consistent approach in terms of geography or extent of previous relationship with the HEI. Across the RPs there are examples of continuing to contract a geographically distant HEI for Cohort Two and those choosing instead to contract a local HEI, with whom pre-Step Up to Social Work relations existed. It also appears that, in at least one case, the decision-making for contracting the Cohort Two HEI was based on cost rather than more specific quality or relationship issues in respect of the Cohort One HEI. What does appear significant however, is the decision of all RPs involved in Cohort One to contract a single HEI when progressing onto Cohort Two. Reflecting on their experience of Cohort One, 'we would have preferred to have just gone with one or the other [not lead and delivery]' (Central East, interview). A Greater Manchester respondent also expressed the notion that '[I] imagine the lead/delivery model to be much more complicated'.

One of the best decisions we made early on was a fairly pragmatic decision that we wanted the lead HEI to be the same as the delivery HEI because we thought it would be just too complicated in Cohort One to have different ones. (East Midlands, interview)

For the second set we chose to work with only one university. (WLA, interview)

When dealing with the delivery HEI, regional partnerships found contractual discussions relatively straightforward. However, the contractual arrangements between the lead HEI and CWDC meant that the regional partnership had to act carefully, so as not to undermine either contract. Clearly relationships between local authorities, regional partnerships and HEIs were managed differently across the country and as such views and perspectives articulated by respondents were in response to specific events and experiences. However, what has been clear throughout the evaluation is a pragmatic, 'can do' attitude towards managing the challenges inherent within such a diverse set of complex relationships.

4.6 HEI Perspectives on Relationships

Clearly, many new relationships were forged as a result of the Step Up to Social Work programme and in almost all cases the relationships between the lead HEIs and regional partnerships were new (with the exception of the North West (LTP and Greater Manchester), where understandably there were a number of prior relationships in place. Furthermore, the 'triangular model' adopted in some areas, of lead and delivery HEIs combining to deliver a work-based learning programme with a regional group of local authority partners, was unique to the Step Up to Social Work programme. What many of these arrangements had in common was the fact that relationships were being developed across significant geographical distances. HEIs and RPs shared the view that face-to-face, direct contact between partners was central to establishing relationships and a pre-requisite to facilitating partner engagement and understanding. It does not appear that the maturity and pre-existing nature of many partnerships always meant that partnership working was easier, although some did suggest this:

The easiest relationships were where they had an existing relationship ... where they [WLA and Greater Manchester] had a clear view of what they wanted ... when we went through trials and tribulations they were robust enough to deal with these. (Salford, interview)

On the other hand, even where there was no prior relationship, a common purpose could emerge relatively easily. An MMU representative noted that the West Midlands partnership, as a new partnership

came with a very clear idea of how they wanted it [the course] to work ... they were different from the others, they went down their own pathway. (MMU, interview)

HEI representatives stressed that consultation was key to working in partnership with regional partnerships and local authorities and that early on in the process great efforts were made to engage with the regional groups:

We invested heavily in working with them [regional partnerships] in the regions ... our approach was to meet in the regions at their steering group meetings. (MMU, interview)

This was central to ensuring LA engagement in the development of the programme, especially given that lead HEIs had formulated the outline of the programme but needed both to explain the ideas behind their approach and understand the delivery-related needs and desires of the employers, as the contractors of the HEI provision at local level. One MMU member of staff likened the situation to painting by numbers: 'at the start we needed to present the ethos of the programme ... we had

the outline but no content'. Furthermore, direct relationships between HEIs and regional partnerships were considered to work better than going via management and recruitment consultants, as had been the case in the early stages of programme development:

[Relationships] worked better where they were direct relationships and not via intermediaries. (Salford, interview)

Best examples of partnership working were where I could sit in a meeting and talk to people directly; we could talk things through and get things sorted much quicker than via intermediaries. (Salford, interview)

HEIs generally described partnership working, especially in regard to programme development, as a process of negotiation and consultation. One of the clearest accounts was given by an MMU member of staff who recounted her experiences:

Where we were delivering we consulted on each module and took on feedback, to marry practitioner and academic perspectives, what should, could be in, and this is difficult sometimes – it becomes a negotiation about what's achievable and realistic with a unit. For me this is key, we have to have this negotiation.

Others echoed this sentiment and went on to suggest that without such 'incredibly useful dialogue' (Salford, interview) programmes would not have turned out as they did. The consensus amongst HEIs was that this opening of communication channels between LAs and HEIs was critical in improving understanding between partners:

We were all in the tent together, starting to share information. (University of Chester, interview)

Anything they [LAs] wanted to change they could, they have highly influenced the growth of this social work programme. (Bedfordshire University, interview)

This is not to say that all negotiations ran smoothly and one initial obstacle to such dialogue was the apparent use of different language between partners:

Initially there were a lot of misunderstandings ... we corrected our language to make sure we were all talking about the same thing and then it got better. (University of Bedfordshire, interview)

Of more concern to others was the extent to which partners were able to respond effectively to the consultations as a result of the time pressures and capacities available within LAs:

The intention was for employers to decide on course contents, but in smaller RPs they couldn't dedicate resource to do this ... they were consulted ... but sometimes there wasn't the capacity to take this up. (Salford, interview)

I think it was a case of information overload, especially as the programme was developing ... I'm not sure how the RPs kept on top of the information coming out from the CWDC, PIPC and PENNA as well as really in-depth information on unit development. (MMU, interview)

The impact on the programme attributed to the relationships developed between HEIs and regional partnerships is considered in greater detail in chapter 8. Nevertheless, HEI stakeholders did identify a range of factors which they considered to have influenced and aided strong working partnerships:

- the genuine enthusiasm and commitment to Step Up to Social Work on the part of the regional partnerships;
- the provision of administrative support in some regional partnerships, or at least the identification of clear lead personnel for various aspects of the programme, which allowed questions to be directed at the right people;
- openness to communication and dialogue about all aspects of the programme; and
- timely responses to questions and queries.

Similarly, HEI partners were candid about where tensions arose in partnership relationships with the HEI. These were generally considered to have been caused where communications had been affected by either the involvement of intermediaries or where capacity issues had prevented timely responses to questions. Changes in personnel were also noted to have, at times, disrupted communication channels:

Everyone was so busy producing materials but it raised process issues that took a long time to resolve really. (University of Hertfordshire, interview)

There was a perception that the HEIs and LAs needed to learn to respond quickly, but we ended up planning on the hoof and that's never good ... we were trying to work in this way with an institution that's not used to working at this pace. It's the same for LAs, sometimes they were really engaged and at other times they were pulled in other directions and couldn't respond as quickly. (Salford, interview)

A further factor noted by two of the delivery HEIs was the extent to which certain regional partnerships had adopted a 'supplier–contractor' approach to partnership working. This was reported to have undermined the partnership as a result of information not always being effectively shared and placed the regional partnership as an intermediary between the lead and delivery universities. Some partnerships, such as the West London Alliance, East, and the East Midlands, were pleased with the 'contractual' nature of arrangements with delivery HEIs though, feeling that this gave them greater control and certainty in terms of being able to determine what would be delivered.

With regards to the relationships between lead and delivery HEIs, the two lead universities both acknowledged that this was an 'unusual' arrangement which posed challenges for all parties. One respondent from MMU referred to the need for 'a delicate balance' to be struck between the lead HEI overseeing and protecting the integrity of their own master's course as well as enabling the partnerships and delivery HEIs to create their own materials and use their own expertise. Where both lead HEIs were working with regional delivery HEIs, they stressed the focus on their quality assurance role and acting as a 'support' for the local HEI rather than adopting a 'big brother, little brother' mentality (MMU, interview).

Whilst lead HEIs acknowledged the 'strange' position that delivery institutions found themselves in, working to another university's programme, it was suggested that difficulties stemmed from issues of distance and interpretation rather than as a result of any hostility to the model:

It was a learning curve for us in terms of quality assuring work of colleagues we didn't know, and them being accountable to another HEI ... practical and technical questions came up ... you know, what did you mean when you wrote this ... we did get there, we worked at it. (Salford, interview)

Clearly, partnerships were not immune from differences in opinion and challenges, but lead and delivery HEIs were on the whole very positive about how relationships had been formed and deployed.

Key Findings

- Step Up to Social Work regional partnerships included well-established partnerships as well as local authorities brought together specifically to engage in this programme.
- Regional partnerships engaged positively with the aspirations of Step Up to Social Work to invest in high quality trainees joining the workforce in reduced timeframes and enhance employer involvement in the development and delivery of social work education.
- Most regional partnerships placed trainees on training bursaries, although there were exceptions whereby trainees were on employment contracts or guaranteed employment on successful completion of the programme.
- A strong regional partnership coordinator was identified as central to effective management and communication, and gaps in this role created challenges in some partnerships.
- The lead/delivery HEI model added an additional layer of complexity to relationships and contractual arrangements and this was largely streamlined for the second cohort.
- Relationships with HEIs were generally good, although as might be expected with a new way of working, misunderstandings did arise on occasion and HEI responsiveness and approachability were identified as key to developing effective relationships.
- Partnership relationships were generally sound, with consistent evidence of strong commitment to making the partnership work and 'added value' for individual local authorities of collaborative working.
- Implementation of the programme was challenging for those RPs with limited dedicated staff resources but generally viewed as manageable, albeit with periods of high demand in terms of staff time.

5. The Recruitment Process

5.1 Commissioning Recruitment Consultants

The recruitment process for Step Up to Social Work was initially developed for the first cohort as a standalone task, for ease of administration and effective project management. As such, it was tendered as a separate piece of work and PENNA Consultancy was the successful bidder. The project specification stipulated that the task would involve liaison with regional partnerships and HEIs 'to ensure that no subsequent interviews' of potential candidates would be needed, but that the bulk of the selection process, from initial application to final offer of a place would be managed by the provider.

The outline specification provided by CWDC laid the basis for the development of detailed tools and processes, and tools for the recruitment process. In particular, it required the design and implementation of an overarching framework for assessing the kind of competencies thought to be essential to high quality qualified social work practitioners.

Additionally, PENNA was assigned responsibility for implementing a thorough and demanding assessment centre process to ensure candidates' suitability for the programme. As PENNA's senior lead on the Step Up project explained:

It was incumbent on PENNA to scope, design and deliver a recruitment campaign that selected a special type of candidate, dedicated to making a difference, whilst adapting to the challenges faced as a result of completing a work-based placement at the same time as studying towards a master's level qualification. (Young, 2011, p. 2)

Acknowledging the interactive nature of the programme, PENNA recognised the importance of developing a range of 'selection tools' capable of assessing both work-based and academic capabilities. It was also recognised at this point that two additional factors would affect the process: namely, the number of key stakeholders, and the tightly circumscribed timescale. In order to achieve the stated objectives of the recruitment phase, PENNA carried out a number of initial scoping exercises, including stakeholder interviews and focus groups with service users. In addition, in collaboration with senior CWDC colleagues, they drafted and consulted on selection tools alongside development of assessment centre exercises and 'benchmarking' (i.e., setting the thresholds for acceptance onto the programme).

5.2 The Assessment Framework

The key document underpinning the selection process was the ‘assessment framework’, designed in consultation between PENNA, CWDC and other ‘stakeholders’ (HEIs, regional partnerships and PIPC), which formed the basis for decision-making in relation to Cohort One applicants (Young, 2011), and which remained in place to inform selection for Cohort Two.

The purpose of the framework was to provide a comprehensive set of criteria against which candidates for social work training for children’s services could be assessed, at all stages of the recruitment process.

ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK FOR RECRUITMENT TO STEP UP TO SOCIAL WORK

Child-centred approach: Has the young person’s or child’s interest at the centre of all they do.

Values: Consistently exhibits behaviour in line with the values of the social work profession.

Verbal communication: Communicates effectively and professionally with others to ensure they are understood, adapting their style to the audience and/or situation as appropriate.

Written communication: Writes in a clear and professional style to aid understanding and influence others.

Resilience: Displays resilience, maintaining a professional service and optimistic outlook under difficult circumstances.

Analysis & decision-making: Gathers information to solve problems and inform decisions; considers the wider implications and takes ownership for decisions made.

Planning & organising: Organises self effectively, takes a structured and methodical approach to ensure that tasks are completed on time.

Building & managing relationships: Builds and maintains positive relationships with service users, colleagues and other professionals.

Self-awareness & self-development: Is passionate about social work and motivated to succeed in this field; understands own values and has the ability to self-reflect to enhance personal development.

(adapted from Young, 2011)

These represent what are commonly viewed as essential attributes of effective social work practitioners. The subsidiary definitions offer further detail, and indicators were also developed of 'effective' and 'less effective' behaviours against which candidates' applications and performance at assessment centres could be rated (see Young, 2011 for fuller detail).

Having established an agreed basis for candidate selection, application forms and assessment centre exercises consistent with this were designed, with the aim of ensuring coherence throughout the recruitment process and achieving the desired level of quality amongst successful candidates.

5.3 The Selection Process

The selection process itself was designed to involve a series of stages, from the receipt of completed application forms, including an initial sift by CWDC to ensure that candidates met the eligibility criteria (in terms of prior qualifications – at least 2:1 at degree level, relevant experience and status); a 'sift' against the agreed assessment criteria, undertaken by regional partnerships; the assessment centre itself – utilising a selection of written and group exercises, interviews and a standardised 'scoring' system; and finally, confirmation of satisfactory CRB and other checks and references.

The two key components of the process were the initial application form and the assessment centre, allowing for an initial judgement of potential suitability against static criteria, and then a more detailed evaluation of candidates' qualities relevant to social work, including a number of 'live' simulations. The use of assessment centres was justified according to PENNA because their results are the 'best known predictor of future performance in role'; they allow 'multiple assessors to observe candidates'; they are 'fair and objective'; they offer evidence as to candidates' potential performance 'in different situations'; and they allow candidates to gain a 'realistic' view of what might be expected of them in role (Young, 2011, p. 14).

Where candidates in the first cohort were to be evaluated against the assessment criteria, benchmarked thresholds were set, firstly to establish eligibility and secondly to determine whether or not to make an offer or place candidates on the reserve list. It was possible for candidates to achieve the minimum standard to warrant a place on the programme, but still to be unsuccessful due to the limit on the number of places available. Where possible, reserve candidates were subsequently offered places on withdrawal of previously successful candidates.

5.4 Applying the Assessment Framework

The assessment framework was designed to be applied consistently throughout the recruitment process, but with sufficient flexibility to prioritise different requirements at each stage. Thus, the application form included three ‘competency-based questions’ which were intended to test candidates in respect of: their ‘direct experience of working with children and young people’; their ‘motivation to succeed on a challenging programme’; and their understanding of social work values.

Q1 CHILD-CENTRED APPROACH

Outline experience you consider as relevant to this application. This experience must include working and building relationships with children and young people in a paid or voluntary capacity.

Q2 MOTIVATION

What has influenced your decision to apply for the CWDC Step Up to Social Work programme?

Q3 VALUES

What values do you believe are important in social work?

(adapted from Young, 2011, p. 10)

The written responses to these questions enabled assessors to make judgements about candidates’ capabilities and potential in these key areas, as well as self-awareness and their written communication skills; that is to say, five of the nine assessment criteria were addressed by way of the written application. Subsequently, at the assessment centre stage, a number of exercises were designed similarly to determine candidates’ suitability across the range of criteria specified, including: separate interviews with lead HEIs and local authorities; a group exercise with service user involvement; a written exercise; and a telephone-based exercise.

Although RPs commented favourably on PENNA’s role in developing the selection materials, they were largely critical about their (PENNA’s) role in managing the assessment process. Problematic factors were identified by all RPs, although the extent of concerns was greater within some RPs than others. Within six of the RPs, significant issues of concern about the selection process were highlighted during interviews. These concerns included: problems with the application portal; complexity of process and too many people involved, with PENNA described as an ‘unnecessary layer’ (Greater Manchester, interview); disparity in importance attached to selection criteria, with the example of ‘key qualities not being scored high enough’

(Yorkshire and Humber, interview); 'paperwork not properly checked' (East, interview), with a number of RPs noting that this included references, CRB status and right to be in the country: 'there was a lack of clarity about whose responsibility it was to check visas' (Greater Manchester, interview). In addition, specific examples were cited by three RPs of candidates who 'got through who shouldn't have' (Central Eastern, interview).

It should be noted, however, that PENNA shared many of the RP concerns about the process and particularly the problems relating to 'so many people (being) involved' (PENNA, interview). Timescales were recognised by PENNA to be challenging as deadlines were moved forward by CWDC, and PIPC also imposed their own project management timescales. PENNA noted that 35 assessment centres took place over a period of two weeks and on one occasion, 24 candidates were seen at an assessment centre on one day. This inevitably created pressures for all involved, including the RPs and HEIs trying to provide sufficient number of staff to support the assessment centre activities.

A number of concerns were highlighted, however, by the RPs about the management and organisation of the assessment centres and the sense that there was a 'minority role for local authorities at the assessment centre' (Yorkshire and Humber, interview). Respondents described having 'control removed' (Greater Manchester, interview) in respect of the decision-making processes about candidates and there was universal acknowledgement that appropriate changes had been made to the Cohort Two recruitment process to ensure that local authorities had greater responsibility. RPs noted that PENNA 'assessors were not subject specialists' (East, interview) and felt that this further impacted upon the quality of the decision-making process:

Some interviewers were inappropriate and didn't know enough about the [social work] business. (West Midlands, interview)

On the other hand, of those survey respondents involved in the recruitment process, most (15/18) were 'satisfied' with the recruitment process and 14 out of 17 responses agreed or strongly agreed that the process 'did attract high quality individuals'.

The 'group exercise' incorporated a discussion of the 'skills and attributes' required by social workers with children and young people, and the means of ensuring that children and young people are 'involved in' key decisions affecting them. Observations, including feedback from service users, would then provide the basis for evaluation against three criteria: values, verbal communication and building and managing relationships. Candidates would also be required to complete a written

evaluation of their own performance in the group exercise, to be assessed against the two criteria of written communication, and self-awareness and self-development.

The written analysis exercise used a 'typical' scenario of a young person at the point of leaving foster care to inform the task set for candidates of assessing relevant case information, in order to produce a written summary of the 'key issues' involved, their recommendations, and a brief plan identifying 'the next steps'. The written exercise would be assessed against four criteria: child-centred approach; written communication; analysis and decision-making; and planning and organising.

The telephone exercise, based on a simulated call from a 'young person in distress' and a written evaluation form completed by each candidate, provided for assessment of aptitude against these criteria again, with the substitution of resilience for relationship-building.

Two interviews were also incorporated into the day-long assessment centre (described as a 'tough day', Yorkshire and Humber, interview, and a 'gruelling process', West Midlands, interview), with a series of standard questions designed to assess academic ability and suitability against the criteria of: self-awareness and self-development; planning and organising; values; and analysis and decision-making. It was intended that each criterion would be assessed twice in different ways, and candidates' composite scores across the range of criteria would determine their eligibility (or not) for the Step Up to Social Work programme. As already noted, the achievement of this threshold would not necessarily guarantee a place and this aspect of the selection process was competitive, as the highest scoring candidates attracted offers first.

In addition to the concerns highlighted above, a number of respondents raised concerns about arrangements for the young people participating in the assessment centres, described as 'ill conceived' (East, interview). The West Midlands outlined significant concerns about both the practical arrangements for the young people, in terms of payment, food and length of day, but also the exercises designed to be used by the young people which were described as 'patronising' (West Midlands, interview). Indeed, a West Midlands respondent reported having to change the nature of the young people's involvement on the day of the assessment centre itself. However, it appears that the experiences of service users differed across the different regional partnerships. Within both the WLA and Yorkshire and Humber, the service users who participated in focus groups reflected positively on their experiences and indicated that they had been well looked after on the day, 'had a nice lunch' (Yorkshire and Humber, focus group). In addition, they reported being well-prepared and -supported and felt positive about contributing to the assessment of social work students. In both regions, however, service users commented that it would have been useful to have had feedback, both in respect of their role and in

relation to assessment outcomes for the candidates with whom they engaged, as they reflected some uncertainty as to the impact of their contribution.

The process was certainly viewed by regional partnership members as tough and a 'high pressure day' (LTP, interview). However, there was also considered to be some merit in the rigour of the process, in that successful applicants felt a sense of achievement simply by obtaining a place (East, interview). Despite the concerns that it had been a 'nightmare process' (East Midlands, interview), the general view across the RPs was that the assessment framework was an effective mechanism for selecting high-calibre trainees on to the Step Up to Social Work programme.

5.5 Reflections on the Design of the Selection Process

The recruitment process for Step Up to Social Work was designed to be both broad and intensive, covering the key areas of social work values and child-centredness, core skills (especially in communication), personal qualities of reflection and resilience, and knowledge of key aspects of social work with children and young people. Its range and rigour of assessment compares well with the evidence available from social work qualifying programmes more widely (Holmstrom, 2010), although there does seem to be a general move amongst qualifying programmes towards more thorough 'multi-dimensional' and 'triangulated' assessment processes, according to Holmstrom (2010, p. 24). The rigour of the Step Up to Social Work recruitment process therefore fits well with the recommendations of the Social Work Task Force (SWTF) to raise the calibre of entrants to qualifying programmes (SWTF, 2009b).

Some features of the approach taken to recruitment by Step Up to Social Work are of note, such as the emphasis on 'resilience', that is, ensuring that candidates are equipped to withstand the heavy demands of a highly varied and intensive programme. It is also important to reflect on questions which cannot be satisfactorily answered at 'design stage', such as whether a highly specific and rigorous selection process works to exclude certain individuals or groups unnecessarily or unfairly. A number of our respondents expressed concerns about the prohibition against considering candidates with lower qualifications than 2:1 degrees (Central East and Yorkshire and Humber, interviews, for example). PENNA also noted concern that they 'lost some good candidates' (PENNA, interview), citing an example of accepting someone with a 2:1 in physics but rejecting someone with a 2:2 in sociology, purely on the basis of academic qualifications rather than previous experience or relevance of degree. Several respondents also commented on what they saw as the relatively 'unrepresentative' nature of the cohort of trainees eventually recruited compared with the wider population of qualifying social work students, particularly in respect of

ethnic diversity (Salford University, interview; Yorkshire and Humber, interview; Central East, interview; Greater Manchester, survey respondents).

5.6 Applications: Progress and Outcomes, Cohort One

The Step Up to Social Work programme did not adopt a conventional route for applications and assessment of potential candidates for social work training, owing to its distinctive design, targeted recruitment aims and the recruitment timeframe. The selection process was structured specifically to meet the requirements of Step Up to Social Work, and this involved the establishment of a series of decision points, involving both paper-based eligibility and screening procedures, and a rigorous assessment centre exercise. The process overall involved seven stages, as follows:

Application submitted → eligibility checking → screening exercise → invitation to/ attendance at assessment centre → assessment centre exercises → offer made → acceptance.

