

**The PEdDS Project: disabled
social work students and
placements**

2005

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Disclaimer: The views here are those of the project team and do not necessarily represent those of HEFCE or the NDT. Whilst every care has been taken, this document should not be taken as reflecting legal authority.

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SECTION 1 - EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background: In 2001, the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA) amended the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 to include, for the first time, the provision of education and related services. This marked a significant change in the provision of higher education for disabled students in England and Wales. For the first time, higher education institutions (HEIs) had a duty to make reasonable adjustments to accommodate the additional needs of disabled students and the Act introduced a basic duty to avoid discrimination. The legislation was 'anticipatory' in nature: that is, it was not sufficient for HEIs to respond to a case as it arose; institutions needed to bear in mind future potential barriers to accessing services and the curriculum and either eradicate or ameliorate their impact through adjustments.

Most HEIs now have dedicated Disability Services which recommend needs assessments for disabled students and help them in gaining access to assistive funds such as the Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) as well as with ongoing support through their course of study. Many courses within higher education take place on-campus through the traditional media of teaching such as lectures, seminars, tutorials and assessment, for example examinations and essays. However, students on many professional courses, such as social work, nursing, medicine and teaching have always undertaken a large part of their learning off-campus in external organisations in the form of practice placements and extended periods of time spent 'doing the job' under close supervision. Practice learning within these disciplines is seen as a core requirement, the question arises of if, and how on-campus support translates into the off-campus world of the workplace, the social work agency office or the ward.

The PEdDS (Professional Education and Disability Support) project set out to address these questions and explored the experiences of disabled students in placements in order to inform and produce best practice guidance in this area. Social work was chosen as the key discipline to investigate as it has had a long association with anti-discriminatory and inclusive practices. A new social work award and relatively new professional social care body, the General Social Care Council (GSCC) had recently come into existence with the aims of making the social work workforce and profession more accountable to the general public and working to increase the number of entrants to a profession that has a shortage of qualified staff. These changes offered an opportunity to focus on social work's capacity to support disabled people in training and so draw on and develop a valuable source of new recruits for the profession.

The aims of the PEdDS research:

- To explore the barriers and opportunities for disabled social work students on placement.
- To gather examples of good practice through the views, perspectives and experiences of disabled social work students and staff about supporting disabled students on placement.

Research design: A predominantly qualitative methodology was adopted with one hundred semi-structured interviews undertaken. This followed a comprehensive review of the literature.

Fifty disabled social work students with 'unseen' disabilities were interviewed from a voluntary sample. All had undertaken at least one placement. Three groups of professional staff (50 in total) were also interviewed. These comprised 25 practice assessors/teachers, 13 placement co-ordinators and 12 disability support staff. Staff were recruited through contacts at participating HEIs, articles in the press and through social work and disability email lists.

Interviews were transcribed and analysed by the team, with the aid of the qualitative analysis software package Nvivo 2.0. Other data were stored in SPSS 11.0 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) and frequencies were generated using this software.

Findings: Disabled social work students reported a mixture of positive and negative experiences on placement. Positive elements included the importance of pre-placement planning, adjustments being introduced to the placement and ongoing support and monitoring by staff. Negative elements included limited understanding and awareness of the student's disability by placement staff, a lack of adjustments made to the placement and discriminatory experiences such as being made to feel like a 'burden'. Fears and concerns over disclosure were also reported. For example, 73% of students interviewed expressed concerns over the impact of their disability on future employability. All three staff groups evinced an understanding of student disclosure concerns. However, they also considered that disclosure and the passing of information about a student's disability might be necessary to uphold the professional duty of care to service users. There was patchy knowledge among placement co-ordinators and practice assessors/teachers about the duties imposed by new legislation and a lack of institutional policies and guidelines within HEIs and placements. Most staff interviewed felt that a shared approach to supporting disabled students on placement offered the most constructive way forward for maximising positive outcomes for disabled students on placement.

Conclusions: There is evidence of good practice in this field and a willingness on the part of staff to improve their practice. There is still room for improvement. The report concludes with recommendations for each group included in the study and points the way forward for better integration and communication between key stakeholders.

SECTION 2 - THE STUDY CONTEXT

2.1: Enhancing Learning for Disabled Students

In 2002, HEFCE commissioned a mapping exercise to identify existing resources and materials for the learning and teaching of disabled students. This research, undertaken collaboratively by three universities (Open University, University of Dundee and Coventry University), identified gaps in provision with regard to subject specific resources; resources based directly on the views and experiences of disabled students, and resources relating to work placements and study abroad (French, 2002). Following this, HEFCE set aside £5.4 million in 2002 to support development projects within two strands. The second strand of this funding supported 24 projects which had a direct remit to “develop, promote and transfer activity which will help institutions across the sector to develop and enhance learning and teaching provision for disabled students” (HEFCE, 2002). These projects were supported by the National Disability Team (NDT) who provided support and advice. The Professional Education and Disability Support (PEdDS) project was funded under this initiative.

The following review of literature sets the scene for the PEdDS project and is divided into three main sections. Section 1 (2: 3) places the discussion of disabled students in education within the wider disability agenda in higher education. This agenda is linked to the current Labour government’s social inclusion policies. Section 2 (2: 5) draws on the broad range of literature on placements in higher education in order to explore themes and recommendations that have a specific bearing on professional education. Since there are many different forms and models of ‘placement’, where appropriate, reference is made to other relevant disciplines and government policy. Section 3 (2: 9) provides an overview of the current situation in social work education through analysis of relevant documents from the General Social Care Council (GSCC) and Department of Health (DoH) guidance. This is followed by a review of research studies and personal accounts describing the experiences of disabled social work students.

2.2: Search strategy

The project searched for relevant literature from 1995 onwards. This was the year of the introduction of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). It was also relevant that the landscape of higher education and provision for disabled students has changed significantly during the years since 1995. However, where relevant, some literature pre-1995 is cited. A general search of the major available databases and Internet search engines (Academic Search Elite, BIDS, Caredata, Cinahl, ELSC, Google, Ingenta, Pubmed, SOSIG, Swetswise, Web of Science, Yahoo, Zetoc) was undertaken using a variety of search terms and many different combinations of these terms were employed in order to maximise relevant ‘hits’. Other relevant references were identified in discussion with academics and researchers who had undertaken work in this field. The key search terms are listed at Appendix One.

This search produced a large number of references. There were also a number of articles relating to disability/placements and other professions such as medicine, nursing, teaching, geography and professions allied to medicine. Some of these have been included in the following review (where there was useful general information about placement support). However, this report does not provide a comprehensive review of literature in fields other than social work.

2.3: Legislation and Responsibilities of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) for disabled students

In the approach to the 1997 General Election, the Labour Party made a manifesto commitment to comprehensive and enforceable civil rights for disabled people (Disability Rights Task Force, 1999). The Disability Rights Task Force was established following its successful election victory with the following terms of reference:

“To consider how best to secure comprehensive, enforceable civil rights for disabled people within the context of wider society, and to make recommendations on the role and functions of a Disability Rights Commission.” (DRTF, 1999)

The government followed the initial advice of the Task Force’s first report, *‘Towards Inclusion: Civil Rights for Disabled People’* in March 1998. This formed the basis of a White Paper *‘Promoting disabled people’s rights - creating a Disability Rights Commission fit for the twenty-first century’* and established the Disability Rights Commission (DRC). The Commission opened its doors on 25 April 2000 and has been involved with a number of cases involving access and provision to higher education (see <http://www.drc.gov.uk/thelaw/index.asp>).

The scope of the Task Force’s final report, *‘From Exclusion to Inclusion’* (1999), was extensive and contained a number of specific recommendations for education:

“The gaps in the DDA are well recognised. The exclusion of education from the DDA is unacceptable. The education that disabled people receive will determine their future opportunities in life and is essential to extending equality of opportunity...A separate section on further, higher and LEA-secured adult education should be included in future civil rights legislation to secure comprehensive and enforceable rights for disabled people. The legislation should have an associated statutory Code of Practice, explaining the new rights.” (1999: 8)

At the time of writing (2005) the DRC looks set to be incorporated into a wider body, ‘The Commission for Equality and Human Rights’ (CEHR), which will address multiple forms of discrimination in a context of human rights (www.womenandequalityunit.gov.uk/equality/project).

2.4: Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SENDA) 2001

While the Task Force's recommendations related to education in general, a focus on further and higher education developed. Specifically, government responded to these recommendations by introducing the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001 (SENDA 2001), which places duties on providers of post-16 education and other related services not to discriminate against disabled people. The Act makes it unlawful for higher education institutions ('responsible bodies') to discriminate against a disabled person in the following respects:

- in admissions or enrolments of students
- in the terms on which admissions or enrolment offers are made
- by refusing or deliberately omitting to accept an application for admission or enrolment.

The Act covers services provided wholly or mainly for students or for those enrolled on courses. This includes courses of education, training, recreation, leisure and catering facilities and accommodation (DRC, 2002, Section 2.13).

Discrimination occurs when a responsible body fails to make a reasonable adjustment and when a disabled student is placed, or is likely to be placed, at a substantial disadvantage in comparison with a person who is not disabled. The Act defines a disabled person according to the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 definition – that is, a disabled person is someone who has a physical or mental impairment, which has an effect on his or her ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities. That effect must be:

- substantial (that is, more than minor or trivial); and
- long term (that is, has lasted or is likely to last for at least 12 months or for the rest of the life of the person affected); and
- adverse (DRC, 2002, Section 2.1).

Placements are explicitly included in SENDA (2001, S3.14). In the case of placements, more than one organisation may have legal responsibilities towards a disabled person. The Disability Rights Commission Code of Practice makes it clear that "the fact that two bodies have responsibility does not diminish the responsibility of either body" (2002, Section 3.18, 10.22). This is particularly pertinent for professional education where entry to some courses is regulated by a professional body. From October 2004, Qualifications Bodies became covered by Part 2 of the DDA 1995. A Qualifications Body, such as the General Social Care Council (GSCC) or the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC), has a duty to make reasonable adjustments to the way it "confers, renews or extends professional or trade qualifications. It owes this duty to a disabled person who holds a qualification conferred by it and to a disabled applicant or potential applicant for such a qualification" (DRC, 2004b, Section 8.15). These bodies are also asked to review regularly any competence standards to ensure they are framed in a way that does not exclude disabled people from being able to meet them (*ibid* Section 2.11). The legislation goes on to say that less favourable treatment of

a disabled person will only be justified if the qualifications body can show that the standard is (or would be) applied equally to people who do not have the disabled person's disability, and that its application is a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim (*ibid* Section 6.4). A mapping exercise by the Institute for Employment Studies (Hurstfield *et al*, 2004) found that most qualifications organisations were aware of the changes enacted in October 2004. However, more than a third did not know whether they would be covered by the new regulations or not.

A further Code of Practice from the DRC, '*Employment and Occupation*' (2004a), also has implications for disabled students on placements. From October 2004, it has been unlawful for a placement provider to discriminate against a disabled person who is seeking or undertaking a work placement with regard to:

- a) the arrangements he (*sic*) makes for who should be offered a work placement
- b) the terms on which he (*sic*) affords him access to any work placement or any facilities concerned with such placement (2004a, Section 9.42).

In particular, the Code places an emphasis on co-operation, negotiation and dialogue:

“It would be reasonable to expect the sending organisation and the placement provider to cooperate in order to ensure that appropriate adjustments are identified and made. It is good practice for a placement provider to ask a disabled person about reasonable adjustments before the placement begins, and to allow him to visit the workplace in advance to see how his needs can be addressed. Once a particular adjustment has been identified, it would be reasonable for the sending organisation and the placement provider to discuss its implementation, bearing in mind their respective obligations under the Act.” (2004a, Section 9.50)

While there is an emphasis on shared responsibility for meeting the needs of disabled students on placement in the guidance, in practice the higher education institution (HEI), as the instigator and seeker of placements, may carry the main share of responsibility. This may be particularly so when placement supply is low and HEIs are dependent on placement providers. As Fell and Kuit (2003) note, “Higher education institutions rely on the goodwill of the placement provider but if their responsibilities are too onerous then there may be little incentive for them to take a student” (Fell and Kuit, 2003:21). This was one issue explored in this study. It can be argued that, when placements are provided on a 'good will' basis, disabled students have had to rely on this for ensuring equality of opportunity. This is often inadequate.

2.5: Disabled students and higher education

Political interest in disabled students pre-dates New Labour. In 1996, the Conservative government set up a National Committee of Inquiry: the first major examination of Higher Education since the Robbins Committee reported in 1963. Chaired by Ron Dearing, it reported in 1997. The report, '*Higher Education in the Learning Society*' made many recommendations. While some argued (for example, Hurst 1999) that the Dearing Report failed to adequately address the support and inclusion of disabled students, it did include a number of positive statements that appeared to acknowledge this group:

“Apart from the economic imperative, there are other influences pointing to resumed growth. Unless we address the under-representation of those from lower socio-economic groups we may face increasingly socially divisive consequences. As a matter of equity, we need to reduce the under-representation of certain ethnic groups, and of those with disabilities. Not least, there will be increasing demand for higher education for its own sake by individuals seeking personal development, intellectual challenge, preparation for career change, or refreshment in later life.”

(1997, section 1.17, page 10)

This emphasis on widening the participation in higher education of certain traditionally under-represented groups has been fuelled by an anxiety about the impact of the fall in the birth rate on the output of graduates and the consequences of this for the economy (Hurst, 1992). However, as Hurst (1992, 1999) and Wilson *et al*, (2002) note, these developments have often ignored the needs of disabled students and failed to distinguish them as a group with specific requirements of provision. Wilson *et al*, (2002) suggest that widening participation has focussed largely on recruiting students from low socio-economic backgrounds and that some institutions with a good record of actively recruiting disabled students now exercise caution due to the financial implications of attracting and then having to support them.

Certain key organisations have taken a lead on provision and standards for the inclusion of disabled people in education, most notably the Quality Assurance Agency for higher education (QAA). The QAA has the responsibility to safeguard the public interest in setting standards of higher education qualifications, and to encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education (QAA website, www.qaa.ac.uk). At the time of its establishment, Hurst (1999) noted that it was important that the body included something on provision for disabled students to avoid criticism of an overly narrow approach to the meaning of 'quality'. Initially, the QAA was reluctant to produce a separate code for disabled students as it felt this was covered within the equal opportunities framework (Wilson *et al*, 2002). Nonetheless, the QAA went on to publish two documents relevant to an examination of the learning of disabled students in

professional education. The first is the '*Code of Practice for the Assurance of Academic Quality and Standards in Higher Education - Section 3: students with disabilities*' (QAA, 1999), containing 24 principles ('precepts' within the Code). Precept 11 relates specifically to the learning of disabled students on placement and is worth citing in full:

11. Institutions should ensure that, wherever possible, disabled students have access to academic and vocational placements including field trips and study abroad.

Where placements, including international placements, are a formal requirement or standard component of the programme, institutions should consider ways of ensuring that the specified learning opportunities are available to disabled students by:

- seeking placements in accessible contexts;
- providing specialist guidance on international placements;
- re-locating field trips to alternative sites or providing alternative experiences where comparable opportunities are available which satisfy the learning outcomes;
- working with the placement providers to ensure accessibility;
- providing support before, during and after placements that takes account of the needs of any disabled students, including transport needs.

Where a placement is an optional but desirable element of the programme, institutions should consider making similar arrangements to support access for disabled students. (QAA, 1999, page 14)

The second relevant document from the QAA, the *Code of Practice on Placement Learning* (2001), notes that institutions should produce policies on placement learning in which institutions should, among other requirements:

- **consider health and safety requirements**
- **consider the requirements of relevant statutory, regulatory, professional or funding bodies. (Precept 4)**

In addition, Precept 5 of this Code asks institutions to "ensure that students are provided with appropriate guidance and support in preparation for, during, and after their placements" (page 7). There is also a call for monitoring placements and establishing procedures "within which feedback on the quality and standards of the placement can be received and appropriate action taken where necessary" (page 8).

It is evident from the raft of legislation and documents which place specific responsibilities on HEIs that the inclusion of disabled people in higher education is high on the social inclusion agenda. However, what is not evident is whether duties imposed are being fulfilled; and whether practice across the sector is responding to SENDA's anticipatory duty to make reasonable adjustments. Like all legislation, the specifics will be established by the courts and at this point in time, SENDA requirements are being tested out in court cases supported by the DRC (see <http://www.drc-gb.org/thelaw/legalcases> for more information on cases supported by the Disability Rights Commission).

2.5: Placements and disabled students

A work placement, according to SKILL (2003a), involves any time learning off-campus and includes:

- work experience at secondary school
- field trips
- years abroad
- Modern Apprenticeships
- Entry to Employment (E2E)
- voluntary work
- vacation placements
- course-related projects at an employer's premises
- work shadowing
- internships.

Work placements are defined by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES, 2002a) as:

“A planned period of work-based learning or experience, where the learning outcomes are part of a course or programme of study. This is usually provided outside the institution at which the student is enrolled. Work placements may be part of a sandwich course, a short placement, a work taster, temporary work or a period of supported employment as part of vocational training. Placements may also take place abroad. Students may arrange their own placement, or they may be set up by the institution or a third party. In all cases the duties on the institution are the same.” (2002a: 2)

Fell and Kuit (2003) note that placements “have a long history in higher education, particularly in the former polytechnics where an ‘industrial year’ was an integral part of a sandwich degree” (page 214). They also cite Davies (1990) who observed that: “the benefits of supervised work experience are unique, identifiable and not achievable by other means” (page 216). Placements vary in length and setting and may be paid or unpaid. In professional training courses such as social work, nursing, medicine and teaching, placements are a mandatory component of courses and are inextricably linked to successful completion of course and the subsequent award of ‘professional status’.

The present government is keen to see an increase in work-based learning. The Dearing Report (1997) stated:

“All the evidence that we have reviewed endorses the value of some exposure of the student to the wider world as part of a programme of study. This may be achieved through work experience, involvement in student union activities, or work in community or voluntary settings. We have seen examples of an excellent range of opportunities for students.” (Section 9.26: 135)

The White Paper ‘*The Future of Higher Education*’ (DfES, 2003) fuels the drive for more work-based and work-linked learning and provision of opportunities through its emphasis on the need for an increase in foundation degrees:

“We believe that the economy needs more work-focused degrees - those, like our new foundation degrees, that offer, specific, job-related skills.” (2003, Section 5.9)

The terms ‘work based’, ‘work related’ and ‘workplace learning’ are used interchangeably in the literature. Levy *et al*, (1989, cited in Lewis, 2003) define work based learning as “linking learning to the work role” and identify three inter-related components, each of which provided an essential contribution to learning:

- structuring learning in the workplace
- providing on-the-job learning and training opportunities
- identifying and providing relevant off-job training and learning opportunities.

Seagreaves *et al*, (1996, cited in Lewis, 2003) develop further the idea of work-based learning and suggest that linking learning to the requirements of people’s jobs has three strands:

- Learning for work : thus increasing student employability
- Learning at work : this strand relates to an individual’s activities undertaken as part of their job role and includes delivery in the workplace of at least some components of the course and flexibility over time and assessment arrangements
- Learning through work - learning is centred on and through the work environment.

Of these, arguably the third, ‘Learning through work’, relates most closely to the role of professional practice placements: i.e. students learn and test their skills for the profession by ‘doing the job’ under supervision. This is distinct from simply gaining experience and mimics the conditions of ‘being an employee’, albeit a closely supervised one.

The increase in the value attached to work place learning and off-campus learning leads to questions about provision of work placements for disabled

students, whose numbers are undoubtedly increasing as a result of widening participation initiatives for 'non-traditional' groups in higher education.

2.6: Guidance and legislation for supporting disabled students on placement

Much of the guidance relating to disabled students and work placements encourages HEIs to be pro-active in pre-placement planning for disabled students and to ensure that adjustments are in place prior to the placement commencing (Crawshaw, 2002; DfES, 2002a). A key theme, which has been constantly reiterated, is the need for flexibility. Flynn (2002) suggests that, "As far as students are concerned the key is to be flexible and supportive" (page 4). Inflexibility from professional bodies in their stipulation of placement requirements was one of the most frequently cited difficulties encountered by social work educators in one study (Manthorpe and Stanley, 1999).

Flexibility can be encapsulated in the form of written agreements. CoWork (2001), a three year collaborative project between three British universities to produce staff development materials to help improve the curriculum for disabled students, advocate written agreements as a means of providing flexibility as they "ensure that each party is aware of their responsibilities in terms of any adjustments or additional support that may be required." (2001:1)

The most comprehensive guide available for disabled students on work placements is the DfES guide '*Providing Work Placements for Disabled Students: a good practice guide for further and higher education institutions*' (2002a). The guide highlights the importance of monitoring placements:

"Placement staff need to monitor placements to ensure they are working well for disabled students. In particular staff need to monitor the adjustments made for the students to ensure they are responsive to their current needs." (DfES, 2002a: 20)

Monitoring is conceived as a means of maintaining flexibility:

"It may not be possible to identify in advance every adjustment that needs to be made. In many cases, it will be necessary to adapt support arrangements as the placement progresses, as students become more confident in their roles, or as new needs arise. Placement organisers need to keep in touch with students on placements and with placement providers to ensure that support arrangements are adjusted accordingly." (DfES, 2002a: 19)

The guide emphasises the need to discuss support needs with the student prior to the placement (pre-placement planning):

"Often, extra time spent during the preparation period may be all that is required to ensure that a disabled student's work placement fully achieves its aims." (DfES, 2002a: 10)

Disclosure is a particular issue for students with hidden disabilities who will often have a choice as to whether, when and to whom their disability is disclosed. The DfES stress the health and safety implications of disclosure of a disability:

“In some cases the implications of a disability may impact upon the work placement, and the Institution may therefore be obliged to ensure that information is passed on. Where students will be working with children or other vulnerable people, or with chemicals or dangerous equipment, for example, there will be health and safety and other considerations.” (2002a: 12)

Waterfield and West (2002) have also produced a useful ‘checklist’ for work placements and disabled students. More recently, in their guide entitled ‘*Access to Practice: Overcoming the barriers for disabled social work students*’, Turner *et al*, (2004) include a recommended checklist for staff and students in social work education. This accessible guide focuses on the rules and regulations, common attitudes and assumptions (such as risks of seeing the students as clients) and tackles many of the practicalities of placements, for example, access to assistive technologies. It finally focuses on issues requiring national strategies and calls for implementation of the legislative requirements to take place in a spirit of inclusivity rather than defensiveness.

The implications of disclosure were highlighted by Doyle and Robson (2002) who emphasise that early disclosure facilitates effective pre-placement planning:

“If students are agreeable to disclosing their disability to the potential employer it is in their best interest. Ill-prepared placement providers can often lead to poor experiences for all (and could possibility (*sic*) jeopardise the future availability of placements). Prepared placement advisers who are fully informed of the needs of their students often encourage staff awareness and will be more likely to make adjustments.” (page 39)

The Southern Higher Education Consortium (2000) produced 28 discussion papers covering various aspects of supporting students with different disabilities. Their brief guide for placements (paper 27) covers legislation, academic and financial support for disabled students and applications. It also includes a focus on the issue of references:

“There is an ethical dilemma of confidentiality versus duty of care. On one hand, the HEI and its staff may be bound to adhere to their policy on confidentiality and not to disclose any information regarding a student, without the student’s express permission. On the other hand, if the HEI knows of a disability, which would substantially effect (*sic*) the student’s ability to carry out the duties mentioned in the job description, and withholds this fact, they could possibly face legal action by the prospective employer at a later date, if any damage to property or other personnel, or loss of business occurs as a result of the student’s undisclosed disability.” (2000: 4)

This echoes similar dilemmas regarding references identified by Manthorpe and Stanley's (1999) study. This 'duty' of care on the part of academics is arguably more applicable to staff working on professional training courses such as social work, nursing, teaching and medicine. Many academics in these disciplines are bound by their own professional codes of conduct and are increasingly being asked to confirm students' 'fitness to practice'. The need to ensure high standards of practice in a profession can conflict with real concerns that disabled students may be discriminated against in terms of employment opportunities.