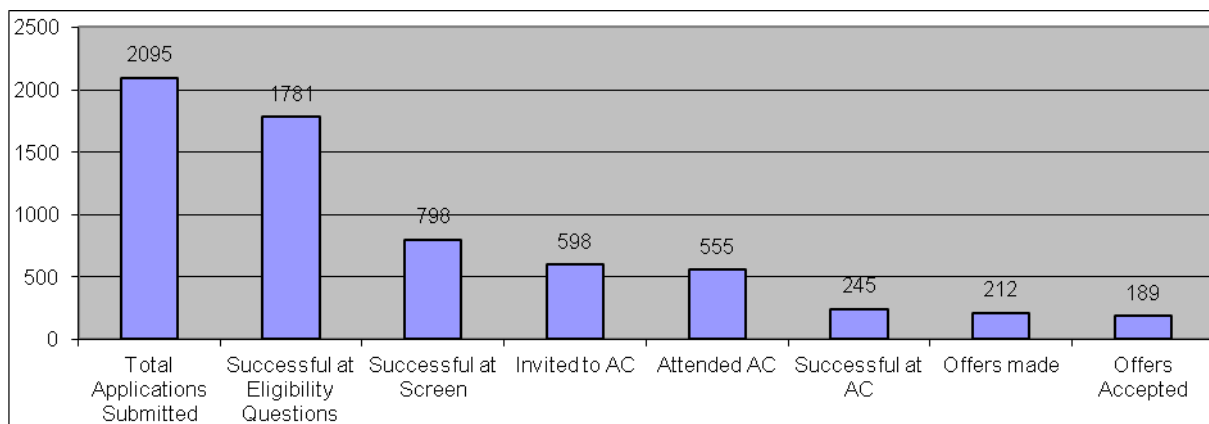
From the 202 places made available on the Step Up to Social Work programme by the eight regional partnerships, 185 places were filled. The number of trainees on the programme was affected not only by the varying sizes and capacities of regional partners but also by the approach taken to the allocation of trainees to specific programmes during recruitment.

5.7 The Recruitment Process: An Overview

In undertaking a process of this degree of rigour and with the inevitability that the final number chosen for the programme would only represent a small proportion of the original applicants, it is important to review the progress of candidates, in order to account for factors associated with the profile of those who were eventually successful.

In all, 2095 applications were received for the first intake to the Step Up to Social Work programme (see Figure 5.1). Of these, some (314/15%) clearly fell outside the eligibility criteria, in terms primarily of prior qualifications and experience. A much larger number (983/47%) were turned down following an initial screening exercise, based on a detailed appraisal of their written applications, and a further 200 were excluded on the basis of a more detailed review of their eligibility for the programme. Thus, of the total applying, only 29% were invited to participate in the assessment centres.

Figure 5.1 Applications received, progress and outcomes.



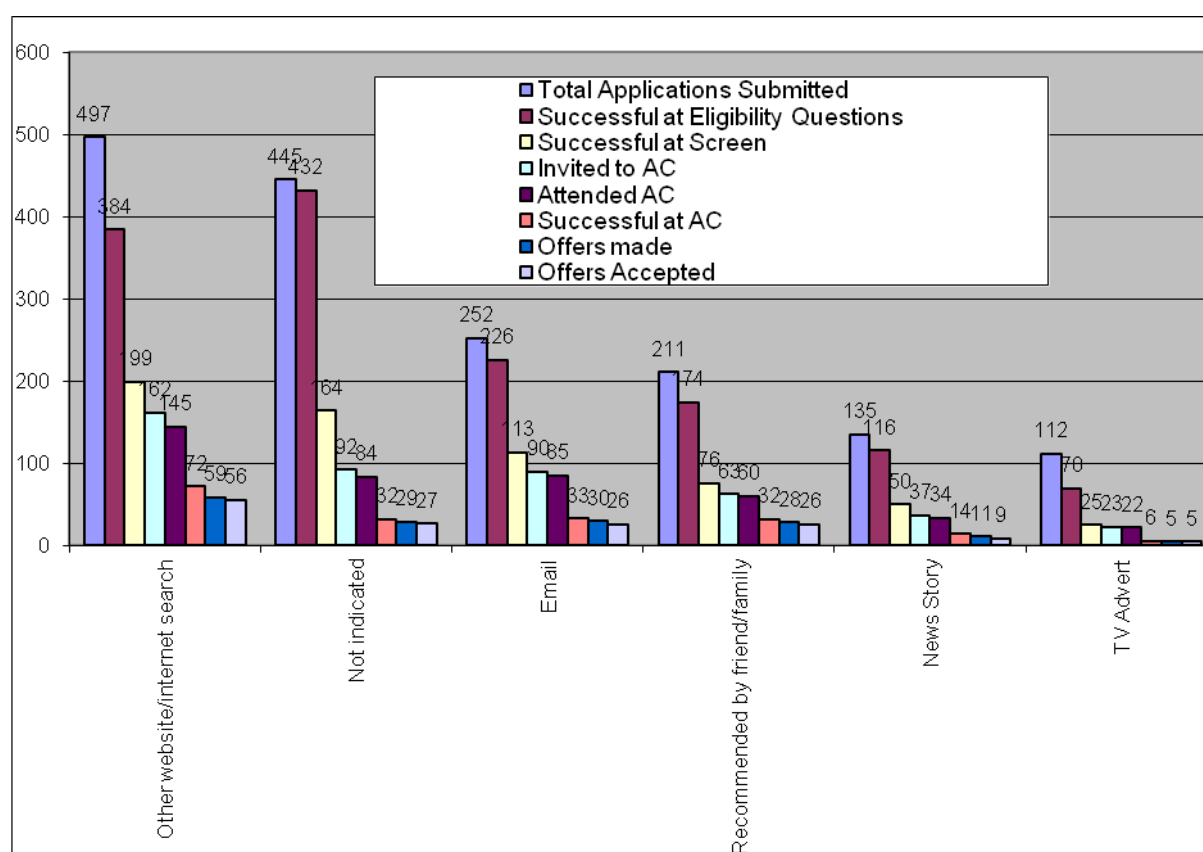
Somewhat less than half those attending the assessment centres were successful (12% of all applicants), and of these 189 finally received and accepted the offer of a place (9%), although four of these candidates subsequently did not join the programme. Thus, both the initial screening exercise and the assessment centres were decisive in determining the overall outcomes of the application process.

5.7.1 Applicant profile

Based on the information provided by candidates and collated by CWDC, it is possible to classify them according to a number of key demographic characteristics: age, disability, gender, ethnicity, religion and sexual orientation, and further statistical analysis helps to clarify any patterns which emerge over the course of the application process. Initially though, information was gathered on which media were influential in prompting interest and securing applications (see Figure 5.2).

These figures appear to show that the internet is an increasingly important route by which intending social workers are alerted to qualifying programmes such as Step Up, as might be expected, and it also seems to show that the source of this information has little bearing on the likelihood of eventual acceptance, except possibly in the case of TV advertising, which generated a limited response and few successful applicants. It should be noted, however, that the TV campaign to promote social work at the time was intended to generate wider interest in the profession, and was not explicitly connected with Step Up to Social Work.

Figure 5.2 Sources of interest and routes onto the programme.



As the selection process progressed, it seems that age disparities widened, and at the point of accepting the offer of a place, only two candidates were over 50, that is 2% of those who applied in this age range, whilst 12% of applicants in both the 20–24 and 25–29 age ranges went on to accept places on the programme.

5.7.2 Age

Although Step Up to Social Work is reported as having been targeted at ‘high flyers’ who might already have established successful careers in other fields of activity, the age profile of applicants is clearly weighted towards the younger end of the scale. Of those who specified their age (n=1787), 30% were under 25, and a further 23% were aged 25–29. At the other end of the age range, 6% of applicants whose age was known were older than 50 (see Figure 5.3).

As Figure 5.4 illustrates, the result was a predominantly younger cohort of programme ‘joiners’ (60% under 30).

Figure 5.3 Age profile of applicants.

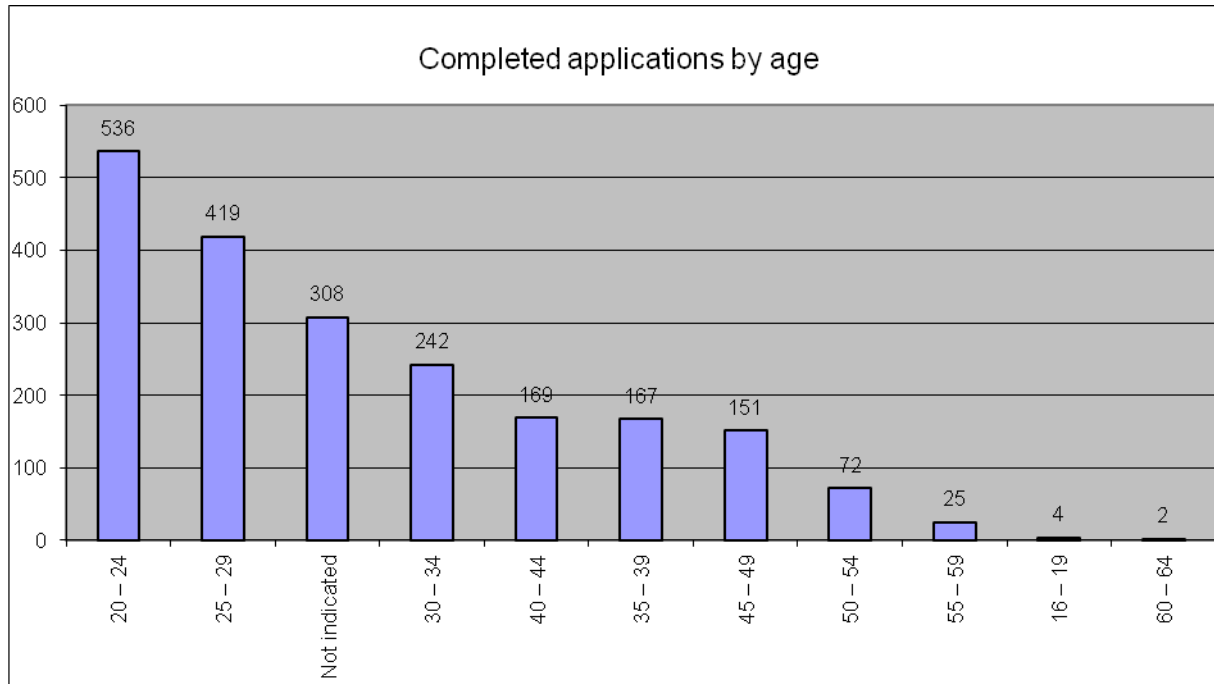
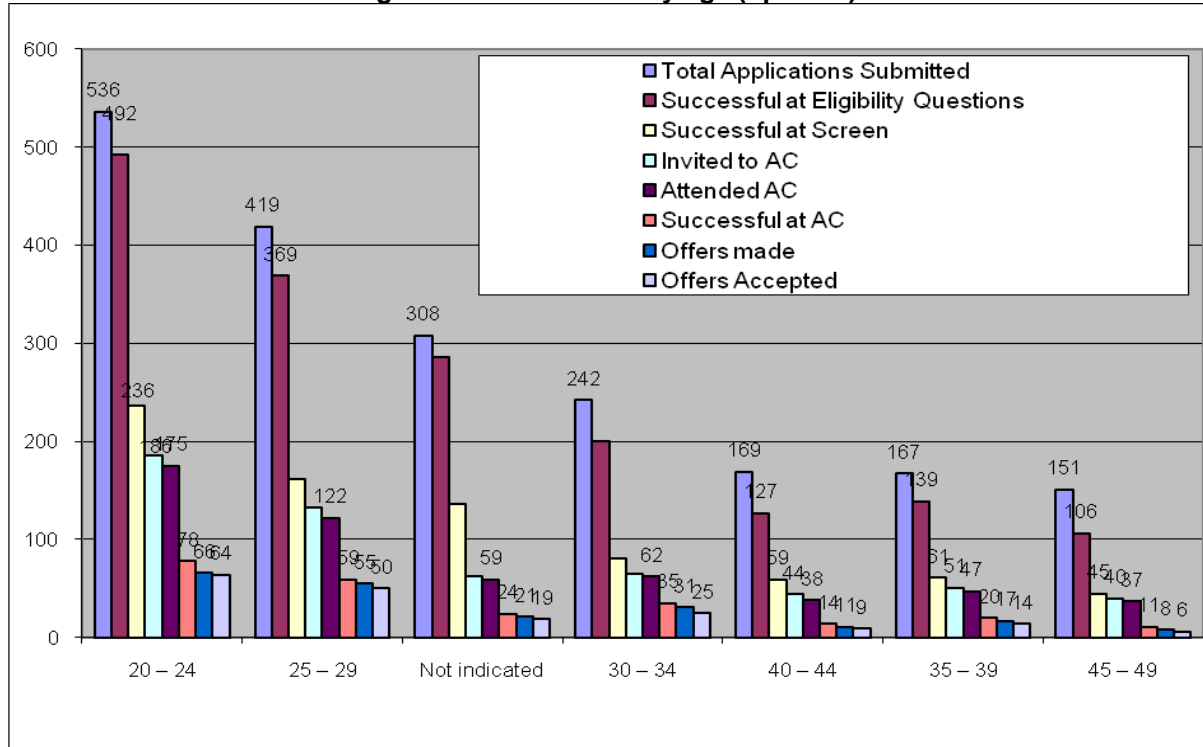


Figure 5.4 Outcomes by age (up to 49).



Further analysis reveals that the widening disparity between the point of application and the acceptance of a place on the programme is statistically significant, with those aged 20–34 being disproportionately more likely to achieve a place, and those aged 40–54 less so ($\chi^2=19.2$, $df=6$, $p=0.004$).

When considered by stage of the process, it is demonstrable that this trend is accounted for to a great extent by the initial determination of 'eligibility', and it seems that those under 30 were significantly more likely to meet the specified criteria ($p<0.001$). There was no indication of further age-related bias at any subsequent stage of the application process.

Interestingly, the age profile of the first cohort of successful Step Up to Social Work candidates also reflects a higher proportion at the younger end of the age range than does the profile of those admitted to conventional social work master's programmes (37.6% of successful Step Up to Social Work applicants aged 20–24, compared to 32.8% amongst those taking up places on conventional programmes, according to figures provided by UCAS).

5.7.3 Disability

Of the total number of applicants, 1763 indicated whether or not they considered themselves to have a disability. Of these, 141 (8%) specified one or more of a range of disabilities or mental health issues. Approaching half this number (65) reported a learning disability (which could include dyslexia), 12 indicated some form of mental health difficulty, and four reported multiple disabilities (see Figure 5.5).

At the conclusion of the assessment process, 153 (9%) of those with no known disability were offered and accepted places, whereas 15 (11%) of those stating they had a disability of one form or another were successful (see Figure 5.6).

The table does not include those categories numbering fewer than 10; it is also problematic to attempt to determine statistical significance on the basis of small cell sizes, but the overall outcomes do not suggest that the process itself disadvantages those with disabilities.

Figure 5.5 Applicants by disability.

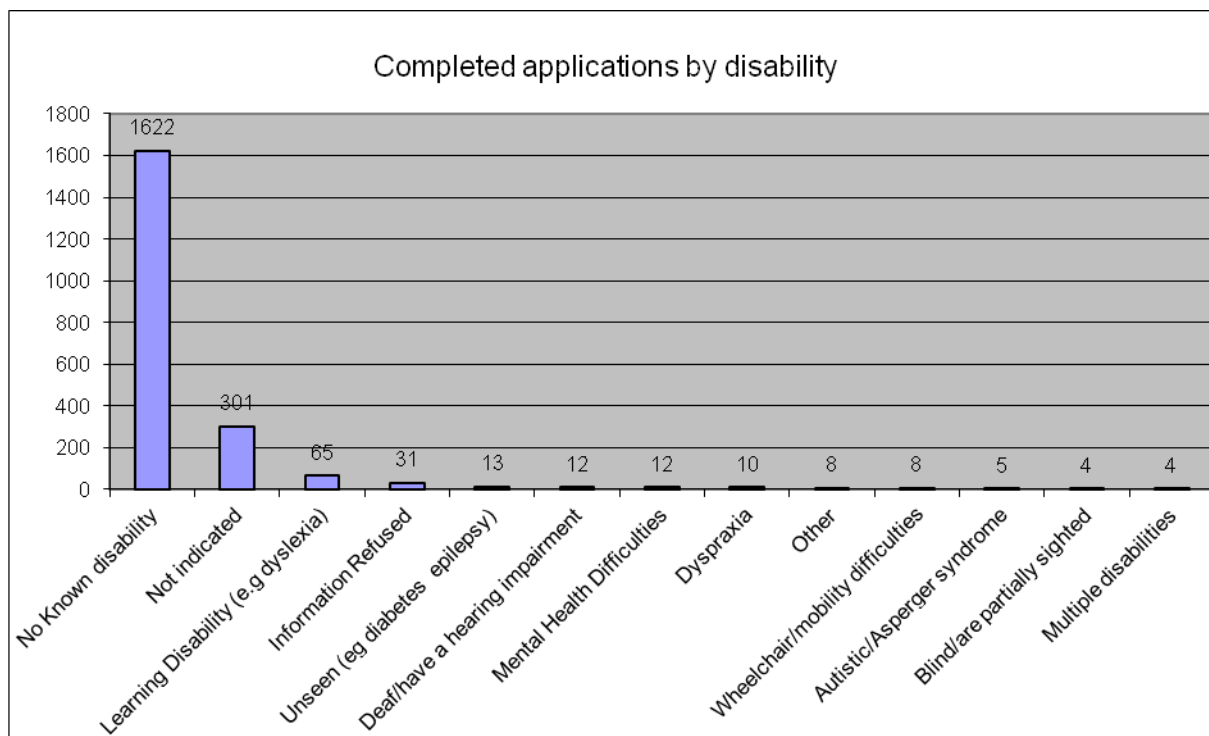
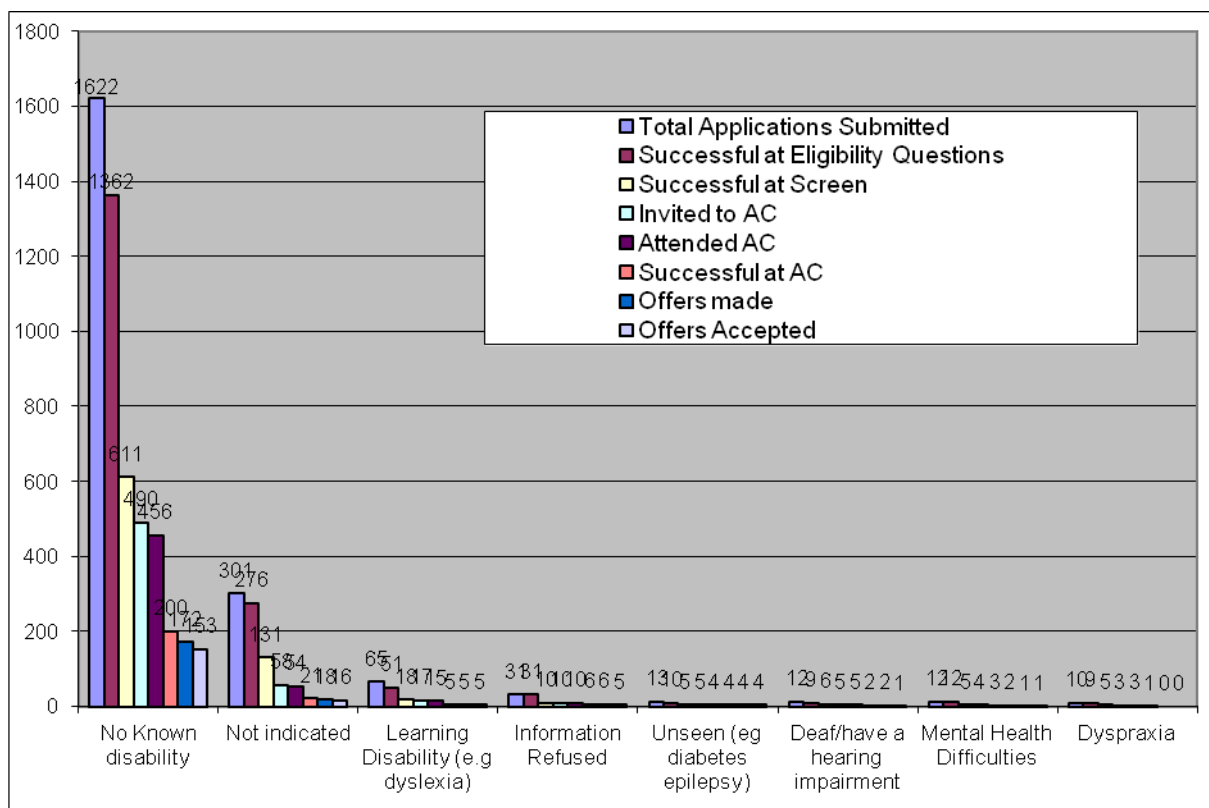


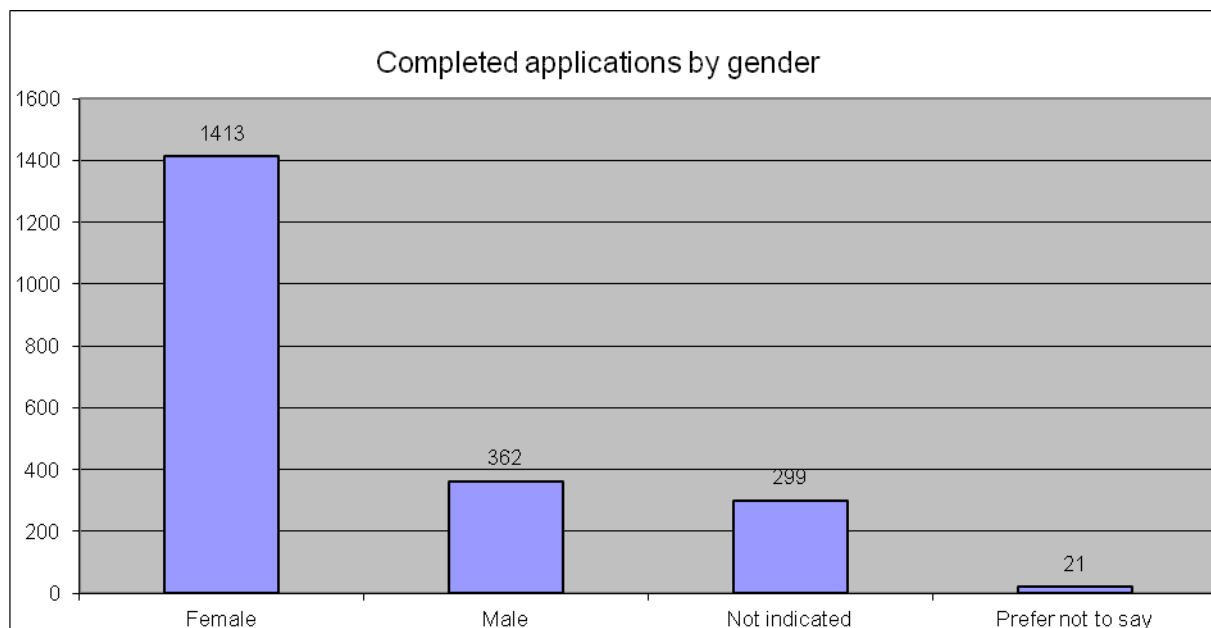
Figure 5.6 Applications progress by disability.



5.7.4 Gender

Given the stated aim for the Step Up programme of broadening the appeal of social work, it might also be expected that this would result in changes to the gender distribution of applicants, and eventually of selected candidates. Of the total number of applicants whose gender was specified at the point of application (1775), 1413 (80%) were female and 362 (20%) were male (see Figure 5.7).

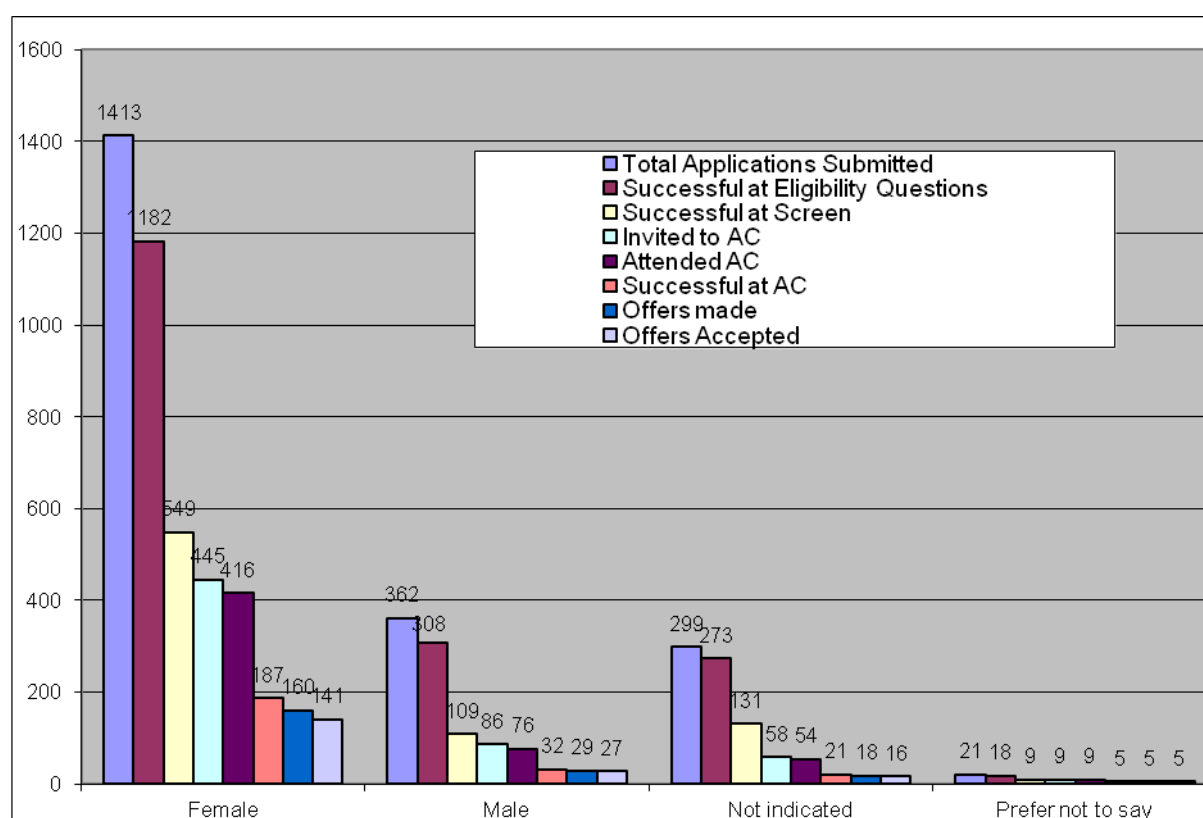
Figure 5.7 Gender distribution of Step Up applicants.



By comparison, of all those applying to social work qualifying programmes at undergraduate level in 2010, 82% were female and 18% male; for master's programmes, the equivalent figures were: 79% female and 21% male (figures obtained from UCAS). At first glance, then, it does not appear that the availability of the Step Up to Social Work route had much effect in terms of the gender balance, at the point of application.

In terms of eventual outcomes (see Figure 5.8), where their gender was identified, 141 (10%) female applicants to the programme were successful in Cohort One, compared with 27 (7%) male applicants. Statistical analysis did not, however, show that this slight shift in favour of female candidates should be treated as significant ($\chi^2=2.14$, $df=1$, $p=0.14$).

Figure 5.8 Application outcomes by gender.



5.7.5 Ethnicity

Candidates' ethnicity was recorded by CWDC according to the Office for National Statistics standard categorisation for England and Wales. Of those for whom information was available (1754), 76% were white (white British, white Irish, white other). The remaining applicants were distributed amongst the other 13 categories in use, the largest of these groupings being black British-African (8%), black British-Caribbean (4%) and Asian/British-Indian (3%) (see Figure 5.9).

Despite the proportionately greater level of interest from non-white applications than might be expected, based on aggregate population figures, the assessment and selection process reveals distinctive patterns based on ethnicity (see Figure 5.10).

Figure 5.9 Ethnic distribution of applicants.

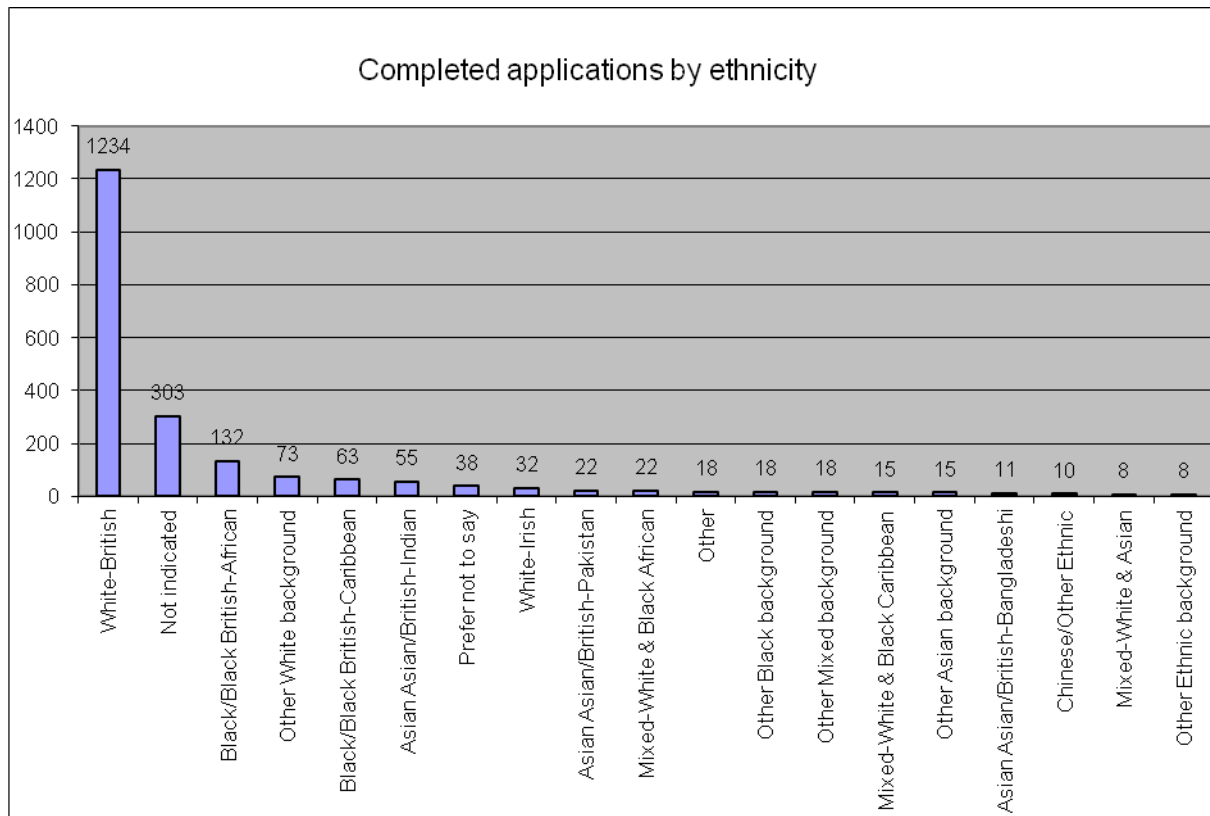
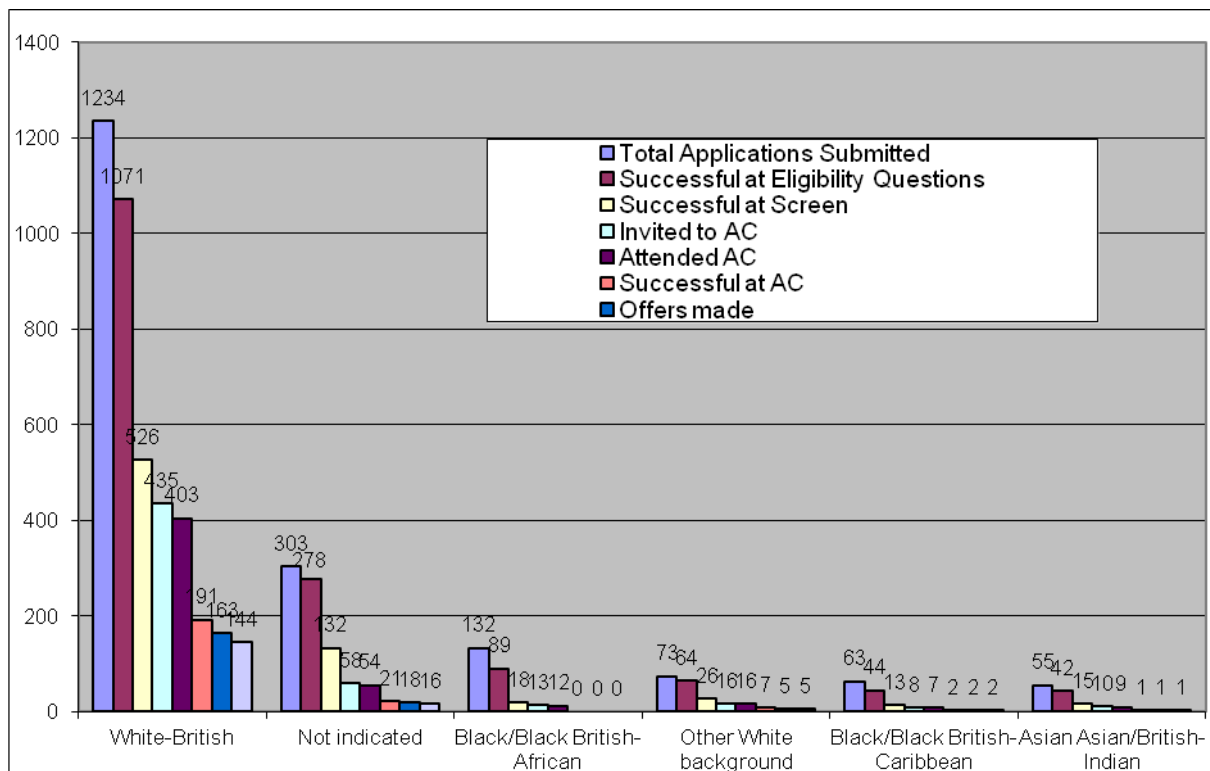


Figure 5.10 Applications processes and outcomes by ethnicity.



Closer analysis reveals clear disparities. Whereas 12% (154) of all white candidates were offered and accepted places on the programme, none of the 132 black British-African candidates proceeded beyond the assessment centre. Similar patterns are evident elsewhere, amongst the other most numerous categories of non-white applicants. Of 63 black British-Caribbean applicants, two (3%) eventually accepted places, and only one (2%) of the initial 55 Asian/British-Indian candidates was successful. When white or white British candidates' pathways through the process were measured against those of other ethnicities combined, these disparities were found to be statistically significant overall ($\chi^2=2701.4$, $df=4$, $p<0.001$), and at most stages in the process. White candidates were found to be more successful at the 'eligibility questions' stage ($p<0.001$); white British candidates were found to be more successful than all others at the 'screening' ($p<0.001$) and 'invitation to assessment centre' ($p<0.01$), and 'successful at attendance centre' ($p=0.003$) stages, whilst 'other white' candidates (not white British or white Irish) were less likely to receive and take up offers ($p<0.001$).

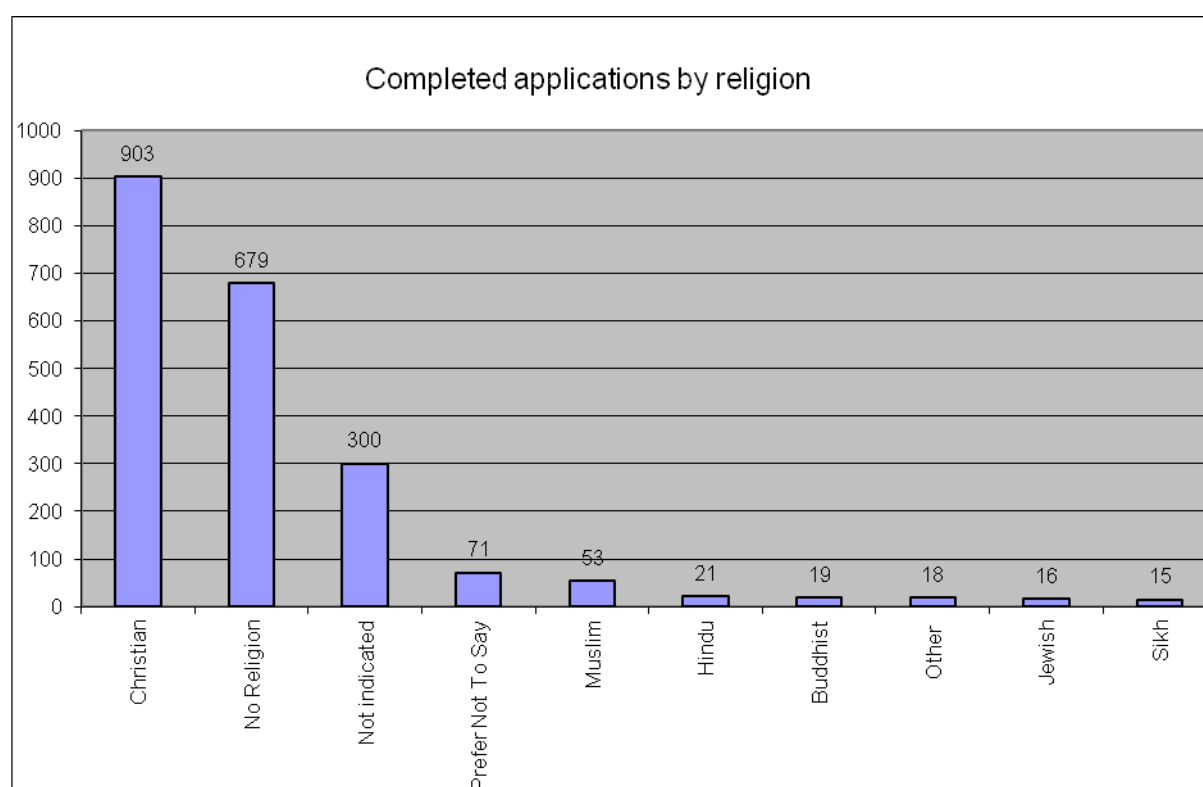
In the context of these overall patterns, there are found to be some notable 'cliff edges', where, for example, only 20% of eligible black British-African candidates progress at the point of 'screening', compared to 49% of white British candidates progressing successfully at the same stage. Similarly, only one out of nine Asian/British-Indians progressed from the assessment centre, compared to 47% of white British and 63% of white Irish, whilst none of the 12 black British-African candidates were successful at this point.

We cannot conclude that there is evidence of discrimination integral to the selection process, particularly because of the possibility of other intervening variables, but these patterns and their consistency suggest that further detailed investigation is required, as discussed further below.

5.7.6 Religion

Of those applying to the Step Up programme, 1724 were prepared to state their religious orientation (see Figure 5.11), and of these, 903 (52%) stated that they were Christian, 679 (39%) professed no religion, and much smaller percentages were Muslim (3%), Hindu (1%), Buddhist (1%), Jewish (1%), Sikh (1%), or of another religious persuasion (1%).

Figure 5.11 Profile of applicants by religious affiliation.



As compared with census (2001) figures, the only notable disparity in this profile is the relatively smaller proportion of Christian programme candidates relative to the census-based UK figure (71%), and the comparably larger proportion professing no religion (15% nationally, according to the census).

In view of the relative cell sizes, it is difficult to draw very precise conclusions from the reported outcomes, although it is notable that there were numerically more (80, 12%) successful candidates with 'no religion' than those from a Christian background (75, 8%). In relation to the numerically smaller groups of applicants, 2 of 53 Muslim candidates were successful and took up a place on the programme (2%), and none of the 15 Sikh candidates reached the same stage. Candidates from other faith backgrounds were slightly more successful, but the numbers remain very small, so inferences cannot be drawn here.

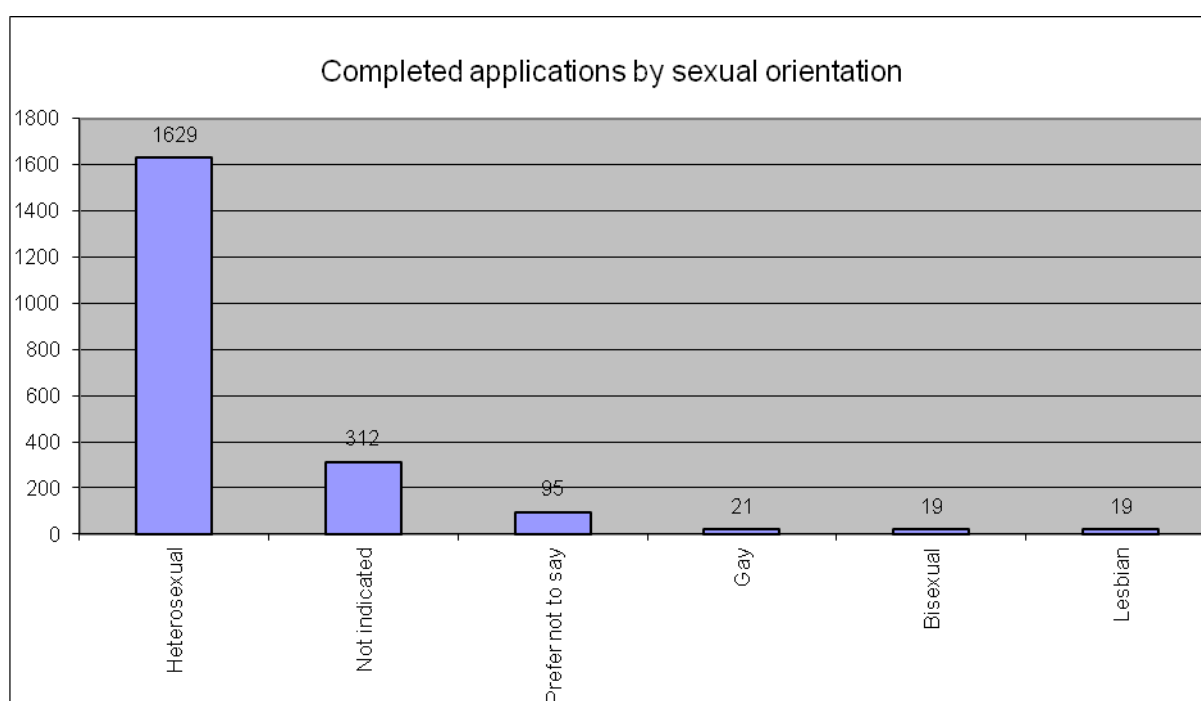
Statistical analysis confirms that the greater success of those with no religion is statistically significant ($\chi^2=7.5$, $df=2$, $p=0.023$). This overall finding is associated with a smaller likelihood of Christian candidates meeting the initial eligibility criteria ($p=0.046$), and a demonstrably greater success rate for those with no religion at the assessment centre stage of the process.

These outcomes lead us to consider the possibility that there may be a relationship between ethnicity and religious orientation which is reflected in these findings, but the possibility of any such association would require careful further investigation.

5.7.7 Sexual orientation

Of those stating their sexual orientation (n=1688, see Figure 5.12), 1629 (97%) were heterosexual, and 59 (3%) indicated another sexual orientation (gay, bisexual or lesbian).

Figure 5.12 Applicant profile by sexual orientation.



In terms of eventual outcomes, 155 heterosexual candidates were successful and accepted a place on the programme (10% of this group), and seven of those of other sexual orientations went on to accept places (12%). Statistical analysis revealed no significant differences arising from these findings.

5.8 The Application Process: Summary

Overall, the recruitment process for Step Up to Social Work can be seen as sophisticated and detailed, with a multi-stage process ensuring a progressive reduction in the number of candidates deemed suitable to the precise demands of the programme. In the end, less than 10% of those applying were successful in achieving a place.

Particular areas for further scrutiny are the questions arising from investigation of the workings of the process itself. Although not an explicit prior stipulation, any expectation of a change in the gender balance of candidates would be confounded by these findings, with males making up 16% of the final intake. Younger candidates were more successful, but this seems to reflect a higher rate of 'eligibility' according to the formal selection criteria, rather than being a consequence of the selection process itself. But, of most significance is the evidence that despite their relative over-representation in the initial applicant population, candidates from black and minority ethnic backgrounds were more likely to be excluded over the course of the selection process itself. On the information available from this analysis, it would be unsound to speculate on the reasons for this, but this finding merits further consideration.

A similar, but not such an extreme pattern is observable in the application data collected by UCAS relating to 'mainstream' social work master's programmes. These data are not directly comparable because UCAS provides aggregate data based on a relatively simplified classification of ethnicity, but nonetheless, the figures for applications and acceptances in 2010 demonstrate that the acceptance rate for white applicants was 13.2%, whilst for black applicants the equivalent figure was 4.8%. Concern about the implications of this disparity and how it is explained therefore goes well beyond Step Up to Social Work; further investigation would seem to be necessary.

Aside from the statistical evidence obtained, the recruitment process for Step Up to Social Work was assessed by way of interviews with regional partnerships and others involved in recruitment. These findings provide a very mixed picture. Some respondents felt that the selection process went well and it seemed that some of the methods and tools employed in the selection process were recognised as having considerable value, for instance in delivering primary evidence and testing values. On the other hand, concerns were expressed about the 'gruelling' nature of the exercise, that too many people were involved, and that some assessors were clearly not subject specialists.

Although parts of the process were generally agreed to have worked well, this contrasted with real problems over planning and other practicalities involved in delivering the selection process. There was a sense of being sidelined, which was not appreciated in some regional partnerships. Most respondents who participated in recruitment of the second cohort contrasted this experience strongly with what had happened first time round, expressing considerable satisfaction at being able to exercise much closer control over selection and do it their way. Equally, most

acknowledged the value of the materials and tools developed for the first cohort, and were employing or adapting these for their own use.

It is, of course, important to acknowledge that the first iteration of the selection process for Step Up to Social Work was carried out under enormous time pressures, and in a context in which every aspect of the programme was 'in development' at considerable speed. These factors themselves must have contributed substantially to many of the challenges faced and difficulties experienced in delivering the process. On the other hand, it is also apparent that some respondents from the regional partnerships felt marginalised and deskilled, and with the benefit of hindsight would have preferred to have been given control from the start.