Another area of higher education where work has been undertaken to support disabled students is geography fieldwork. This form of placement is similar to 'traditional' placements in that they both take place off-campus. As Nairn (1999; cited in Healey, 2003:11) notes, fieldtrip culture is often based on the "taken for granted notions that everyone is physically able". In this area, notable work has been carried out by the Geography Discipline Network (GDN, see www.glos.ac.uk/gdn). Chalkley and Waterfield (2001) make a number of recommendations in relation to fieldwork which might usefully be applied to other disciplines. These include academics working more closely with disability support staff to open up new understandings and opportunities; staff thinking more imaginatively about ways in which different students may be enabled to demonstrate their competence; and seeking the views of the 'key' participants. Similarly, well-written and useful guides in this series are provided by the GDN (see Birnie and Grant, 2001; Wareham *et al*, 2001; Shepherd, 2001). Such work demonstrates the extent to which the needs of disabled people on placements is an issue which transcends a range of different disciplines.

2.7: Placements and disabled students-opportunities

For student support staff and academics in HEIs, a particular advantage of evaluating placement learning is that many of the issues faced by disabled students in higher education are magnified in this form of teaching and learning (Healey *et al*, 2001). Burgstahler (2001) notes the positive outcomes of placement learning for disabled students:

“The transition from school to work is particularly difficult for people with disabilities. Attitudinal barriers and accommodation issues are compounded by the fact that college graduates with disabilities often have had few previous work experiences. Participating in work-based learning experiences has been recognised as a contributor to positive employment outcomes for all students, including those with disabilities.” (2001: 3)

The value of work experience and placements in facilitating access to employment for disabled students is identified by SKILL (National Bureau for Students with Disabilities) (2003a). Its guide, *'Into Work Experience: Positive experiences of disabled people'* (2003a) lists a number of opportunities inherent in placements:

- Improve and strengthen your skills and knowledge
- Develop interpersonal skills
- Learn 'employability' skills
- Find out how your disability affects you
- Demonstrate to employers what you, as a disabled person, can do and so encourage them to be more pro-active about employing disabled people
- Explore career options by 'trying out' different areas of work
- Gain practical experience of securing a job
- Add aspects of your experience to your CV
- Maybe earn some money.

(SKILL 2003a: 5-6)

Burghstahler (2001) also identifies the advantages for employers:

“For employers, providing work-based learning opportunities to students allows them to help prepare workers for the next generation and also test the job skills of potential future employees. When a participant has a disability, employers also gain practice in working with an individual to create a work environment that maximises productivity and minimizes the impact of a disability.”(2001: 3)

An additional benefit is that a work placement may also allow disabled students to 'test out' the world of work to see what response their disabilities evoke and to discover what adjustments might be required when they enter that environment as employees.

2.8: Placements and disabled students—challenges and barriers

Research by Flynn (2002) explores the challenges faced by disabled students on placement. She reports that issues of self-esteem, low confidence and reduced expectations from others posed more of a challenge than practical adjustments.

In her study of students' decisions to disclose dyslexia on work placements, Blankfield (2001) proposes the use of 'system advocates' in the university (such as disability support workers) "through whose efforts the education playing field is levelled as far as possible so that the dyslexic student is not disadvantaged" (2001: 23). The system advocate is an individual at the institution who can negotiate on behalf of the student – in a sense 'fight their corner'. Normally, this role would usually be adopted by the disability support worker. When the student is on placement they become a 'pseudo-employee' of the agency and this system advocate may be lost.

In conclusion, whilst there is a wealth of literature on the nature of placements and types of 'work based' learning, information regarding how best to support disabled students remains fairly limited. This is particularly the case with professional education, and although some lessons may be learnt from

disciplines such as geography, the peculiar and unique nature of professional education placements renders the support issues for disabled students especially challenging.

2.9: 'Setting the scene'—disabled students and social work education

In England, social work education has recently undergone significant change with the introduction of the new three-year degree award replacing the two-year DipSW (Diploma in Social Work). As well as extending the length of undergraduate social work programmes from two to three years, the new criteria require students to undertake two hundred days of practice learning (DoH, 2002b). Providers of courses need to ensure that each student has experience in at least two practice settings, of statutory social work tasks involving legal interventions and of providing services to at least two user groups (for example, child care and mental health) (DoH, 2002b). These courses are validated by the newly established regulatory body, the General Social Care Council (GSCC), which has also established Codes of Practice that social workers and students must agree to uphold when they register. Practice learning is seen as a crucial element of preparing students for practice (Billingham, 1999; Cartney, 2000; Kearney, 2003; Parker, 2004) and expansion of student numbers has meant an increase in practice learning opportunities (Manthorpe *et al*, 2003). Practice experience was also at the forefront of the QAA (2000) benchmarking statement for social work:

“The applied nature of social work as an academic subject means that practice is an essential and core element of learning...practice provides opportunities for students to improve and demonstrate their understanding through the application and testing of knowledge and skills.” (2000: 11)

However, social work practice learning opportunities (placements) have always been at a premium and the longstanding shortfall has increased in recent years. To cope with the new demand, the Department of Health established a Practice Learning Taskforce, hosted by the Training Organisation for the Personal Social Services (TOPSS), with a remit to increase practice-learning opportunities by 94% by 2006.

Social Work students with disabilities - “a generally depressing picture”
(CCETSW 1999, preface, p.2)

There are many claims that disabled people are under-represented both in training and in the social work workforce as a whole (Crawshaw, 2002; Lyons *et al*, 1995; Phillips, 1998). In a survey of the social services workforce in the UK, McLean (2003) notes:

“It might be expected that social services would have a greater awareness of the needs of people with disabilities and the effects of discrimination; however, the evidence suggests otherwise.”
(2003: 54)

The evidence base is limited. In their examination of the demographic profiles of social workers, Lyons *et al*, (1995) report:

“There is even less information on social workers with a disability, in contrast with the amount of literature about this client group. Could this be an indication that disabled people in social work are seen almost exclusively in terms of service users?” (1995: 174)

Oliver (2004) suggests that the low priority accorded in the educational arena reflects service and employment agendas:

“...disability issues have remained a poor relation in all of the equalities of social work training. Disabled people’s needs have also remained very low down on the agenda of most social services departments. There is little doubt that the hegemony of the individual model still exists within social work and, indeed, the other professions as well.” (2004: 10)

In terms of the training of disabled social work students, it might be assumed that social work would be proactive in welcoming disabled recruits to the profession (Phillips, 1998; Taylor, 1996). Phillips (1998) observes:

“It could be argued that if any profession might be expected to have an enabling ethos in relation to training its new recruits, then social work should. The ‘empowering’ tradition which, it is claimed, is integral to social work cannot be put into practice if social workers themselves do not feel empowered.” (1998: 13-14)

The evidence base regarding disabled people undertaking social work training is also limited (Gakis, 1990; Phillips, 1998; Cooley and Salvaggio, 2002; Turner *et al*, 2004). A 1991 CCETSW (Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work) paper entitled, *‘Disability Issues: Developing Anti-Discriminatory Practice’*, made a number of recommendations for social work education and disabled students. These included flexibility in course structure and a range of modes of assessment for those who required it (for example, British Sign Language). It also made recommendations in the areas of recruitment; admissions and retention; monitoring of applicants; those called for interview; those offered places; and those completing and not completing courses. Seven years later, a collection of papers exploring aspects of the experiences of disabled social work students was published in *‘The Enabling DipSW?’* which drew together reports commissioned by CCETSW from 1995 through to 1998. Additionally, Phillips *et al*, (1995) present the findings of their semi-structured interviews with 23 disabled social work students, practice teachers and academic staff. They identify five ‘disabling barriers’ - an inaccessible learning environment; the requirement of people to categorise themselves into disability stereotypes on Social Work Admissions Service (SWAS) forms; equal opportunities policies making no reference to disabled students; the rhetoric of equality functioning as a barrier - that is, in the attempt to make all students ‘equal’ the needs of disabled people are

overlooked; and self-limitation through reluctance to disclose a disability. The authors make three recommendations in relation to placements:

- a) placements for disabled students should be made well in advance**
- b) workload relief for the practice teacher should be available if the placement had generated extra work**
- c) the suitability of a placement for a disabled student should be mentioned in the agency profile. (1995: 47)**

Crawshaw and Somerton (1999) highlight the importance of early placement finding for students and disclosure, noting that statistics about disabled applicants can be unreliable. They also point out the importance of recruiting more disabled students as a way of increasing the workforce:

“The presence of increased numbers of students with disabilities in the social work section will offer crucial user feedback to the Department from within as well as showing a commitment to increasing the pool of people with disabilities working in the field of social work within a professional role.” (1999: 154).

Walker (1999a) undertook a survey of DipSW programmes in the North of England to ascertain the extent to which they had addressed the needs of social work students. Provision of support for disabled students on placement was an acknowledged shortfall and Walker explores the issue further in a second study (1999b). When asked whether they had a protocol or guidance with reference to disabled students, 65 out of the 67 providers who responded indicated that they did not. The study (1999b) produced a number of recommendations, summarised below:

- I. Practice teachers particularly willing to take disabled students should state this in their personal profiles.**
- II. Agency profiles should state the suitability of a work place for a disabled student.** This would allow for ample time for students to consider whether the placement would be able to meet their needs in advance of being offered a placement. This material should be made available in a variety of media for example, audio tape.
- III. Workload relief should be given to a practice teacher if the placement of a disabled student has generated extra work.** Practice assessors/teachers may be reluctant to take a disabled student for fear that it creates extra work that might interfere with their clients. If there is an agreed workload relief this may make them more likely to accept a disabled student and also means that that practice assessor/teacher might have more time to spend with that student.

- IV. Programmes should try to ensure as full a range of placements as possible are available to disabled students.** There should not be one agency that is seen as the agency to which all disabled students are sent. This limits choice and does not allow exposure to the range of learning experiences that a student needs.
- V. Programmes should develop protocols for providing support and for assessing students on placements when usual methods are not available or not valid.** This may include altering assessments for students where 'normal' assessment procedures are not appropriate for that student. An example would be assessing a deaf student using British Sign Language (BSL).
- VI. Practice placement providers should carry out an audit of all placement facilities from the point of view of the disabled student at least annually.** This ensures that information about accessibility of that placement is kept up to date for incoming students.
- VII. Placements for disabled students should be considered before those of non-disabled students.** This allows pre-placement planning to take place in a realistic time frame so that each party is aware of their responsibilities and the adjustments that may be required.
- VIII. No disabled student should start a placement without all support systems being in place at the beginning.** This disadvantages the student within the first few weeks and places them at an unfair disadvantage. Disabled students should not have to 'make do for a while'.
- IX. Academic institutions must provide all relevant information about disabled students to potential placement providers.** This recommendation highlights the importance of communication between the academic department and the placement. However, confidentiality and student wishes must be balanced against a 'need to know'.
- X. Practice placement providers should undergo disability equality training.** This training is to be distinguished from 'Disability Awareness training' which relies on 'what it is like' to have an impairment. This approach adopts an individual model approach to disability. Disability Equality Training (DET) enables trainees to see disability as a social construct (the social model approach) (see anonymous, 1999).

Within the literature, the experiences of disabled students on social work programmes are reported. For example, George (1994) highlights the needs of social work employees with a disability and notes that, "Disabled social workers' experiences range from good to very ugly, though problems with training and practice placements are commonplace". Pang (1994) relates her experience of social work training as a black female wheelchair user. She stresses that a lack of pre-placement planning may prolong the course for disabled students:

"They were ill prepared for a disabled student. My disability was misrepresented by social work practitioners, with whom I was about to work. The conflicts which ensued, I felt had resulted from blatant disablist discrimination on the part of these social workers. Alternative placements had then to be found, which proved difficult. Delays that would not normally have arisen resulted in an extension to the course by an extra academic year, which was not financial (*sic*) supported by a grant." (1994: 92)

Winchester (2000) recounts the experiences of two students. She notes that training can be arguably more arduous whilst students are also managing the effects of disabilities. Echoing Pang (1994), one interviewee said:

"It was absolutely hopeless, dreadful. There were no facilities for disabled people, no one knew I was coming, no one was prepared for me to be there." (2000: 26)

More recently, Harris (2002) reported in-depth interviews with four second-year disabled social work students about their placement experiences. Students drew attention to a lack of transparency in the placement allocation process, insensitivity and lack of awareness (particularly with regard to dyslexia) among staff. Harris (2002) concludes:

"As Student A's experience reflects, there is a danger that students with dyslexia may have their difficulties overlooked or trivialised by practice teachers. Whilst practice teachers, like most of the general population, may not be familiar with dyslexia...Practice teachers would be better equipped to address the issue sensitively if the student's individual learning needs were discussed at the Working Agreement. It might also be appropriate to devote one of the practice teachers' workshops to the subject." (2002: 7)

Similarly, Campbell and Cowe (1998) point to the lack of awareness among practice assessors/teachers working with students with dyslexia:

“As a practice teacher operating within the culture of the written word, it may be tempting to start from a position that says that if a social work student cannot deal with the written word as required by the agency, then s/he cannot demonstrate the full range of competences and so cannot operate as a fully functioning social worker. However, such a position denies all the other qualities and skills that such students may bring and anyway, which of us, with or without dyslexia, is a fully rounded social worker in all respects? We all have areas of our practice that we have to (or should) grapple with. Is it just that an ability to use the written word is more visible than some others that may be equally or more important?”
(1998: 23)

2.10: Accessibility

Winchester (2000) quotes the Head of Development, Promotion and Quality Assurance Manager for CCETSW who notes the tendency for issues of accessibility to be defined purely in terms of physical access:

“Lots of courses and colleges advertise themselves as accessible...but in practice most are not. I think they find building ramps for wheelchairs relatively straightforward, but they haven’t got round to dealing with other disabilities.” (Winchester, 2000)

In a survey of placement opportunities in one area, Gaulton and Cullen (2001; 2002) suggest that placement agencies may regard reasonable adjustment as comprising changes to a physical environment:

“For instance, a common response concerned the availability of disabled access toilets in adapted buildings. This seems to reveal some of the personal perceptions of disability that exist, and suggests that for some, disability needs to be seen in order to have a profile...agencies tended to be more straightforward when answering questions relating to the physical environment of the agency.” (2002: 9)

Keetch (1998) reports that students with unseen disabilities felt isolated and thought that they were being viewed with suspicion by staff and students:

“This reinforces the view of some disabled students that staff need to be made aware of individuals’ circumstances and needs so that negative attitudes and assumptions can be avoided.” (1998:12)

2.11: 'Fitness to practice' in social work

For students on professional education courses, a declaration has to be made by the educators within that profession that a student has demonstrated that they are 'fit' to practice, usually in accordance with the guidance laid down by the profession's regulatory body. In social work, the regulatory body, The General Social Care Council (GSCC) is relatively new compared with those of older professions such as Law and Medicine. The GSCC was established in order to promote higher standards of care and public protection by registering the social care workforce. The legal basis is provided by sections 56 to 61 of the Care Standards Act 2000. This requires the GSCC to establish a register, and to check that applicants are of good character; physically and mentally fit to perform the relevant work; and have completed recognised training.

The GSCC has no specific policy regarding disabled students and no across-the-board definition of 'fit to practice'. In its advice to students it states, "The health requirement is not a bar to registering for people with disabilities." (2004, GSCC website, www.gsc.org.uk/care_students.htm). Decisions are made on a case-by-case basis. Where there have been concerns, universities have been advised to consult employers, since the employers are responsible for accepting students on practice placements, and subsequently for employing graduates. To receive GSCC accreditation, social work programmes must sign a 'Statement of Agreement' in which they accept a number of statements. Included within these are points that have potential implications for disabled students. For example, programmes should select candidates who are literate and numerate and carry out criminal conviction and health checks on applicants (GSCC, 2002c: 21).

However, the GSCC also requires universities to:

- **Provide for flexible access to the degree, and make public any systems for the accreditation of learning before entry**
- **Use broad access and recruitment policies which make sure that they select students from all sections of the community**
(ibid: 21)

Elsewhere, this document states that programme providers are expected to "prevent unjustifiable discrimination and disadvantage in all aspects of their work that we regulate." (GSCC, 2002c: 10).

In matters of registration, if an applicant declares a health condition, the Council considers whether this is 'relevant'. Examples of relevant conditions include:

- **Conditions which cause seizures, such as epilepsy**
- **Conditions that could result in short term memory loss or lapses in memory**
- **Serious communicable diseases, such as hepatitis B, hepatitis C and HIV**
- **Mental ill health such as serious depression**
- **Substance dependence, including substance dependence which is being treated**
- **Treatment or medication for a condition which results in short-term memory loss or lapses in memory.**
(GSCC, 2003b)

Where there is doubt about an individual's 'fitness to practice', the GSCC may appoint a medical adviser and seek their input. This procedure has been outlined in the Council's '*Guidance for General Social Care Council appointed Medical Advisers*' (2003b). A medical report is obtained and the applicant is invited to provide more information surrounding the nature of their condition such as:

- **Whether their condition has affected their performance in either their current or previous employment**
- **Whether they consider the medical reports are a true representation of their ability to meet the registration criteria**
- **Any action already taken by their employer in respect of their health**
- **Any change in circumstances since they submitted the application form**
- **Anything else they consider to be relevant for the Committee to make a decision** (2003b: 2)

The guidance also makes explicit the action the GSCC will take if it decides an individual is 'unfit'. For example, he or she will be refused registration or have conditions imposed upon his or her practice:

“The Registration Committee will propose that the Applicant is refused registration when it considers that the Applicant poses a medium to high risk to the public, which cannot be addressed by the imposition of conditions in accordance with policy. It will propose that the Applicant is not registered when there is evidence that the Applicant poses a risk to the public through lack of insight into their condition for example, due to profound personality disorder.” (2003b: 3-4)

“If the Committee decides to grant the application but impose conditions in cases where a health declaration is considered to be relevant, the condition will have specific wording in accordance with policy: “You shall work within reasonable bounds relating to your health, and inform your employer or any prospective employer about your health condition if it is relevant or will be relevant to your work”. (2003b: 3)

2.12: Fitness to Practice, the ‘climate of concern’ and disclosure of disability

In his analysis of student disclosure strategies, Rocco (2001) notes that one reason for fear of disclosure may be the risk that “once the instructor receives the disclosure, he or she will simply deny access to the program on the premise that the disabled person will not fit in or cannot do the work, or is not capable by virtue of the disability.” (2001: 11). In contrast, Manthorpe and Stanley (1999) found that this concern was also reflected in responses of staff who evinced some understanding of students’ reluctance to seek help:

“Students’ concern that by making an appointment with a counsellor, this would be something that could count against them as nursing students. A feeling that they should be able to cope without this help/support, because they are training to be a nurse (lecturer in nursing).” (1999: 360)

The mental health of students in caring professions attracts particular attention because of the potential impact on others. It is widely acknowledged that there has been a rise in reported mental health problems among students (Rana *et al*, 1999) and that also that the stigma associated with mental health problems is a disincentive to seeking help:

“...the stigma and fear still attached to mental illness...leads to failure of disclosure by both the sufferers and those around them; fear of mental illness also prevents some individuals from acknowledging problems and seeking appropriate help.”
(Rana *et al*, 1999: 1)

Fear of being judged unfit to practice is one reason for reluctance to disclose. Other reasons can include an unwillingness to assume disability identity. For example, according to Maudsley and Rose (2003), “They might feel embarrassed to mention it. Or they might...quite simply believe that it will not have an effect on their learning.” (page 10). Maudsley and Rose (2003) also observe that, “it is important to realise that many students (for example, those with dyslexia, a medical condition or a mental health difficulty) will not see themselves as having a ‘disability’” (ibid). There may also be a sense in which the information is considered ‘private’. Rocco (2001) notes that:

“Several factors weigh in the disabled person’s decision whether or not to disclose. These factors include weighing the positive and negative reactions of others, determining the value of the disclosure to the relationship, reducing uncertainty and tension and the value of the accommodation against the risk of a negative or non-responsive reaction. Some reasons a disabled person might not disclose are a concern for right to privacy, fear of the other person’s reaction and fear of discrimination. The right to privacy includes the right to self-identify as a disabled person or not.”
(page 11)

A recent US study (Dalgin and Gilbride, 2003) examining disclosure of psychiatric problems to employers also found that ‘disability identity’ played a large part in decisions to disclose:

“The fact that the definition of the term “disability” will vary with each person and context is a vital issue. It presents the question: why would someone talk to an employer about a psychiatric label if they didn’t consider themselves to have a disability? They don’t consider themselves to have a disability; therefore they don’t need accommodations ...hence what would be the purpose of disclosure?” (Dalgin and Gilbride, 2003: 307)

They also note how disclosure could result in changes in their experience of work:

“The participants in this study described their concerns about the way disclosing to an employer could result in a change in: supervision (being more closely monitored); isolation from co-workers; termination; not being hired at all; lack of opportunity for advancement; and a need to work harder than others to prove one’s worth. Every participant mentioned this issue during the focus group and interviews.” (2003: 308)

Other research into disclosure of mental health in the workplace also sheds light on disclosure decisions. A report from the Mental Health Foundation (MHF) (2002), *‘Out At Work’*, shows that revealing a mental health diagnosis to an employer is still a complex issue and can leave people feeling discriminated against. In an earlier study, Scambler and Hopkins (1986) report evidence that individuals denied themselves promotion through fear of disability disclosure:

“Not only were nearly three-quarters of those in full-time work when we interviewed intermittently on guard against possible exposure, but some had also denied themselves opportunities of career advancement because they thought promotion would increase the personal cost of exposure and hence the stress associated with information management.” (page 38)

These findings are significant for students on professional education courses. A student who discloses a mental health problem on admission to a social work programme is effectively revealing their condition to their future employer. Only one in three people in the MHF study (2002) felt comfortable about disclosing his/her experiences of mental health problems on application forms.

Williams and Healy (2001) offer an explanation of the dilemma experienced by individuals:

“Seeking help may result in a diagnosis, which in turn is a double-edged sword. The possibility of cure or alleviation appears possible and yet at the cost of disclosure and potential labelling and stigma. Many individuals may be as concerned about the social consequences of their condition or illness as they are about the clinical condition or prognosis itself.” (2001: 115)

Research into another potentially stigmatising condition, HIV/AIDS, reveals similar dilemmas and variations in disclosure strategies (Simoni *et al*, 1997; Attrill *et al*, 2001; Fesko, 2001).