Key Findings

- Analysis of the recruitment and selection process for Step Up to Social Work confirms that it is highly competitive, with less than 10% of applicants achieving a place on the programme.
- Regional partnerships agreed that the recruitment process was effective in selecting high-calibre candidates for the programme.
- Those obtaining places were predominantly female.
- Candidates from some black and minority ethnic backgrounds were disproportionately more likely to be excluded than white British candidates, as is the case with social work programmes more generally.
- The tools and methods used for the selection process were generally viewed as robust and appropriate, offering a suitable test of resilience and commitment to social work values.
- These tools and methods were retained for the second cohort of the programme, and it was reported that consideration was being given to incorporating a similar approach to recruitment to social work qualifying programmes more widely.
- Some pressures were experienced in recruiting for the first cohort of Step Up to Social Work trainees, which are likely to have been a product of the compressed timescale, and the novelty of the process itself.

6. Programme Structure, Organisation and Content

6.1 Context: The Role of the Lead HEIs

As outlined in chapter 3, on completion of the contractual agreements, the two lead HEIs were faced with the task of gaining validation, internally and externally, for their programme delivery arrangements. They also faced specific challenges, since the prevailing nationally prescribed requirements, including National Occupational Standards (TOPSS UK Partnership, 2002), QAA Benchmark Statements (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2008) and Department of Health Guidance (DoH, 2002) were unmodified in respect of the programme, whilst the organisational frameworks and timescales were substantially different from those applying to existing social work qualifying programmes. Whilst both universities had prior experience of delivering social work qualifying programmes, at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, the new programme demanded such significant changes that these could not be delivered simply by utilising existing frameworks or delivery arrangements. Under normal circumstances, planning, development, approval and implementation of a new degree programme could be expected to take up to two years. The Step Up to Social Work timescale was thus highly compressed and necessitated a series of procedural changes, such as 'fast-track' internal validation and subsequent approval by the GSCC.

Those involved in programme planning had to be innovative in order to meet the challenges inherent in the new framework, such as the 18-month programme duration, whilst also accommodating standard requirements, as laid down by the Department of Health and GSCC, including the mandatory 200-day practice learning component and parallel requirements relating to university-based teaching. In addition, the Step Up to Social Work framework was expected to be tailored to the specific needs and objectives of the various delivery partnerships and those employers who would be hosting trainees, as specified in CWDC's programme goals. Thus, in principle, it might be possible to give greater emphasis to working with cultural diversity in some areas and, say, working in rural areas in other partnership groupings. The programme also had to demonstrate compliance with the generic requirements of a professional social work qualification. For instance, experience of different service user interests in the course of practice learning and an understanding of relevant law and policy across the age range would both need to be evidenced at an appropriate level.

6.2 Developing Step Up to Social Work Programmes

Both lead HEIs met the deadlines set for programme delivery to start in September 2010 and appointed staff specifically to undertake the necessary development and implementation. Both, it appears, also made considerable use of their own well-established frameworks for programme planning and design and their substantial experience of delivering social work qualifying programmes. This is evident in the processes adopted and in the structure and content of the programmes themselves. Thus, the University of Salford utilised its existing generic work-based learning framework in order to develop a model suited to the needs of employers and establish a coherent modular structure for the programme. Manchester Metropolitan University, on the other hand, drew upon its own experience in 'flexible' programme design, allowing for a considerable range of precisely specified modules within the programme. In both cases, the programme handbooks demonstrate that they had taken account of, and sought to comply with, the expectations of QAA (subject benchmark statements), National Occupational Standards for Social Work, GSCC and the Department of Health requirements for social work training, with a detailed mapping exercise elaborated in the MMU documentation, for example.

Given the aspirations of CWDC to ensure the centrality of employers in the new arrangements, it is clear that both lead HEIs took account of this in establishing processes for active involvement of key stakeholders in programme design, management and evaluation. In both cases, management groups were established for each delivery site, with an expectation of regular meetings and a responsive agenda. Both HEIs demonstrated a clear commitment to the inclusion of service users and students in the programme management process. As the University of Salford programme handbook (2010, p. 5) put it:

The development of the programme has been undertaken in close collaboration with employers that expressed an interest in this national initiative. The CWDC has facilitated communication between the employers and the University of Salford via PIPC, a management consultant agency, and frequent joint meetings have been held to discuss the processes and content. The four regional partnerships of employers have been engaged in the whole process of development ... The existing service user partnership has been involved in discussions about the philosophy, content and practice of the new programme.

Similar commitments are evident in the MMU programme documentation.

As outlined in chapter 3, there were differences of perspective regarding the extent to which RPs had been able to contribute to the programme development phase. Some regional partners, however, indicated that this aspiration was definitely achieved, with individual authorities taking on responsibility for elements of trainees' learning, supported by the university to do so. One region commented on the responsiveness of the lead HEI whilst also noting the role of a proactive service user group in contributing to programme development. The HEI was reported to be very receptive to both input and feedback from regional partners:

Her [lead HEI rep] willingness to listen and tweak modules even if it's only a small thing – that's the difference ... We looked at what employers need and what type of person we wanted to emerge from this module. (East Midlands, interview)

Another region also commented on the responsiveness of the HEI:

You can email them and if they know the answer they'll respond immediately otherwise you can guarantee an answer in a few days. (West Midlands, interview)

However, the complexity of the model and the different sets of relationships compared to mainstream social work education clearly presented some challenges. In one instance, for example, a regional partnership complained that programme and module handbooks said different things, and there were disagreements about delivery between lead and delivery HEIs. In several regions (Central East, the West London Alliance, the West Midlands), it was noted that there had not been as much involvement in detailed programme development as originally envisaged. In one region, it was commented that the partnership was 'forced to accept a course imposed on us' (Yorkshire and Humber, interview), partly because of delays and communication problems at the planning stage and partly because of a shortage of staff within the regional partnership with the specialist skills to generate programme materials.

A distinctive feature of the organisational framework is the level of support offered to trainees by employers, which appears to be akin to that available to 'sponsored' students on conventional social work courses. Again according to Salford's handbook, there is expected to be a 'formal written agreement' (University of Salford, 2010, p. 7), specifying the professional and personal support to be provided by a 'mentor' from within the agency to which the trainee is allocated. This was intended to establish a distinctive mutual relationship with benefits accruing both during and on completion of the programme. Whilst partnerships did develop different models for providing continuing support to their trainees, most appear to have recruited 'host teams' which would provide ongoing support, sometimes from in-house staff,

sometimes from independent ‘tutors’. It was generally felt that this kind of arrangement represented a higher degree of engagement and potential support than would be available to conventional social work students. Supporting this model of multiple parallel delivery arrangements clearly had implications for the HEIs, both in terms of their own ongoing investment in it and in the likelihood of emerging pressures to respond rapidly to changing needs and circumstances ‘in play’. Whilst this should not be a surprise given the terms laid down initially by CWDC, the practicalities of demonstrating greater flexibility and responsiveness might still have proved to be taxing.

A further level of complexity was incorporated into the delivery arrangements where specific programmes (two for each lead HEI) were delivered by partner HEIs, rather than directly. This sort of arrangement has broken fresh ground for social work. In these cases, the expectation falling on ‘delivery’ HEIs of acting effectively as agents might itself be a source of tension, especially where local circumstances might predicate the need for change in the pre-designed programme schedule. In an interview, one regional coordinator explicitly contrasted the greater simplicity and immediacy of a one tier relationship with a local university for Cohort Two to the delays and confusion experienced under the lead/delivery module in the first iteration of the programme.

The broad approach to programme structure across the RPs is depicted in Table 6.1.

Table 6.1 Cohort One delivery structure.

Regional partnership	Lead HEI	Delivery HEI	LA host team model	Placement structure	Placement settings	Academic delivery	Trainee status
Central Eastern	Salford	Bedfordshire	Yes	1: 40 days 2: 60 days 3: 100 days	1: Children's services 2: Mainly children's services 3: Children's services, host team	Local delivery	Bursary
East	MMU	MMU	No	1: 100 days 2: 100 days	1: Mix of children's & adult settings across the different LAs 2: Children's services	Distance learning and RP-based delivery, LA-based tutor, online MMU academic tutorials	Bursary
East Midlands	MMU	MMU	No	1: 100 days 2: 100 days	1: Mainly children's services but some LAs provided 20 days contact in adult services 2: Children's services	Distance learning, HEI delivery & RP-based tutors	Bursary
Greater Manchester	Salford	Salford	No	1: 40 days 2: 60 days 3: 100 days	1: Children's services 2: Some adult services settings 3: Children's services	Local delivery	Bursary
Learn Together	MMU	Chester	Yes	1: 100 days	1: Children's services but with attempts to include an adult focus	Local HEI delivery	Employment

Partnership				2: 100 days	2: Children's services		contract
West London Alliance	Salford	Hertfordshire	Yes	1: 40 days 2: 60 days 3: 100 days	1: Range of children, young people & family settings 2: Adult settings, including mental health, domestic violence, substance misuse 3: Children's services, in host teams	Local HEI delivery	Trainee contract and bursary
West Midlands	MMU	Coventry	Not in all LAs	1: 80 days 2: 120 days	1: Children's services 2: Children's services	Local HEI delivery, RP placement tutor	LA fixed term contract
Yorkshire & Humber	Salford	Salford	Yes	1: 40 days 2: 60 days 3: 100 days	1: Children's, mainly residential, children's centres 2: Adult settings, including mental health, learning disability, substance misuse, domestic violence 3: Children's services, mainly in host teams	Delivery base in Leeds	Bursary

6.3 Programme Structures and Timing

For both lead HEIs, there seemed to be little room for manoeuvre in terms of programme organisation, given the detailed nature of the national policy frameworks and standards and the range of other factors specific to Step Up to Social Work. These included: the specific time constraints, physical constraints (such as distance), the requirements set by CWDC, academic progression, the generic nature of social work education, the 'local' expectations of the regional partnerships, their own 'internal' university timetables for assessments and awards, and the relative urgency of the task of getting 'up and running'.

Outline timetables were clearly a priority from the outset, simply to provide a basis for incorporating the necessary programme components. Practice learning, for instance, had to be provided in fairly substantial integrated blocks, in order to ensure manageability and continuity of the experience for trainees, provider agencies and practice educators, as well as for service users. For both HEIs, the programme outline allowed for at least some parallel learning, with several days practice learning

and one or more days of academic input in a typical week. In order to provide some opportunity for reflection and transitions between episodes of practice learning, both programmes also provided for short blocks of academic learning (one or two full weeks) and periods of independent study/leave, to allow for the completion and submission of assessed programme assignments. This kind of arrangement also allowed for academic providers to deliver some components of the programme directly, where distance or the specific partnership arrangements would otherwise have made this difficult. Thus, the balance between different elements of a 'blended' learning approach could be adapted to local circumstances and programme constraints.

Despite the fairly tight constraints, the programme structures and timetables differed in certain key respects, stemming from the distinctive approaches taken to the organisation of modules or learning components. MMU adopted a more finely-grained modular approach, with individual modules attracting 10, 20 or 40 credits towards an overall requirement of 180 credits, including two from a choice of four 'specialist units' determined at regional level and a full-scale research study. Salford, by contrast, made all modules compulsory, but organised them in more substantial learning blocks, each of six months duration and comprising two assessed elements attracting 30 credits each. In passing, it should be observed that this might indicate rather different pedagogical assumptions between the two HEIs, for example concerning modular teaching and learning, the integration of learning and approaches to 'reflection'. In addition, the consequences of these alternative arrangements can be observed in the two programmes' approaches to practice

learning, with Salford incorporating three placements of 40, 60 and 100 days duration, and MMU providing for two 100-day placements, with the exception of the West Midlands, who decided on an 80 and 120 day model of practice learning.

The differing programme structures were also reflected in the organisation and timing of formal assessments, with MMU requiring 12 written assignments, eight of which were to be completed in the first year, and four (including a 15,000 word dissertation) in the final six months. Salford's assignment schedule was organised in three six-monthly blocks, with substantial written tasks to be completed in each phase. In total, however, MMU's requirements, including the dissertation, involved a substantially greater number of written words than Salford's (55,000 as compared to 29,000). This does suggest considerable divergence between the two models and a provisional

observation that the 'pacing' of the programmes would feel rather different to participants, with implications concerning the possible emergence of 'pressure points' as the volume of work required may have built up at certain times. This may, in turn, be linked to the disparity in the award of distinctions between the two programmes (see chapter 8).

6.4 Programme Content

Both HEIs' documentation provides evidence of the ways in which the programmes 'map' onto the formal requirements of social work education mentioned previously, and module (unit) content was designed to meet these expectations, drawing on previous experience. There were, for example, a number of 'standard' elements in both cases, which could be expected in any social work qualifying course, such as 'preparation for practice', 'human development', 'law in social work practice' and work to encourage research-mindedness. Despite this common ground, there was also evidence of differences of emphasis, with Salford offering specific components focused on social work values, and theory and methods, whilst MMU's programme structure appeared on the face of it to focus more on tasks and intervention techniques, such as 'communication and engagement' and assessment and intervention processes.

At the same time, however, MMU appears to have given greater emphasis to the development and application of research skills, relevant and transferable to social work, and to various specialist areas of practice, depending on regional preferences (such as mental health and work relating to immigration). MMU also included a specific 20 credit module focusing on 'working with children, young people and their families'. Salford did not separate out this aspect of learning, stressing that unless specified each area of the curriculum should be taught using examples from all areas

of practice whilst mindful of the commissioners' aims to educate and train social workers for the Children's Workforce. (University of Salford, programme document, April 2010, p. 34)

This was reflected in the component of the 'work-based project' which incorporated 'adult issues and their impact upon children and families'; thus, for example, the impact of domestic violence on children could be highlighted through the work undertaken on this module.

In both cases, there was evidence of creative attempts to ensure that modules achieved multiple objectives in meeting externally imposed requirements, illustrated in Table 6.2 by the mapping exercise undertaken by MMU.

Table 6.2 MMU mapping of DoH guidance against programme curriculum.

Area of specific learning and assessment by academic level and unit	Level 7
Human growth and development	Human growth and development Critical perspectives on working with children, young people and their families
Mental health	Critical perspectives on working with children, young people and their families Critical perspectives on processes of social work Law in social work practice Electives
Disability	Critical perspectives on working with children, young people and their families Critical perspectives on processes of social work Developing professional practice Electives
Communication skills with children, adults and those with communication needs	Communication and engagement Critical perspectives on working with children, young people and their families Critical perspectives on processes of social work Human growth and development

	Electives Practice learning
Law	Critical perspectives on processes of social work Law in social work practice Practice learning
Partnership working and information sharing across professional boundaries	Critical perspectives on processes of social work Developing professional practice Electives Practice learning
Assessment, planning, intervention and review	Critical perspectives on processes of social work Critical perspectives on working with children, young people and their families Professional studies Preparation for placement Practice learning

NB. Extract from *Step Up to Social Work Programme Handbook* (MMU, 2010, p. 21).

Despite this attempt to integrate different elements of learning effectively, there are areas of social work practice which may still have been under-represented in the programmes as a whole, such as youth justice and work specifically with young people, which do not appear to have been given much space on either programme. In addition, concern was noted by some RPs that the ‘adult perspective was not strong enough in some modules’ (East, interview).

6.5 Delivery Arrangements

A significant factor impacting upon delivery arrangements for Step Up to Social Work was the notion of separate lead and delivery HEIs, a very different model to that pertaining to mainstream social work qualifying courses. As outlined previously, each lead HEI worked with two other HEIs commissioned by RPs to deliver the programme (see Table 3.1 for details). The delivery HEI, while having some flexibility to adapt module delivery to accommodate their own expertise and RP needs, was nonetheless required to adhere to the programme specification and quality assurance requirements of the lead HEI. For both lead HEIs therefore, the

programme design had to be sufficiently flexible to accommodate different delivery modes, with a mix of directly-provided and ‘commissioned’ inputs in each. Both lead HEIs made reference to the need for a range of teaching strategies, including e-learning, group-based project work, workshops and master classes and well-supported tutorial arrangements. Salford, for example, produced a series of ‘module delivery packs’ outlining the aims, learning outcomes and curriculum content of each distinct component of the programme. At the same time, ‘topics’ within the module were linked with suggested delivery and learning methods, whilst still enabling local delivery HEIs a degree of latitude as to content and mode of learning. Of course, in modular programmes it is important to provide an overall balance in terms of delivery strategies, as well as ‘within module’ coherence. It is worth noting that the delivery guides provided by Salford did propose a very wide range of options in this respect, so considerable thought had clearly gone into making programme content appropriately accessible and manageable, at least in principle.

By contrast, MMU’s approach was to specify fairly closely the content of each module and the programme overall, providing a substantial amount of material online. This sought to ensure a high degree of coherence and consistency of substantive content whilst enabling local partnerships to adapt their approaches to delivery, utilising a range of locally-based workshop providers. The risk in this respect was that quality of input could be uneven, where locally invited contributors were not familiar with the programme, as appears to have been the case in some instances (MMU, interview, and regional partnership, minutes, 21 July 2011). In practice, as this was the first iteration of the programme, there needed to be a degree of flexibility built in to the delivery process and this was certainly evident. Commenting on ‘their’ HEI (acting as both lead and delivery), one respondent observed;

they’ve been very accommodating, listened to what we wanted, we haven’t had that, ‘well we know everything – you don’t’. (East, interview)

6.6 Approaches to Assessment

The modular structure adopted by the lead HEIs necessarily led to rather different approaches to assessment, both in terms of timing (see section 6.3), and methods. As already noted, the overall assessment word length specified by MMU was considerably greater than that of the Salford programme. However, this is partly offset by a rather more diverse approach to the organisation of assessment tasks in the case of Salford (see Table 6.3), very few of which were to be completed in standard ‘essay’ form.

The Salford approach included a number of differently specified assignments of varying word lengths, which routinely emphasised the principle of relating written work 'reflectively' to practice. Longer and more 'academic' assessments related more to the acquisition and application of research skills, although social work practice represents the substantive area of inquiry to inform these assignments. Thus, assignment two for 'research, knowledge and theory for social work' required trainees to 'identify and critically analyse a key sociological perspective *and its application* [evaluators' emphasis] to an aspect of children and families social work practice'.

Within the MMU assessment portfolio (see Table 6.4), trainees were required to undertake a number of pieces of work in essay format, including an analysis of aspects of human growth and development (*and* their implications for practice), an examination of the factors affecting parents with mental health problems, plus a substantial literature-based 'research study' (dissertation) of 15,000 words. For both programmes, the timescales involved significantly curtailed trainees' ability to carry out original field-based research and this was not a requirement in either case. The Salford module guide strongly advised trainees to undertake 'literature-based' investigations.

Table 6.3 University of Salford assessment schedule.

Module	Module level & credits	Assessment	Hand in date
Evidencing personal and professional practice	M Level 30 credits	Portfolio demonstrating a critical reflection of personal professional development and professional body requirements (pass/fail) Reflection on personal and professional development (4,000 words)	Fitness to practice assessment 22 October 2012 Monday 28 February 2011
Independent learning studies (incorporating 40 day assessed practice placement)	M level 30 credits	Portfolio of a range of practice-based evidence justifying future actions required to meet future learning needs and open book Law Examination (pass/fail) A critical, analytical and reflective	Monday 28 February 2011

		commentary on their professional context (4,000 words)	
Work-based project (incorporating 60 day assessed practice placement)	M level 30 credits	Portfolio of a range of practice-based evidence (pass/fail) A written project (4,000 words) Presentation (15 minutes)	Monday 22 August 2011
Research, knowledge and theory for social work	M level 30 credits	Assignment (3,000 words) Assignment (3,000 words)	Monday 22 August 2011
Professional practice	M level 30 credits	Journal project (6,000 words)	Monday 26 March 2012
Practice education (incorporating 100 day assessed practice placement)	M level 30 credits	Portfolio of practice-based evidence (pass/fail) Reflective commentary (2,500 words) Assignment (2,500 words)	Monday 26 March 2012

The intensity of the programme has been a recurrent feature of partnerships' responses (see below) and clearly the assessment load contributed to the level of pressure experienced by trainees. Although it was generally observed that trainees 'knew what to expect' (East, interview), the notion that perhaps there was 'a bit too much academic work and challenging timeframes ... 18 months is too short a period to really integrate theory and practice effectively' (Yorkshire and Humber, interview)

was echoed across most RPs, particularly the sense that it was ‘full time plus some’ (LTP, interview) within the 18 month timescale.

Table 6.4 MMU assessment schedule.

Unit	Hand in dates	Hand back dates
Preparation for placement Credit value: 10 Word count: 2,500	Monday 11 October 2010	Monday 8 November 2010
Communication and engagement Credit value: 10 Word count: 2,500	Monday 15 November 2010	Thursday 23 December 2010
Critical perspectives on processes of social work: Assessment, planning, intervention and review Credit value: 10 Word count: 2,500	Tuesday 4 January 2011	Friday 18 February 2011
Human growth and development Credit value: 10 Word count: 2,500	Monday 7 February 2011	Friday 18 March 2011
Law in social work practice Credit value: 20 Word count: 5,000	Monday 18 April 2011	Friday 27 May 2011
Social work research methods Credit value: 20 Word count: 5,000	Friday 24 June 2011	Friday 5 August 2011
Addictions Credit Value: 10 Word count: 2,500	Friday 15 July 2011	Friday 26 August 2011
Social work and mental health	Friday	Friday

Credit value: 10	29 July 2011	9 September 2011
Word count: 2,500		

6.7 Practice Learning

As in other respects, the two lead HEIs' programmes appear rather different in their approaches to practice learning and assessment. Salford, for example, aligned three periods of practice learning with the three overarching programme 'blocks', consistent with the university's wider work-based learning strategy. As with any social work programme at the time, practice learning had to be assessed against the prescribed National Occupational Standards, but it was also integrated with the overall learning objectives specified for each block; hence, for example, written assignments were explicitly linked with practice experience and learning, and subject to verification by the practice educator concerned. Practice assessment was overseen and managed by one centralised Practice Assessment Panel, with responsibility across the delivery sites for which Salford took the lead.

Whilst it is clear that assessment tasks were also linked to practice learning in the case of MMU, the structure of the programme did not allow the same degree of integration, with two long practice placements set against the shorter, more intensive academic components favoured in this case. MMU did, however, utilize learning from placements to inform and support online learning.

Differences are also evident in other respects, with practice assessment arrangements devolved to local partnerships under the MMU model.

For both lead HEIs, the frameworks for assessment of practice learning combined reflective elements based on evidence generated by trainees and practice educator evaluations, based on supervision, direct observations and other feedback on the quality of the trainee's work, including service user comments. In these respects, certainly, the two programmes provided a practice learning experience which would be broadly comparable in outline to those offered by other social work qualifying programmes. In one instance, praise was offered for the structured placement portfolio developed by MMU for Step Up to Social Work which, it was understood, could offer a model for integrating the proposed Professional Capabilities Framework (East Midlands, interview).

Both programmes undertook to introduce trainees to a range of practice learning experiences and to ensure that, as with the academic elements of the programme, the generic aspects of social work education were properly accommodated. In order to meet Department of Health (DoH) requirements for social work training (DoH,

2002) each trainee should have experience of working in at least two different settings with different service user groups. According to evidence obtained from RPs however, it appears that Step Up to Social Work trainees were not consistently provided with a suitably diverse range of placement experiences (see Table 6.1 for details). Although placement provision seems to have been achieved fairly comfortably in the majority of cases, without substantially disrupting arrangements already in place with existing social work programmes, this was not consistently the case (see section 7.3 for further details).

Regional partnerships took a range of approaches to securing the necessary placement opportunities for Step Up to Social Work trainees and this meant that the lead HEIs were working with different models across the RPs for which they were responsible. Most regions had to develop new models of placement provision to accommodate the specific programme requirements. One region welcomed the opportunity afforded by the 40/60/100 day split to offer an introductory practice learning experience in a community setting, which provided the added benefit of improved relationships with community organisations (East), whilst others disliked this arrangement (Yorkshire and Humber). Despite this, Yorkshire and Humber was able to secure complementary placements relatively straightforwardly, for example in adult mental health and then child and family settings.

Key Findings

- Programme structure and content, both academic and practice learning, differed substantially between the two lead HEIs, with potential implications for the learning experience and outcomes of Step Up to Social Work trainees.
- Although regional partnerships acknowledged engagement in programme development, the timeframes presented challenges and there were different perspectives across the RPs as to the effectiveness and extent of their influence.
- The lead and delivery HEI model created confusion over roles and responsibilities in some cases.
- Despite expressed commitment to meeting the DoH requirements, concerns were noted about the programme's capacity to remain truly generic, particularly in relation to practice learning where trainees within some regions were offered only children's services placements.
- The programme was acknowledged to be challenging, particularly in the context of the 18 month timescale. However, this was also felt to prepare trainees more effectively for the kind of pressure to be expected in a qualified child and family social work role.

7. Programme Delivery

The overarching structure and content of the programmes developed by the two lead HEIs has been outlined in the previous chapter. The focus of this chapter is an exploration of how the regional partnerships and HEIs perceived the different models of delivery.

7.1 Partnerships and HEIs: Implications for Delivery

As indicated in chapter 3, the timescales for Step Up to Social Work placed considerable pressure on regional partnerships and HEIs to put the new delivery model into operation effectively. Perhaps inevitably, there were initial teething problems and, as outlined in chapter 4, these included tensions within some RPs around a sense of being driven by the process, rather than leading the development of the programme. Some pragmatic decisions had to be made in respect of programme delivery arising, for example, from significant geographical distance between some RPs and their lead and/or delivery HEI. As chapter 6 identifies, this resulted in extensive use of online and distance learning materials within some RPs, outlined in Table 6.1.

Partly, the tensions that arose were the inevitable consequence of being put in a new and unfamiliar situation and having to work out how to make the programme 'deliverable'. Equally though, changes in the balance of power sometimes appear to have played a part, with HEIs in particular having to come to terms with the reality of being commissioned to deliver Step Up to Social Work according to the requirements of the partnerships. In addition, as outlined in chapter 6, where the lead/delivery HEI model was adopted, this added a layer of complexity with additional sets of relationships and power dynamics for the RPs and HEIs to navigate.

Where delivery HEIs were 'local' there was more opportunity to engage continuously with the partnership, and there was some evidence from the perspective of regional partnerships that this enabled a more responsive approach to be developed. In one region, the delivery HEI specifically commented that local agencies wanted them to be involved because they already had a strong strategic relationship and knew that they would be willing to respond to agency input. However, again as outlined in chapter 4, this was not universally the case, and some RPs described very positive partnership working with a distant HEI and indeed chose to retain a distant HEI for Cohort Two. Regardless of the variability of experiences, there is considerable evidence of a constructive dialogue about key aspects of delivery at local level. In one instance, for example (the West Midlands), this involved deviating from the proposed arrangements for practice learning specified by the HEI, and instead of two 100 day placements, the model of 80 days and 120 days of placement was adopted.

Certainly the perception from both lead and delivery HEIs was that they had attempted to be consultative and respond as far as possible to local expectations and endeavoured to ‘under[stand] what local authorities wanted’ (Chester interview).

There were, however, inevitable disagreements, stemming sometimes from a lack of appreciation of each other’s roles and potential contributions and sometimes over approaches to learning and content. In one instance, the regional partnership expressed the view that the history of social work need not be a key part of the curriculum. The lead HEI, believing that it was important for trainees to understand the context of social work, negotiated with the RP and this teaching was subsequently compressed and delivered in a two hour teaching session. Dialogue and negotiation appears to have been central to overcoming initial teething problems both between the RP and HEI (lead or delivery) and between the lead and delivery HEI. It became clear that the key to successful partnerships was the relationships between staff on all levels, from LA staff to the teaching staff and senior managers. Survey results indicated that the majority of respondents felt their relationships with HEIs were ‘effective’ or ‘very effective’ (33/55 in respect of lead HEIs and 39/54 in respect of delivery HEIs). The synergy between the local authorities and the universities was also important. Local authorities realised the limits of what they could deliver, as did the universities. In most cases, despite any initial difficulties, mutual understandings developed, and the quality of the working relationship clearly improved.

7.2 Teaching and Learning Models

Once again, the specific characteristics of Step Up to Social Work, combined with the practical demands of teaching a compressed programme, sometimes from a considerable distance, led to some creative approaches to ensuring effective delivery. As outlined in Table 4.2, there was considerable variation in the size of the cohort across the different regional partnerships and in one region, the small cohort provided an ideal opportunity to employ an approach based on ‘Action Learning Sets’. In response to a request from the partnership that the programme should deliver integrated and practice oriented learning, this model was felt best suited to enabling trainees to draw on their practice and assimilate wider theory and knowledge to their applied experience. In turn, this was supported by the use of external practitioners (as was the case in other partnerships) to supplement academic teaching and help to break down what was perceived as a ‘false binarism’ between academic and non-academic learning. Concern was still expressed on some occasions about the balance between the different elements though, with five-day teaching blocks being described in one instance as ‘very intense and a bit like overload of information that they couldn’t process’ (West Midlands, interview).

It was also noted that in some RPs, local authority staff had taken a distinctive role in contributing to module design, co-writing materials and reviewing and revising planned content, as well as simply delivering sessions. It was suggested that this interactive aspect of the programme offered local agencies the chance to influence and enhance the programme:

It's about a deepening, we provide delivery and the programme, they [LAs] know the programme in advance and they can avail themselves of other opportunities that really strengthen that learning experience and integrate theory and practice. (MMU, interview)

The notion of 'added value' deriving from engagement in Step Up to Social Work was identified across some RPs, with respondents noting how aspects of the delivery model had been embedded within their wider organisational context. One local authority in the North West, for example, built upon the Step Up to Social Work delivery to initiate a series of 'master classes' which offered expert practitioner input to both the Step Up to Social Work trainees and their own local authority staff, thus ensuring the benefit of this learning for the organisation as a whole.

Both Salford and MMU utilised distance learning resources, although the practicalities of this were not unproblematic, in terms of trainee access to appropriate equipment and trainees often 'not used to it [the technology being used]' (Salford, interview). The use of e-delivery was thus described as a 'mixed success for staff and students' (Salford, interview). In those instances where the lead HEIs were also delivering to more distant RPs, both adopted a mix of e-learning and more face-to-face input, although different approaches were employed. For the Yorkshire and Humber region, for instance, Salford negotiated teaching space at Leeds Metropolitan University for delivery of taught sessions. This was organised in order to reduce travel commitments for trainees who would otherwise have to travel to Salford. However, the size of the Yorkshire and Humber region meant that they still had complaints from trainees about the distances being travelled. Indeed, this factor was acknowledged within the RP and the local authorities developed a consistent approach to funding travel for Cohort Two. For MMU's taught delivery to the East region, complementing other elements of the programme, teaching was delivered in week-long blocks. Trainees were brought together in a central location agreed by the RP, in this case Cambridge, and the MMU teaching team delivered material across a range of modules on the programme. This also enabled the online and telephone tutorial support throughout the rest of the programme to be supplemented with face-to-face tutorial input.

In some instances, there were concerns about the alignment of the class-based teaching and what was subsequently assessed. In the West Midlands, it was observed that law teaching did not appear to be aligned with the requirements of the

related assessment. Difficulties also emerged where there were separate lead and delivery HEIs, for example: 'I was teaching something and then had to change to address assessment' (University of Bedfordshire, interview). However, these concerns were offset by the recognition that the structure of the programme generally facilitated close linkages between learning and practice (East Midlands, interview).

The extent to which service user and carer perspectives were integrated into the Step Up to Social Work programme appears to have differed significantly across the RPs and very few respondents were able to articulate specific examples of direct involvement in curriculum delivery. The two lead HEIs both provided evidence of engagement with service users and carers, to greater and lesser extents, in the planning and development of specific modules. MMU, for example, worked with local service user groups within the regions in module development, although acknowledged a desire to 'revise the approach to service user involvement ... [and being] keen to develop involvement' (MMU, interview). Likewise, Salford outlined their work with a local service user group who contributed to specific teaching sessions, such as experiences of care or mental health services. However, specific difficulties were also highlighted, particularly in relation to resources within the RPs to support and develop service user involvement. An example was provided of a service user group that had been actively engaged within the East Midlands, but that the LA had lost the staff resource that supported the group and as a consequence, the involvement of service users had diminished. This issue also specifically impacted upon the evaluation and prohibited the organisation of a service user focus group within the region. The service users participating in the two focus groups conducted for the evaluation had only contributed to recruitment and selection of trainees and there was thus no direct feedback from service users or carers who had contributed to programme delivery or assessment. Both lead HEIs, however, acknowledged their intention to review and enhance the extent of service user involvement in the programme for Cohort Two, particularly in relation to assessment.

7.3 Practice Learning

Across the regional partnerships, different models were employed for the organisation, support and assessment of practice learning and this included the different placement structures outlined in Table 6.1. Within the RPs who adopted the host team model, the trainees had been placed in their host team at the beginning of the programme and this served not only as an induction to social work and to the agency but was also a specific preparation for their final placement, which would be spent within that team.

Across the RPs, there was a general view that the trainees were well-prepared for placement, although different perspectives were expressed about the concurrent models of practice learning. Some respondents felt that completing placements alongside academic modules enhanced the integration of theory and practice, while others felt that a reduced number of days on placement each week impacted upon the breadth of work that could be undertaken and thus the learning opportunities available. However, it was noted that such concerns were not unique to Step Up to Social Work, and Step Up to Social Work trainees were generally compared favourably to other social work students in relation to their engagement with practice learning.

However, a key factor identified in the success of practice learning experiences for Step Up to Social Work trainees was the level of support afforded them, both in relation to their specific placement experiences and on the programme as a whole. In that respect, many respondents suggested that students would 'be as good on any other programme [with that level of support]' (East Midlands, interview). The learner guide or mentor role was described as central to integrating the trainee into the agency, providing a level of support that is not generally available to other social work students and acting as a conduit between the trainee, the agency and the specific placement team settings.

RP staff with placement coordination roles expressed different perspectives regarding any additional pressures associated with Step Up to Social Work placement organisation, although most agreed that they 'put a lot more effort into organising placements before they [trainees] arrive' (WLA, interview), particularly for Cohort One. Although the detail might have been different between the various regional partnerships, typically each RP had a practice learning coordinator who acted on behalf of all the local authorities within the regional partnership and liaised with a lead tutor at the university. The coordinators ensured that placement opportunities were organised through specific arrangements at local authority level. The role inevitably necessitated liaison with the RP coordinator, team managers, host teams and the HEI, possibly both lead and delivery. In addition, the role often involved delivering training and support to those involved in placement provision, such as practice educators and mentors. In those RPs which provided a comprehensive programme of training for staff contributing to the Step Up to Social Work programme, such as the West London Alliance, respondents generally demonstrated a clear understanding of not only their own role but that of others within the partnership. In the Greater Manchester partnership, for example, practice educators, onsite supervisors, learning mentors, tutors and trainees all had the same training before the onset of the placements, ensuring that everybody knew what to expect of each other and of the curriculum. The fact that trainees knew the agencies

and staff before the start of their placements meant that their integration into teams was a lot quicker:

*I think they were well-prepared before they came for their final placement ... [the trainee] had those shorter placements, which was like an induction.
(Greater Manchester, interview)*

There generally appeared to be a sense of 'ownership' and engagement on the part of agencies with regard to Step Up to Social Work trainees. Lines of communication were reported to be clear and direct between trainees, practice educators and programme representatives. Where concerns arose, these could generally be dealt with quickly and responsively as lines of accountability had been clearly established and areas of responsibility understood. Practice educators participating in the evaluation generally indicated that 'there is no real difference in the practice educator role for Step Up and other students' (WLA, interview). They were largely positive about their experiences of working with the Step Up to Social Work trainees but had limited awareness of the Step Up programme as a whole, although some had also contributed to the recruitment and selection process. Indeed, very few had any real sense of how the Step Up to Social Work programme differed from other social work programmes or had any knowledge of the CWDC role in respect of Step Up to Social Work. Many practice educators stated that they had little, if any, direct engagement with the HEI, although noted that this was not unusual as it was normally the practice learning coordinator who liaised directly with the HEI. However, a number of practice educators indicated that they had not attended any briefing sessions regarding Step Up to Social Work, although HEIs described these being provided. Overwhelmingly though, practice educators reported their direct lines of communication being with their RP placement coordinator rather than with the HEI and described this as an effective process.

One key area of difference between the Step Up to Social Work approach to practice learning and that adopted in most mainstream social work programmes, related to the placement tutor role. Whereas in most social work programmes the academic tutor has a role in respect of convening placement meetings, with Step Up to Social Work this role was separated out from academic tutors. Across the regions, tutors were generally identified by the RPs, although they were contracted to the HEI. This 'division' between the roles of academic tutors and placement tutors was noted to create some confusion over who was responsible for assessment and placement support and is a role that many RPs have sought to clarify in their arrangements for Cohort Two. The East Midlands, for example, referred to enhancing the role profile for the tutor to ensure consistency of support and approach to trainees.

The delivery of the programme had to be flexible, particularly with Cohort One as it was a new and untested model. Across a number of RPs, the decision was made to provide some part of the practice learning experience within adult services, recognising this not only as a requirement within a generic degree but also the need for social workers to have a rounded knowledge base. This was particularly the case in the WLA and Yorkshire and Humber, where there was an evident commitment to providing diverse practice learning experiences and ensuring that trainees had knowledge across service user groups. In other RPs there was an attempt to provide an 'adult focus' within one placement, such as in the East Midlands where students spent 20 of their 100 day first placement in adult service settings. However, it is clear that in several RPs, the arrangements were such that most students completed all placements within children and families settings (see Table 6.1). Although the HEIs clearly sought to include adult perspectives within the academic curriculum, this inevitably raises some questions as to the 'generic' nature of the programme, as may well also be the case with some mainstream programmes. Different approaches were clearly taken to implementing the requirement for trainees to have 'experience of at least two settings and two service user groups' (DoH, 2002), and there has been acknowledgement, at least in some RPs, that there was a 'bending of the rules' in terms of the generic requirements, but that this was 'allowed by the GSCC' (West Midlands, interview). However, it was also reported that, in some regions, this 'pattern was not uncommon with local HEIs' and reflected difficulties both in the quantity of placement provision and the lack of willingness in some areas of children's services to offer final placements to those without previous children's experience.

Across the two lead HEIs, the three placement model adopted by Salford, of 40 days, 60 days and 100 days appeared more able to facilitate the inclusion of adult-focused placements and it is notable that the two RPs guaranteeing adult placements were both working with the Salford programme. However, in three partnerships utilising the three placement model (Greater Manchester, the WLA and Yorkshire and Humber), practice educators observed that the expectations placed on the initial 40 day placement were problematic, both for trainees and for themselves. Three specific concerns were raised, namely the short time frame involved in the first placement, the fact that onsite supervisors were not necessarily social workers and did not have the appropriate training, and the volume of work to be completed:

There is a lot crammed into the 40 days, it is the same volume of work as the normal 100 day placement, it has been hectic ... it is a lot of work in a short space of time. (WLA, interview)

Although most RPs and HEIs indicated that the impact of Step Up to Social Work on local placement provision had been less than initially feared and in some cases steps had been taken explicitly to offset any extra demand for placements, this was not consistently the case. Step Up to Social Work was described as being 'seen to be taking placements' by other qualifying programmes (East Midlands, interview). It was also acknowledged by some that child protection placements were being reserved for final Step Up to Social Work placements and were thus not available for other students. However, even within some RPs different perspectives were expressed, for instance within the WLA one person felt that 'Step Up placements have impacted on other placements and less placements are available', whereas another indicated that 'placements to other HEIs had reduced due to resources and Step Up was not the major difference'. However, concerns were expressed that placement provision may change in the current resource-challenged climate and 'if you want Step Up you'll need to supply more placements' (East Midlands, interview).

Despite these concerns, placements were thought by HEIs and regional partnerships alike to be well-managed and of good quality. Indeed, the quality of placements experienced by the Step Up to Social Work trainees was a theme that emerged consistently (seen as a 'key' requirement in the Learn Together Partnership, for instance), with both HEI and LA staff commenting that Step Up to Social Work trainees had been fortunate in accessing the placements made available to them (Chester University, West Midlands). Examples were also given of teams offering placements for Step Up to Social Work trainees when they had previously been reluctant to provide placements and this then being used to build placement capacity within the LA (Central East, the West Midlands).

When trainees were on placement three broad features emerged which appear to be facilitated by the organisational programme delivery arrangements associated with the Step Up to Social Work model.

1. A collaborative, enquiring and experiential model

In a number of partnership areas, the strength of collaborative and enquiring approaches was recognised. Trainees were encouraged to support each other in the learning process via group work. The initial idea in the Greater Manchester area was to have student units to support the training, but because of the distances between trainees the model had to be changed, although the principle of collaboration was maintained:

Students are empowered to find out how to find out what they need to know. Group work is also really important. (Greater Manchester, interview)

Support groups arranged for trainees were more easily arranged in the West London Alliance where geographical distance was not such a major factor. In general, regional partnerships have reported a very high level of mutual support between trainees, both facilitated and informal. The sense of a common identity and belonging appears to have worked to promote a strong bond between trainees within each partnership. Indeed, partnerships themselves were keen to provide opportunities for their trainees to share experiences, support and learn from each other:

They also had their own support groups ... and they belonged to a team from the start. If you are students you belong to the university. Their sense of belonging is with the university, now [in Step Up to Social Work] they are part of a team at the local authority and they were invested in ... from the start and they have the professional networks. (WLA, interview)

2. Learning and teaching as a two way process

The intention for Step Up to Social Work was for teaching and learning to be a collaborative process, with frontline staff contributing expertise and knowledge alongside the academic input from universities, but in a more systematic fashion than previously:

We have had practitioners going and doing some of the teaching and engaging with the programme. Previously it was ad hoc that guest lecturers came in and there was no assurance of what the people who did go in said ... There always was an issue of accountability ... trying to get employers to be engaged with being involved in the HEIs was difficult. (WLA, interview)

Two partnerships mentioned the importance of the trainees not only learning from the team within which they were placed, but that the teams learnt a lot from trainees applying what they had learnt in class. One example was reported (East, interview) of a trainee who worked with a family where the local authority social workers had had involvement for a long time, with no positive change. The trainee applied different theories and methods to understand and influence what was happening, producing a very different and positive outcome for the family.

In Central East, it was commented that trainees were bringing relevant experience to the practice setting, and another noted that the practice learning experience felt more like a 'shared' piece of work between the student and the practice educator (East Midlands, interview). Yorkshire and Humber also identified that involvement with Step Up to Social Work produced benefits for existing staff in enabling them to reflect on their own practice. Awareness of the programme enabled practice

educators to engage more meaningfully with the learning process and provide relevant learning opportunities:

If they're learning about communications, you want them to be doing direct communications work. (East Midlands, interview)

3. Personalised learning

As the preceding quote suggests, practice educators noted the ability of the delivery model to be individualised both in terms of the needs of the trainees and the LA. Regular meetings took place with programme tutors, allowing for the learning needs of the trainees to be addressed quickly and effectively. It was observed by a West Midlands respondent that there were close links between what was being taught and the trainees being able to see this 'lived out in practice', which facilitated the linkages they were able to make between theory and practice:

That's the biggest achievement for me, actually bridging the links between theory and practice and research. (West Midlands, interview)

The advantages of gaining a cumulative understanding of the trainees were noted by a respondent in the Central East region, who commented on the importance of being able to build on 'reports back from earlier placements'. This sense of continuity was certainly a distinctive feature of the Step Up to Social Work programme, probably even more so than other employment-based routes, which do not always guarantee continuity of placements or close linkages between the academic and practice curricula. The organisation of Step Up to Social Work clearly facilitates this sort of tailored and systematic approach to the learning and professional development process.

7.4 Outcomes for Trainees

The view was consistent throughout the RPs that the programme produced workers who were generally better prepared to move onto the NQSW year than those qualifying through other programmes. The trainees were believed to have a more rounded view of what social work is actually about:

These students have also already established the partnership with other professionals, so they know what the job is and can work quite challenging cases. Some of the normal students have not done a statutory placement. (Greater Manchester, interview)

A member of the West London Alliance remarked that

it is not only about the calibre of students, but about the programme and how they have been prepared for the work. It is about the whole process and them being part of the NQSW programme, so well-prepared. They understand the job and what is expected, and it shows. They feel better prepared; they have leadership skills and qualities. In terms of projections, we see them as moving up the structures quicker; they feel valued and feel adopted by the local authorities.

It is thus not only about short term gains for trainees, but also that their aspirations for the future seem to be more ambitious, according to partnership members. Conversely though, concerns were raised by several respondents that these more able workers could very soon be drawn into management structures and lost to frontline work.

7.5 Factors that Supported Implementation

7.5.1 Funding

A key reason for the successes of the programme identified by respondents was the funding and resourcing of the programme in comparison with standard social work training, both for the trainees and within the local authorities. Trainees had bursaries whilst doing the programme and it was thus easier for them to focus on the training programme. One practice manager said that ‘funding was never an issue’ (Greater Manchester, interview). Resources were also pooled effectively by partnerships and this was found to be particularly helpful by some of those involved from smaller agencies. As indicated previously though, there was some discrepancy across the RPs as to how effectively the CWDC funding was utilised within the local authorities. Systems for allocating the funding did not appear to be understood within all local authorities, and it was not always clear how it was specifically supporting the Step Up to Social Work infrastructure.

7.5.2 Support

There were three forms of support available to trainees. Consistent and reliable support was reportedly available to trainees both from within the local authorities as well as from their university tutors. Regular contact between these two was intended to ensure a coordinated structure around trainees and that individual learning needs of trainees could be addressed. The third level of support was peer support, the arrangements for which were discussed earlier. Indeed, the trainees appeared to be very well-supported and in one instance the provision of learning guides in addition

to tutorial and host team input became redundant. However, a number of respondents highlighted concerns about support available to students with specific learning support needs, such as dyslexia:

The course has been very difficult as [dyslexia] not picked up till month four. (Central East, interview)

The pressurised timescale of the programme was another aspect highlighted in respect of support available to trainees as there was felt to be no scope for trainees to take time out to cope with the implications of ‘family [crisis], disability or impoverished background because of intensity [of the programme]’ (Yorkshire and Humber, interview). However, it is clear that some trainees did experience significant personal challenges while on the programme and generally, they were supported by both the RP and HEI to successfully complete.

The sense of ‘belonging’ engendered by the close ties with agencies was of considerable importance, both in practical terms, but also in that the trainees could rely on a continuing sense that they were being provided for; as well as this, of course, they were able to derive confidence associated from having a good idea of where and with whom they would be working on qualification.