2.13: The Clothier (1994) and Bullock Reports (1997)

A number of high profile cases, notably that of nurses Beverley Allitt and Amanda Jenkinson (reviewed in the Clothier Report [1994] and Bullock Report [1997] respectively), have contributed to a ‘climate of concern’ within the field of professional education (Rooke-Matthews and Lindow, 1998; Manthorpe and Stanley, 1999; Stanley *et al*, 2000). Barbara Salisbury, a nurse jailed for attempted murder of patients, is a more recent addition to this list (see <http://www.guardian.co.uk/crime/article/0,2763,1242551,00.html>). This climate is characterised by an increased scrutiny of entrants to the caring professions within the context of a loss of public confidence and an emphasis on high risk. Eight of the Clothier Report’s twelve recommendations argued for tougher screening procedures in admission to professional training - “the problems are not restricted to nursing. Our recommendations might usefully be applied to other professions which give access to patients” (Section 5.5.3). The subsequent Bullock Report (1997) recommended that these be extended to cover all health care professions. One particularly controversial recommendation from the Clothier Report (1997) was:

“Further consideration should be given to proposals that any nursing applicant with excessive absence through sickness, excessive use of counselling or medical facilities, or self-harming behaviour such as attempted suicide, self-laceration or eating disorder, should not be accepted for training until they have shown the ability to live without professional support and have been in stable employment for at least two years.” (1997: 84)

A recent DoH document, *Mental Health in the NHS* (2002a) acknowledges that this recommendation has caused problems for individuals and the profession:

“A further outcome of the Clothier Report has been the stigmatisation of people who have experienced or are experiencing mental health problems, leading to the use of inappropriate criteria to exclude people from employment and a reluctance on the part of NHS employees with mental health problems to disclose this information, where appropriate.” (2002a: 9)

This report established the principle that the ‘2 year rule’, stipulating that employees had to have been ‘free’ from treatment for this length of time, was no longer to be used in the NHS - “maintenance of treatment of a stable condition will not be a bar to recruitment and continued employment.” (2002a:12)

Despite this shift, examples of widespread stigma and discrimination against people with mental health problems undertaking professional education, working in care services and in employment more generally have proliferated (Rooke-Matthews and Lindow, 1998; Warner, 2002; MHF, 2002). Social exclusion is associated with all forms of disability. However, the highest levels of stigma and discrimination are evoked by mental health problems which carry a connotation of danger and violence (Sayce, 1999, Laurance, 2003).

Whilst social work guidance remains unclear, anxiety about the negative consequences of disclosure may persist for students. In the absence of disclosure, students may not be able to access the necessary support to function at their best and may risk being deemed ‘incompetent’. In 1999-2000, for example, only 4.5% of the 1.6 million students in higher education declared a mental health problem (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2003). The Royal College of Psychiatrist’s report, ‘*The Mental Health of Students in Higher Education*’ describes this figure as “a gross misrepresentation, reflecting a continuing reluctance to declare mental health disability.” (2003:15).

2.14: Legislation and guidance on disclosure

There is currently no legislation requiring students to disclose a disability (as opposed to, for example, the disclosure of a criminal offence). The DRC Code of Practice (2002) on SENDA 2001 states:

“For a responsible body to discriminate against someone by treating him or her less favourably because of a disability, it needs to know about the disability. If the responsible body did not know and could not have reasonably known that a person was disabled, then the disabled person has not been treated less favourably for a reason relating to the disability.” (2002, Section 4.17)

However, institutions or responsible bodies must have taken reasonable steps to find out about a person's disability in order to claim lack of knowledge concerning that disability. The government has produced guidance on good practice in identifying disability in the DfES publication, '*Finding Out about People's Disability: a good practice guide for further and higher education institutions*' (2002b). As this guidance makes clear:

"Institutions should note that when *one person* has been told in the institution then the institution could be deemed to know about a person's disability. *For example, if a student tells a tutor that she has to see a doctor and take medication on a regular basis and the tutor fails to pass that information on to a responsible person, the institution may not be able to claim that it did not know about the student's disability.*" (DfES, 2002b: 1, original emphasis)

However, regarding confidentiality, this publication states that:

"In some cases, a disabled student may have told someone in confidence at the institution that they have a disability. As the person will not be able to pass that information on to the relevant authorities, the institution would be able to argue in such cases that it could not reasonably have known that the person had a disability." (DfES, 2002b: 4)

This guidance notes that opportunities for disclosure need to be provided at times when it is important to ask a student to disclose his/her disability. Such occasions include:

- when registering for examinations
 - when arranging work placements and field trips
 - when requesting accommodation
 - when using the careers service for the first time
 - when joining the library
 - when registering at the beginning of each new year or module
- (DfES, 2002b: 2)

The guidance goes on to acknowledge:

"In some cases it may be obvious that students have disabilities, for example, because they are visible or because you can reasonably infer it from a conversation with the individual or their application. A responsible body does not formally have to be told that a disabled person or student requires a particular adjustment before making such an adjustment." (DfES, 2002b: 1)

The primary message from this guidance is that ample opportunities for disclosure need to be offered throughout a course of study. However, for most students the decision to disclose ultimately lies with the student concerned. They may still feel that disclosure involves a risk of discrimination, particularly

if that disability carries a perceived stigma. SKILL (2003b), in its advice to disabled students about whether to disclose their disability to an employer, advises that:

“There is no clear-cut answer as to whether you should tell an employer that you are disabled. You must use your own judgement.”
(SKILL, 2003b)

Social work students are given slightly less freedom of choice in this respect by the requirements of the accreditation of the new social work degrees for students to make a health declaration at the point of entry to programmes. Universities are free to decide the format of this declaration but they need to respond to any concerns which the health declaration may raise in relation to prospective students' suitability for training. The response may involve seeking medical advice or evidence. In the face of this procedure and the requirement to make a declaration, decisions about disclosure are more restricted from the students' perspective.

2.15: Health and Safety, risk and 'false excuses'

A recent DRC report (Kreel, 2003) acknowledges that “employers of managerial, professional and administrative workers are more likely to have health and safety concerns about people with mental health problems and learning disabilities than about people with physical impairments” (page 9). Health and safety requirements are often cited as a reason for not employing or accepting certain individuals on placements. Researching visually impaired students' experience of social work training, James and Thomas (1996) identify unwillingness on the part of practice teachers to take on visually impaired students, citing the risks for 'vulnerable' students who may be faced with aggressive service users. Even where practice teachers did agree to supervise such students, they still expressed anxieties regarding visually impaired students' capacity to spot evidence of abuse, such as bruises on a child's body. The social work practice teachers in James and Thomas's (1996) research also held assumptions about other disabilities:

“In the view of students, agencies were often quite dishonest in their refusal to take on a visually disabled person, citing fire regulations or the fear that they would be vulnerable to potentially violent or aggressive service users. Students felt strongly that the real problem lay in the view that visually disabled people simply could not 'do the job' and in, just as negatively, an unwillingness to let them try. These attitudes were to be found, more openly, in practice teachers.” (1996: 39)

They found that the scepticism on the part of practice teachers led to questions about the worker's ability to see child abuse in all its forms (the 'overlooked bruise'). Practice teachers in this study also expressed similar anxieties regarding work with people who were mentally ill. Walker (1999b) notes:

“A number of replies indicated that the agency would not allow a blind student to cover any aspects of child abuse work simply because of a lack of sight although a number would encourage co-working. Some replied that students should not be given potential child protection work irrespective of a disability and some questioned whether any long term work should be undertaken by students. Some agencies working with drug and substance abusers raised the problem of security, needle/syringe exchange etc. as a potential problem for blind students.” (1999b: 95-96)

Similar examples can be found in French’s (1993; 2004) studies of disabled professionals.

Recent work between the Health and Safety Executive and the Disability Rights Commission (DRC) (Exell, 2002; Hurstfield *et al*, 2003) into the extent of the use of health and safety requirements as an excuse for not employing disabled people also highlighted this issue:

“The surveys pointed to a widespread tendency on the part of the responding employers to identify the health and safety risk in terms of a risk to the individual applicant or employee. This may result in what the literature and case law reviews in this report have identified as paternalistic or excessively cautious approaches.”
(Hurstfield *et al*, 2003: 6)

2.16: Concluding comments

There is now a legal imperative to promote the inclusion of disabled students. This means enabling them to have fair access to professional education and training. However, evidence reveals a tension in social work education between widening access to disabled people and ensuring that they do not experience additional discrimination or stigma on the one hand and seemingly restrictive requirements to prove ‘fitness’ to practice on the other. Social work educators, as never before, are having to examine the ‘fitness’ of candidates. The personal experiences of disabled social work students confirms that some disabled students experience fears over disclosure, both physical and attitudinal barriers and lack of appropriate placement support. It is within this context that the PEdDS project was established. The project sought to further explore the barriers and opportunities for disabled students on placement by gathering the perspectives of students and professional staff.

SECTION 3 – THE PEdDS RESEARCH

3.1: Rationale

The purpose of the study was to explore the experiences of students with unseen disabilities undertaking social work placements in order to elicit best practice for these students. Some main themes were identified following an analysis of the literature. These themes informed the design of the research study which was intended to provide an evidence base for best practice in this field.

This project adopted a number of different methodologies including semi-structured face-to-face and telephone interviews (see Table 2) and collection of demographic data. The project was conceived as an exploratory qualitative study which sought to examine the experiences of disabled students and professionals within the context of professional education and placement learning. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the most appropriate and cost-effective method of capturing a range of different perspectives on the issues.

3.2: Participants

A volunteer sample was constructed comprising two key groups: disabled social work students and a range of professionals involved in working with and supporting disabled students in relation to practice learning; namely academic and practice staff and disability support staff.

The students participating in the study were either currently undertaking a full or part-time, undergraduate or postgraduate course leading to a professional qualification in social work, or had graduated in 2000. Students needed to have completed at least one practice learning experience (or be part-way through the first). The PEdDS team chose to focus on unseen disabilities in order to ensure that issues of physical access were not predominant and to allow opportunities to explore attitudes to, and expectations of, disabled students on placement in some depth as well as the issue of disclosure. The staff participating in the study were all involved in organising, monitoring and/or assessing practice learning opportunities for social work students or provided support to meet the needs of disabled students.

3.3: Recruitment of Sample

Interviewees were recruited through a number of different mechanisms. The majority were contacted through university social work departments and HEI disability support services. Twenty institutions across England were involved in the project in total. A number of other strategies were used to publicise the project, including accessing the project's advisory group networks, an article in *Community Care* (Manthorpe *et al*, 2003), information on web pages,

discussion rooms and email lists, (for example, Social Work Student.Com and Dis-Forum [www.jiscmail.ac.uk]). These approaches recruited a small number of informants (10% of total sample). Table 1 (below) outlines the relative success of the different recruitment methods for the student sample.

Table 1: Recruitment methods of the student sample (50)

Method of recruitment	Numbers successfully recruited
Mail shot with invitation to participate - letter and project flyer via Social Work Departments and Disability Services (10 institutions)	35 (70%)
Contacted project following article in <i>Community Care</i> 28 August – 3 September 2003	3 (6%)
Contacted via www.socialwork-student.com	4 (8%)
Other, for example, word of mouth	8 (16%)
TOTAL	50

Similar mechanisms were used to recruit from the three professional groups. At the HEIs involved, the placement co-ordinator for social work was invited to participate. We also asked placement co-ordinators to pass on details of the research to their practice assessor/teacher networks. This enabled the project to consult practice assessors/teachers from across different parts of England.

3.3: Issues of Consent and Ethics

This research was designed to be conducted in a manner that respected the people who participated in the process, and conformed to the general ethical conventions of social research (Haber, 1998). All project documentation, covering letters, demographic details form and interview schedules were submitted to the University of Hull's Faculty of Health and Social Care Executive for ethical approval prior to data collection. Information packs comprising a flyer and covering letter were prepared by the project team and student and staff contact details were added later by relevant academic departments and disability support services. This ensured that no contact details were made available to the project team without an individual's consent. Students and staff made direct contact with the project after seeing publicity material. All participants were asked to sign a formal consent form prior to the interview taking place (See Appendix Two).

3.4: Interviews

Semi-structured interview schedules were developed to explore a number of key themes identified from the literature (see Appendix Three). Interview schedules, comprising open questions, were developed for each of the stakeholder groups. The questions covered areas such as disclosure, experiences of support (positive and negative), rights and responsibilities, benefits and challenges. Further amendments to the schedule were made following consultation with the project's advisory group. The interview schedule was piloted with a small group to ensure readability, comprehensiveness and that the questions elicited appropriate responses.

Interviews were conducted by the project's research assistant between July 2003 and January 2004. Fifty interviews were completed with disabled students and 50 interviews were conducted with a range of professional and academic staff involved in placement support. As Table 2 shows, these included: 13 practice placement co-ordinators¹, 25 practice assessors/teachers and 12 disability support staff². Each interview lasted approximately 25 to 45 minutes and was tape-recorded. Following interviews, tapes were transcribed anonymously and all identifiers were removed, the tapes and transcripts were stored in a secure and locked location in accordance with data protection requirements. A number of interviews were conducted by telephone: 35 with students and 23 with professionals. In addition to this, demographic details were also collected from the participants.

Table 2: Interviewees and method of interview

Interviewees	Numbers interviewed	Method	
		Face to face	Telephone
Practice assessors/teachers	25	11	14
Placement co-ordinators	13	8	5
Disability support staff	12	8	4
Students	50	14	36

¹ Staff attached to social work programmes with responsibility for finding and placing students in practice learning opportunities have different titles at different institutions. For example, 'Practice Learning Facilitator' or 'Placement Finder'.

² Interviewees were asked broadly similar questions, with some questions specific to their role.

3.5: Data Analysis and Interpretation

The transcriptions were analysed using Nvivo 2.0; a software package designed to manage large amounts of qualitative data and to facilitate content analysis and the formation of theoretical categories. Qualitative content analysis using Nvivo was derived through two key means; identifying manifest content (whereby participants' actual words form concepts) and/or latent content (whereby concepts are derived from the interpretation of participant responses).

Some of the main analytical categories were already known since they formed the key concepts in the interview questions and had been identified in the literature. Five randomly selected transcripts were independently examined by two researchers to identify potential 'nodes'. These transcripts were then compared and a consensus of potential 'nodes' was established. The software was then used to search all sets of documents for text patterns, codes and other key terms. A preliminary analysis of the transcripts then took place and second-level coding was used to ascertain core themes within each key category. The 'spread function' was used to examine the text surrounding the nodes in more detail to ensure that the correct data was being captured. Irrelevant or random data was removed. All non-coded data was also examined. This enabled an additional check to the validity of the analysis.

SECTION 4 – STUDENT VIEWS AND EXPERIENCES

4.1: Disabled social work students: demographic details

The demographic profile of the student sample is given below:

Table 3: Demographics of student sample

<u>Age</u>			<u>Gender</u>			<u>Course</u>			<u>Ethnicity</u>		
23-32	12	(24%)	Male	13	(4%)	U/graduate	25	(50%)	White	42	(84%)
33-42	20	(40%)	Female	37	(26%)	P/graduate	25	(50%)	Mixed	2	(4%)
43-52	16	(32%)							Black	4	(8%)
53-57	2	(4%)							Asian	2	(4%)

Certain aspects of Table 3 are worth commenting on. Firstly, there are a greater number of females in our sample than males. This is consistent with national figures for admissions to social work programmes (Perry and Cree, 2003). Secondly, the ages of our sample are older than might be expected in a 'typical' student sample – that is, students who may have just left college and come to university at age eighteen. There are two main reasons for this trend. First, for the former social work award, the lower age limit for entering practice with the DipSW was twenty-two years old. (This limit has since been abolished). Secondly, social work is seen as a profession and training that values life experience and thus has tended to attract older candidates. Equal numbers of postgraduate and undergraduate students were involved in the study.

Overall, comparing Table 3 and Table 4 indicates that our sample is comparative with the national population of social work students in terms of age profile.

Table 4: Successful applicants to social work courses in England by age, 2000-2003 entry³

AGE	2003 entry		2002 entry		2001 entry		2000 entry	
20-25	710	(35%)	669	(28%)	676	(29%)	629	(26%)
25-35	677	(34%)	870	(36%)	901	(38%)	1053	(43%)
35-45	474	(24%)	660	(28%)	617	(26%)	636	(26%)
Over 45	151	(7%)	198	(8%)	160	(7%)	146	(5%)
Total	2012		2397		2354		2464	

³ Figures obtained from SWAS

4.2: Classification of disability type

In classifying the unseen disabilities of student respondents, the classification of disability type used by UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) and SWAS (Social Work Admissions Service) was employed. These application forms categorise disabilities as follows:

- Specific Learning difficulty
- Medical condition
- Mobility difficulty
- Mental health
- Autistic spectrum disorder
- Deaf/hearing impaired
- Blind/visually impaired
- Two or more of the above
- Unseen disability

Figure 1 provides a visual representation of our student sample by their declared disability. All students interviewed defined themselves as having an 'unseen disability' as this was the main criterion for inclusion in the study, while the other was having completed at least one placement.

Figure 1: Graph of the disabilities declared by PEEdS student research participants

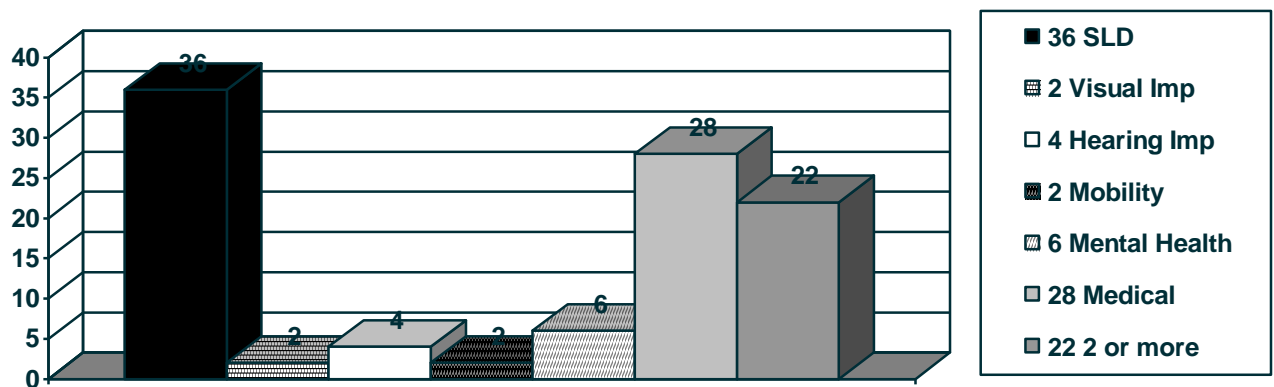


Figure 1. Type of Disability (in percent)

Specific Learning Difficulties was by far the largest category – all of these students reported being diagnosed with dyslexia. Some students also reported difficulties with numbers but did not have an 'official' diagnosis of dyscalculia. Medical conditions represented the second largest group and included conditions such as epilepsy, diabetes, respiratory difficulties (for example, asthma) and heart conditions. However, there is the potential here for these conditions to also be included in the category of 'unseen disabilities'. The number of students with mental health difficulties in our sample was small. It is well documented that few students report mental health conditions (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2003) and perhaps this reluctance to disclose mental ill health is represented in the small numbers in our sample. Anecdotal evidence gathered from talking to staff and other students on social work programmes suggests that the numbers are often higher than is reflected in

our sample. There were no students in our sample who identified themselves with an autistic spectrum disorder.

The SWAS statistics in Table 5 show that the national figures of disabled social work students who have declared a disability have some similarity to the breakdown of our sample with dyslexia emerging as the largest declared group.

Table 5: Frequencies (no.s) of type of declared disability in the student social work population, 2000-2003 entries⁴

Disability	2002	2001	2000
Dyslexia	48	46	43
Blind/partial sight	4	5	3
Deaf/partial hearing	6	9	8
Wheelchair/mobility	9	8	9
Personal care	0	0	0
Mental Health	5	3	6
Unseen disability	34	20	25
Multiple disabilities	7	3	4
Other disability	23	24	15

For 2003, the SWAS figures for disability are categorised slightly differently but students with learning disabilities are again the most sizable group:

Table 6: Frequencies (no.s) of type of declared disability in the social work student population, 2003 entry⁵

Disability	2003
Learning Disability	49
Blind/partial sight	5
Deaf/partial hearing	9
Wheelchair/mobility	11
Mental Health	0
Unseen disability	6
Multiple disability	15
Other disability	3
Autistic disorder	19

⁴ Figures published by SWAS 2000-2003

⁵ Figures published by SWAS 2003

As from 2003, dyslexia became 'Learning disability' (presumably 'specific learning difficulty'), the category of 'personal care' was removed and a new category of 'autistic disorder' was added. The changing categories makes it difficult to identify successfully any meaningful trends over the years.

There are no records of students in 2003 entry declaring a mental health disability; this could be explained in two ways:

- a) a reluctance by any students to disclose mental health problems
- b) students with mental health problems may have ticked the box marked 'unseen' disability. In comparison with the mental health category, there are a large number (nineteen) of students declaring 'autistic spectrum disorder'.

Within social work programmes in England, there also appears to be variation in the numbers of disabled social work students. A survey of seven of the higher education institutions that participated in the PEEdS project showed considerable variability, as shown in Table 7 below:

Table 7: Numbers of social work students at anonymised institutions and the numbers of those students registered with Disability Services at that institution

INSTITUTION	NUMBERS ON PROGRAMMES	NUMBERS REG. WITH DIS SERVICES	%
A	238	50	21
B	195	33	17
C	108	5	4.5
D	84	9	11
E	205	41	20
F	569	55	9.5
G	54	4	7

The table shows the numbers of social work students who were formally registered with the disability service at their HEI in 2004. The figures do not reflect the real numbers because there may be many disabled students on social work programmes who chose not to disclose to the course or disability service or indeed, the students may not be aware that they have a disability. Figures suggest both variations in numbers between programmes and variations in students' readiness to disclose disabilities to student services.

4.3: Interpreting and Using the Data

A social work placement can be a daunting and difficult experience for disabled and non-disabled students alike (Parker, 2004), arguably even more so on a first placement as this is often a student's first exposure to the world of 'real' social work. A certain amount of isolation can occur on a placement and may be magnified if that student experiences barriers, both attitudinal and environmental. Some disabled students attributed negative experiences to their interactions with their university rather than the placement and this data did not form part of the final analysis in order to retain our focus on practice placement experiences. The words of the students are used to illustrate the issues and themes but their contributions have been anonymised. We have not identified the student's specific declared disability but rather have used the broad UCAS categories listed under Section 4.2. The terms such as 'student with a medical condition' are not entirely satisfactory, but such descriptions contribute to the anonymity of interviewees.

4.4: Disclosure: factors and fears influencing students' disclosure decisions

The literature review highlighted the importance of disclosure for disabled students. Disclosure decisions and dilemmas were therefore addressed in interviews with students and professionals. All students in the sample had declared their disability at some stage to the programme and to the placement but still experienced disclosure dilemmas. It was evident that students applying to and being accepted onto courses struggle with who, whether and what to tell others about their disability. We found some consistent factors influencing students' disclosure strategies:

a) Fear of discrimination or stigma following disclosure

Students frequently reported feeling anxious about other people's reactions following a disclosure:

"I mean I am sort of slightly concerned about what people's reaction would be in terms of - you don't quite know who's going to be looking at the form and what kind of preconceptions and prejudices they're gonna have."