7.5.3 Investment

All the LAs commented on the investment they made in the trainees and that consequently the trainees appeared willing to make a reciprocal commitment to them too. The investment was financial, practical and personal. Because trainees were part of a team and not merely another student, the teams at a local level took ‘ownership’ of the trainees and the programme:

Yes it was a big demand. They expected more and there was a lot of extra work. But because the ownership is different ... this was very important because they felt part of the process. (WLA, interview)

Unfortunately, from the point of view of some agencies, the cost-benefit of the investment was difficult to justify. In one LA only one person completed the programme although various members of staff were involved in the training, thus calling into question the extent of resource investment. In another case, neither of the trainees recruited by one local authority remained with them on completion. There was never any doubt over the quality of the trainees, but there was clearly some concern amongst respondents that local authorities might be unwilling to continue to support and resource a programme with limited potential gains for them as an organisation.

7.6 Challenges to Implementation: Time and Pressure

There was general acknowledgement that the time frame to complete the programme was tough, and that expectations were very high:

It was their choice, but I'd struggle to do that amount of work. They are basically doing two qualifications in the same time. There is not time to be off or to be ill ... But they signed up for it, they knew it was only for 18 months ... And I think it also prepares them for the real world of social work ... as they say, if you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen. (Greater Manchester, interview)

The time frame also impacted on the structure of the learning provided. The intention to provide time for reflective learning did not materialise as planned. Instead the focus was on meeting deadlines and results and getting from one assignment to the next. Respondents consistently commented on the demanding nature of the programme from their perspective, and these perceptions were mirrored in survey responses, with 32 of 55 respondents stating that they believe the 18-month timescale of the programme to be highly challenging, and the same number stating that this is true of its impact on trainees' work/life balance. Similar comments were provided by respondents from both regional partnerships and HEIs. For example, it was commented that there is 'no space for a social catastrophe' (East, interview).

And from the HEI perspective:

[I]t's a challenging course – it is intense and certainly the students [felt] under pressure. (MMU, interview)

This is not to suggest that the programme is unmanageable – clearly this is not the case, given the extremely high overall success rate. Indeed, some respondents clearly also held the view that it was a realistic preparation for the challenges of a demanding job (Central East, interview).

Key Findings

- The Step Up to Social Work programme was delivered largely on time and to specification across all eight regional partnerships.
- There was evidence of a changing relationship between local authorities and HEIs, with local authorities welcoming the clarity and control associated with the commissioner role.
- Some lack of clarity regarding roles and responsibilities was evident, particularly relating to the separation of academic and placement tutor roles.
- A range of taught and e-learning techniques was utilised, although it was reported that some measure of direct contact was preferred by trainees and some practical difficulties emerged in respect of access to ICT.
- The 'host team' model has been positively evaluated, providing effective support for trainees, induction into the placement setting and integration into the wider local authority.
- Practice learning appears to have been coherently managed and of more consistent quality than for conventional social work programmes.
- Support for trainees was well-organised and readily available.
- The challenging nature of the programme timescales was acknowledged and although this is not felt to be unmanageable, concerns were highlighted about the impact on students with specific learning support needs or personal difficulties.
- The integration of theory and practice is an acknowledged strength of the Step Up to Social Work model.

8. Programme Outcomes

This chapter provides an overview of both actual and perceived outcomes of the Step Up to Social Work programme, drawing upon HEI data of trainee achievement as well as respondent perspectives drawn from fieldwork interviews and survey responses as to how well the programme achieved its stated objectives. Both lead HEIs were generous in their sharing of anonymised student outcome data, not only in relation to Step Up to Social Work but also in respect of their standard master's (MA) programmes. This enabled comparison of outcomes across the regional partnerships as well as between Step Up to Social Work trainee outcomes and students on standard MA programmes within the two lead HEIs. This chapter explores the evidence gained from the evaluation in relation to the three key objectives of the Step Up to Social Work programme:

- increasing the quality of social workers entering the profession;
- enabling local employers to shape initial training for students to address local needs; and
- developing a new entry route in to the social work profession.

8.1 Increasing the Quality of Social Workers Entering the Profession

The evaluation has explored a range of factors considered relevant to this overarching objective, including the actual academic outcomes of trainees; perceptions of their qualities, knowledge and skills; their capacity to be effective, competent newly qualified social workers, and success in attracting 'high flyers' from other professions. Access to anonymised trainee evaluations has also provided useful insight into their own perspectives as to their preparedness for their role as newly qualified entrants to the social work profession.

8.1.1 Academic outcomes

As indicated elsewhere in this report, Step Up to Social Work trainees achieved remarkably successful academic outcomes. By virtue of a range of relevant comparators their progression and achievement has at least matched students on 'mainstream' MA programmes, in terms of: award classification, retention rates, completion on time, extension and deferral rates. Data available from some of the Cohort Two HEIs indicate that these trainees are also progressing well.

Table 8.1 identifies outcomes for the Step Up to Social Work trainees and enables comparison both between HEIs and across RPs. As can be seen, the retention rate

is high, with only 8% withdrawing from the 185 that were initially registered at the two lead HEIs, with a number of these withdrawals occurring in the very early stages of the programme. Although it is not possible to provide an accurate comparison nationally, these figures are comparable with the standard MA programmes delivered by the two lead HEIs. However, it is when comparing completion rates that Step Up to Social Work trainees are really found to have fared better: across the Salford programmes, 90% of Step Up to Social Work trainees who were initially registered on the programme have completed while 69% of their standard MA students completed within two years. The 10% who did not complete comprised the eight trainees who withdrew plus the one who was excluded from the programme as a result of concerns relating to 'fitness for practice'. For MMU, at the expected date of completion, the completion rate was 85% for Step Up to Social Work and those with outstanding work constituted only 4% of the total who were initially registered on the programme (all of these subsequently completed successfully). Although the overwhelming majority of trainees completed the programme within 18 months, some were subject to referrals or deferrals beyond this point, and were processed through examination boards in September 2012.

As Table 8.1 demonstrates, there are differences across the RPs in terms of the award classifications achieved by the Step Up to Social Work trainees. In the MMU programmes, only one RP, the West Midlands, achieved any distinctions (two trainees), whereas in the Salford programmes, only one RP, Central Eastern, did not achieve any distinctions. There is also an interesting comparison between HEI programmes, as Salford's mainstream MA produced no distinctions, whereas the Step Up to Social Work programme produced distinctions for 14% of the cohort.

Table 8.1 Step Up trainee academic outcomes (percentages)

RP	Lead HEI	Delivery HEI	*No registered	Withdrawn	MA pass	MA merit	MA distinction	Continuing	Fail
East	MMU	MMU	25		36%	60%		4% (1 student)	
East Midlands	MMU	MMU	26	11%	35%	50%		4% (1 student)	
LTP	MMU	Chester	38	11%	26%	53%		5% (2 students)	5%*
West Midlands	MMU	Coventry	10	10%	10%	60%	20%		
TOTAL MMU			99	8% (n=8)	29%	54%	2%	4%	2%
Central East	Salford	Beds	6		33%	67%			
Greater Manchester	Salford	Salford	16	6% (n=1)	56%	25%	13%		
WLA	Salford	Herts	33	6% (n=2)	18%	55%	21%		
Yorkshire & Humber	Salford	Salford	31	13% (n=4)	32%	42%	10%		3%**
TOTAL Salford			86	8% (n=7)	31%	45%	14%		1%
TOTAL			185	8%	30%	50%	8%	2%	2%

***2 students**

****1 student excluded**

NB: Percentages don't add up to 100% due to rounding.

While it is clearly not possible to draw any definitive conclusions as to causal factors leading to the differences in award classification between the two lead HEIs, the evidence does indicate some possible reasons. Firstly, the consistent view of respondents from regional partnerships involved with MMU was that trainees were under significant pressure during the latter stages of the programme (West Midlands, East, East Midlands; interviews). During this period, they were completing their final placement, both in terms of the assessed work and the practice, alongside completion of a 15,000 word research study, the latter not being required within the Salford programme. Although there was a sense, from both LA respondents and the trainees themselves, from their programme evaluations, that this level of pressure equipped them well for the demands of frontline social work practice, it is not unreasonable to conclude that this may have impacted upon the time and commitment they were able to devote to completing their research study. In addition, as the research study was a 40 credit module, the results inevitably made a significant contribution to their overall award classification. Indeed, an analysis of MMU examination board results indicates that six trainees failed initially and had to resubmit their research study, five with a capped mark.

The nature of data available to the evaluation team has not enabled tracking of trainees through from recruitment to final award (recruitment data were not trainee specific). It has thus not been possible to identify any correlation between the type and level of first degree and eventual outcome, nor has it been possible to explore any correlation between depth and extent of previous social care experience and final outcome. Further interrogation of the recruitment and achievement data may help illuminate factors indicative of successful outcomes, which would clearly be of benefit to social work education more widely.

8.1.2 Skills and qualities of trainees

Respondents have largely been unable to attribute the quality of the trainees to any one specific factor and many have questioned whether individual trainees would 'have been as good on any other social work programme' (East Midlands, interview). Generally, respondents have highlighted the importance of a range of factors: 'robust selection is key' (lead HEI), the support provided to trainees, and good quality placement experiences have all been cited as key contributory factors. However, although it has not necessarily been possible to determine why, the overwhelming perspective of respondents was that the Step Up to Social Work programme has 'produced good social workers' (lead HEI, interview).

'Resilience' has been a term cited frequently by respondents to describe the Step Up to Social Work trainees and there was consensus that this was effectively tested throughout. The view that the fast pace of the programme has promoted development of resilience has, in fact, been echoed by trainees themselves, as their programme evaluations generally indicate acknowledgement that their ability to manage the complex and extensive demands of the programme has given them a real flavour of what to

expect in practice. The challenges of the programme have been felt to equip them with the capacity to 'manage work/life demands' (East Midlands, interview) and thus reduce the likelihood of early 'burnout' as they move into demanding frontline roles in children's services. The importance of support networks and the ability to utilise them effectively, has been highlighted as central and a further contributory factor to developing resilience.

Step Up to Social Work trainees were often described, particularly by practice educators, as having 'confidence and life skills' (East Midlands, interview) different to other social work students, although again, respondents struggled to pinpoint potential reasons. It is worth noting at this point, that the evaluation interviews with practice educators coincided with the final placement and, although they were asked to reflect on their holistic experiences of Step Up to Social Work, it is reasonable to assume that their responses were heavily influenced by their experiences of final placement rather than beginning trainees. By that stage in the programme, the trainees had clearly benefitted from good placement experiences and had developed the skills to manage a demanding programme of academic and professional study. That said however, a key factor identified by respondents was trainees' 'engagement with the host team ... don't need the level of induction for the final placement' (WLA, interview). Unlike other social work students, by the time Step Up to Social Work trainees commenced their final placement, they were already 'more engaged ... known in the agency' (East Midlands, interview) and familiar with organisational policies and procedures. This was identified as a significant factor in promoting their levels of confidence within the placement setting and enabling them to 'start the final placement at a higher level' (East Midlands, interview).

A number of RPs ensured that first placements provided trainees with direct experience of communicating and working with children and felt that this enabled them to develop a confidence and become 'comfortable with children' (WLA, interview) which then carried forward into their subsequent placements. The general experience of practice educators was that the Step Up to Social Work trainees had 'good practice skills ... can knock on doors' (East Midlands, interview). Although it was not universally the case that trainees were 'strong' from the beginning of the programme, RPs generally reported that the trainee 'grew and developed a lot ... the final placement prepared [trainee] for practice' (Yorkshire and Humber, interview).

Alongside the practice skills, many respondents also highlighted the development of more 'academic' skills, including good quality written skills, analytical abilities and the capacity to critically reflect upon both their own practice and that of others. The intellectual ability of trainees was identified as crucial to their capacity to adopt an evidence- and research-based approach to their practice: 'bit of intelligence, able to link theory to practice' (Central East, interview). The development of sound analytical skills was identified as key to enhancing the quality of social work practice and outcomes for service users as outlined by the Munro (2011) Review of Child Protection, and to the creation of a workforce with 'strong ideas about service improvement and a better understanding of the agency context' (West Midlands, interview).

8.1.3 Capacity to be effective practitioners

There has been an overwhelming view that the Step Up to Social Work graduates have been well-prepared 'for the realities of social work practice' (East Midlands, interview). Some RPs commented on the relatively high drop-out rate of NQSWs but expressed their view that Step Up to Social Work trainees 'are in it to stay ... expect them to be more resilient and cope with NQSW' (Greater Manchester, interview). Referring to the recommendations of the Munro Review (2011), several respondents indicated their expectation that the Step Up to Social Work trainees would contribute to enhancing the quality of children's social work and their academic and practice skills would help drive up 'defensible decision-making' (WLA, interview) within the agency and the wider profession. The skills and qualities outlined above were therefore felt by many respondents to place the Step Up to Social Work trainees in a strong position not only to make a 'flawless transition to NQSW' (East Midlands, interview) and be effective NQSWs but also to be 'a benefit to the team ... up to date with research ... an asset' (WLA, interview). The general view from LAs where the Step Up to Social Work trainees had been recruited as NQSWs was that managers had 'all said what a dream they've [trainees] been, they gave them an induction but they didn't need hand holding, were very able and willing' (East, interview).

In addition to having the capacity to be effective NQSWs, respondents were also of the view that the experiences the trainees had of managing the challenges of a demanding programme 'prepares them well' (East Midlands, interview) for embarking upon the new Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE). Again, the link with the LA throughout the programme was identified as being central and 'as NQSWs they are much further on because they are integrated into the local authority' (Greater Manchester, interview).

8.1.4 Attracting 'high flyers' from other professions

The general view of respondents was that 'expectations had been exceeded regarding the calibre of students' (East Midlands, interview). However, there was less certainty as to whether the objective to attract 'high flyers' from other professions had been met. Across several RPs, it was reported that many of those attracted to Step Up to Social Work were 'those who may have considered social work anyway' (East Midlands, interview):

We never attracted the people that politically it was thought it would attract in to the programme – most of the people who got through shortlisting had low level childcare experience in social care, or social care and education settings, not high flyers from other disciplines ... they were already going in that direction. (Greater Manchester, interview)

Indeed, one of the lead HEIs reported losing students to Step Up to Social Work who had already been given places on their standard MA, being attracted by the funding available

to the Step Up to Social Work programme. The Central Eastern region also reported that, in Cohort Two, 7 out of 18 applicants were existing LA staff.

8.2 Enabling Local Employers to Shape Initial Training for Students to Address Local Needs

Respondents frequently made reference to a key strength of the Step Up to Social Work model being the extent to which LAs were in control of the programme. However, there appears to have been variation across the RPs in the extent to which they felt able to influence the actual curriculum, particularly for Cohort One. While only indirectly connected to the theme of employer influence on shaping local social work education, many respondents highlighted the role of Step Up to Social Work

as a vehicle for cultural change ... responding to the Social Work Reform Board's recommendations about social work education. (WLA, interview)

Learning from the Step Up to Social Work programme 'needs to be embedded at local HEI level ... closer partnership working with local HEIs' (East Midlands, interview). This notion of the need to 'unpick' how aspects of the Step Up to Social Work model could be translated into working with local HEIs featured in several interviews, with respondents highlighting how the contractual relationship had put them in the 'driving seat' with the HEI. LAs identified the learning they had taken from this experience and felt this could and should be translated into development of their partnership agreements with local HEIs to ensure a more effective connection between employer needs and students produced from local programmes. The Social Work Reform Board's (SWRB, 2010) recommendation in relation to more effective partnership working between employers and HEIs was frequently cited by respondents, who were keen that learning from the Step Up to Social Work model be embedded more widely within social work education.

As highlighted elsewhere in this evaluation, a number of RPs expressed concerns about the extent to which adult perspectives were fully incorporated into what is supposed to be a generic programme, both in relation to curriculum content and placement arrangements. Although both lead HEIs had clearly outlined the generic nature of the programme, different RPs working with the same lead HEI implemented this in varied ways. However, across the RPs there was a consensus regarding the importance of a 'think family' approach and developing an understanding of the impact on children and young people of factors affecting adults and families, and this was identified as an area for development within Cohort Two.

8.3 Developing a New Entry Route in to the Social Work Profession

Respondents overwhelmingly expressed positive views about the value of Step Up to Social Work as a qualifying award in social work and a number identified aspects of the

Step Up to Social Work approach that they had already discussed with their local HEIs, such as changes to recruitment processes and development of partnership agreements in line with the SWRB recommendations. However, a number of reservations were expressed about the viability of the model given the immense resources required, as it was seen as

additional work for few candidates ... I would like to say yes the model has a future but it is very resource intensive and expensive. (East Midlands, interview)

This sentiment was echoed by a number of respondents, particularly within LAs with a small number of trainees, and the programme was described as a

phenomenal investment, money was thrown at it – but outcomes are disproportionate to investment unless you look across social work as whole. (East, interview)

The funding available to support the Step Up to Social Work programme was therefore highlighted across all RPs as crucial to its success, with many suggesting that ‘without funding ... couldn’t give the time to this programme’ (East, interview).

The changing economic and employment landscape was cited by many respondents as a factor pertinent to the future of Step Up to Social Work. It was acknowledged that Step Up to Social Work was conceived at a time when many LAs were struggling with both recruitment and retention in children’s services and the idea of Step Up to Social Work was warmly welcomed as a route to attracting good quality graduates into the profession quickly. However, since Step Up to Social Work was launched, many LAs acknowledged that the financial pressures within local government were impacting upon their capacity to recruit more staff and thus vacancy levels had reduced: ‘it’s two years too late for the job market’ (Greater Manchester, interview). Although the Step Up to Social Work model was regarded positively by RPs, some LAs identified potential tensions between the objective to attract ‘high flyers’ from other professions and routes to qualification designed for their own local workforce. Central Eastern for instance, noted some concern that in a difficult economic climate, any commitment to Step Up to Social Work may be at the expense of supporting other internal sponsorship schemes that enable existing staff, such as social work assistants, to become qualified. Given that such staff were reported seldom to have a first degree, Step Up to Social Work would not be an option for them. One LA within Yorkshire and Humber also identified a desire to train social workers from within the local community, recognising that this may also enhance retention, but noted that the requirement to have an existing 2:1 degree posed significant challenges within the specific local context. It appears therefore, that although Step Up to Social Work has been welcomed as a new route to qualification, some LAs offer a note of caution and would wish to ensure that it is simply one of a range of routes to suit a diverse range of candidates and local circumstances.

Some respondents also highlighted potential dilemmas arising from having produced good quality social workers, in that

there's potential that they'll do really well, and therefore be promoted quickly, and then come off the frontline, which would be a shame. (Central East, interview)

The issue of whether their skills would take them into management roles rapidly was a dilemma for some LAs as the benefit to be derived of gaining good managers would potentially be offset by losing good frontline workers. Some concerns were noted about long term commitment of the trainees to the LA, particularly arising from the Cohort One recruitment process, which on occasion resulted in trainees being allocated to RPs rather than choosing or being selected by specific LAs.

8.4 Positive Impacts Associated with Step Up to Social Work

The findings of this evaluation demonstrate elements of the Step Up to Social Work programme that appear to have worked and these observations largely coincide with what local authorities, regional partnerships and HEIs considered to have been its strengths. Clearly, not all of these impacts were to be found in common across all regional partnerships, as experiences varied. Nevertheless, they represent the most common impacts, and various combinations are evident in the detailed findings of the evaluation. The positive impacts have been summarised in Table 8.2, and will be discussed in more detail, drawing on specific examples where possible, in the following sections of this chapter.

Table 8.2 Positive impacts associated with the Step Up to Social Work programme.

Positive impacts	Resultant effect/change
Introducing consistency of practice across local authorities	Providing the same training offer/pay/opportunities thereby reducing regional disparities in trainee experiences and potential for 'shifts' between authorities. Allows for sharing of best practice and cross fertilisation of ideas in relation to Step Up to Social Work and wider social work practice.
Reviewing and formalising internal procedures	The need to procure services (e.g., with HEIs) and formalise partnerships has meant reviewing 'needs' and devising appropriate contracts to deliver, which are now monitored within LA teams. This led to enhanced clarity about partner responsibilities for trainees and different approaches to commissioning HEI services.
Greater investment in trainees	Trainees are embedded in teams from the outset, relationships mature and learning at both organisational and individual level is possible.
Greater sense of 'ownership' of trainees	Closer relationship between trainee and LA ensured more effective support whilst on the programme and enhanced the likelihood of retention on completion.

Trainees contribute to organisational learning	Trainees' 'contemporary' experience of learning is used to inform organisational thinking and practice and promote culture of learning beyond workforce development teams and into operational teams.
Closer working relationships between LAs and HEIs	Greater parity between partners has afforded more equal voices to educators and employers resulting in better 'exchange' of information and subsequently a better understanding between partners.
Developing creative and effective approaches to teaching and learning	Greater understanding between partners assists with the development of stronger programmes and materials especially in relation to practice teaching as well as inducing a sense of ownership and shared responsibility for social work education and trainees' learning experiences.
Ensuring robust recruitment	The recruitment process designed for Cohort One ensured a committed, capable and competent cohort of trainees. Elements of the model have been deployed in Cohort Two and integrated into some internal local authority recruitment procedures.
Integrated approach to social work education and training	Practice learning was closely aligned with academic input in many cases and this facilitated the application of 'theory into practice'.

As has been noted, consistency in approach across regional partnerships – be this from prior experience of working together or via senior managers committing to shared visions – was considered to be a key strength of several regional partnerships (for instance, the WLA and the LTP). The resultant consistency in pay, training and placement provision led some to suggest that regional working prevented disparities across authorities within the same region. Furthermore, regional approaches were said to assist smaller authorities, who benefitted from larger authorities' resources and were therefore able to participate in schemes where they themselves could not provide the resource necessary for a leadership role. This was highlighted for instance by Yorkshire and Humber. Additionally, regional partnerships have enabled local authorities to address key gaps in skills and experience appropriate to each authority; 'it's been tailored to us as employers, for instance what assessment tools and approaches we use in [LA]' (East Midlands, interview). It was also noted by numerous respondents that the benefits achieved by the regional partnerships as a result of participation in the Step Up to Social Work programme could not have come to fruition without the generous goodwill and 'earnest commitment' of partners (East, interview). Overall, partnerships and the approaches taken therein were considered to have greatly benefitted individual partners and allowed for best practice to be identified, consolidated and shared across authorities.

Reflecting on the benefits and impact of the Step Up to Social Work programme at local authority level, several examples of positive change were identified. A significant development was said to have been the way in which relationships had been 'formalised' as a result of the programme. One respondent from the Greater Manchester partnership noted: 'it's [Step Up to Social Work] driven contracting into the heart of it, we're clearly on

a contract and that's no bad thing'. Another interviewee in the Central Eastern region echoed this view:

It's been quite slack in the past with who is doing what, whereas now we have a 50-page contract and my procurement team expect me to be watching it and monitoring that both sides [LA and HEI] are delivering.

The impact of this was reportedly the opportunity it gave all partners to have open and frank discussions about expectations and delivery, in addition to highlighting how all partners shared responsibility for their trainees.