(Student with a specific learning difficulty)

This was particularly evident among the six participants who had a history of mental health problems. One student interviewed here (with mental health difficulties) noted feeling shame and embarrassment coupled with fear of being deemed somehow incapable of completing the course:

“No I didn’t disclose to many people on placement, because of the nature of the depression I was quite ashamed of how I felt and I was worried it would impact on my studies and possibly have to leave the course or something to that effect so I didn’t. I informed my supervisor (in the placement) but I didn’t inform anybody else.”
(Student with a mental health difficulty)

Almost three-quarters of participants, (73%) reported concerns over disclosing to future employers (see Figure 5, Section 4.14). Many of these concerns related to fears of being considered less ‘employable’ than their non-disabled peers - the following statements are typical examples of the concerns expressed by most of these students:

“I am terrified of putting down on that form, ‘open heart surgery’. You would never prove it, but if there are two applicants and one is fit and well and one has an alien part and is on medication, even though I work as hard as anybody else, if not harder, I am frightened I might not get that opportunity.”
(Student with a medical condition)

“I always worry that if you put dyslexia on the form you may get put aside for somebody that's not.”
(Student with specific learning difficulty)

Some students felt that it was necessary to disclose to the placement area. Their reasons were various and included:

1) Health and safety reasons: eight students in our study felt their disclosure was necessary as they might become ill or have a seizure and require urgent medical attention. This was particularly evident in the case of students who classed themselves as having a medical condition such as epilepsy:

“It is not necessarily a comfortableness, it is a necessity for my own safety. Because I have problems it is imperative that people around me know.” (Student with a medical condition)

2) Access to support and adjustments: some students alluded to their initial fears of disclosure but once having disclosed, they had experienced the benefits of receiving services and support:

“In an ideal world the only thing that I’d have done different is that I’d have opened my mouth sooner.”
(Student with a medical condition)

Linked to this was the perception that staff could not help them if they were not aware of the disability and that disclosure could ensure appropriate support and adjustments:

“You can’t expect people to support you in placement and to understand if they’re not aware. You’ve got to give people the information.” (Student with a specific learning difficulty)

3) Disclosure as being ‘fair’: two students described the disclosure of a disability as being ‘fair’ towards colleagues or the institution. This concept of fairness was linked to the idea that a social work trainee should be honest and open, qualities and values perceived as valuable for a student on a professional education course. These students felt that failure to disclose could be seen as being deliberately deceptive or deceitful, thus identifying another benefit of disclosure:

“Yes, I think it’s only fair if you’re going to be honest and open and expect to be assessed fairly I think you’ve got to be reasonably open about it.” (Student with an unseen mobility problem)

Some students considered that they should not have to disclose to the placement area as they had already disclosed to the university and felt that this issue had already been addressed. This raises a question over communication between the HEI and the placement: when students disclose to the university are they also disclosing to the placement? These students felt that programmes need to be clear with students about what happens to information about their disability once a disclosure is made. Three students stated that, as they had made a disclosure to the university, they didn’t feel it was their responsibility to make a separate disclosure to the placement. There was an assumption on their part that disclosure to the university be passed on to the placement. One student with a medical condition stated:

“...when I say I didn’t disclose (to the placement) it’s because as far as I’m aware the university knew everything about me, it’s there in black and white on paper and I would have thought everything would be transferred to my placement because everything else has, so why not that?”

This was in contrast to other students who did regard the placement and the university as two distinct entities and saw disclosure to either as a separate decision.

One student made the point that it was difficult for students to disclose to both programmes or placements when they did not know anybody:

“I think students find it difficult to say what their needs are, especially before they know anybody. It is humiliating.”
(Student with a specific learning difficulty)

However, others described themselves as confident in disclosing their disability to the placement. Three students were quite clear that they had no problem disclosing their disability and were pro-active in doing so. One student with multiple disabilities explained her feelings on this issue, attributing a growth in confidence to her experiences on the social work programme:

“Like I say, I don’t have a problem talking about it. I used to, but certainly since doing the course I don’t. I think because people are more understanding. I don’t know whether it is the nature of the work or the course or.... but my confidence has you know, got better, and doing the course and talking about it, you know, so when the placements came along I didn’t have any problems.”
(Student with multiple disabilities)

Prior experience of working in social care was often key in determining an individual’s confidence in relation to disclosure. Knowledge of individual staff in agencies in the local area could be particularly helpful – ‘fear of the unknown’ was reduced for these students as they had had the opportunity to ‘test out’ disclosure in a working social care environment.

Linked to disclosure behaviour is the concept of disability identity. Dalgin and Gilbride (2003) argue that disability identity plays a large part in the decision to disclose. A key theme arising from the interviews with students was how they constructed their identity as disabled people.

4.5: Disabled Identity as ‘Problem’/‘Burden’

Some of the students in the sample implicitly and explicitly referred to their disability as being problematic and expressed the opinion that the disability (and by definition they as people) was/were perceived as a burden by others, notably those involved in social work education. Five students referred explicitly to being made to feel like a burden or a problem. One student with an unseen mobility problem said:

“Well, if I complained about there not being anywhere to sit properly in the first one I did feel like I was just being a pain sort of thing.” (Student with a mobility difficulty)

Another added:

“Yes, I’m being made to feel like a troublemaker.”
(Student with a medical condition)

These students described how the behaviour of staff often re-enforced their feeling of being a burden. A student with a specific learning difficulty said:

“Well, it has actually been quite a disempowering position because one of the things that I found is that the administrators in the team would be very anti-me because they saw that I put more work on them.” (Student with a specific learning difficulty)

4.6: Disabled Identity as a 'label'

Ten students were concerned about being labelled 'disabled', one reported:

"I've had to come to terms with it, to be told I've got a specific learning difficulty made me feel like I've got Down's Syndrome...and I've cried and I've told myself I'm a failure and I've been through all that whilst on placement, you know."

(Student with a specific learning difficulty)

Another who had a medical condition said:

"I have always steered clear of it. It is around not wanting to be different. It is around trying to find any other way around other than trying to use that route. I suppose if I really had to I would but I don't want to be seen as different, I really don't. I want to be able to do this on equal terms as anybody else with allowances made."

The issue of labelling appeared to be particularly apparent for students with mental health difficulties. One student explained:

"I was very fearful of the label of having mental health problems and as I said, it took me a lot of courage; I knew that I had to tell someone. It took a lot of courage to tell my supervisor. One of my greatest fears was being told that I wouldn't be able to carry on the course because of the way that I felt. Yeah, it was difficult and I was very ashamed, that is probably why I have not told an awful lot of people."

Students with mental health difficulties also talked of the need to break down stigma by being open about their mental health problems:

"If it affects my work or I needed something then I suppose I'd have to think about mentioning it, but generally I guess I wouldn't but that's probably a lot to do with stigma. And part of me thinks I should be a lot more open about this because otherwise this stigma never stops."

Six of the students who participated explained that they rejected the label of 'disability' because they did not perceive that their condition had a sufficiently disabling effect on their lives or work to warrant it. One argued:

"I think the reason I don't use it as a label is because part of me would feel a bit of a fraud. I suppose that is my interpretation of disability, but having worked with people with disabilities you just think that I don't see myself in that category. Even when I am really ill I suppose I could say I am, but on the whole I don't like to put myself in that because in a way I feel that that is demeaning them."

(Student with two or more disabilities)

Another reported not feeling significantly 'disabled' in comparison with people that he/she had worked with:

"I didn't really want that label. And because I've worked with lots of very, very severely handicapped and disabled people when you think about the problems I have they don't even begin to compare. So it's about getting it into perspective and that's why I didn't consider that I had a disability because I've worked with so many people that their inability to do things really affects their lives so significantly I don't think mine does."

(Student with multiple disabilities)

4.7: Disabled Identity as a 'benefit'

All students interviewed felt that their experience of having a disability brought some benefits to their work. The most commonly reported benefit was greater empathy with service users:

"I guess an insider view which I have got; a greater empathy, understanding and knowledge because I have obviously developed a knowledge about epilepsy having it myself. I think having gone through experiences in the past myself of adjusting to that knowledge there is a self-understanding which is relevant to working in a Disabilities Team which brings another dimension to myself in dealing with other people with disabilities."

(Student with a medical condition)

Another student with a different medical condition argued:

"It's something that I am sensitive to because I have a disability so in other people I tend to be able to recognise - I feel anyway I do pick up on things that maybe somebody who hasn't got a first-hand experience of disability may not." (Student with a medical condition)

Another frequently identified benefit was the provision of an educative role for the placement agency and team which might then in turn benefit their work with service users:

"It gives them a chance to ask somebody who's been in that position, who isn't their client, a question that might then apply to their client or give them a better way of working."

(Student with a specific learning difficulty)

One student felt that her practice assessor/teacher and agency had felt educated by her. In her view, this had been accomplished with tact and without making her feel the centre of attention:

“She (practice assessor/teacher) did say at the beginning it would be a learning curve for all of us and so she feels that I have brought in a lot of lessons and shown a lot of things they hadn’t noticed....so they realised and noticed things, but they’ve not made it so obvious that you think, “Oh, I’ve made a fuss here”. They’re doing it in such a way that it’s been done nicely.”

(Student with multiple disabilities)

(It is worth noting that staff also expressed caution lest the student become the ‘disability resource’ in the placement – see Section 5.2).

One participant considered that the disability label increased opportunities for recognition and support from others. Thus, disclosure led to potential benefits in the form of appropriate support. This view contrasts with that of those students who felt that ‘labelling’ carried negative connotations and experiences:

“I think when you are categorised as disabled and it is a recognised disability, although it is a label, it does help people to understand more. Like if you have a disabled sticker on your car or whatever you are classified then I think that makes it somehow easier.”

(Student with multiple disabilities)

Four students specifically reported that being labelled ‘disabled’ had the potential to confer advantages in terms of opening access to courses and employment. A student with a medical condition said:

“I ticked the box on the application form around disability because it guaranteed me an interview, it fitted the criteria and I wasn’t sure they would interview me without that.”

This student had applied for a job in a mental health service where user-experience was valued and disclosure encouraged. When asked if she/he would have felt so confident disclosing to another employer, there was some doubt. A student with a medical condition noted how one might be able to use disability to one’s “advantage”:

“I don’t consider myself to be a person with a disability. Although as with many other people you kind of tend to use it to your advantage if you need to.” (Student with a medical condition)

Such an approach might demonstrate an emerging awareness on the part of students that some disabilities may not constitute barriers in terms of employment. However, such observations were noticeably absent from the students in the sample who had mental health difficulties or dyslexia.

4.8: Disability as ‘personal and private’ information

Students also talked candidly about their disability as being private and personal information:

“I feel in a sense it’s like bearing your soul, ‘cos it’s quite private. If it’s unseen it’s therefore private and so therefore only your husband, your children, your immediate friends and any employer or, you know, managerial staff know, wherever you are working. Other than that it’s private, it’s secret.”

(Student with a medical condition)

Two students referred to simply being embarrassed and were self-conscious about their condition, which had led to their disclosing as little as possible to as few people as possible:

“No, I have never been comfortable doing it. I know some dyslexic people are very comfortable and are almost proud of their dyslexia, but I am not. I find it very embarrassing.”

(Student with a specific learning difficulty)

Another student with a specific learning difficulty explained his/her unwillingness to draw attention to it, both through embarrassment but also because s/he did not want to be treated differently:

“I do feel quite self-conscious of it as well; I don’t want to draw that much attention to it. There are those issues going on.”

As Sapey *et al*,(2004) note, such students can feel reluctant to claim extra help because they wanted to be treated on an equal footing as everyone else and may feel this gives them an unfair advantage over other members of their cohort.

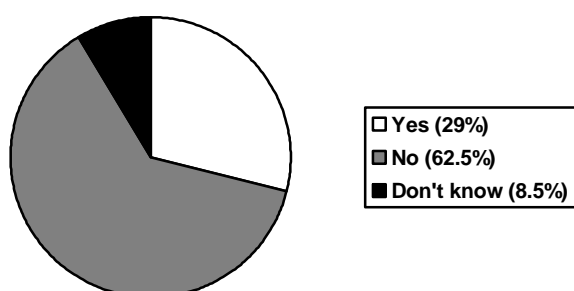
4.9: Placement choice

The majority of students (62.5%) in our study, as shown in Figure 2, felt that their choice of placements had not been affected by their disability. One reported:

“No, I think the focus was on finding a placement that suited my academic background and skills and not the disability.”

(Student with multiple disabilities)

Figure 2: Responses to the question, 'Do you feel as though your choice of placements has been limited as a result of your disability?'



Many students had themselves limited the choice of placements by stating certain criteria on their placement application forms, for example, wanting a placement with no stairs or one that did not involve heavy lifting.

One-third (29%) however reported that they felt their choice of placements had been limited in what they perceived as a negative way. For example, one said:

“Yes, I feel that my placement choices have been very limited as a direct result of my disability. I believe that many Social Services’ departments did not want me because they would have to ‘find room’ for my support team and my hearing guide dog and were not prepared to put up with the inconvenience.”

(Student with a visual impairment)

Another student with mental health difficulties felt strongly that they had a restricted choice of placements as it had been felt that they would be ‘safer’ in a ‘less-taxing’ placement and so was placed working with older service users.

Other students felt that their disability could affect their future choice of placements. One considered:

“I think that there might be a case where other practice teachers don’t understand the impact so, yes it could make a significant difference.” (Student with multiple disabilities)

4.10: Factors identified by students as contributing to positive experiences on placement

The analysis of students’ placement experiences identified perspectives on ‘what works’ and what they felt was helpful for them as disabled students on placement. It was clear that, although students differed in their personalities and experiences, there were certain common themes which were categorised as positive, negative and mixed aspects of support (see Figure 3, Section 4.12). Positive factors included:

a) Effective pre-placement planning

Pre-placement planning was identified as a key component of effective placement support by a number of students. A student with two or more disabilities talked about a pro-active practice assessor/teacher:

“He said, ‘once you know where you’re going then we need to have a meeting with you and your tutor and so we can discuss what you’ll need’. And that didn’t happen last time.”

Another student found that prior planning discussions and formal recording were beneficial:

“Prior to my placement I discussed the matter once or twice with my practice teacher. When I had a practice placement agreement meeting with my practice teacher, tutor and link worker I raised the subject there, made a formal record, and agreed that should any problems arise I would note it at the time and act appropriately. It is all in the open.” (Student with a medical condition)

b) An open-door ethos

Once a placement had been planned and had started, students found that a generally helpful and open-door ethos from individual staff was important. For many, simply the knowledge that support was available was significant. This was especially so for students whose conditions were variable, resulting in fluctuating levels of well-being. A student with mental health difficulties told us how she found the courage to disclose and the benefits of that disclosure and the ‘open door’ approach which ensued:

“At the beginning when I was feeling very down and very ashamed, I found it very difficult to tell her (practice assessor/teacher) but I was pleased I did and then I think I had phone calls every other week checking how I was and if I wanted to pop in; it was like an open door policy which we used.”

Another student attributed their continuation on the programme to the support from their placement co-ordinator:

“Without her (placement co-ordinator/tutor), I can tell you, I was going to walk away from this course on several occasions and without her I would have done.” (Student with a medical condition)

Others attributed support to placement staff more generally:

“My supervisor, the manager and the director were the type of people who had open doors. If you had a problem you would say it.” (Student with multiple disabilities)

These examples suggest that the nature of the staff-student relationship is a key factor for disabled students as for most students on placement. Where disabled students reported negative placement experiences this was often attributed to a poor relationship with a member of staff (either placement or academic) rather than to their disability, for example, “we just didn’t get on” or “I didn’t like her”.

c) Reasonable adjustments in place

Students’ positive experiences were also characterised by appropriate support or adjustments being put in place. These were often apparently simple modifications to the physical features of an office, things that were relatively cost-free yet having a substantial impact for that student:

“They’ve made sure that shelf space for me is at the right height so I am not bending you know, any of the other workers will pick up files or anything else that I can’t lift.”

(Student with an unseen mobility problem)

“I think with the first one it was the way they put themselves out to make sure that I had all the paperwork enlarged if I needed it and that was as much the admin staff as much as the practice teacher. It was the whole team which were really supportive.”

(Student with a visual impairment)

d) Monitoring need

Ongoing monitoring or ‘checking out’ and responding to changing needs was also valued. Supervision, both formal and informal, was often cited by students as the vehicle for this:

“It was just constantly checking out how was I feeling - are you alright? He (practice teacher) ran the computer, you know making a laptop available to me and stuff like that, giving me the space and not giving me grief when I was saying I was feeling a bit rough.”

(Student with a medical condition)

Monitoring may be particularly important for students with fluctuating conditions and to check that adjustments which have been put in place are effective:

“And my practice teacher’s been absolutely brilliant with it, she’s been really, really good and says to me, “is there anything we can change, or amend anything?” (Student with a mobility difficulty)

4.11: Factors identified by students as contributing to negative experiences on placement

As noted, students often attributed unsuccessful or unsatisfactory placements to the quality of personal relationships with social work staff. Students also referred to other problems in their lives, which made it difficult to establish whether negative experiences on placement were a consequence of how their disability was perceived or attributable to other factors. This also illustrates the variety of factors that go to make up 'the placement experience'. Students would talk of times when they were feeling generally overworked or stressed. As one student commented:

“I can honestly say that I was just put under great stress. So it’s hard to differentiate in a way the health thing from the placement quality, the placement, because the two were intermingled.”
(Student with a medical condition)

However, again consistent themes were reported by students about elements that characterised a 'negative' placement experience as a disabled student. These included:

a) Lack of flexibility by placement staff

It became clear that this was a particular factor noted by the majority of students who cited negative experiences. As a student with mental health difficulties noted:

“What I would’ve liked was probably more flexibility and I suppose for them to think about reasonable adjustments, rather than it seeming to be on my shoulders to ask for things. It would have been nice if things were offered, or whether there was a policy so that there was something written down that, ‘well these are what we could consider, come back to us when you’ve had a think about it’.”

b) No adjustments put in place

There was evidence of a perceived failure on the part of some placements and their staff (and HEIs) to make reasonable adjustments in preparation for a student arriving. This student felt that their needs had not been sufficiently taken into account and they were made to 'slot in' to a busy office:

“I mean we moved offices and nobody even sort of gave me any sort of idea about what the office would be arranged like, nobody gave me a choice of where would be best for me to sit and so consequently I was in an open plan office with eight others and the noise levels are very distracting for somebody with dyslexia.”
(Student with specific learning difficulties)

c) Unhelpful attitudes of staff and colleagues

Where reasonable adjustments had been made, problems did not necessarily cease. For example, one student with a specific learning difficulty perceived resentment from other members of an under-resourced placement team:

“My last placement I took in my computer and it did cause resentment between team members when I came in with this flash computer and they were struggling with this seven-year old machine that was breaking down all of the time because it was a particularly under-resourced team.”

A small number of students reported examples of discriminatory and/or unhelpful attitudes, comments and actions from placement staff, including non-social work qualified staff. Although few in number, such experiences suggest the need for awareness raising in relation to disabilities to extend to all staff in an agency. As one student with a hearing impairment explained, their practice assessor/teacher’s expression of surprise on the student’s successful completion of the placement may demonstrate prejudice concerning the student’s ability to do so:

“One of my practice teacher’s comments on her final report was ‘*** has passed this competence but I have no idea how’. I found the whole experience both frustrating and depressing and I had, at times, great difficulty in persuading myself to continue.”**

Students who felt that they had encountered negative and/or discriminatory attitudes and treatment, expressed shock that they could encounter this from staff and a profession committed to anti-discriminatory practice and inclusion:

“What did shock me was, considering the area of study that I’m in, how many people are so intolerant and so unaware of, you know, sort of disability, they’re not tuned in at all.”
(Student with a medical condition)

d) Lack of acknowledgement and understanding

A number of comments were made by participants describing what they considered to be a general lack of effective acknowledgement, understanding and awareness from placement staff (when students had disclosed and the staff were ‘aware’ of the student’s disability):

“I did explain all this (my health condition) to her (practice teacher) but it was like...I’m afraid it was falling on deaf ears.”
(Student with a medical condition)

“It also should have been advantageous to my colleagues at the centre to have first-hand experience of working with a person who has an unseen disability but all I met was ignorance and very little willingness to understand. I made an attempt to teach them to use 'finger-spelling' but I was very quickly 'put in my place'. The whole experience was very depressing and miserable for both my support team and myself.” (Student with a hearing impairment)

At its worst this could be experienced as disempowering and infantilising:

“...it was just everybody was being so helpful, wanting to do so much, making sure I had everything I needed, that the responsibility of saying, ‘oh I’d like this’, was taken away from me.”
(Student with a visual impairment)

f) Ignored

A number of students felt that their disability had been ignored and that they found themselves having to constantly remind placement staff. This was also difficult to accept, given the courage it may have taken to disclose in the first place:

“I felt that I had to remind them constantly that I had a disability; and trying to tell them what my disabilities were.”
(Student with a specific learning difficulty)

Some students suggested that this might have been because their disability was ‘unseen’: A student with a medical condition said:

“I have often felt that I would rather have an arm missing at times, because sometimes you find yourself having to explain why you are in hospital for three months when there is nothing wrong with you. So to have a physical disability that is visible, I have often thought would be easier. I don’t think people have an understanding of what all the unseen disabilities are about.”

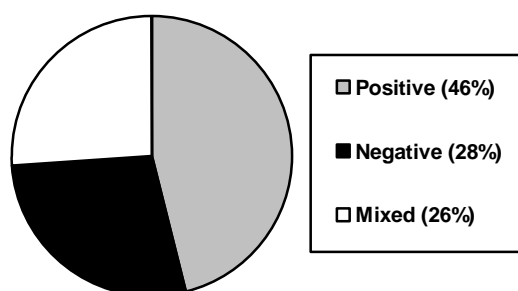
Students also reported examples of staff, once being aware of the disability, failing to respect the student’s confidentiality. Again, it can be argued that fear that confidentiality will be breached will inhibit a student’s willingness to disclose. One student with multiple disabilities recalled what she felt was a particularly humiliating experience:

“I was asked to do Hangman on the wall as one of the activities, there is no way as a dyslexic I could do that. I was very shown up and embarrassed. I tried to do it but I just couldn’t do it. I just had to say to one of the members of staff, ‘I can’t do it’. She said, ‘oh yeah, you are dyslexic, I forgot, sorry’. It was awful because it was in front of everybody in the whole room.”

4.12: The prevalence of positive and negative experiences of disabled social work students

Each transcript was analysed to establish whether disabled social work students had reported mainly negative, mainly positive or a mixture of both positive and negative experiences on placement. To 'qualify' as a mainly 'negative' experience, the interview contained three or more examples from the negative themes above. A similar approach was used to establish a positive experience. For 'mixed' experiences, transcripts were identified as including both positive and negative themes. As Figure 3 shows, nearly half (23) of the students in the sample had had generally positive experiences on placement. However, fourteen had placements that were experienced as predominantly negative and thirteen had had mixed experiences.

Figure 3: Students' positive and negative experiences on placement



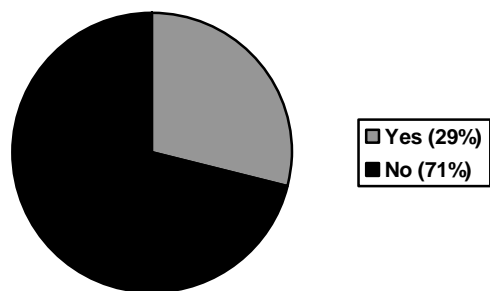
Transcripts were also examined to determine whether particular categories of disability were associated with negative, positive or mixed experiences. The impairments most commonly associated with stigma and discrimination are epilepsy, mental health problems and dyslexia. The largest declared disability among the student sample was dyslexia (24). Of these, eleven students referred to mainly positive experiences on placement. Nine referred to mainly negative experiences and four referred to mixed placement experiences.

Four students in the sample declared their disability as epilepsy. Of these, three declared mainly positive experiences with one having a mainly negative experience. Four students in the sample declared mental health problems. Of these, two reported mainly positive experiences and the other two had had mixed experiences.

4.13: Awareness of rights

Students were asked about the extent of their awareness regarding their rights and responsibilities as disabled students. Responses can be seen in Figure 4:

Figure 4: Responses to the question, 'Are you aware of your rights and responsibilities as a disabled student in Higher Education?'



The majority (71%) had no understanding of their rights and had not heard of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001. The remaining 29% had some awareness but this varied from an in-depth working knowledge of SENDA 2001, to a vague awareness concerning disability discrimination. There was also some uncertainty concerning which disabilities were covered and whether their condition was relevant under current legislation. For example:

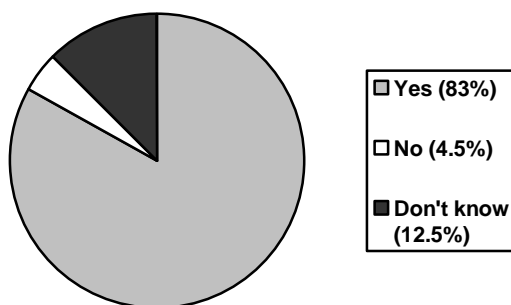
“So, I didn’t know a great deal and I think, I mean I’ve read bits of the Disability Discrimination Act and generally I’m not sure mental health is mentioned. A lot of the Act talks about disability and means physical.” (Student with a mental health difficulty)

It was difficult to establish how much this lack of knowledge in relation to rights affected their experiences on placement. It may be argued, however, that they would have been more proactive in seeking adjustments or redress for any perceived inequalities that they experienced had they been furnished with a better knowledge of SENDA 2001. Among those students who clearly were aware of their rights, there was evidence that they had been vocal and forthright in bringing matters to the attention of their departments. Again, these individuals tended to be older and more assertive. However, other students did not want to ‘rock the boat’ lest they gained reputations as nuisances and troublemakers. One student who was aware of the legislation considered that it gave protection to those who disclosed disabilities and felt comfortable about disclosing in the context of that legislation:

“Probably with the legislation, I would imagine employers are more aware of the legislation and more aware of unseen disabilities and I think more provision is made now in the work place. The Authority I work for is pretty hot really and I certainly wouldn’t have any qualms about disclosing it at all.” (Student with a medical condition)

Students were also asked to comment on whether social work staff would benefit from more training on supporting disabled students on placement (see Figure 5):

Figure 5: Responses to the question, ‘Do you think that social work staff need more training around supporting students with unseen disabilities on placement?’



The overwhelming majority (83%) considered that training for staff would be helpful but differed as to whether the training should be disability specific (many acknowledged the practical difficulties and risks of reductionism from this approach) or more general disability awareness training. Many expressed the view that disability training should be an integral part of the training for practice assessors/teachers. A number of students provided answers along the lines that extra training for staff ‘can’t be a bad thing’, while others based their responses on actual treatment they had received from staff.

4.14: Concerns about future employment

Practice placements offer disabled students a chance to rehearse for future employment. Students were asked whether they thought that their disability might impact on their future employment opportunities.

Figure 6: Responses to the question, 'When you finish your course are you concerned that your disability may affect your chances for employment?'

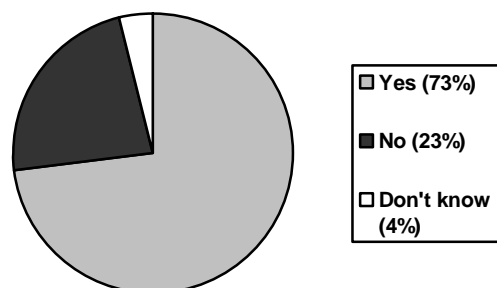


Figure 6 shows that 73% of the participants thought that their chances would be adversely affected. Their concerns included the likelihood of experiencing stigma, the fear of being considered a risk or a burden, and a concern that they would be seen as less 'attractive' to an employer than a non-disabled candidate. Many students stated that they would not disclose a disability on an application form and would wait until interview to mention it. One student with a medical condition commented:

“One of the things I’ve learnt about it over the last couple of years is when you go onto the internet and look at these *** websites they’re all doom and gloom sites because of the nature of the illness. The last thing I want an employer to do is say, ‘ ***** , what’s this?’ - have a quick look on the internet and get bombarded with all this information, because it’s on a continuum.”**

Those students who were not concerned about their employment prospects were the same people who felt their disability could be used to an advantage, for example, in securing interviews. Those who had been previously employed and who had had the opportunity to ‘test’ out the process of disclosure and the impact of their disability in an agency setting also did not express as many concerns as those who had not yet had this experience in social services settings. Students also considered that the responses of prospective employers were likely to vary according to the type of organisation. Generally, students anticipated that voluntary agencies would be more sympathetic than statutory ones:

“I am sure that I will only really be made welcome by voluntary agencies that supply services on behalf of social services and I also feel sure that a wide range of excuses will be made by any statutory organisation that I may apply to.”
(Student with a visual impairment)

SECTION 5 – STAFF VIEWS AND EXPERIENCES

Fifty members of staff were interviewed comprising three distinct professional groups:

- Placement co-ordinators (13) - academic staff with responsibility for arranging placements for social work students
- Practice assessors/teachers (25) - social work staff in agencies who teach student practice skills and assess their competence and fitness for practice
- Disability support staff in HEIs (12)

The breakdown of the staff group by gender, age and ethnicity is provided in Table 8.

Table 8: Age, gender and ethnic profile of staff consulted for the PEdDS project

<u>Age</u> *			<u>Gender</u>			<u>Ethnicity</u>		
23-32	5	(10%)	Male	10	(20%)	White	47	(94%)
33-42	10	(20%)	Female	40	(80%)	Mixed	1	(2%)
43-52	17	(34%)				Black	1	(2%)
53-57	12	(24%)				Asian	1	(2%)
57 +	5	(10%)						

* 2% (1 person) declined to provide age

**2% (1 person) declined to provide information on disability

The placement co-ordinators interviewed included social work programme staff with responsibility for arranging placements for social work students. This role can carry different titles for example, placement learning facilitator, practice placement facilitator or placement arranger. The role broadly involves liaison with social services departments' training and human resources sections and directly with smaller social work agencies and practice assessors/teachers. We have chosen to refer to the thirteen members of staff interviewed in this group as 'placement co-ordinators'.

Some areas in the country have established practice learning consortiums where practice assessors/teachers and co-ordinators meet to discuss placement availability and allocate students to placements. Often, co-ordinators will also be academic members of staff with teaching responsibilities and so may have a prior knowledge of students though their contact with them in lectures or personal supervision.

Twelve staff employed in disability support services at HEIs were also interviewed. Within such services, staff also have various titles and often different roles, for example, Disability Officer, Mental Health Co-ordinator and Dyslexia Adviser. We have used the generic term 'disability support staff' for this group. These staff were asked similar questions to the other two staff

groups but with questions specific to their role. Again, staff were invited to discuss examples of disabled students they had been involved with.

The largest professional group interviewed were practice assessors/ teachers (25). These are mainly qualified social work staff who are often (though not always) additionally qualified to teach and assess social work students after having completed the Practice Teaching Award. A range of staff from a variety of practice settings were interviewed. Most had had experience of supporting disabled students. A minority had not supervised students with diagnosed disabilities but had suspected that students were disabled. It became clear, following analysis, that the responses of staff with little or no experience of practice teaching/assessing a disabled student only differed from those that had in their ability to recall specific vignettes about certain students. Their responses, which described how they would react to a disabled social work student, did not differ substantially from those of practice assessors/teachers with relevant experience. We have selected the term practice assessor/teacher to refer to this group as the term encapsulates the dual task undertaken and reflects the shift in terminology within the social work profession.

All participating staff were asked to answer a core group of similar questions (experience of support, disclosure issues, knowledge of institutional policies/guidelines) as well as some questions unique to their role (for example, disability support staff were asked specifically about needs assessment). This was particularly the case for disability support staff who have a very different role from the academic staff, especially in arranging assessments of need. A knowledge of disability legislation and the broader issues facing disabled students was evident when interviewing disability support staff.

A number of broad themes was found across all three professional staff groups while some issues were unique to one particular staff group.

The staff data is reported under the following broad themes:

- disclosure and confidentiality – the dilemmas and benefits of early disclosure
- disabled students' skills
- assessment of need - disability support staff
- placement allocation for disabled students
- what 'works' in supporting disabled students
- challenges and barriers facing disabled students on placement
- institutional policies and guidance
- lack of communication
- fitness for social work practice
- further training
- shared responsibility

5.1: Disclosure and confidentiality

Fears and concerns about disclosure

It was evident from the literature, and from the student interviews reported in Section 4, that disclosure was an important decision for disabled social work students that involved both risks and benefits. Staff were aware that not all students disclose. Social work staff also spoke of occasions when they had worked with students in the past and had suspected that they might have a disability but the student had not disclosed. When asked about students they had arranged support for on placement, all the social work staff could recall certain examples but often qualified those with statements such as, 'Those are the one's I've *known* about'. Staff evinced an understanding of disclosure dilemmas, particularly the fear that disclosing will lead to students being judged not fit to practice. One member of staff with substantial experience of working with students from a variety of disciplines felt that, although social work was perhaps considered more 'understanding', such fears and concerns still exist:

"I mean in other areas, it's less of a case for social work actually, but another area would be teaching, where they might say, 'I don't want anybody to know because that might mean they won't let me be a teacher', and students actually think that's the case, or nursing or the health areas." (Disability support staff)

Another member of disability support staff from a different institution felt that this fear could be compounded by the nature of the disability, and suggested that students with conditions such as mental health and dyslexia experienced more reluctance to disclose:

"People are always less willing to disclose to placement providers or at least always ask the question, 'do you think it will affect my chances on placement?' and that is an attitude to disability in general I think, particularly students with mental health difficulties, but also dyslexia. I have had students who say, 'they think I am stupid'." (Disability support staff)

Staff also identified fear of failure and being considered 'unfit' for practice as primary student concerns, as well as being singled out and treated differently:

"That is the biggest fear ...they don't want to be seen as unable to cope by their colleagues. Some of them are wary about, 'what if I get on placement and I am not coping and they fail me?' The opposite of that is, 'what if I tell them and they start treating me like somebody different and making all sorts of allowances out of pity?' I think there is a whole process that goes on before they even go out onto placement." (Placement co-ordinator)

Staff recognised challenges to the student's self-identity, particularly when newly diagnosed with a disability. It was suggested that students first needed to resolve issues relating to their disabled identity before disclosing this information:

“People can be quite stressed when they find out because the whole of their self image is affected; when they realise that they are not the person they thought they were; that is one of the views, ‘I was a person who didn’t have dyslexia and now I have’ and this can be at the age of forty and the whole self-concept gets challenged. It is traumatic.” (Practice assessor/teacher)

Responsibility to disclose and benefits of disclosure

Placement co-ordinators and practice assessors/teachers shared the view that students had a responsibility to disclose. Disability support staff, however, were less likely to subscribe to this view. One practice assessor/teacher was clear that ‘letting people know’ was a professional obligation that distinguished students on professional training courses from other students on academic courses:

“We are training people to be professionally competent. If you are a professional practitioner employed by an agency you do have a responsibility to the agency and clients if you do have specific needs that may impact on other people or the office or clients. In my opinion that is being professionally honest which is different to doing a degree in, say, psychology.” (Practice assessor/teacher)

Disclosure was conceptualised as part of the process of professional development and entailed openness:

“...yes...this is what I argue with the students, it’s a professional relationship, it’s about trust and group work and honesty, treating people equally, yet you’re going to be withholding something that’s actually essential information about yourself.”
(Placement co-ordinator)

Others considered that they should be informed about a student's disability if it was going to have an impact on their work and service users, but perhaps the need to know was less urgent if disabilities were controlled or would not have an impact. This was linked to the idea that students must be fit to practice and should not pose a risk to service users (see Section 5.9):

“I think it is dependent on what it is. If people have diabetes, if they manage that themselves over a long period of time and are quite stable in their conditions then I am not sure that I would need to know about that.” (Practice assessor/teacher)

“If it could possibly affect their work then the agency needs to know. If it is mild and won’t affect their work...there may be mild disabilities which wouldn’t affect their work which we wouldn’t need to know about.” (Practice assessor/ teacher)

All staff consulted, while understanding students’ reluctance to disclose, felt that disclosure could bring benefits for the student. From their perspectives, early disclosure allowed for additional support to be offered from the outset:

“It is very helpful to me as a practice teacher if students do disclose that information and being able to do that thinking and planning and discussing in advance rather than confronting the situations as they arise.” (Practice assessor/ teacher)

Early planning also allowed possible adjustments to the placement to be explored. Staff described encouraging students to disclose so that such adjustments could be made:

“That is what we try to encourage students to do; to disclose so that we can put the support in place before the placement starts and then try to break down the myths and work out the adjustments.” (Disability support staff)

A number of interviewees also noted that failure to disclose might lead to a student’s disability not being taken into account and possible failure, based on erroneous assumptions about the student’s ability and competence on the placement:

“..if you haven’t disclosed to people on placement you can have people making assumptions about you as being to do with the level of education and intellectual ability.” (Placement co-ordinator)

“Something might come up related to the disability; they had not been able to fulfil the needs of the placement and then the practice teacher will probably fail them but if they realise that it is a disability they may be able to work with them.”
(Placement co-ordinator)

All of the staff interviewed described their institution, department or service as providing opportunities for students to discuss or disclose their support needs. The most frequently cited opportunity for disclosure was the placement application form that students are required to complete before the placement. These forms invariably have a section for ‘extra needs’, although how specific these forms are varies between HEIs. One participant referred to their departmental placement application form, suggesting a very pro-active response to disabled students:

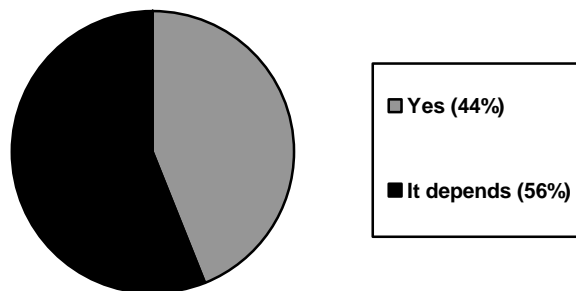
“There’s a section on the form where it asks if someone has any particular needs. ‘Are there any particular needs or circumstances you’d want taking into account when arranging a placement?’ And there’s a question, ‘If you require a Disability Access Survey please tick here’. (Placement co-ordinator)

Two placement co-ordinators also said that, as part of their selection procedure, ‘diagnostic essays’ were completed by the students which might identify students with dyslexia. These approaches of ‘finding out’ were combined with more frequently employed informal methods with staff letting students know that if they had anything they wanted to talk about regarding placements and their special needs then they could be approached – this is consistent with the ‘open door’ approach so valued by the students whose views are reported in Section 4 of this report.

Being aware in advance was a theme mentioned by a number of participants among the three groups of staff. Again, this was because it allowed time for sufficient planning. As Figure 7 shows, the importance of having sufficient time for planning for placements for disabled students was stressed by all three groups of professionals, but this view was particularly widespread amongst the practice assessors/teachers. Amongst the 25 practice assessors/teachers consulted there was a consensus that having a student with a disability entailed more work for them, although the extent of this work often depended on the type of disability:

“I would be sorry I didn’t know about it and I possibly would wonder why it hadn’t been disclosed earlier. I would always say as much information or advice that you have at the beginning the better.” (Practice assessor/ teacher)

Figure 7: Do you think that having a disabled student on placement entails more work for yourself? (Practice assessors/teachers)



As Figure 7 shows, the majority of practice assessors/teachers indicated that this often depended on certain factors, for example, whether the student had even disclosed their disability in the first place:

“If they don’t tell you it won’t involve any work at all. If they do tell you it would depend on how they are coping with the disability, the extent of the disability and I guess the type of placement.”

(Practice assessor/teacher)

The type of disability involved and the extent of a student’s additional support needs were also relevant:

“I think it depends. It depends on the impact of the disability on the student’s ability to manage the placement. Some students manage the impact of the disability as part of their overall presentation and so it’s not that noticeable. Others do demand extra work in terms of extra time to go through work with them or use a particular model that they perhaps come with in terms of their learning contract.”

(Practice assessor/ teacher)

For the practice assessors/teachers who agreed that it did entail extra work, most responses about the type of extra work involved fell into two broad categories:

1) More time was required in the preparation for a placement:

“..so there’s all that sort of planning and there’s planning for equipment, there’s planning for supervision, there’s planning for sort of teams, talking to teams about how we need to manage a placement.” (Practice assessor/teacher)

“There is certainly time; extra time to discuss. Space; extra space to reflect on what they are doing and making sure that other members of the team - because as a practice teacher you don’t do everything on your own - making sure other members of the team have access to information that the student wants them to have access to, to ensure that the placement runs smoothly really.” (Practice assessor/teacher)

2) More time was likely to be spent ‘checking’ the output of a student, for example, with a specific learning difficulty such as dyslexia:

“If it was a piece of work such as a court report, I would expect to check it thoroughly and I wouldn’t expect it to be perfect first time. I would expect that anyway but I may expect to put a bit more time in if the person had dyslexia. It would depend on what it is like because people without dyslexia can turn in poor reports as well.”

(Practice assessor/ teacher)

“I think it did put an extra strain on the team because she needed extra support and we didn’t have an extra worker to do that; it was all within our own time. The admin staff were very supportive to her but I was concerned with her Care Manager that that was putting more stress on them.” (Practice assessor/teacher)

Practice assessors/teachers also highlighted often an additional general support role which might involve “emotional labour” on their part:

“I can think of one person who did have mental health needs and the responsibility lay with me to ensure that I wasn’t putting too much pressure on that person by insisting on deadlines and so on. There had to be a degree of flexibility, which having been an approved social worker for many, many years it wasn’t a problem for me, but clearly I had to work a bit harder.”

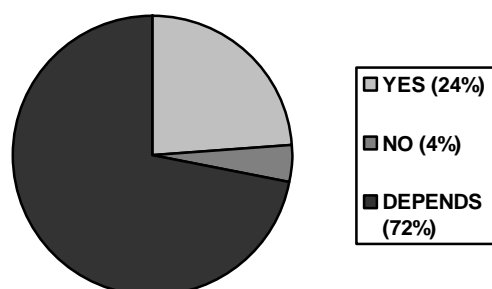
(Practice assessor/teacher)

For another this was increased because of inexperience:

“Really it was my first student so I was struggling trying to get my head around the curriculum and the role of the practice teacher. I think if I was a more experienced practice teacher I probably would have gained from the difference but because it was my first student I found it quite stressful.” (Practice assessor/ teacher)

Practice assessors/ teachers were asked whether they felt they should be informed about a student’s unseen disability. Their responses are shown in Figure 8.

Figure 8: Do you think that you should be informed about a student’s unseen disability?



The high number of ‘it depends’ responses were linked to the impact of a disability on the student’s ability to complete the placement successfully and safely:

Confidentiality

Linked to the issue of disclosure is the question of what then happens to that information and who, if anyone, is informed following disclosure. Indeed, it can be argued that disclosure is made more likely if students are fully aware of what happens to the information. Students’ fears about disclosure appeared to be linked to a sense of having little control over the information once it had been disclosed. Disability support staff were clear that the decision to disclose should remain with the student.

Only a minority of the disability support staff interviewed agreed that the placement should automatically be informed about a student's disability without their consent if, for example, there were risks to clients or the student:

“It depends on the student; whether they consent to that or not, because we have a policy of confidentiality and it is up to them whether they want to declare or not. If they declare to us then we ask for the consent to liaise with other people within the university, but apart from applying for Disabled Student Allowance we don't liaise with anybody outside without the student's permission. It would depend on the student. Some do prefer not to say anything and to keep it confidential.” (Disability support staff)

“I think the individual should be responsible for informing the placement. And it's entirely up to them whether they wish to disclose their disability.” (Disability support staff)

Nine responses from disability support staff fell into an 'it depends' category. For example:

“Ideally the climate would be that you wouldn't have to disclose; you know, when you're a vegetarian, you don't have to say. At this point in time I think that the procedures only work if a student discloses and then is able to make sure that the support is available. Not everyone knows the working teams and not everyone's attitude is desirable. At this point in time I think that it is important that they do.” (Disability support staff)

A higher number of practice assessors/teachers felt that they should be informed about a student's disability. Again, this was linked to the issue of duty of care, discussed in Section 5.9. However, practice assessors/teachers did demonstrate an awareness of the importance of respecting students' wishes for confidentiality within the placement setting:

“As long as one person in the team is aware what the issue is we can speak up for the student if we need to, with the student's permission. It is the issue of confidentiality which becomes a real blurred issue. As long as one person can say that this student has personal issues or whatever; as long as one person is aware.”
(Practice assessor/ teacher)

“The agreement we came to was, well there were various things, one was around confidentiality and how he wanted knowledge about his disability to be handled and we agreed that he would choose if and when we shared information about the fact the student has epilepsy with team members.”
(Practice assessor/teacher)

One practice assessor/teacher recalled how he/she and the student took the decision to keep the information about her disability between them:

“My reaction was to support her and not discuss it with anyone else because it took her a long time to confide in me and I knew there was something going on because I knew she wasn’t eating, but it wasn’t my place to tackle it and she confided in me and I saw that as a big confidence and I worked with her and provided information and tried to support her.” (Practice assessor/ teacher)

Confidentiality was also explored with placement co-ordinators who also appeared aware of the importance of confidentiality and of obtaining the student’s consent:

“I don’t think I’d ever go to a personal supervisor, or an agency, or a practice teacher without the student knowing what I was doing, because that’s the thing we’re always saying to students about, ‘well you need to be open and honest about your unseen disability’, and I feel that should be there as well and the students need to know that their confidence will be maintained and also where that confidentiality can’t be maintained.” (Placement co-ordinator)

We asked placement co-ordinators if they felt that a placement should be informed about a student’s unseen disability. Four of the thirteen placement co-ordinators interviewed felt that a placement should be informed as they considered such information could reduce the student’s chance of being judged ‘not competent’:

“Yes, because it can lead to problems and misunderstandings but I don’t think you can do it without the student wanting them to know. All you can do is work for the student and say, ‘if it isn’t discussed and you’re having problems it might be put down to you not being competent rather than you needing extra help and support’.”
(Placement co-ordinator)

Most placement co-ordinators (8) felt that the question of informing a placement of a student’s disability should be determined by the perceived impact that the disability had on a student and their ‘safety’ in practice. This placement co-ordinator felt that information should be communicated on a ‘need to know’ basis:

“I think it’s about being able to meet student need. I mean I would be led by the student, if the student didn’t want to, but I wouldn’t give the final say to the student really, because that would be a bit unfair on clients andobviously there’s a range....I don’t think disclosure has to be full, but it’s a need-to-know basis I would say.”
(Placement co-ordinator)

Eight of the placement co-ordinators considered that the student should be responsible for informing the placement about their unseen disability:

“Well, I think the student needs to state what their wishes are and they can decide whether they want to do it or whether they want us to do it as the sort of brokering of the placement, I think it’s up to them, it’s their disability.” (Placement co-ordinator)

However, they recognised that this might not always be easy for the student, in which case placement co-ordinators expressed a willingness to do this on their behalf:

“I think it’s the student’s responsibility. But if they want to pass that responsibility on to me then I am happy to do so, only with their agreement and a discussion about what is said. But I do think that it is the student’s responsibility to do that.”
(Placement co-ordinator)

Five of the placement co-ordinators felt that the responsibility for informing the placement fell to them in their role:

“If it is all above board and is on the request form then it is a natural process arising from placement finding. The placement request form goes out to the placement so if it is on there it is on there. If it is not on there it becomes a problem.”
(Placement co-ordinator)

Despite being aware that a disabled student may entail extra work, staff across each professional group were able to identify skills and other benefits that disabled social work students could bring to the placement setting and their work.