Further changes were also apparent at an organisational and individual level within local authorities. One respondent in the East region suggested that this was as a result of trainees being 'embedded' in the local authority from the beginning: 'they [trainees] already see themselves as [LA] employees ... and practice educators see them as team members'. This was contrasted to mainstream placement students who, by comparison, 'turn up, complete their placement and then are gone' (Greater Manchester, interview). These sentiments were echoed by survey respondents who provided the following insights:

Through completing placements within the chosen authority it allows relationships to be formed, clear assessment of skill to be made and therefore in the long run a more advanced practitioner within the authority. (East Midlands, survey response)

There is a potential to recruit intelligent, capable candidates who know the organisation well [have completed placements within that organisation], have already been inducted and received some relevant training. It feels like there has been investment. (Greater Manchester, survey response)

The fact that students are placed with an Authority for the duration of the programme is a real benefit to them and also to the Authority. This really allows investment in ensuring that they are prepared for practice as it allows for individual development plans to be put in place given the longer term investment by both parties. (Greater Manchester, survey response)

A representative from the WLA suggested that their willingness to engage and invest in the programme was as a result of staff knowing that trainees were of high calibre and would (hopefully) be retained. This led to a 'sense of ownership' over trainees and in turn encouraged a greater degree of investment in the trainees and their learning experiences. According to another respondent in the East Midlands, trainees were further assisted by having extended placements on Step Up to Social Work, allowing them to integrate in to teams and 'feel comfortable enough to bring things [issues] in to teams, so that wider staff benefit'. Consequently, the strength and impact of Step Up to Social Work at an organisational level was in the opportunity it afforded authorities to review and change current practice and learn from 'contemporary thinking'.

Others noted that having a Step Up to Social Work trainee in their team meant they had 'stepped up' their own practice:

It's been good to visit some of the more contemporary thinking about theory ... we've been able to debate some of the issues going on in frontline practice, I've enjoyed that, it's sharpened my thinking. (East Midlands, interview)

As a result of using more internal practice educators and senior managers, one respondent in the Greater Manchester region noted that practice teaching had changed for good:

We've developed a new way of thinking, we're all now using in-house people, so memory will be organisational and not individual.

Additionally, some respondents suggested that Step Up to Social Work had directly impacted on corporate policy. For example, one authority in the East region had decided to only employ master's level qualifying social workers on the basis of their experience with Step Up to Social Work. Likewise, in the Greater Manchester region respondents noted that efforts were being made to integrate lessons from Step Up to Social Work into corporate programmes and believed that Step Up to Social Work was not something of only temporary value:

When the money runs out, the lessons won't all disappear – one of my tasks is to maximise the resources and start planning how it will make a difference longer term. (Greater Manchester, interview)

Working in the employer-led manner required by Step Up to Social Work led many respondents to suggest that relationships between local authorities and academic institutions were tangibly different from previous experience. One respondent in the West Midlands went as far as to suggest that the approach was 'groundbreaking' due to local authorities 'being able to influence delivery and actively [be] involved in thinking about what the delivery programme might be'. A popular view was that the demands and needs of local authorities were genuinely listened to during the course of the programme, that these needs were accommodated within programme content and that a 'real' partnership facilitated this change. A prominent consequence of these working relationships was the sharing and exchange of information between HEIs and local authorities from programme design through to delivery. HEIs also noted that the closer working relationships with LAs resulted, for most, in a better understanding between the partners, lifting the mysticism around academic programmes, and balancing academic and practice perspectives on social work education:

It being employer-led also meant that local authorities gained an understanding of the constraints on what could be delivered, in terms of QA [quality assurance] and what HEIs have to meet ... [it's] been incredibly useful dialogue that we don't usually have ... reinforcing that we're not delivering the finished article, it's the start of their careers, [I] think this was paid lip service to before [by LAs]. (Salford, interview)

Where such negotiations and dialogue were present, local authorities were more assertive in requesting and initiating changes to the programme which in turn led to more creative and innovative approaches to programme design and delivery:

It's been about co-development of units with employers, some practitioners have co-written materials, there's been some teaching by practitioners, as well as materials being reviewed by practitioners adding their comments to modules alongside academic tutor comments. (MMU, interview)

According to another MMU colleague, the degree of employer involvement in programme design was considered instrumental in improving trainees' learning experiences:

It's about a deepening, we [the HEI] provide delivery and the programme, they [the LAs] know the course in advance and then can avail themselves of other opportunities that really strengthen the learning experience and integrate theory and practice. (MMU, interview)

One such example of this related to court work sessions developed by the University of Bedfordshire with direct assistance from practitioners:

It works well when you get the right practitioners in [to teach] ... court work really benefitted from this shared approach, we used barristers and other practitioners ... [I'm] not sure the students appreciated what a quality experience they were getting. (University of Bedfordshire, interview)

This is another example of the benefit of an integrated approach to social work education which facilitates the marriage of theory and practice.

Clearly, as one would expect with a pilot comprising new collaborations, these operations were not always as smooth across all regional partnerships as would have been desired. Regional partners had variable experiences of relationships with HEIs, leading some to question the 'shared' nature of the Step Up to Social Work model. In one instance, this was considered an 'illusion' underpinned by the belief that bringing in different stakeholders would automatically induce a shared perspective.

Nevertheless, the majority of respondents agreed that Step Up to Social Work demonstrated how authorities no longer needed to be 'passive recipients' of trainees (Central East, interview) and how all partners have responsibilities to deliver effective social work training. According to one WLA representative, 'Step Up to Social Work has

shown local authorities what they can ask for, how they can be involved with HEIs ... it's been a really good experience'. Furthermore, the experience of working with 'new' HEIs for the majority of regional partnerships apparently gave some authorities greater confidence in liaising and negotiating with local institutions: 'having worked with alternative HEIs now, it strengthens our bargaining position with local HEIs' (East, interview). For the HEIs, the experience of working with employers was generally recognised to have improved accountability: 'it was positive [Step Up to Social Work], it made us accountable for what we were teaching and questioned why we cover certain things [in social work education]'

Whilst views about recruitment were mixed (see chapter 5 for a full discussion) it appeared that the tools and techniques, if not the approach to delivery, brought by PENNA were recognised as having considerable value. This related not only to the sense that local authorities were able to review primary evidence and test the values of prospective candidates but also to how the assessment approach gave candidates a 'taste' of what the programme would be like. Aside from the logistical and practical difficulties experienced in Cohort One recruitment, the majority of respondents considered the assessment approach to have been a positive element of the programme and felt able to identify a capable and competent cohort of trainees due to the internal rigour and robustness of the process. Affirmation of this is provided by the fact that several respondents reported having shared the approach with HR staff in their respective agencies in order to improve internal recruitment procedures.

8.5 Negative Impacts Associated with Step Up to Social Work

As well as identifying the key positive impacts of the Step Up to Social Work programme, respondents were also asked about the elements of the programme which they considered to have hindered or negatively impacted on programme progress (see Table 8.3). In much the same way that positive impacts were to a degree dependent upon individual partnership, local authority and HEI experiences, not all identifiable negative impacts were experienced consistently across all partners and partnerships.

Table 8.3 Negative impacts associated with the Step Up to Social Work programme.

Negative impacts	Resultant effect/change
Complex partner arrangements	The numbers of partners and different stakeholders engaged reportedly caused confusion over roles and responsibilities thereby 'diluting' ownership, resulting in certain cases in elongated and inefficient communication channels. Differences in language and interpretation also took time to resolve.
The effect of working with significant time constraints	Launching the programme in a condensed period reportedly meant that some processes were not wholly thought out in advance and subsequently the programme was not deployed in some areas as participants would have wished.

Resource demands and changes in personnel	At certain points in Step Up to Social Work the resource requirements are considered to be significant; and this could be construed as a potential weakness given the local government context of streamlining resources. Furthermore, changes in staffing were said to have had a destabilising effect on regional partnerships.
Limited impact on demographic profile of social work profession	Recruitment of 'high flyers' did not lead to any great extent to the enrichment of the pool of practitioners; many Step Up to Social Work trainees were likely to pursue a social work career already. Concerns over lack of 'diversity' expressed at regional level.
Diversion of resources and risks of creating divisions	Concentration of resources on Step Up to Social Work trainees and some indication of resentment from other social work students could be problematic if not carefully managed.

At a regional partnership level, one of the most frequently reported weaknesses of the Step Up to Social Work programme, particularly in the early stages, related to the confusion of roles and responsibilities which was considered to be a direct result of the number of partners and agencies involved in the programme. The sheer volume of partners reportedly caused a certain degree of 'angst', especially with regard to the introduction of external consultants, such as PIPC and PENNA. One representative in the West Midlands region felt this was associated with a top-down approach:

They [CWDC] brought in externals [PIPC/PENNA] but didn't ask us if we could do it [initial set up] ... it was all or nothing and no understanding of what we [LAs] actually needed – you're just the same as every other LA. (West Midlands, interview)

More specifically, several respondents commented on the 'strange' model of trainee recruitment which involved external recruitment consultants liaising with local authority representatives in each regional partnership to appoint graduates to an MA programme run by, potentially two, HEIs, with a significant work-based element and yet who would not be guaranteed a job at the end of the programme. Furthermore, the complexity of some of the partner relationships and arrangements was considered to have had an adverse impact on the 'chain of command' and notably meant that from a trainee perspective, 'there were too many people on the ground, too many people talking to them [the trainees].' (Central East, interview)

In some cases, regional partnerships themselves acknowledged that attempts to define roles had been problematic: 'we tried to give out roles [to each partnership member] but whilst this worked in some places it didn't work in others ... Cohort One was so pressured'. As indicated here, the time-constrained nature of the set up phase of the programme was considered a significant factor and directly responsible for a number of the difficulties experienced by the programme.

Others, when considering the relationships with HEIs in the first cohort, especially where there was the presence of lead and delivery HEIs, suggested that communication channels were elongated as a result of the partnership arrangements resulting in a 'slow' flow of information. One representative from Salford University acknowledged that there was a perception of 'slow' communication:

The timeline wasn't good ... working in this way within an institution that's not used to working at this pace It's the same for local authorities, sometimes they were really engaged and at other times they were pulled in other directions ... ended up planning on the hoof and that's never good. (Salford, interview)

Similar cultural issues were experienced in relation to different partners having different vocabularies and interpretation of roles: 'we had senior workforce managers [on the partnership] and they are trainers and not educators ... it's been about learning to transfer that language across' (University of Bedfordshire, interview).

One representative in the Yorkshire and Humber region commented that the employer–HEI model actually diluted responsibility for trainees, as partners, often working remotely, were unsure of who had what responsibilities. One consequence of this, reported in more than one partnership, was the lack of information exchange when it came to student progression leading some to believe that opportunities were missed to identify and support struggling trainees because of partners being uncertain of how much information to share. In a similar vein, at least two of the delivery HEIs expressed concern at the division between academic and practice roles, especially in relation to practice teaching and placements:

Roles and responsibilities were the main stumbling block at the beginning ... the fact that the HEI tutor didn't do the placement tutoring ... there was a division between academic and practice [learning], yet academic staff had to mark portfolios. (University of Bedfordshire, interview)

I still had to mark the placements having had no input and therefore no purchase on them, it was a complete severance. (University of Hertfordshire, interview)

The pressurised nature of the programme, in relation to the time available for the initial set up phases of the programme, was referred to on multiple occasions by evaluation respondents and some significant impacts were considered to be directly related to this element of Step Up to Social Work, not least the extent to which some processes and procedures were not considered to be fully developed prior to partners commencing recruitment and programme design. One respondent in the East Midlands acknowledged that contracts had to be written from scratch, contracts between LAs, with the trainees and with MMU ... these things hadn't been thought through at the beginning ... there were no templates.

Others noted that certain aspects of the programme were not fully considered at the outset:

It [the course] would have benefitted from looking at it from start to finish ... to be able to see the end from the beginning ... for example in order to plan placements properly. (East Midlands, interview)

Consequently, the programme started and respondents reported having to resolve issues as and when they arose, often with 'quick fixes'. One respondent in the West Midlands likened the experience to it being: 'a new world and we were trying to think about things that we hadn't had a choice about before'.

To further compound this, the lack of time during programme inception meant that not everyone felt that they had enough time to review all materials, resulting in a sense amongst one or two employer representatives that the programme had been 'imposed' on them in some respects. There was an acknowledgement amongst some HEI representatives that consultation does not automatically equate to engagement especially where there is a degree of information overload:

[It was a case of] information overload especially as the programme was developing, [I'm] not sure how regional partners – where we were delivering – kept on top of the information coming out from the CWDC, PENNA, PIPC as well as on top of all this really in-depth information on unit development ... you can't keep this level of detail in your mind. (MMU, interview)

Whilst time constraints were considered to have caused specific resourcing issues, others noted that factors such as changes 'in personnel and staffing can have huge impacts on how partnerships run and the clarity of people's roles' (East, interview). Similarly, a respondent in the East region suggested that sufficient internal local authority resources were imperative to the working of Step Up to Social Work, a point echoed by a Salford University member of staff:

[Some LAs] couldn't dedicate resource to do this [decide on programme content] ... they [LAs] were certainly all consulted though – but there wasn't always the capacity to take this up [the offer of consultation]. (Salford, interview)

Others noted that whilst the ongoing management of Step Up to Social Work does not impinge on workloads [with the exception of 'pinch points', such as during recruitment] staffing levels have changed in local authorities during the course of the programme:

There's no free resource, no slack [in local authorities] it's the world we're in now ... you have to pay for everything somehow. (Greater Manchester, interview)

There's been so much restructuring and reorganisation in local authorities; it's had such an impact on placements, because teams are one minute there and then not. (Salford, interview)

Some concerns were expressed, too, at the level of attention required to support Step Up to Social Work which might come at a cost to support for social work education through conventional programmes. The input required to run Step Up to Social Work on the part of the local authority was cause for concern, especially amongst a small proportion of those interviewed in the evaluation, where authorities were working with small numbers of trainees:

Some of the partnerships may question Step Up to Social Work, especially those with small numbers ... to build that infrastructure for just six trainees ... they [LAs] must ask whether it's worth it. (Greater Manchester, interview)

On several occasions, regional partnerships spoke of the noticeable difference between the Step Up to Social Work cohort and their usual social work qualifying students, particularly regarding their age (younger) and ethnicity (predominantly white). These observations were also supported by the demographic data provided by CWDC and DfE, as outlined in chapter 5.

Whilst it is undoubtedly desirable to attract able candidates with significant career potential into social work, great care has to be taken not to disadvantage others. One HEI, for example, spoke of losing child and family placements it would normally be offering because they had been taken up by Step Up to Social Work trainees. In other cases, reference was made to Step Up to Social Work trainees knowing they were different; in one instance, it seemed that this had also led to some expression of resentment from other university-based social work students. Most partnerships had clearly gone to considerable lengths to manage these tensions, but it is something to be borne in mind when considering the size and scope of potential further development of the Step Up to Social Work model.

It is important to note that a number of the weaknesses identified above were considered to have been addressed during the life of the programme or were the focus of attention in developing the second Step Up to Social Work cohort.

8.6 Wider Benefits for Social Work Education and Practice

Considering the positive and negative impacts of the Step Up to Social Work programme as outlined above, some general points can be made about the wider benefits and implications of the programme for social work education and practice. Clearly, however, much of this will only become evident over time.

- New employer-based partnership models and processes have been thoroughly tested, revised and redesigned during the two cohorts which could potentially provide a long term alternative route to social work qualification.
- Employer involvement in designing and delivering a qualifying social work MA programme has enabled LAs to address perceived skills gaps, obtain experience

in liaising, contracting and working collaboratively with HEIs which may facilitate greater dialogue in non-Step Up to Social Work HEI relationships.

- The 18-month timeframe associated with this programme has been proven to be achievable, albeit with some difficulty, and can deliver the requisite amounts of academic theory and practice learning, when undertaken with the commitment and involvement of both HEI and LA partners. This may have broader implications for how LAs involve themselves in the 'delivery' aspects of other programmes.
- Extended placements undertaken simultaneously with academic teaching have been seen as a central tenet of the Step Up to Social Work programme and as such have demonstrated the benefits of a blended learning approach for both the trainees involved and the organisation hosting the placement trainee.
- Greater investment in trainee learning by LAs, as co-developer of programmes and 'owner' of trainees rather than merely placement provider has been shown to benefit LAs – both institutionally via chances to improve services, and individually by obtaining NQSWs who are familiar with internal LA procedures and policies and able to commence their social work careers within teams, upon completion of the programme (reduction in the cliff edge).

Similarly, some aspects of the Step Up to Social Work programme may be, with the fullness of time, shown to have negative implications and impacts on those involved. Although these questions may be fewer in number, their significance cannot be underestimated.

- It is clearly too early to know whether the Step Up to Social Work programme has any long term motivational or capacity issues for trainees. Both HEI and LA respondents expressed concern at the risk of 'burnout' of trainees, given the intensity and pace of the programme being completed in 18 months. Furthermore, it remains to be seen whether these 'high-calibre' trainees will remain in frontline social work teams and positions or, as a result of their skills and experience, will be fast-tracked in to management positions or move to employment outside of social work.
- There remain concerns about the explicit focus on academic skills and experience in the eligibility criteria for the Step Up to Social Work programme and specifically the focus on 2:1 first degrees which may lead to more persistent divisions between Step Up to Social Work and other qualifying social work programmes.
- Although not a negative in and of itself, a key theme identified by a number of respondents was the importance of learning the lessons from the Step Up to Social Work model and ensuring that the ways in which the trainees manage the transition into their NQSW roles is effectively evaluated. This is necessary in order to establish the extent to which the programme has been able to engage with the wider social work reform agenda of raising standards across the profession.

Respondents highlighted the importance of embedding the learning about what has worked well in Step Up to Social Work across social work education as a whole and, as one respondent noted, 'if they based it on Teach First it hasn't worked, not set up or managed in the same way' (East, interview).

Key Findings

- Step Up to Social Work is generally considered to have achieved its objective of producing good quality professionals, able to integrate a sound academic knowledge base with effective practice skills.
- There is no clear evidence that Step Up to Social Work has achieved the objective of recruiting large numbers of 'high flyers' from other professions into social work and most trainees were reported to have prior experience or interest in social work careers.
- Completion and achievement rates have been high and compare favourably to other social work qualifying programmes.
- The majority of local authorities involved with Cohort One have continued to participate in Cohort Two.
- Step Up to Social Work appears to have positively influenced relationships between HEIs and employers, leading to a clearer sense of purpose and new ways of thinking about teaching and learning.
- Changes in organisational culture and practice were described as added value of local authority engagement in the Step Up to Social Work programme.
- Changes in workforce planning and development were described as significant since the inception of the programme, with retention rather than recruitment now a key concern for many local authorities.
- Step Up to Social Work graduates were generally acknowledged as having the potential to be highly capable newly qualified social workers. However, the need remains for comprehensive evaluation of their transition into practice.
- Learning from the Step Up to Social Work programme needs to be integrated into the wider social work reform agenda.

9. Cohort Two: Early Observations

The second cohort of Step Up to Social Work to Social Work trainees started the programme in February 2012 with an intended completion date of July 2013. The evaluation could only focus on those phases of Cohort Two which were completed during the life of the evaluation; namely the application, selection and recruitment process, tendering for HEIs to deliver in the regions and the commencement of the academic programme in the first term. Initial objectives in respect of the focus on Cohort Two were necessarily curtailed in respect of the number of interviews conducted with new Cohort Two LAs and HEIs, and some opportunities to document learning may have been missed, unfortunately.

Nonetheless, a number of interviews were conducted with LAs and HEIs who were involved in both Cohort One and Cohort Two, and who were thus able to provide comparisons between the two cohorts. Interviews were also conducted with local authority representatives from 'new' agencies who joined existing regional partnerships in Cohort Two. Details of interviews conducted with LAs involved in Cohort Two can be found in Table 2.2. In addition, the evaluation team was able to interview staff at Liverpool John Moores University, who joined Step Up to Social Work as a new HEI for Cohort Two.

This section of the report provides a brief overview of the structure and delivery model adopted in Cohort Two, and data in relation to the recruitment process, as well as providing qualitative reflections from those interviewed during the course of the evaluation who were involved in Cohort Two.

9.1 Structure and Organisation of Regional Partnerships in Cohort Two

Firstly, there were a number of changes in regional partnerships themselves, with one withdrawing entirely (the West Midlands), some reconstituting themselves with the introduction of new lead authorities (Central Eastern) or additional local authorities (the Learn Together Partnership), and three new partnerships joining the scheme (see Table 9.1).

For some existing employers, the need to recruit new social work staff had significantly diminished, so they chose not to continue (for example in Cambridgeshire), whereas others felt that the wider benefits achieved through their initial involvement more than offset any concerns about finding employment for their Cohort Two trainees on completion. For Cohort Two, the configuration shown in Table 9.1 emerged.

Table 9.1 Regional partnership arrangements in Cohort Two.

Regional partnership	Local authorities (lead LA in bold , new C2 partners in <i>italics</i>)	HEI
Central Eastern	Central Bedfordshire, Luton, Hertfordshire	University of Bedfordshire
East	Norfolk , Suffolk, Southend, Thurrock, <i>Essex</i>	MMU
East Midlands	Leicester , Nottinghamshire, Nottingham, Derby, Northamptonshire, <i>Derbyshire, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire</i>	MMU
Greater Manchester	Salford , Bury, Bolton, Manchester, <i>Stockport</i>	Salford
Merseyside (Learn Together Partnership)	Wirral , Knowsley, St Helens, <i>Cheshire East, Cheshire West & Chester</i>	<i>Liverpool John Moores University</i>
North West Midlands	Stoke , Sandwell, Staffordshire, Telford and Wrekin, Worcestershire	Lead: MMU Delivery: Staffordshire
South East	Buckinghamshire , Oxfordshire & Milton Keynes	University of Bedfordshire
South East London	London Borough of Bromley , London Borough of Bexley, London Borough of Lewisham	Goldsmiths, University of London
West London Alliance	Ealing, Brent, Hammersmith & Fulham , Harrow, Hillingdon, Hounslow, Westminster, <i>Kensington & Chelsea</i>	University of Hertfordshire
Yorkshire & Humber	Sheffield , Rotherham, Leeds, Calderdale, North Lincolnshire, Kirklees, North Yorkshire, <i>Doncaster, North East Lincolnshire</i>	Salford

Clearly, one of the most significant differences between Cohort One and Two is the almost universal change to having just one HEI involved in programme delivery. The exception is one of the new regional partnerships, the North West Midlands, who adopted a lead and delivery model similar to those employed in Cohort One with MMU as the lead HEI and Staffordshire University as the delivery HEI. Apparently, this was because Staffordshire University did not have prior experience of developing and delivering a Master's level programme in social work. The four RPs who utilised the same HEI as lead and delivery in Cohort One have retained that university in Cohort Two. The remaining three RPs who progressed to Cohort Two have all adopted a single HEI, rather than the separate lead and delivery models they worked with in Cohort Two. This

highlights a general preference for the simplification of dealing with just one HEI and commissioning local providers with whom there already exist established working relationships. This renegotiation of arrangements with HEIs has significantly affected relationships for most partnerships and appears to have been welcomed by the HEIs involved:

We're more comfortable not having [the] lead and delivery aspect in Cohort Two; we didn't tender to be delivery only. (Salford, interview)

They [the regional partnership] were keen to have one HEI ... it's always more complicated when you have multiple partners. (University of Chester, interview)

We were happy to carry on, we bid directly for the programme this time. (University of Bedfordshire, interview)

We were relieved to lose the three partner structure [lead HEI, delivery HEI and RP] in Cohort Two. (University of Hertfordshire, interview)

9.2 Specific Cohort Two Changes and Observations

Cohort Two of the Step Up to Social Work programme has seen a number of significant developments based on the experience of the first iteration, which are widely expected to lead to improvements:

We now have the course in Cohort Two and we've experience of delivering, it's now a complete picture, part of the problem [with Cohort One] was [that] it was a blank page at first. (MMU, interview)

9.2.1 Changes to recruitment

It is clear that the regional partnerships have valued acquiring greater responsibility for specific aspects of the programme such as trainee recruitment and feel that this has allowed them to adapt the process, for example, by seeking to attract more 'local' candidates, who are also believed to be more likely to remain with the agency on qualification. Several respondents also noted that the separate HEI and LA interviews conducted in Cohort One which had been felt to 'muddy' ownership of trainees have now been integrated in Cohort Two. The reported sense that HEIs were superfluous in the recruitment of trainees in Cohort One had reportedly been addressed by a greater degree of HEI involvement in Cohort Two. It was claimed that: 'HEIs do have good experience of spotting real potential' (University of Chester, interview).