5.2: Disabled students’ skills

The staff interviewed described the particular benefits that disabled social work students could bring to placements. Social work staff emphasised the ability to engage certain client groups and the potential for more empathy with disadvantaged groups of people:

“Their own life experiences really; if you have somebody who has suffered from mental health problems but is now stable they can draw on their past experience.” (Practice assessor/ teacher)

“I think that coping with any kind of disability, particularly if it has been dealt with very positively in childhood and schooling, makes them very strong and very able to promote themselves as an active and normal member of staff if you like. That positive role model is excellent.” (Placement co-ordinator)

“A lot of the young people that we work with have got unseen disabilities as well and I certainly think from their point of view of the young person, if they knew that that particular student had a similar disability to them, I think they might disclose other things to them that they may not talk to me about for example, so I think that that would be one very positive benefit.” (Practice assessor/teacher)

Social work staff also identified the benefits for a staff team, including increasing the knowledge of staff about that student’s particular disability or helping staff to work with service users with similar disabilities:

“I think where it has worked it has made the rest of the team stop and think and review their own position and thinking. It is about disability and what it is and what it does and all of those kinds of things. It is quite educational to other people and they say, ‘oh yeah’.” (Placement co-ordinator)

“It could help a colleague to understand their clients’ needs a bit more because they are getting first-hand knowledge of that condition from a colleague.” (Practice assessor/teacher)

However, there was also an acknowledgement from some placement co-ordinators and practice assessors/teachers that the students should not be put in the position of the team’s ‘disability expert’:

“...I think to some extent they can actually enhance a team and can help a team and help to enlighten people in terms of disability awareness, but I’m not always sure that that should be their role because it can be like an added burden to a student when they’re on placement ...in teams we should be looking at other ways of educating people.” (Practice assessor/teacher)

Disability support staff tended to see more generic benefits and skills that disabled students could and did offer, such as the ability of students with specific learning difficulties to ‘think differently’:

“There are all the benefits that a person with any specific learning disabilities has. They think in a different way; they think about things, often they can visualise things and systems and look at archaic systems that seem to operate, and would see a clearer and better way for themselves which might also coincidentally improve the system as a whole. There seems to be...it is very much that this is the way we have always done it; you must fit into our system.”
(Disability support staff)

“Knowledge, experience and background of values, experience of practising with different people, how to overcome difficulties, knowledge and their own skills like any other students; some are going to have strength, some are really creative or have a good rapport with clients.” (Disability support staff)

5.3: Assessment - disability support staff

When students receive an initial disability needs assessment, their needs whilst on placement can remain unacknowledged in the report. Good practice would suggest that students' needs be re-considered prior to going on placement. Disability support staff were asked if their service did this.

The majority of participants stated that re-assessment did not take place for all cases automatically, i.e. it was not a 'standard' procedure. However, most would look at a student's needs if the student requested it and if they felt the initial needs assessment did not cover the placement area adequately:

“As with all students we always have a review process. Any student is able to make an appointment with their adviser at any time they see fit, if they're needing something more. So every term there is a review process, so really I think it would be down...I think the system is kind of there for the student to instigate an appointment if they felt they needed something more than the review process.” (Disability support staff)

“...only if the student brings it up. Sometimes they don't need any additional support needs. They have a computer at home. They don't have any extra written work whilst on placement so they will be fine in their placement and they don't have difficulties with the set work. It is usually just the written work they have had difficulties with or the 9 to 5. It really depends on the student's needs.” (Disability support staff)

It was frequently highlighted that the initial assessment of needs might be inadequate as it was often difficult to know what a student would need on placement as they would often not know the necessary details at the point of initial assessment (i.e. which service user group, what sort of agency - statutory/voluntary, travel arrangements, what tasks would be required of them for example, written reports):

“I think the assessment report is usually very vague. The trouble is the student doesn't necessarily know what they're going to need on the placement either at that stage, not until the first day, that's always the problem, like doing assessments of students before they actually come to university, when they actually come it's, 'I didn't know I was going to take notes', 'I didn't know I needed to use the library', 'I haven't thought about that'.”
(Disability support staff)

The issue of who ought to provide and pay for that support was explored with disability support staff. Eight of the twelve disability support staff indicated that ideally the funding for any reasonable adjustments should come from the Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) which could be accessed through the LEA (Local Education Authority) for undergraduate students or the GSCC for postgraduate students. Some suggested that DSA will only fund adjustments up to a certain point and that the HEI should take over funding from that point:

“If they were paid I would’ve said Access to Work because I know they’ve supported students if it’s been paid employment, but if it isn’t I think the DSA can support the student’s needs to an extent, but I also think the student has a responsibility to put those reasonable adjustments in place as well. So it may be that the DSA provides a personal assistant for that individual but if further support is needed that goes beyond the DSA. I think under SENDA now the institution also has a responsibility to meet the needs of that individual.” (Disability support staff)

Other potential sources of funding were identified:

“The Social Work Funding Body, the bursary people have funding available for disabled students. If that funding isn’t sufficient, there is funding that you can get from the university disability funding. There is also funding from charities; there is quite a lot of funding to draw on.” (Disability support staff)

One disability support member of staff considered that the placement agency could also make provision for adjustments:

“I’m not sure...I couldn’t answer strictly but I think with regards to putting the support in place it will actually cost them next to nothing at all...for example, a student who I know of did a placement and needed somebody who’d be able to read information to them, it wasn’t social work but I could see how the same could apply. They already had somebody in that area who could do that so it was no additional cost to them to provide that support.” (Disability support staff)

5.4: Placement allocation for disabled students

The process of placement allocation was explored with placement co-ordinators as this is a key aspect of their role.

Agency resources

Placement co-ordinators were asked whether they felt that their placement partners (social work agencies in the community) had sufficient resources to meet the needs of social work students with unseen disabilities on placement. Only one out of the thirteen participants answered ‘yes’ to this question. Six participants considered that the necessary resources were not available. Their

responses indicated that in the past support had been very poor. One placement co-ordinator noted the inadequate level of provision for students with 'seen' disabilities (for example, wheelchair users) and it argued that the same must be true for students with 'unseen' disabilities:

“Well, I mean what’s bothering me a bit...the unseen disability because, I mean, I’ve worked with students with disabilities that are very obvious. Provision for them is quite appalling.”

(Placement co-ordinators)

Another placement co-ordinator acknowledged that, while goodwill was often present, the question of 'who should pay for what' was still a concern:

“I think my experience would be that there is a lot of good will out there, but there aren’t the resources. There are difficulties because as you know there are still whole areas which are grey areas about resources that have to be paid for. I think that is an issue.”

(Placement co-ordinator)

Six participants felt that *some* of their placement partners had sufficient resources. They pointed to the often 'patchy' nature of the ability of agencies to accommodate students with extra needs:

“It can vary from area of practice - I know that a lot of the staff, if they’re approached, particularly the individual practice teachers... if I know about an issue I’m able to make an approach to them through the training department, they will do as much as they possibly can to ensure that this particular student’s needs are accommodated.” (Placement co-ordinator)

These participants acknowledged differences of provision depending on the type of agency, for example, variations between statutory and voluntary agencies. Voluntary agencies were considered to be better geared to meeting the needs of disabled students, particularly agencies whose users included people with disabilities:

“I think they are more flexible and there are some voluntary agencies who only take students with disabilities because it is a disability-run placement. We have got a few who only take students with disabilities and I think the others try to be more flexible.”

(Placement co-ordinator)

However, there was also an acknowledgement that smaller agencies, which perhaps have the attitudinal 'resources', might often fail to have the required concrete resources (for example, funding, adaptations, technology) and so their ability to support a disabled student might be compromised:

“If it’s a mobility problem a larger statutory office may have a lift and so on, and with a more independent-based agency, it may be an agency that is in a couple of converted houses, you know that sort of building, when it would be quite difficult for some people to get up those stairs...” (Placement co-ordinator)

“You know, some agencies will be more able to help than others. Bigger organisations often are.” (Placement co-ordinator)

For one participant, the split between statutory and voluntary was not necessarily indicative of an agency’s ability to support a disabled student:

“I wouldn’t say it breaks down easily within say, large statutory organisations, being necessarily better than small voluntary, or vice versa. But there’s a mix...it’s often the resources are there in theory, but it takes an awful lot of will to get them and sometimes it comes down to quite small things like the attitudes of a placement co-ordinator, or training officers.” (Placement co-ordinator)

One placement co-ordinator suggested that consideration of a student’s extra needs arising from their disability assumed a relatively low place on practice assessors/teachers’ agenda, due to stretched resources:

“I think that people just see it as one other thing to think about rather than seeing it as something positive in terms of equal opportunities and as a learning experience. I think that particularly statutory agencies are getting bombarded with inspection, with new legislations and all sorts of policies and procedures that I think overwhelm practitioners sometimes and thinking about what students or staff with unseen disabilities need is a major issue which doesn’t get taken on board.” (Placement co-ordinator)

Placement allocation

Placement co-ordinators were asked whether they would seek to allocate disabled students to certain placements and practice assessors/teachers. Seven participants indicated that this is something they would do. For one co-ordinator, this was a clear procedure at their HEI, not just for disabled students, but other minority groups:

“Yes, and then we look at the forms and we try to...we do an initial placement and we place disabled students and black students first. So what we hope that does is give the widest choice available to those from the outset really. So we try and match needs at that stage to what’s disclosed on the form. That would be the first process.” (Placement co-ordinator)

A couple of participants likened their approach to the process of ‘matching’ a placement to a disabled student to that employed for a student who had other needs such as childcare and /or transport:

“It’s to try and as far as possible match the student to the placement and practice teacher and although sometimes it’s very difficult to do that in great depth, just like we take into account geography and the area of interest to the student and learning needs, disability can be an issue as well.” (Placement co-ordinator)

Other placement co-ordinators agreed that they would try to match the student with an experienced practitioner and with an agency with a good track record. This was perceived as being of potential benefit for the student concerned:

“I think that generally speaking I would look for a practice teacher who had some experience. Generally speaking I wouldn’t look to a first time practice assessor/teacher to take a student with an impairment. That is because I think it has the potential for risk and if it can be avoided it ought to be avoided for the student’s experience.” (Placement co-ordinator)

Another acknowledged that they used their experience and knowledge of local agencies and practice assessors/teachers to ‘select’ placements for disabled students:

“I am being selective before I start anyway, so I don’t approach the agency and say I have a disabled student that needs this, this and this. There is not really an equal opportunity to say, ‘yes we can or no we can’t’. I select in my mind, knowing buildings, the way the service works or whatever, who would be best matched where. I do that for every student, but obviously I need to do it more for disabled students, so I am sort of skimming-off that process a little bit if you see what I mean.” (Placement co-ordinator)

Others suggested that their choice in placing students was itself restricted as the limited supply of practice assessors/teachers had meant that adequate knowledge of their skills and experience had not been built up:

“Because we use lots of new practice teachers each year and there’s a big turnover, we don’t always - you know, we don’t know people well enough to have preferences.” (Placement co-ordinator)

Those placement co-ordinators who were less likely to attempt to match students to certain placements were mindful of the dangers of ‘compartmentalising’ disabled students into particular areas of practice:

“There is a danger of individualising; that is not a helpful way to go. I think it is more of, ‘this is a programme partnership arrangement’ ...if you can practice teach you do it with everybody.”
(Placement co-ordinator)

Demands of placement allocation

Six of the 13 placement co-ordinators interviewed stated that they felt disabled students did require extra work, 6 stated “it depends” and 1 participant felt that it did not entail extra work.

Placement co-ordinators described the extra work that was required in the pre-placement stage including:

- planning
- contacting the student for further information
- finding out what a student’s needs were
- arranging adjustments
- passing information on

Two participants alluded specifically to the extra work which arose from trying to ‘market’ their disabled student to agencies:

“... one of the roles I think I have in the matching process is to make sure that disabilities are put to the fore, the students’ needs are met by the placement, that the students don’t get fobbed off and that can take a fair bit of extra work in the negotiating process with agencies.” (Placement co-ordinator)

The practice co-ordinators were agreed that the workload involved in placing a disabled student varied according to the nature of the student’s disability, its impact on their practice, and the student’s individual personality and coping strategies.

5.5: What works – positive placement outcomes for disabled social work students

Here we outline the key factors which the professionals identified as contributing to positive placement outcomes for students with unseen disabilities.

Pre-placement planning

This was the most frequently mentioned factor identified by the three groups of staff. Advance planning for placements was cited by all practice assessors/teachers as an important element in preparation for a student’s placement with active efforts made to plan for responsibility for support, for example, by attending pre-placement meetings:

“All four parties to that meeting signed the agreement, really what I wanted to get was some sort of shared responsibility. If there were issues that came up in the placement, any element of risk for him, we had all agreed on what approach we would take.”
(Practice assessor/teacher)

“Preparation for a start....it is important to find out what that student’s requirements are. The pre-planning... I know that there is a certain amount of pre-planning with any student you have, but I think it is checking out that any requirements that the disabled student might have will be met.” (Practice assessor/teacher)

For one practice assessor/teacher, being made aware in advance (if early disclosure by the student offered this opportunity) allowed them to undertake an extensive planning meeting for placement staff in their team, demonstrating a pro-active approach to support:

“For example, with one of the students I had to hold a very big first-aid session to make sure everyone knew what to do should anything happen, how to react, who to call, what to say on the phone to the ambulance men...how to make sure we were covered, what the student was going to do at training sessions, how they were going to get support workers involved if they had to go out, how could we make it more easier for them.”
(Practice assessor/teacher)

Disability support staff were able to recommend that the student had a needs assessment in time and arrangements could be made for funding any adjustments. Many staff described occasions where they had been involved in pre-placement planning for students and how this had facilitated communication about student needs:

“All I can say is that we have a good system at establishing the support needs with students with visible and unseen disabilities in the preparation period and the department, my colleagues and the student work closely together to make sure that the equipment is available at the placement.” (Disability support staff)

Another member of a disability support service explained how they had been involved early on and actively liaised with the social work department:

“We met with her at a very early stage and we did a lot of liaising with the department prior to her starting because obviously there was a lot of support that needed to be in place and for staff to be aware that there could be communication problems and how best we could overcome those problems.” (Disability support staff)

The same member of staff was involved in a three-way meeting before the commencement of a placement:

“Very early on we met with the placement officer because I think in her first year she was doing a very, very short placement for two weeks, so we did make sure that we met with them very early on that first time and it was very much a case-conference situation where it was the student, the work placement officer and myself.”
(Disability support staff)

Early planning was also a consistent theme in the responses of the placement co-ordinators as it allowed them time to accommodate students' needs in the matching process:

"I think planning and preparation are very important for any student going into any placement but more so where there are particular needs like unseen disability." (Placement co-ordinator)

"It's better to try and plan in advance as much as we can so that the students' needs are met." (Placement co-ordinator)

This could be a formal stage of planning such as a written pre-placement agreement:

"With every student we do a learning agreement at this part of the placement and we have some standard expectations and sections of the learning agreement that are printed for every student for every placement. One is to look into any special needs of the student for that placement including disabilities."
(Placement co-ordinator)

or a less formal approach based on an open-door type approach. Again, this was mentioned as a feature of a support approach across the three staff groups:

"If a student comes to me and says, 'I don't think people are being helpful or supportive' I'll go back into the agency - revisit, see what's happening for the student. As I say, again, this is done very informally. It can be that a student can ring me up."
(Placement co-ordinator)

Many disability support staff stated that their services were often stretched and this open-door approach was also tempered by whether the service was stretched at that particular time:

"We always say that our doors are open but it depends on whether they can get an appointment at the time that they need, which if it is a very busy time of the year it might not be that easy for them to do." (Disability support staff)

It was felt by staff 'on-campus' that an open-door was particularly important as students could feel isolated away from their peers. As one member of disability services noted:

"We are aware that they are on placement and we usually say that if they have any problems on placement to contact us."
(Disability support staff)

Negotiation and communication

Linked to many other themes was the importance of effective communication. Staff across the three groups emphasised that negotiation and communication were essential at all stages of the placement process for disabled students and creating three-way dialogue between the student, placement co-ordinator and practice assessor/teacher was particularly singled out. One placement co-ordinator outlined her approach and stressed that students also have a part to play in this dialogue, again emphasising the student's responsibility:

“So there was a lot of liaison about things that were required. I mean, the students do a lot of this as well. I might indicate that this is roughly what the student needs but then I would expect the student to help, because they know what they need. She knew what particular computer programme was required, so it is best if she liaises directly with Social Services to say that this is the one.”
(Placement co-ordinator)

Negotiation/liaison and advocacy were particularly noticeable themes among disability support staff. This included a strong focus on communication with the disabled student:

“It is working with the student. It is very much talking to the individual and seeing how they want to handle it but also giving some advice on how they could handle it because sometimes they can become dependent on a mentor so we try to keep them independent.” (Disability support staff)

A service that was perceived as too student-centred might well lead to an over-dependence from the students on the service. This concern was expressed by two participants who felt that there was a need to promote more autonomy in disability support work:

“I did once (disclose to the placement on behalf of a student). It seems always best to allow a student to do it with advice because you don't want to be taking over the student.”
(Disability support staff)

“So, we do have a lot of students...a lot of them just want to touch base, a lot of them use our service for all of their timetabled hours and a lot of them pick and choose. But we do like to try and withdraw it to a certain extent over the year so we're not putting as much in as we were at the end just so we're promoting that kind of independence and autonomy.” (Disability support staff)

Linked to pre-placement planning were the skills employed to make that planning worthwhile and effective: these were advocacy and negotiation. These activities were seen as key elements of the role of disability support staff as one member of staff explained:

“I see we can be advocates for those students and advise the department on behalf of the student of the nature of their disability through a case conference whereby the student is involved as well, but we are there to support the student in obviously informing the department.” (Disability support staff)

There was also evidence of the practical support and adjustments made by disability support staff and their service such as general emotional support:

“And a lot of my time with her was spent talking to the tutor and with her, really I suppose just supporting her generally, making the point that it’s OK to need that extra help.” (Disability support staff)

Specific tasks, for example, included proof-reading the work of students with dyslexia:

“However, the support that we’re offering is in terms of proof-reading of work, support with organisation of essays, and emotional support I would say currently.” (Disability support staff)

Ongoing monitoring and checking out

Once a disabled student had been successfully placed and adjustments had been made, continual monitoring of that student’s placement was considered important. This was to check if adjustments were ‘working’ and if a student’s needs had changed:

“I was talking to one yesterday who has dyslexia and I said, ‘how is it going, is there anything in this session that is not okay? Tell me and I’ll do it.’ That is the kind of dialogue we need to create. I am not a mind reader but if you tell me I will do it.”
(Placement co-ordinator)

Supervision was mentioned as the ‘vehicle’ for practice assessors/teachers to undertake this mainly informal ‘checking out’. Practice assessors/teachers saw this as an integral part of their role for *all* students:

“I think that it is part of your role as a practice teacher to be aware of what is happening to the student and if I felt, or became aware that there was something, I may discuss it with them if it was affecting the placement.” (Practice assessor/teacher)

“...we had a chat about where she felt she was and at the start of the placement she was feeling quite well. We had regular supervision and one of the questions really is, ‘how are you?’ It was important that I was monitoring the work load of the student but also, in a sense, monitoring how she was actually handling the work.” (Practice assessor/teacher)

Making adjustments

In discussing examples of support for disabled students, staff referred to adjustments they were aware of or had set up themselves. These included assistive technology:

“I got onto the university support person so, for instance, something that they gave was they allowed the student to borrow a CD-Rom to help with written work and a programme especially for dyslexic people.” (Placement co-ordinator)

“I’ve worked with students who’ve brought a range of resources like a laptop and that kind of thing and we’ve made arrangements to identify how they handle/how they produce written materials and that’s kind of gone on a scale of not having any impact at all that was noticeable, to having a significant impact which did take up more time and certainly more effort on the student’s part and more time on my part in allowing them to work through physically the things we were looking at or producing.” (Practice assessor/teacher)

Less tangible but equally effective adjustments involved ‘time out’, depending on the disabled student’s needs:

“She also had extra time on placement because she was doing a shorter week so there was consideration there which was done through the placement co-ordinator, the university and us. To make sure that she was able to complete the required number of days she started earlier than most students would do and did a shorter working week.” (Practice assessor/teacher)

“The impact in terms of placement was around things like routine of arrangements to ensure that there were proper meal breaks and rests, and that there was access to sugary drinks, that they were kept available in the fridge in the kitchen area if the student felt he needed to use them.” (Practice assessor/teacher)

One member of disability support staff praised the adjustments that had been made by the social work department and placement for a disabled student with a high level of communication need:

“One of the things was their good working practices, they decided that he should have two CSWs (communication support workers) with him on his course. Basically because it’s just good working practice for them to have regular breaks from signing, but also because of the nature of the information, the fact that they would need to have time to actually brush up on the language, the terms and all that kind of stuff in social work. I mean basically they had to almost do the course as well to be able to get a command of the language. Because obviously there were certain terms that the student hadn’t actually heard of and also there wasn’t a sign that existed for it. So they were encouraging that kind of language as well. So they also gave their CSWs management preparation time.” (Disability support staff)

The teacher-student relationship

Underpinning all of these aspects of positive support for disabled students on placement is the nature of the teacher-student relationship. Social work staff often referred to the unique relationship that develops during a placement between practice assessor/teacher and student. Practice assessors/teachers felt that this was the same for all students but that the quality of that relationship could assist disabled students in disclosure if they had not disclosed prior to the placement:

“... I think if you haven’t got such a good working relationship with them they’re not going to disclose any unseen disabilities, they’re not going to come to you with any problems that they’ve got. So you know, I see that relationship as absolutely crucial in any placement.” (Practice assessor/teacher)

“But I would hope to have a relationship with a student where they would be able to say. Some of these things would be very difficult I would imagine for a student to say. If I became aware for instance that they had trouble, and I think that would become evident very quickly, then I would have to discuss that with them.”
(Practice assessor/teacher)

Some practice assessors/teachers felt that the success of a placement for a disabled student lay in this relationship and not necessarily the actual placement setting and client group:

“I don’t think it is about the agency, I think it is about the individual practice teacher and how welcoming and approachable they are really. I have heard some nightmare stories of students who have come to their final placement here. They have told me about some bad situations in other placements and I don’t think it is about the agency; I think it is about the practice teacher.”
(Practice assessor/teacher)

Individual members of staff, most notably practice assessors/teachers, were singled out by placement co-ordinators as being supportive and this had contributed to successful placement outcomes. This reinforced placement co-ordinators’ emphasis on the value of matching a disabled student with a certain placement and with skilled and experienced practice assessors/teachers:

“Those kinds of attitudes are very much about focusing on the disability as opposed to these people have skills that will make them a smashing social worker. That differs because we have had some superb situations where practice teachers have pulled out all the stops to change the environment and support the student.”
(Placement co-ordinator)

“The practice teacher was really good in terms of knowing she needed the student to be safe in her practice but not being phased at all by the fact it was happening. There was no, ‘she shouldn’t be a social worker’, there was none of that; it was like, ‘we have a difficulty but we are going to get around it and make sure you are alright’ and that is what the student wanted.”