In terms of the recruitment process, the evidence from further statistical analysis suggests that the process itself does not demonstrate any substantial anomalies, except that black African applicants are less likely to be successful at the initial screening stage

than other applicants and did not achieve the benchmark score necessary to be given further consideration:

[The] profile seems slightly different for Cohort Two – seems to be more relevant experience, [perhaps] as local authorities have been more in control of who they were picking. (Salford, interview)

[The] recruitment criteria [are] perhaps sharper; they [trainees] seem to have been more ready to move in to placement. (Salford, interview)

In a couple of regions, the opportunity to recruit locally, and in some cases, existing staff, was seen as a distinct advantage this time round. However, there was some concern that this may have introduced new and potentially unwelcome internal dynamics (Yorkshire and Humber).

9.2.2 Changes to programme design and delivery

One MMU representative acknowledged that the first cohort student feedback had resulted in additional action learning sets being integrated in to the programme in Cohort Two. This was designed to reduce the ‘feeling’ of loneliness which can accrue as a result of the degree of online learning embedded in the programme and to make the most of ‘natural action learning’ which is brought about by groups meeting and working together in a self-directed manner. Similarly, Salford University reported making changes to assessment feedback, providing this earlier as a result of trainee feedback. Other specific changes in programme delivery included:

- making timetabling changes – for example, moving the child development module from the second part of the programme to the first in order to assist trainees in their first placement settings which frequently included working with children aged 0–5 years (Salford);
- rationalising the number of learning outcomes in Cohort Two and clarified wording in other outcomes (Salford);
- streamlining some assessments – ‘we were perhaps testing some things more than we needed to’ (Salford);
- making the tutor role more explicit, with regard to the practice learning experience (MMU); defining roles more clearly in relation to trainee welfare (University of Bedfordshire) and combining the academic and placement tutor role (University of Hertfordshire); and
- rationalising portfolio requirements to remove unnecessary repetition (University of Hertfordshire).

Local authorities also reported making changes to the elements of the programme and in particular placement experiences:

- keeping trainees based in the local authority area in which they live and providing local placements to try and build knowledge and resources and hopefully make trainees feel more valued (Central East);
- attempting to integrate more experience of 'adults' into placement settings (the East Midlands); and
- encouraging past trainees to talk to new trainees in order to share knowledge, tips and information (Central East, Yorkshire and Humber).

Rather than as a result of any specific change in Cohort Two, one respondent in the East Midlands regional partnership reported that the completion of Cohort One and the experience gained by LA workforces would have a beneficial impact on Cohort Two trainees:

Workforce expectations will change ... in C1 going in [to placements] as Step Up to Social Work trainees didn't mean much but now for C2 trainees they have a high reputation for being able to get on with the job, being high-calibre ... expectations will be higher this time.

There was still a sense in some quarters that the Step Up to Social Work programme, even in Cohort Two, lacked sufficient support for trainees with complex requirements and in particular the lack of clarity about whether the programme would continue in to a third cohort meant that, 'if people need to drop down or drop back any employer should be able to offer that ... it's a real deficit' (University of Hertfordshire, interview). The current uncertainty about the future of the Step Up to Social Work programme precluded any such reassurances being given to trainees:

Cohort One [trainees] have benefitted from there being a Cohort Two in terms of extending dissertation deadlines, Cohort Two might not be so lucky ... it would be better to know sooner if there is going to be a C3. (Yorkshire and Humber, interview)

For the new Cohort Two local authorities, several appear to have kept a watching brief on the first cohort to see how the programme developed and at the earliest opportunity were eager to join existing regional partnerships. With regards to the benefits for them of joining an established programme, the consensus was that they benefitted from adjustments made to the programme as a result of Cohort One:

[Step Up to Social Work C2 seems] more seamless ... the planning isn't so onerous. (Stockport Council)

[We realised that having] a programme coordinator is a necessity. (Hertfordshire Council)

The point was made that this also indicated a requirement for consistency and continuity of funding (East, interview) and that it would not be viable to simply try to 'mainstream' the Step Up to Social Work model without maintaining sufficient budgetary provision for the programme.

9.3 Cohort Two: Summary

Overall, there appears to have been a degree of continuity between the first and second cohorts, with a substantial number of agencies and partnerships sustaining their involvement. There is evidence that it has been possible to 'learn the lessons' from the first cohort and adapt the structure, organisation and content of the programme to introduce improvements, such as the more 'hands on' involvement of regional partners in the selection process.

10. Conclusions

10.1 The Context: Challenges for Social Work Education and the Emerging Rationale for Step Up to Social Work

As discussed earlier, Step Up to Social Work was developed and implemented against a backdrop of continuing concerns about the standards and relevance of social work education (SWTF, 2009b), and persistent difficulties in maintaining sufficient numbers of qualified practitioners in the statutory workforce, despite an array of initiatives intended to tackle this problem (Harris et al., 2008). Government had been aware of the problems of recruitment and retention in social work for some time and appeared interested in developing new approaches to education and training (DfES, 2003; DCSF, 2007), with an emphasis on 'work-based routes' to professional qualification.

In one sense, then, the context was characterised by a sense of deep-seated and apparently intractable problems in ensuring that the social work workforce was sufficient in numbers, and sufficiently well-prepared to undertake difficult and critical tasks such as safeguarding children. It might seem that the first of these concerns, at least, had been substantially addressed through the introduction of the social work degree programme in 2003, with a significant increase in student enrolments, a larger and more diverse pool of applicants from which to recruit and a concomitant increase in their prior educational qualifications (Evaluation of Social Work Degree Qualification in England Team, 2008). Indeed, evaluation of this programme revealed an improvement in academic standards, widespread student satisfaction and 'enthusiasm among ... practice agencies' for the new qualification. Indeed, it has been shown that employers' 'overall satisfaction' with the quality of their newly qualified social workers had risen noticeably since the introduction of the new degree (Sharpe et al., 2011, p. 12). It was concluded that the results from the evaluation of the degree

suggest that the decision to implement the social work degree qualification represents a policy success and comprises an important part of the government's overall objectives to modernise public services. (Evaluation of Social Work Degree Qualification in England Team, 2008, p. xix)

However, this generally positive view of social work education sat awkwardly with a continuing sense of unease about practitioners' readiness for complex and challenging work at the point of qualification, particularly in children's services (Baginsky et al., 2010). Some employers continued to make the case that newly qualified practitioners were simply not well enough equipped to undertake the type of work which might be expected of them, and, of course, the evidence arising from further inquiries into child deaths seemed only to confirm these suspicions for some. Notwithstanding the general increase in employer satisfaction levels, it was also noted that 'Directors in Children's Services seem consistently less satisfied than Directors in Adult Services, and keener on specialist

childcare qualifying programmes' (Sharpe et al., 2011, p, 12). This sense of unease was further substantiated by other influential sources:

Not all newly qualified social workers are emerging from degree courses with the necessary knowledge, skills and expertise; and they are especially unprepared to deal with the challenges posed by child protection work. Degree courses are not consistent in content, quality and outcomes – for child protection, there are crucial things missing in some courses such as detailed learning on child development, how to communicate with children and young people, and using evidence-based methods of working with children and families. Theory and research are not always well integrated with practice and there is a failure to align what is taught with the realities of contemporary social work practice. (Munro, 2011, p. 97)

Lord Laming (2009), too, had concluded that social workers were not well-prepared for the responsibilities they would be expected to meet in practice:

Social workers themselves do not think that their training is equipping them to take on the responsibilities for which they are being trained – two-thirds of newly qualified social workers felt that the degree prepared them just enough or not at all for their current role ...

At the heart of the difficulty in preparing social workers through a degree course is that, without an opportunity to specialise in child protection work or even in children's social work, students are covering too much ground without learning the skills and knowledge to support any particular client group well. There are few placements offered in children's services and fewer still at the complex end of child protection or children 'in need'. (Laming, 2009, p. 51)

His report, focusing on events surrounding the death of 'Baby' Peter Connolly, had also drawn attention to problems of recruitment and retention, partly attributable to problems of 'inadequate training' (p. 44). Against this backdrop, there was clearly a considerable impetus for new measures to recruit and train social workers who would be 'fit for purpose', and ready to meet the very specific challenges to be faced in specialised children's services. For some, such as the SWTF (2009b), it seemed that it would be appropriate to increase the capacity to provide such opportunities at master's level.

The rationale for the development of Step Up to Social Work was therefore established, and the search for high-calibre and suitably experienced candidates for the programme was inspired by the consensual analysis emerging from these influential quarters.

10.2 Potential Challenges

Whilst there did seem to be a sound logical basis for the establishment of the Step Up to Social Work programme, there were also a range of potential criticisms, relating both to its rationale and potential impact. Concerns have been raised on occasion about the

relationship between education or training programmes in social work, and wider interests such as those of government and employing agencies. The very fact that government had taken a much closer interest in social work education (see previous chapters), and its continuing political sensitivity, are likely to lead to an environment where competing expectations are keenly felt (Moriarty, 2011). Preston-Shoot (2000), for example, has been critical of a perceived tendency to reduce social work education to no more than preparation for practice, with the associated loss of any critical edge to their learning, and denial of the potential value of being 'challenging' to parent organisations. Wilson (2012), too, cautions against the risk of practice learning becoming 'routinised' at the expense of deeper learning by way of critical reflection, if it becomes over-dominated by agencies' procedural priorities (Parker & Whitfield, 2006). Interestingly, this appears to echo the concerns expressed by Munro (2011), in highlighting the importance of 'double loop learning', rather than simply assessing the capacity to comply 'with prescribed behaviour'.

Such fears might appear to be compounded by other features of Step Up to Social Work, such as its rapid and essentially pragmatic construction and implementation; the challenge inherent in constructing a comprehensive generic qualifying programme deliverable in 18 months; the involvement of organisations unfamiliar with social work; and a predictable prioritisation of child and family social work, given the origins of the programme (see, for example, FightingMonstersAMHP blog, 15 July 2011, lamenting the loss of 'genericism'). Such fears were certainly instrumental in deterring many HEIs from engaging with Step Up to Social Work in its first incarnation, and even those actively involved with it acknowledged its 'controversial' qualities (Domakin, 2011).

Further potential criticisms have focused on Step Up to Social Work trainees, in terms of both their characteristics and the nature of their experiences whilst undertaking the programme. It was believed that they would form something of an elite, gaining better levels of funding and support than their mainstream counterparts, and indeed, potentially excluding others from important learning opportunities in the 'best' placements. At the same time, it was felt that the programme itself could be so demanding as to lead to a very high attrition rate, on the one hand, and exclude potential candidates who could not manage to comply with the intensive nature of the programme, on the other. Rather than promoting greater diversity, the programme might thus limit the range of potential candidates, and exclude those with additional responsibilities which could not be timetabled to meet its requirements.

In practical terms, too, there are likely to have been fears at the outset that the development and implementation of an entirely new model of social work training at a time of increasing organisational uncertainty and financial restraint might simply have been placing too onerous an expectation on local agency partners and overworked personnel.

10.3 Coming Through Unscathed?

Of course, it would be unrealistic to claim that Step Up to Social Work had dealt effectively with these issues in every respect, but in its delivery and development, the programme has responded well to many of the concerns and challenges identified.

In terms of programme content, for example, it is apparent that the programme has been able to build on and adapt existing tried and tested approaches to social work education, drawing on the experience of the lead and delivery HEIs involved. There is no obvious evidence of corner cutting, or unduly superficial approaches to key aspects of learning. Assessment and progression are carefully managed, and the integration of practice and academic learning is, if anything, enhanced because of the closer relationship between academic and agency partners.

Concerns, too, about the loss of ‘criticality’ and challenge seem to be largely allayed. The trainees are, in fact, often commended for bringing a questioning and reflective approach to practice settings, demonstrating a distinct readiness to ask why things are not done differently in their placement sites, for example. Equally, it seems, core social work values are not compromised in face of employer expectations.

Whilst there are some examples of perhaps an undue emphasis on child and family work, in other instances, the programme is deliberately constructed to integrate adult perspectives – by commissioning placements in adult mental health, to complement learning about complex needs in families, for example. Although the evaluation has highlighted inconsistency in the extent to which trainees have experienced a generic academic and practice curriculum, genericism does not seem to be fundamentally threatened by the Step Up to Social Work model.

The benefits of closer working relationships between field agencies and education interests are also evident in the improved capacity to address and resolve what have previously been seen as substantial practical challenges to effective delivery. This includes: the integration of practice and academic learning, the provision of suitable and suitably supported placements, the management and resolution of the inevitable ongoing delivery issues, and recruitment and selection processes. Whilst there were distinct inbuilt advantages for Step Up to Social Work, in terms of earmarked financial support and the existence of established partnership arrangements in many areas, this does not detract from the observation that closer working relationships appear to be inherently beneficial (see also Moriarty et al., 2010). The quality and robustness of these relationships appear to have been crucial in terms of creating the right sort of operating environment for the delivery of the programme, given the inherent pressures of accelerated delivery, and, in the first iteration at least, the challenges associated with stepping into the unknown.

This aspect of the delivery framework was critical because it laid the foundations for trainees' journey to successful completion. From the thoroughness of the selection process, through the establishment of close relationships with host agencies and teams, and the provision of continuing and well-resourced support (mentoring and tutorial arrangements), the integration of academic and practice learning, the quality of practice learning arrangements and the frameworks for assessment and progression, there was an overarching sense of continuity and coherence to the process, which is not always evident in the wider field of social work qualifying education (Evaluation of Social Work Degree Qualification in England team, 2008; Moriarty et al., 2010). As a result, it seems, the trainees recruited are well-suited to the expectations and challenges of the programme. They are resilient (Collins, 2007; Kinman & Grant, 2011); they are 'high-calibre'; they are reported to be reflective and challenging; they demonstrate appropriate values and they overwhelmingly complete the programme successfully (91%), and go on to practice in the teams or agencies which have hosted them. Although the programme might tentatively be judged to demonstrate cost effectiveness (see Curtis et al., 2011), the evaluation has not included analysis of the costs involved, which were clearly extensive, and a longer term evaluation of the costs and benefits of the programme may prove insightful for social work education more widely.

In its own terms, then, Step Up to Social Work must be acknowledged as a success, and this is demonstrated by the growing interest from employing agencies (CWDC, 2012), and indeed previously sceptical HEIs, in becoming involved, even though for many LAs the urgency of their recruitment needs may not now be as acute as when the programme started. However, there are inevitably caveats: on the one hand, the programme is not an unqualified success, on the other, we must underline the importance of creating the conditions for success, in terms of providing adequate resources, support, expertise and 'social capital' – critical considerations if the programme is to be extended or further 'rolled out'. Furthermore, the original intentions of targeting and attracting career-changers has to be questioned in terms of whether these aspirations have been achieved in light of the fact that the majority of Cohort One trainees were already considering a career in social work and had experience of working in social care.

In addition, a number of unresolved issues remain, and these should also be taken into consideration. Firstly, it does seem as if the programme is 'selective', in that the trainee cohort is not representative, either of the wider population, or of the overall cohort of master's students in social work – notably in the age profile of Step Up to Social Work trainees. This can be accounted for partly, we believe, by the initial construction of the programme which necessitated a degree of mobility, responsiveness and trainee freedom from continuing commitments. In addition, though, it seems that the programme did not reach far beyond those who would have considered a career in social work in any case; as with the wider recruitment and selection process for social work programmes there appears to be a particular issue regarding black and minority ethnic candidates (see Bartoli et al., 2008; Bartoli, 2011). We believe that this particular question merits wider and more detailed investigation, and recommend accordingly.

There are also some residual concerns about the relationship between Step Up to Social Work trainees and other social work students, with some frictions associated with the emergence of a perception that this is an elite group, better paid, more secure, more likely to get jobs on qualification and better served by providers than other students, echoing findings from earlier evaluation of Grow Your Own schemes (Harris et al., 2008). There is clearly a trade-off between the desire to ensure that the social work profession does attract the highest quality staff to serve vulnerable groups, and the danger of embedding long-standing divisions in the recruitment process which might spill over into the practice setting over the longer term. Partnerships were conscious of this issue, and took steps to avoid obvious grounds for conflict, by, for instance, ensuring that Step Up to Social Work placements did not detract from the available provision for other social work students. This nonetheless was a tension within some LAs and will need to be addressed consistently.

As far as the evaluation was able to discern, the issue of remaining 'generic' in delivery (Moriarty, 2011) was well-handled by most partnerships, but even so, the understandable emphasis on preparing trainees for frontline work with children and families poses a continuing risk of 'narrowing' of the curriculum, and the loss of wider disciplinary perspectives beyond statutory children and families social work. These questions are, to some extent, endemic within social work education; Step Up to Social Work in this sense merely crystallises them once again.

We can perhaps conclude then that the Step Up to Social Work 'model' demonstrates some clear advantages in terms of better integrating and supporting the education of future social work practitioners. At the same time, there are contextual concerns about the way in which the programme is structured and supported which need to be acknowledged and taken into account in considering future development of the model – can it be more inclusive, for example, as it should be? How can the advantages of partnership be extended to 'mainstream' social work education? Can this approach be sustained in the face of the instability of short-termism, such as changeable agency decisions to participate or not?

10.4 Conclusions: A Summary

Step Up to Social Work was widely viewed with suspicion at its inception, and there were substantial concerns about a number of features of the programme, including:

- the haste of implementation and the risks of developing an inadequate 'product';
- the involvement of external organisations unfamiliar with social work;
- reliance on new models of, and arrangements for, partnership working in this context which were largely untested;

- the risk of becoming unduly employer-led at the expense of a broader, critical perspective;
- the challenge of providing a comprehensive, generic social work qualifying programme in 18 months; and
- the risk that existing social work students might be disadvantaged, for instance by losing access to certain placement opportunities.

What we found was that these fears were largely allayed, due to a combination of factors, such as:

- the involvement of effective regional partnerships, often based on previous good working relationships;
- substantial (but not universal) 'buy-in' from senior local authority managers, such as Directors of Children's Services;
- the commissioning of external providers with a good generic knowledge of effective recruitment models;
- the establishment of clear, mutually acceptable working arrangements between partnerships and HEIs (lead and delivery);
- the adaptation of existing social work qualifying frameworks by experienced and knowledgeable dedicated HEI staff teams;
- the additional resources available which enabled employers and partnerships to dedicate staff and resources (such as practice learning opportunities) to Step Up to Social Work without compromising other aspects of their work; and
- a spirit of trust, goodwill and 'can do' which strikingly permeated all aspects of the process at all levels.

As a result, a series of positive outcomes and impacts (see relevant chapters) can be identified, which leads to broadly positive conclusions as to the merits of Step Up to Social Work.

Some concerns remain, however, in the following areas:

- the capacity to provide a genuinely 'generic' social work qualifying programme in the time available, and given the explicit 'child and family' focus of the initiative;
- the 'diversity' of the Step Up to Social Work candidates;
- the need for recruits to 'put their life on hold', and the potentially 'exclusive' nature of the programme; and
- sustainability, should additional resources dedicated to the programme be substantially reduced or diluted.

This leads us to conclude simply that Step Up to Social Work represents a valuable addition to the range of routes towards social work qualification currently available, but that it should not be seen as a replacement for other options. Rather, it provides some important lessons which can be incorporated in the wider domain of social work education, particularly in areas such as recruitment, partnerships and practice learning. This in turn should enrich the process of learning for all candidates for professional social work, irrespective of their learning pathway.

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Appendix 1: Summary Findings from a Survey of Regional Partnerships

The survey addressed several broad areas of involvement with the programme, including: recruitment; working with trainees; partnership relationships; programme benefits; and involvement with the second cohort.

1. Recruitment

Of those responding, most agreed or strongly agreed that the recruitment process was effectively managed (10/17), that the process operated fairly and equitably (14/18), that service users were effectively included in the recruitment process (11/17), and that the assessment centres did ensure that the most suitable candidates were selected (16/18). Overall, similarly, most agreed or strongly agreed that they were satisfied with the recruitment process for Cohort One (15/18).

2. Working with trainees

For those responding to this section of the questionnaire, Step Up trainees were viewed as of 'significantly better' quality by 14 or 'slightly better' quality by 23 (of 56 respondents) than social work students on other courses.

Respondents did believe that the programme was challenging in a number of respects, with 32 of 55 rating the 18-month timeframe 'high' in this respect; similarly 32 of 55 expressed the view that the impact of Step Up on trainees' work/life balance was also 'high'.

In terms of key 'learning outcomes' respondents generally expressed positive sentiments, with 49 of 59 stating that they were 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with trainees' ability to demonstrate reflective learning, 52 of 59 stating that they were 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with trainees' ability to demonstrate independent judgement, and 50 of 55 expressing satisfaction with trainees' acquisition of 'relevant skills'.

In relation to generic learning, 41 of 55 respondents stated themselves to be 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with trainee outcomes in this respect too.

3. Partnership relationships

Most survey respondents expressed the view that relationships were 'effective' or 'very effective' between partnerships and lead HEIs (33/55), between partnerships and delivery HEIs (39/54), and between the partners within the partnership (43/57).

The relationship between practice and academic learning was also considered to be 'effective' or 'very effective' in most cases (47/57).

4. Programme benefits

Most respondents rated the overall benefits of the programme positively. 26 of 48 respondents viewed the programme as 'good value for money', whilst only seven believed that it was not. 34 of 49 believed that the benefits to local authorities of being involved in Step Up outweighed the additional commitment of time and resources, whilst only six disagreed (nine were 'undecided'). 43 of 57 respondents believed that the programme was developing high quality newly qualified social workers, whilst only three believed that this was not the case. Eleven stated that they were either undecided or that it was too early to tell.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, 44 of 60 stated that the programme had been successful as a pilot for testing new routes for training social workers, and only two disagreed, with the remainder stating that it was too early to tell.

5. Involvement with the second cohort

As far as recruitment for Cohort Two was concerned, the picture remained positive, with 21 of 23 respondents 'agreeing' or 'strongly agreeing' that they were satisfied with the recruitment process in this case, and 24 of 26 who responded to this question stated that they 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that the recruitment process did attract high quality candidates.

Overall, responses from those surveyed were consistently positive about all aspects of the Step Up to Social Work programme, although caution must be exercised in attributing a great deal of weight to these findings, given the relatively small number of responses to some questions, and the uneven spread of responses across regional partnerships.



Department
for Education

© Crown June 2013

Reference: DFE-RR290

ISBN: 978-1-78105-249-5

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