(Placement co-ordinator)

5.6: Challenges and barriers identified by staff

As well as having insight into students’ fears and concerns about disclosure, staff also demonstrated an awareness of the challenges and barriers faced by disabled students on placement. These fall into the following areas:

Environmental barriers

Many staff were able to point to physical barriers in the placement setting that could place a disabled student at a disadvantage. Responses tended to focus on physical access issues. Practitioners with experience of supporting disabled students were more able to identify other environmental barriers (particularly disability support staff). Practice assessors/teachers felt that lack of resources often compounded the environmental barriers for disabled students:

“I would say in terms of resources, the lack of access to appropriate facilities for example, computers...and hearing as well, we have no computers with microphones.”

(Practice assessor/teacher)

Disability support staff also pointed to a general lack of resources available in social work agencies:

“I was astonished that a student who has dyslexia has to go into the work place and share a computer with two or three other people. It is jaw dropping.” (Disability support staff)

As one placement co-ordinator also added:

“I think my experience would be that there is a lot of good will out there, but there aren’t the resources. There are difficulties because as you know, there are still whole areas which are grey areas about resources that have to be paid for. I think that is an issue.”

(Placement co-ordinator)

Limited access to necessary assistive technology and inappropriate working environments was seen to affect disabled students’ experiences on placement:

“It is going to be a hectic and busy environment so if you have dyslexia you need a quiet place to work to be able to concentrate; I would see that as a potential problem.” (Disability support staff)

“There are problems with access to computers because quite often they don’t have a lap top. Although they have been supplied with a computer and software for their studies it is not usually a lap top even though they do have placements and access to a computer has been a problem for several of the students. Reams of documents on white paper when they have visual sensitivity, which is very common with dyslexia and dyspraxia, can be an awful problem for them if they don’t have an overlay or they don’t have tinted lenses.” (Disability support staff)

Attitudinal barriers

Social work staff also referred to the pressures of their work and hinted that the extra input required as a result of a disabled student’s additional needs could result in reluctance from practice assessors/teachers to take on a student:

“I think that having a student for a practice teacher or supervisor in a team is always... you know, it is a big job. They have lots of concerns about whether they will be able to pull in the work, plus doing their own work and will it prove more bother than it is worth really for them sometimes. I think that sometimes, if they think that a student is in some way a weak student, either weak academically or weak in practice or have got some difficulties which are going to raise issues and throw up barriers then there is resistance and I have certainly encountered that.” (Practice assessor/teacher)

“Being short staffed and everything you should really have a reduction in your case load to concentrate on the student, but being Social Services you don’t. It just goes on and on and on.” (Practice assessor/teacher)

An awareness of the ‘goodwill’ often shown by practice assessors/teachers was evident among some disability support staff:

“You know social workers are overworked and everybody knows that and to have a social work student, I guess, is one stress. To have a social work student who then needs all of these other adaptations on top of what is already there in adapting to accommodate the student is more stress.” (Disability support staff)

A placement co-ordinator also expressed her suspicion that some agencies and practice assessors/teachers made up ‘false excuses’ in order not to take on a student with a disability:

“In my experience of arranging placements I have sometimes had agencies say, ‘oh it would be very difficult for us to have that student’...and they sometimes say things like practical difficulties and so on. It makes me wonder whether they’re not putting themselves out to provide what the student needs or it’s extra work and too difficult for them and so on...” (Placement co-ordinator)

Staff were asked whether they felt barriers were erected for disabled students in terms of the attitudes of others. As the student findings show, disabled students often felt that others saw them as ‘extra work’ and indeed, social work staff did confirm that, although this varied according to the nature of the disability, this was largely the case. The staff interviewed were in agreement with the students in identifying a lack of understanding and awareness as the main attitudinal barrier:

“Professionals who have never, or rarely come across it (dyslexia) and possibly not in a work setting where a working colleague has the disability, they do not seem to be able to grasp what it means for a severely dyslexic person or a dyslexic person to be faced with masses of form filling.” (Disability support staff)

“It is lack of awareness but even when you make them aware it is a lack of comprehension as to what this really means.”
(Disability support staff)

This lack of understanding and awareness could at times be translated into unhelpful and potentially discriminating actions/attitudes, such as the student being treated like service users:

“I think getting their placement tutor, or the person who is supervising them, to recognise that they do have a disability and not to be treated as clients. That’s something that’s been put to me several times, particularly the ones with mobility difficulties.”
(Disability support staff)

“The work placement officer was quite negative and it was all in relation to her disability, not necessarily with how she was able to do the job, it was in relation to her disability and of course we had to try and address that issue as quickly as possible.”
(Disability support staff)

Placement co-ordinators also gave examples of encountering prejudicial assumptions ‘in the field’:

“I have heard them say they can’t string a sentence together and making all these assumptions but there is this whole set of expectations in social work that this is what you can do. To even apply now for the new degree you have to have a level C grade maths and English. Where does that leave dyslexic students?”
(Placement co-ordinator)

“I think students with dyslexia get mocked almost as illiterate ignoramuses. Some of the other ones, I can think of a couple of students with epilepsy and that is still a condition with stigma I think...and having to alert people to the fact that I may have a seizure and the fear and apprehension that causes...so I think that’s the main ones...” (Placement co-ordinator)

A lack of understanding was also identified by practice teachers/assessors:

“Probably other people’s lack of understanding, if they are unaware and maybe slightly intolerant of them. Not because we are an intolerant team, because we are not, it is just that sometimes people are unaware of a disability and they don’t always know.”
(Practice assessor/teacher)

“I think with dyslexia it is hard for people in general to understand the degree of dyslexia because it is a complex problem. That seems to be what students are up against; there is a general lack of understanding about how it actually affects them day-to-day and they have to keep spelling it out.” (Practice assessor/teacher)

Disability support staff expressed surprise at such attitudes given social work’s association with anti-discriminatory practice and inclusion:

“Having to liaise with them - it was very ironic that it was social work and it was actually working with disabled people, that’s what we found so hard...you would’ve expected them to be so supportive and so understanding.” (Disability support staff)

“I would say in the social work department there is a lack of awareness despite the field they’re in.” (Disability support staff)

Achieving the core competencies

Discussion frequently centred on whether a student’s disability would mean that they would be unable to achieve the core competencies (now the TOPSS National Occupational Standards for Social Work):

“The student was having difficulty using the telephone because of a past incident in her personal life. There was a major problem there because one of the major things we use in social work is the telephone. The student’s ability to turn up for work on time; forgetting to do crucial things when organising packages of care; there were major issues about that.” (Placement co-ordinator)

Another placement co-ordinator was very sure about the importance of a student being able to produce written information of a high quality at short notice (arguably a challenge for students with dyslexia) and implied that all students and staff should have to undertake the same responsibilities regardless of whether they are disabled or not:

“...where you are involved in a case where a child is being abused and something goes wrong you have to write a court report overnight, which I have done as a practitioner and lots of people have to do...the student might need to write, or be part of that report. They should be able to do it, regardless of whether they are disabled or not, is my opinion. Is it fair to not turn up at court because the social worker is disabled? What justice does that do to the child? They are extreme cases, but that is my concern about some students...are they able to practice? In the environment that practice exists in...they should be able to practice anywhere.”
(Placement co-ordinator)

The performance of specific tasks was alluded to by many disability support staff, particularly when describing the challenges faced by dyslexic students having to compile large reports, for example:

“There are the difficulties that can cause them real problems on the placement, whether that’s report writing, recording information accurately, organisational skills ... and that’s on top of all the normal things that happen on the placement anyhow - the extra pressure that a person feels.” (Disability support staff)

5.7: The demands of social work training

Another recurring theme was the view that social work training was stressful (for all students). This could lead to an exacerbation of students’ difficulties on placement. One commented:

“Practicing social work can be very painful for people and it brings back problems that they thought were buried if you like, and in that particular case a lot of problems emerged later in the placement. I think that can be really difficult.” (Placement co-ordinator)

Another interviewed likened this to a ‘triple’ dose of stress caused by dilemmas over disclosure:

“Well, it’s going to stress the student - stress levels are going to be high, and stress levels on placement are high anyway. The nature of the practice placement is stressful. So they’re going to have at least a double dose of stress simply dealing with the pragmatics of managing their disability and then I suppose you could say there’s a triple dose of stress because if they don’t disclose, if they don’t negotiate, they’re having to deal with the consequences of that which adds to the stress on top of that - I would imagine.”
(Placement co-ordinator)

A number of practice assessors/teachers described social work as a difficult profession which required both physical and psychological stamina. They implied that, depending on the disability, disabled students might find it especially challenging. These challenges could manifest themselves in physical exertion:

“You can be moving a child and having to pack cases into the back of your car and things like that or it might be that you don’t finish at 5pm you have to work until 7pm. You have to be able to have some level of physical ability to actually cope with the demands of the job.” (Practice assessor/teacher)

Psychological demands were also identified:

“Another element of the job is the stress and emotional demands of the job. If someone had a health problem, it puts stress and pressure on anybody, but an unseen mental health problem could exacerbate that.” (Practice assessor/teacher)

The same practice assessor/teacher considered that the need to be seen as able to cope could be particularly challenging for disabled students:

“There is a culture in child care social work of being quite strong and coping with difficult work and that is part of the job; you have to be seen to be coping and I suppose that might be difficult for people who are not coping or who have other unseen mental health problems that would make it difficult for them to manage with the stress of the job.” (Practice assessor/teacher)

5.8: Institutional policies and guidelines

All staff were asked about disability-specific policies and guidance at their HEIs. There was a lack of knowledge among participants regarding the existence of specific policies and guidance for disabled students in their institutions. Participants generally were in agreement that this was a problem which needed to be addressed:

“To my knowledge there is no policy that exists as such. But I think...because more students are coming in with more complex support requirements I think...and those students are already coming onto courses with work placements, it’s something that’s being looked at the moment, but no policy as yet.”
(Disability support staff)

Many placement co-ordinators thought that disabled students would be covered under wider equal opportunities policies but there was still a high level of uncertainty. Most practice assessors/teachers were not aware of a policy or guidelines in their agencies (or partner institutions) which covered disabled social work students. This inability to identify policies begs the question of whether agencies are aware of legal responsibilities they may

have. When asked, all social work staff said that they were aware of the change in legislation. However, the extent of this knowledge and awareness of responsibilities varied.

Poor communication

It was noted above that staff identified communication as an important factor in successful student support. One negative aspect of the current state of provision, however, were complaints from disability support staff and some, albeit fewer, from practice assessors/teachers about communication with academic staff on social work programmes. Disability support staff often reported less than satisfactory relationships with the social work department at their HEI. Poor communication was frequently identified:

“A breakdown of communication, you’d be knocking your head against a brick wall half the time because they wouldn’t communicate back with you. And as well, when a student did come, lecturers weren’t always as supportive as they could be in making sure that that student got copies of notes, keeping her updated on making sure that as far as the department were concerned they were as fully prepared as they could be, because they weren’t at all.” (Disability support staff)

“And I think that’s where discussion with all parties hasn’t kind of kicked off. We tend to find we’re support staff, then there’s the academic staff and historically the two things don’t sit quite comfortably so you have got tutors that perhaps do not seek guidance, not talk...” (Disability support staff)

One participant noted that social work programmes were taking disabled students without proper consideration of whether their needs can be met:

“I think it (DDA workshop training offered to tutors) was very much interpreted as a bit of a kind of bashing tool and people tended to just then say, ‘OK, the student’s disclosed a disability, I’m not even going to enter into that’. Therefore, we’re drawn in to support students inappropriately because it’s clear that they’re not going to achieve their goals, but they’ve been accepted onto the course, so we have an obligation to do that.” (Disability support staff)

This may be a consequence of a department’s anxiety about being vulnerable to charges of discrimination; defensive practice can be the outcome. This can take the form of offering places to all disabled students without consideration of whether the programme/HEI can meet their needs or whether they are eligible for registration. However, there was no firm data in the study to support this.

Others perceived that disability support was very low on the agenda of some social work staff’s responsibilities and implied that this could be related to more pressing priorities:

“Where students have difficulties with submitting work on time and work that may have some discrepancies in terms of grammar, spelling and structure they tend to be quite impatient and not understanding. Because they have an excellent reputation as regards their status we seem to feel that it is more important that that standard is fulfilled than it is to help the students. It doesn’t apply to every person in the department but it certainly applies to some.” (Disability support staff)

Another participant echoed this in the failure of the department to take up offers of training, implying a disinterest on the department’s part:

“Well we offer, although the offer is not always taken up, we offer to go and talk to the department; we offer to go and talk to the people on placement, so the long-arm supervisor and on-site supervisor. That hasn’t actually been taken up. Although I facilitated a meeting with a student where all these people were present, but it was actually the first time in nine years that I had ever met any of those personnel.” (Disability support staff)

Practice assessors/teachers on the whole reported good working partnerships with institutions that had developed over the years. There were a few practice assessors/teachers, however, who felt that systems could be improved, particularly with regard to pre-placement planning:

“... there wasn’t a joint meeting. Her tutor was changing as she started the placement. When she put her placement request form in there was no mention of what her needs were. It would have been very helpful for me to have more guidance from the college. They were supportive to me and to her during the placement but I felt that we weren’t very well prepared.” (Practice assessor/teacher)

This was particularly the case when the practice assessor/teacher was new to the role. One recalled:

“Really what I think my experience was that I would have liked more support from the college because of being a new practice teacher and having a very complex student as my first student.”
(Practice assessor/teacher)

‘Caught in the middle’ - Disability support staff

The disability support staff data reported that they often felt ‘caught’ between the student and the social work department. For a minority consulted, this position was positive and allowed the service and staff to act as a ‘go-between’ and engage in advocacy on behalf of the student:

“The service is always in the middle; it is always in the middle of the student and department. That is not a new position. But what I saw as the positive side of my role was actually to bring it all to a head.” (Disability support staff)

Some participants acknowledged that their view was one-sided: they were only seeing the students' side and the department would often offer a new perspective on the situation. This emphasised the need to 'check out' the story from both sides:

“We see the individual who comes and tells us something and quite often the department says something else and we find out that the student - they've told us something completely different or whatever. So sometimes it can be difficult being a go-between and maybe communication could be better.” (Disability support staff)

“The student's perception is not always that accurate. If you don't check out the perceptions that have been going on you can find yourself in really tricky situations; potentially embarrassing situations, the department, the student and the disability service.” (Disability support staff)

Disability support staff were also occasionally critical of the social work departments at their HEI, particularly with regard to what they saw as inflexibility over making reasonable adjustments:

“If we are saying that in an exam situation they need extra time to compensate for the difficulties they have with processing or whatever it is, then why are we saying that when they are on placement they should do everything in the same time as everybody else?” (Disability support staff)

This was linked to the problem of limited awareness:

“It is quite hard really and I think because there's learning outcomes that students have got to achieve, a lot of the attitude is, if they can't achieve it they won't offer it in an alternative way, and I think trying to get across to them that the learning outcomes can be achieved but maybe by putting in a reasonable adjustment in an alternative way, that student can still succeed just the same as a non-disabled student can and I think that awareness is a big issue, a very, very big issue and I do think there's a lot more that could be done.” (Disability support staff)

5.9: Fitness for social work practice

Practice assessors/teachers and academic staff are responsible for 'signing off' students as 'fit' to undertake social work practice. Fitness for practice covers both the concept of competence which is assessed against specific requirements and 'professional suitability' which is harder to define and is usually identified by its absence in individual cases. In the new social work award a substantial part of this process will rely on the assessment by practice assessors/teachers (Furness and Gilligan, 2004). Dilemmas concerning disabled students' fitness to practice were raised frequently in discussions with social work staff (placement co-ordinators and practice assessors/teachers). Practice assessors/teachers work directly with

students and allow them access to 'real' (often vulnerable) clients with 'real' difficulties and often distressing circumstances. As professional workers practice assessors/teachers have a 'duty of care' to those who use services enshrined within the GSCC Codes of Practice. Concerns about maintaining the duty of care to clients permeated many of the other themes discussed, such as confidentiality, and how far this should be protected when faced with the need to protect service users:

"I think something like HIV and AIDS I would want to know because we have very poorly people here who are at risk half the time and have you heard of MRSA?" (Practice assessor/teacher)

"Obviously my concern is yes, for the student, but also around health and safety. If this student, particularly if this student had had an attack in their placement then obviously became unconscious then nobody would've known what it was. Yes, they would've called the ambulance and everything but the student actually carries a particular medication which they have to be given instantly and if no-one knew what that was...it could be anything."
(Placement co-ordinator)

"It is the duty of care to the clients. If there are issues where the health and safety of the client might in anyway be compromised, for example, students with epilepsy. The department would have a duty to inform the placement. Decisions like this must be dealt with case by case; it is not about making rapid decisions of people by a category of medical condition." (Disability support staff)

Others raised their responsibility to protect disabled students who it was assumed (perhaps wrongly) may themselves be vulnerable:

"Perhaps if you are in a situation with a client who was putting you under a great deal of stress and was not allowing you to go out and eat, you get an attack or something, you are going to be more vulnerable. Anything that dents your confidence puts you in a more vulnerable position with a client." (Practice assessor/teacher)

"Yeah, for example epilepsy or a heart or lung problem where we daren't put people in a situation where we put too much strain on people. It is about protecting the student or the worker but also protecting the client. It is as much information as you need to be able to do that." (Practice assessor/teacher)

Practice assessors/teachers also described possible issues around protecting service users from inappropriate behaviour of disabled students with mental health difficulties:

“If I sent a student out who had mental health issues and was still addressing them it wouldn’t be fair on that family because if anything did happen and this student had to go from placement and became ill it would be difficult explaining to that family, not in detail, but you are going to need another worker. It is consistency as well.” (Practice assessor/teacher)

“I think mental health problems...I personally think there has to be a cut-off where the problems are so severe they could impact on the client relationship and whether those people have come into this work for the therapy of cleansing themselves, but I think that is a tiny minority. There are a couple who spring to mind.”
(Practice assessor/teacher)

One practice assessor/teacher summed up the general feeling of practice assessors/teachers struggling with these dilemmas by suggesting that the student must take some responsibility while acknowledging that there may not be a ‘catch-all’ answer or solution:

“I think that students as adult learners are equally responsible for their own learning. It is a partnership. They have to take responsibility for many areas of their learning and if they think that there is something there that has a bearing on that then I think they have a responsibility to share that. I think it is for them to know how much it has a bearing. You could have two people with Irritable Bowel Syndrome and one would think this is really important and is going to make me fail, like this woman did, and another one would think it is nothing to do with anybody when I go to the loo and not feel that they want to share it at all. I would respect both of their points of view. I don’t think there is a definitive answer to that one.”
(Practice assessor/teacher)

It was also suggested that one potential ‘risk’ in having disabled students was that service users could end up disengaging from working with that particular student. Examples of this mentioned in the interviews were very few, but it was nevertheless acknowledged as a potential risk. One practice assessor/teacher illustrated how this had occurred with a student with significant communication difficulties and had led him to question whether there is a danger of setting a student with a communication difficulty up to fail:

“I had a student once who had ***...he had been accepted by the university who didn’t want to discriminate against him and he had been accepted by the team and the on-site supervisor who didn’t want to discriminate against him and he had been accepted by me for the same reason but he couldn’t communicate and he couldn’t hold a conversation without ***** becoming a massive obstacle to him and to the person he was talking to. He went out and saw a service user who made a complaint and we had to terminate the placement and eventually he was counselled off the course. He should never have been given a place on the course because if we can’t communicate as social workers we are stuffed really aren’t we? I think we have responsibilities to be realistic.”**

(Practice assessor/teacher)

The dilemma of how far to support students and raise their expectations of entering the profession was also brought up by a number of other participants who emphasised the need to find the balance between support and over protection. It was linked to earlier observations that social work is a tough and demanding role and to points made earlier about the risk of giving students a false sense of support in training that bears little resemblance to the support available when they have qualified:

“But I would be in a right dilemma there because I have been in this situation before, where you feel like protecting the student you have got from difficult things, but they have to be able to handle that at the end of the placement. It depends on where they were and where they were going but I am sure there would be an element of over-protection really.” (Practice assessor/teacher)

5.10: Disability and Competence

Disentangling the impact of a student’s disability from their competence was a difficulty raised in the social work staff interviews. One practice assessor/teacher reported struggling with assessing one disabled student:

“It was hard for me to understand how much of that was to do with that or whether the disability was being used; as their practice teacher you have to sort out where things are going wrong and it can be really complicated. You can get into making oppressive judgements of people I think, especially with dyslexia, because it is a really complex problem and affects people in so many different ways.” (Practice assessor/teacher)

Placement co-ordinators also were aware of this difficulty:

“There was a student who was struggling to produce written work to the appropriate standard and the issue was whether it was dyslexia or whether it was the fact that the student didn’t understand the assessment process. What would happen was the student wasn’t producing written assessments to the required standard and that was clear. People were struggling to know whether it was an issue of disability or whether it was the fact that she just didn’t understand what was going on, or whether it was the two together.” (Placement co-ordinator)

One member of staff admitted that he could not resolve the issue of disability and competence following an experience the team had of a dyslexic student on placement:

“So she (practice assessor/teacher) was saying, ‘I have every sympathy but I don’t think she’s competent’ and I haven’t kind of resolved that one - whether it was an issue about that particular failing student or whether there are general issues about competence and dyslexia and I think I need to take counsel from wiser people who know more about it. Perhaps one can’t generalise, maybe you can say in some cases the disability is so significant it impairs a person’s cognitive processes so much that they’re unable to do the job properly.” (Placement co-ordinator)

Another suggested that further guidance and training are required so that practice assessors/teachers can begin to grapple with the answers to such dilemmas:

“I think there are dangers of writing people off and I have questioned myself about dyslexia regarding that. Am I writing people off by my insistence that written work is of high quality? Maybe we do need the kind of training that helps us to not assume.” (Practice assessor/teacher)

5.11: Further training

Most participants welcomed the opportunity to undertake further training and felt that they needed to address shortfalls in their own knowledge. For disability support staff, their training needs were identified as further information and understanding as to what is entailed in a social work placement and the competencies that social work students are required to pass. The following statements were typical:

“What we are picking up are the difficulties but it would be helpful to know exactly what is required of them because then you can tailor your support during the time that they are in college to the things that they are going to have to face when they are in placement.” (Disability support staff)

“I think training on what happens on these work placements, how they’re organised and maybe somebody who is, I suppose a supervisor on a work placement for a student it would be interesting to have feedback on them as to how the process works because we only get it from one side.” (Disability support staff)

Lack of knowledge about the social work course and placement requirements was cited by one participant as contributing to failure to meet the needs of social work students adequately:

“I feel that we’re not meeting those needs due to a certain extent through a lack of awareness of what is involved for a student going through a work placement. I mean I’ve obviously experienced it through a previous job, but I don’t think there’s a lot we can do to better our own awareness.” (Disability support staff)

Practice assessors/teachers with the PTA (Practice Teaching Award) stated that they had received training on disability during their practice teaching award training. Some felt that the one half-day offered had been inadequate:

“I had a five-day induction at the college which was useful but it was dealing with generalisations and the ‘normal’ situations.”
(Practice assessor/teacher)

A minority of practice assessors/teachers thought that they had gained knowledge through having close links with the social work programme at their institution. These were also the staff who did not think communication and negotiation with the social work programme were a problem within their HEIs:

“I’ve got quite close links with the placement tutor, the department and students within the department, so I’ve got a good idea of what goes on on the placements but I think that could be fairly rare.”
(Disability support staff)

“I think I understand the course quite well. The only reason I understand the course so well is that I’ve been through all that stuff I’ve described to you and I’ve been in close contact with lecturers and I’ve visited this other student on her placement and talked to tutors, all that kind of thing.”
(Disability support staff)

Responses to do with training from the social work staff centred on more information and knowledge to do with specific disabilities:

“I think probably something around awareness raising about the range really because I think dyslexia has become the most sort of topical unseen disability and there are probably others that we’re not so aware of because we don’t experience them very often and I think some sort of awareness raising, so that practice teachers can include such support in their planning really.”

(Practice assessor/teacher)

“If we have a student coming to us with a particular disability we have not dealt with before then we might want the specifics and I would long to include the student in that. It is not only a question of what is Chrohn’s Disease but how does Chrohn’s Disease affect you? How will it affect you on placement? Many conditions affect people in different ways and people have different responses to them so whilst it is worthwhile receiving training on dyslexia in the round, there are different levels of dyslexia with different impact on people. So yes, training is always helpful but it needs to be focused.” (Practice assessor/teacher)

It was also pointed out that training should be focussed more on strategic approaches to supporting disabled students:

“I think probably the practical arrangements and responsibilities of practice teachers so that practice teachers are clear about what their role is and what the university’s role is. The clarity about who is responsible for what.” (Practice assessor/teacher)

“There is always room isn’t there. Given the new degree and the demands of that I think it would be useful to be continually updating, revisiting, looking in relation to our own policies and practices. I think we have had quite a lot of training around and there are some good publications in terms of managing the learning here. I am not sure that any of us have had specific training around translating that into the practice environment and I think that would be really helpful.” (Placement co-ordinator)

“I think we also need to have the opportunity to formulate policies with regard to students with disabilities so that we get a consistent approach. I am not for training to get more knowledge. I am more about opportunities to develop systems, procedures and structures so that things are happening. That is the kind of developmental activity I think would be worth while.” (Practice assessor/teacher)

A shared responsibility

There was agreement across the board that the person who is 'best placed' to deliver support on placement was most probably the practice assessor/teacher, as they were the person most likely to be in day-to-day contact with the disabled student. The majority of participants across the groups of staff, however, indicated that the best outcomes for disabled students necessitated a shared approach to support, characterised by better communication and planning between all parties involved:

"I think a better understanding on both parts; on our part as to how the process works and on the work placement side of what support we can offer for students going through that placement, it's that communication being aware of what each other can provide, some form of guidelines, general guidelines." (Disability support staff)

"I think more input from all three parties; the department, this service and the placement, well and the student, so four parties, to meet to discuss how the student's needs would manifest themselves. How they could overcome any potential barriers before they're presented really and a report written up and support put into place. Whatever that support may be, whether it's proof-reading of work, whether it's technical aid - an advanced spell-checker on their computer or whatever it might be that could be done with minimal input really." (Disability support staff)

"They could for a start enforce, well not enforce, but encourage Disability Service and departments to meet and the placement to meet and discuss how the student can be best supported and to draw up some kind of agreement to ensure students are supported if they request it." (Disability support staff)

Speaking about the 'ideal model of support' for disabled social work students on placement, two disability support staff saw what they regarded as fundamental to such a model:

"More resources, more funding and more awareness."
(Disability support staff)

"If there was an unlimited budget on learning and if everyone was really aware of what their needs were and everybody was really proactive in wanting to meet those needs and realise that people have different skills to bring to the job. If there was access to everything in the format that was preferred by people; I think it would enable students to do the job to the best of their ability."
(Disability support staff)

The next section discusses these findings in more detail and outlines recommendations for improving practice in this area.

SECTION 6 - DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

6.1: Students

A variable picture

The interviews with disabled social work students revealed the variability of their placement experiences. The number of placements undertaken varied as did the types and settings of these placements. This picture of their experiences was made more complex by each student's unique 'disability identity' and the differing responses to their disability. Some students identify their disability as such while others were quite vocal and assertive about their needs and rights as disabled people. Students also experienced a mix of what they perceived as positive and negative elements of support on placement. Clearly, some students hoped that this study would provide an opportunity to influence the way that disabled students are supported on placement. Comments during the interviews suggested that they had valued the opportunity to talk about their experiences. Some were also clearly angry and keen for their experiences to be documented.

Not all students had experienced all or some of the difficulties presented in this report. Indeed, many students spoke positively about the support received from HEIs, placement providers and individual members of staff. It is worth noting that disabled students described experiences which had contributed to a negative view of their placement but which could not be attributed solely to their status as a disabled student. For example, many students reported uneasy relationships with their practice assessor/teacher or placement supervisor and other problems in their lives, as well as feeling generally stressed and overworked. These experiences are also reported by non-disabled students.

We set out to explore certain themes for disabled students previously identified within the literature. One theme that was not initially intended as an area of exploration, but which subsequently arose in students' 'stories', was that of students' 'disability identity': how comfortable and 'at ease' students appeared to be with their particular impairment, the label used to describe it and its perceived impact on others. The 'disability identity' of students in our sample appeared to be affected by the perceived and actual reaction from 'stakeholders' in social work including the perceptions that they were a 'burden' and created extra work. Five of the students interviewed described the behaviour of members of staff re-enforcing their feeling of being a burden and behaviour/attitudes from members of staff that arguably 'fed' these perceptions. As can be seen from the data from placement co-ordinators and practice assessors/teachers, this perception on the part of students might be confirmed by the views of these two professional groups who found a disabled student could entail extra work for them. This message may be implicitly communicated to students leading to a reluctance to make their needs known through disclosure. For example, Dalgin and Gilbride (2003) argue that

disability identity plays a large part in the decision to disclose. However, some students felt that a label of disability could open doors for them and so were more likely to disclose.

It was evident that students on professional training courses struggle with whether and who to tell that they have a disability. Students attributed non-disclosure decisions to fear of stigma and labelling and were anxious about how their disability might be construed by a future employer. When asked about their strategy regarding disclosure, the majority of the sample referred to what might be termed 'selective' disclosure - that is, disclosure on a 'need to know' basis. Some students with unseen disabilities, however, also felt that even when they had disclosed, their needs had often been ignored as evidenced by the frequency with which they had to re-iterate their disability and needs arising from it.

Some students felt that they were being demanding and did not want to 'rock the boat' lest this damage their relationships with staff who were ultimately going to sanction or 'sign off' their fitness to practice social work. Students felt angry and frustrated when they encountered a lack of understanding and awareness from staff. It has been suggested in another study that staff may often interpret any display of anger at 'the system' as the student being awkward (West of Scotland Consortium, 2003). Students' claims that they are made to feel a 'burden' or a nuisance if they complain or assert their needs may be a reflection of this.

Staff too recognised student dilemmas. The willingness for further training among placement co-ordinators and practice assessors/teachers demonstrates an awareness of shortfalls in their knowledge of disability. This is particularly evident in comparison with other areas of discrimination such as racism and sexism which are both social phenomena that have traditionally received more emphasis in social work education than disability (Oliver and Sapey, 1999).

Positive messages

The analysis of the data sought to identify factors disabled social work students considered contributed to a positive experience on placement. The data shows that in many settings, organisations and individuals are 'getting it right'. The majority of students, while often describing a range of differing experiences with different staff in different settings, were 'positive' in tone regarding their experiences and talked about what worked.

It was clear that disabled social work students felt that their experiences as disabled people had equipped them with skills such as increased empathy and 'seeing the other side' and it was generally emphasised that these 'additional' skills would enhance their practice. These qualities were also highlighted in the professionals' views of the benefits that disabled students could bring to work with service users and the agency team as a whole, demonstrating an apparent consensus that disabled people can offer significant benefits to the profession and which should be valued.

A minority of professionals suggested that this could lead to an expectation on the part of agencies that students with certain impairments are seen to be 'experts' in this field.

Flexibility was cited as an important factor in contributing to positive placement experiences for disabled students, both by students describing what they found helpful but also for staff talking about their approach to support. The need for continual 'checking out' was also a common theme.

One important factor in the success of placements for disabled people appears to be the quality of the student-practice assessor/teacher relationship. Students who reported positive experiences often attributed the positive elements (for example, planning, flexibility, monitoring) to individual members of staff. There are therefore strong arguments for ensuring that those supervising disabled students on practice are experienced and skilled practice assessors/teachers who can establish an effective relationship with students. A large part of the students' testimonies involved emotional experiences of managing personal self-identity in the presence of a disability. It may be that staff have to navigate students through this period as well as through the course. This is in accordance with the views of the West of Scotland Consortium (2003) who note in their guidance for disabled students on placement:

“The importance of this unique relationship between student and practice teacher or supervisor must be emphasised at all times; because of it most students are helped to develop the personal confidence and professional insight that will provide a sound basis for the development of their own professional helping relationships with others. The success of the placement for a disabled student will be helped by establishing a professional relationship based on trust, acceptance and empathy between student and practice teacher. This special rapport will reassure both student and supervisor that the challenges which may adversely affect the student’s progress and achievement can be dealt with in a proactive, positive and sensitive manner.” (2003: 2)

In addition, Furness and Gilligan (2004), in a discussion of students experiencing possible unresolved mental health difficulties, note how this relationship can facilitate disclosure:

“...students are only likely to share...information...with practice teachers once they have established positive working relationships with them. Their doing so seems conditional on several factors...In particular the student must feel 'safe'; they must trust the practice teacher, feel valued by them and expect them to be genuinely concerned and empathetic.” (2004: 473-74)

Negative messages

Not surprisingly, much of what students said was 'negative' about support on placement concerns an absence of the positive elements, for example, lack of reasonable adjustments, planning and flexibility. One key finding was that most students (73%) interviewed had concerns that their disability would affect their chances for employment. This places a question mark over implicit or explicit messages given out by the profession and seems somewhat paradoxical given the workforce crisis and a need for new recruits. Disabled people could represent an untapped pool who might be targeted for entry to the profession. This is an issue for the profession and its employers to consider.

It has been noted that students felt that having adjustments made and support from staff was helpful. Some students, however, also cited times where an overly-attentive approach could be construed as being negative. At one extreme this could lead to students feeling like they were being treated like 'clients'. This issue was also evident in a minority of staff transcripts and elsewhere in the recent literature (Turner *et al*, 2004).

Another concern apparent from interviews with students was that the placement finding process was often opaque. When asked if they felt their choice of placements had been limited, a large percentage simply stated, 'I don't know' as they were not aware of how placements were identified and allocated. There was vagueness about how placements were found and whether their paperwork had been considered by other agencies and rejected. This may be the case for all students but this lack of clarity led some disabled students to suspect that their choice of placements had been restricted as a result of their disability. Indeed, data from placement co-ordinators showed that they try and match *all* students and so undertake an informal selection procedure. There was also a view expressed by students that 'you go where you are offered'. One reason for this is clearly that placements are at a premium (this is widely acknowledged as a problem which the Practice Learning Taskforce has been established to address- see www.practicelearning.org). However, the danger is that disabled students feel obliged to accept a placement which they suspect or know will be unsuitable but feel they will be labelled as 'difficult' or 'demanding' if they refuse it. Clearly, this may apply to all students. Greater transparency in the placement finding process for disabled students might mean less chance for discrimination to occur and/or accusations of it.

Another important finding is the students' lack of knowledge and awareness of legislation and their rights as disabled students in higher education. This clearly has implications for student support, particularly on professional training courses. In short, we need to make students aware of their rights before we can make them aware of their responsibilities as trainee professionals.

6.2: Staff

Positive messages

There were a number of common themes across the three staff groups (disability support staff, placement co-ordinators and practice assessors/teachers). Data from these groups highlighted that they understood the dilemmas facing disabled students. They also, however, demonstrated an understanding of the benefits of disclosure. One such understanding was that non-disclosure could lead to being judged incompetent, and disclosure could lead to the right support being put in place. It was also suggested that disclosure was a professionally responsible thing to do and could demonstrate acceptable professional behaviour on the part of students. There was agreement, however, that the decision to disclose was ultimately the student's choice.

Staff identified approaches to support, many of which concurred with what students identified as positive elements – early pre-placement planning, flexibility, assistive technology and reasonable adjustments. Many of the responses were qualified with the statement 'it depends on the disability', demonstrating a resistance to regarding disabled people as a homogenous group and adopting an individual approach to support. However, this cannot be used as a smokescreen for making no special adjustments for disabled students. Placement co-ordinators and disability support staff were all aware of changes to legislation brought about by SENDA 2001 (Part 4 of the DDA 1995), however, detailed knowledge of the legislation and specific institutional policies and guidelines was often limited.

Negative messages

There were few negative messages from social work staff about their approaches to support: for example, little data was provided about unsuccessful placement experiences. However, the acknowledgement that further training would be welcomed by a large percentage of all staff may indicate a shortfall in required knowledge and skills. Staff were open and honest in their accounts of the dilemmas in determining competence, failing disabled students and in discussing issues of risk and fitness to practice. There needs to be further guidance on this for practice assessors/teachers struggling to determine if a student is failing as a result of the impact of a disability or because they do not have the required competence. The natural origin for such guidance would probably be the GSCC and TOPSS which established the National Occupational Standards for social work. Most staff thought that supporting a disabled student did require extra work, although most also agreed that this depended on the type of disability. This suggests a need for workload relief for practice assessors/teachers with disabled students on placement. However, this should be done in a way that minimises stigmatisation for that student who may feel even more a 'burden' if they become aware that their practice assessor/teacher has been given relief because he/she finds the student 'extra work'.

Some staff identified (and this was also implied by some students) a culture of 'toughness' in social work: along the lines of 'you have to be tough to succeed in this job'. This could fuel the view that those without such characteristics (be they physical, mental or both) cannot possibly 'do the job', leading to further reluctance to disclose needs. The same issue led some staff to ponder whether supporting students on placement is in a sense 'setting them up for disappointment' in the real world where such support may not be forthcoming. This perhaps indicates a need for staff in work settings to become more aware of support that is available through, for example, the Access to Work scheme, an advice and information service that can provide grants towards any extra employment costs that result from a person's disability (see www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk for more information on this scheme).

Many staff interviewed felt that students had a responsibility to inform staff if they had a disability that could impact on their placement. However, as shown by the same staff's awareness of disclosure dilemmas, this is not always easy for the student. This is particularly the case when a student does not know the impact of their disability until they are physically in the placement setting. There is a need both for effective planning and to create an atmosphere where students can feel free to disclose without fear of stigmatisation. Only when this is available can this transform into an ethos of open disclosure of disabilities. Non-disclosure of disability has to be seen as an understandable defensive reaction to a profession that is perceived as demanding with regard to the nature of the work and which is becoming more rigorous in 'weeding out' those considered unfit (as highlighted by the new emphasis on increasing regulation and the setting up of the GSCC register from which 'unsuitable' candidates can be struck off).

6.3: Concluding comments

This project's findings have some limitations. The number of students interviewed was relatively small (50) as was the number of professionals (50). The students in our sample had varying unseen disabilities and the extent to which these affected the students concerned differed. Their perceptions of how their disability identity was constructed also varied so that there was not, nor was there expected to be, one single 'disabled student social worker' experience. The treatment students described experiencing in response to their disability also varied. However, this is a challenge facing the validity of any piece of qualitative research. Nonetheless, the student sample was broadly representative, although problems in respect of national statistics on disabled social work students make it difficult to determine accurately how representative our sample was. The professional sample likewise was small. The three subgroups are unlikely to reflect all the experiences of those in the field but rather offer a limited profile of key issues. The study used a volunteer sample and the introduction of potential bias in terms of those wanting to voice their own negative or positive experiences should be acknowledged. The study also faced time and resource constraints which made face-to-face interviews with all participants problematic. Consequently, a number of telephone interviews were necessary, perhaps resulting in the omission of non-verbal information. Notwithstanding these limitations, the study has used

these approaches to surface and explore key issues in placement support for disabled students. It has generated a large amount of qualitative data which provides a unique insight into this particular aspect of student experiences.

6.4: Recommendations

This study has shown that, although largely positive experiences were reported, there is still considerable room for improvement. New legislative imperatives which have made discrimination against disabled students unacceptable and liable to challenge in the courts will act as a driver for enhanced support for students. Based on the information gathered from our data we make the following recommendations targeted at different stakeholders. As the consensus over key issues within the staff data has shown, these recommendations may transcend different groups of professionals working with disabled students on placement. These recommendations are expanded further in the PEdDS Best Practice Guide, available from the project website (www.hull.ac.uk/pedds).

6.4.1: Students

We recommend that students consider the following issues:

Pre-enrolment

- Students should research prospective courses and ask about a department's past experience of providing support for disabled students including if it has any priority system for allocating placements to meet disabled students' needs.

Disclosure

- Early disclosure allows time for adjustments to be put in place and potential difficulties to be addressed. Early disclosure can allow pre-placement planning (to find out what the placement will entail and what they may need) and will also allow the placement time to put in place reasonable adjustments. Students should make links with the disability support staff at their university, these staff might be able to advocate more on their behalf about their needs.
- Disclosure is best made to the course and the placement early on. Disclosure of disability is ultimately a matter of student choice. There are valid reasons for and against disclosure. However, if the course or placement is not aware of the student's disability it may not be able to make appropriate changes to help them. Not telling the course or placement about a disability may work against a student if it is later thought they were deliberately misleading. In addition, most courses (and professional bodies) require that students declare any health conditions or disability from the outset. We therefore recommend early disclosure by students.

Rights and entitlements

- Students should claim what they are entitled to. Although some may not think of themselves as disabled, they may be entitled to support such as Disabled Students Allowance (DSA), a fund to assist with costs incurred in attending their course, as a direct result of their disability (see www.dfes.gov.uk/studentssupport). An assessment of needs, arranged through the Disability Service at the university (and their LEA), will establish any entitlement. This funding is available to students on postgraduate and undergraduate courses, both full and part-time routes.
- Students should tell their DSA assessor who undertakes the assessment of need that their course will include time on placement. This will enable the needs assessment to take account of this.
- If the original assessment does not account for time spent on placement then students should ask that their needs be re-considered prior to going on placement to account for this crucial part of their course.

Articulating needs and explaining support

- We recommend that students clarify their support needs at the pre-placement meeting. Students can use their pre-placement meeting to clarify the adjustments available to them, any requirements they have and who they can approach for support.
- Students should be able to inform someone (a named individual) if they are in difficulty. If things are not working, they should be honest and let someone know as soon as possible. The right atmosphere should encourage students to not feel afraid to do this.

Students' responsibilities

- We encourage students to be aware of their responsibilities. The legislation gives them rights as disabled students. With rights also come responsibilities. A professional education course is different from other courses as students will engage in direct work with service-users – being upfront and honest about needs and any potential risks is good practice for an embryonic professional. Professional bodies (for example, General Social Care Council or Nursing and Midwifery Council) have certain rules and regulations that they will need to comply with as a requirement of access and registration.

6.4.2: Placement co-ordinators/academic staff

We recommend that staff consider the following areas of their course and course delivery:

Promoting disclosure

- Programme handbooks and websites should include examples of support and adjustments that have been provided to disabled students on placement.
- Programme staff should be familiar with the range of supports and adjustments that can be offered to students on placement. They also need to be familiar with the university's written procedures for the disclosure of information.
- Students should be given clear information on:
 - Whether disclosure to programme staff or disability staff means that information about a disability will be automatically passed on to a placement provider.
 - Whether they can choose to withhold that information from placement staff and what the consequences of doing so might be.
 - Whose responsibility it is to inform the placement provider about a student's disability.

Working with university disability services

- Programmes need to establish mechanisms for on-going communication with disability staff with regard to students' needs on placement.
- Academic staff should undertake training in disability rights and awareness.
- Placement selection and planning for disabled students need to start early and involve disability support staff.

Planning and monitoring placements

- Placement allocation for disabled students should be prioritised over that for other students in order that adequate planning time is available.
- Details of adjustments or support offered to disabled students should be incorporated into placement agreements.
- Robust systems for monitoring disabled students' needs on placement and the continued appropriateness of adjustments are required.

Making adjustments

- Students' needs for adjustments on placement should be considered by programme staff and practice assessors/teachers, working in collaboration with disability support staff.
- The impact of any aids or adaptations on the placement setting as a whole needs to be addressed and managed as part of placement planning.
- Adjusting the pace of placements may be an appropriate form of adjustment and should be considered.
- Where there are concerns about the impact of a student's disability on their level of competence, programmes should ensure that reasonable adjustments have been made.
- Where there are concerns that a disability may affect a student's fitness for practice, a careful risk assessment which can be communicated to others, including the student themselves, should be completed.
- Those organising placements should prioritise disabled students in order that they can be allocated practice assessors/teachers with a wide range of relevant experience.

Valuing disabled students

- Academic staff need to be aware of the contribution which disabled students can make to both placement setting and the profession and should be able to communicate this to others, including students themselves.
- Staff should monitor placement allocation to ensure that disabled students are not being offered less attractive placements than other students.

6.4.3: Practice assessors/teachers

We recommend that the following areas need addressing by practice assessors/teachers and their managers and agencies:

Practice assessment

- Disability support services and academic staff should provide advice concerning possible difficulties of assessment to new and existing practice assessors/teachers.
- We recommend that practice assessors/teachers raise any concerns early with academic staff or the placement co-ordinator and there is careful recording and discussion of the matters giving cause for concern.

Workload

- Extra work may result from the preparation and supervision of a disabled student. Employers should acknowledge this in terms that are relevant (for example, workload adjustment).
- Practice assessors/teachers have an important role to play in feeding back to the professional body which competence tasks are particularly difficult, relevant and meaningful in relation to the core requirements for qualification.

Practice assessors/teachers in their agency

- Practice assessors/teachers should recognise that they may have a key role in communicating the needs and abilities of a disabled student to the wider staff team. Human resources staff may be able to assist here.
- Human resources staff may also have a role to play in assisting practice assessors/teachers to undertake this role. Human resources training on such issues should be extended to the wider team, not just social work colleagues.
- Practice assessors/teachers should have a clear sense that their role is sufficiently valued. This is the responsibility of their agency (managers and colleagues), the profession and higher education providers.

Disclosure

- Practice assessors/teachers recognise the difficulties but also the importance of disclosure of an unseen disability. Their experiences and supportive attitudes should be communicated to students and disability staff to encourage disclosure.
- Information on the sources of support available to students should be communicated to practice assessors/teachers regularly, and should include the name of a key contact from the student's academic programme.

Planning for students

- Practice assessors/teachers need to be provided with opportunities to plan for students with unseen disabilities. Those organising placements should give priority to students with particular learning needs or circumstances as this gives more time for planning. This should continue where it happens, and other organisations should give it consideration.
- Reviews and monitoring, formally and informally, should be accepted as essential.

Training

- Training for practice assessors/teachers (and for those delivering such training) should specifically address issues of the law relating to their responsibilities, the obligations of their agencies, assessing practice, disclosure, planning and arrangements together with approaches that are helpful.

6.4.4: Disability support staff

We recommend that disability support staff take into consideration the following areas to ensure the effective support of disabled students:

Assessment of need and access reports

- Disability support staff should discuss the issue of placements with students prior to their formal assessment of needs undertaken by the Access Centre.
- Disability support staff should ensure that the assessor at the Access Centre is aware that the student will be on placement as part of their course and that this should form part of their recommendations.
- In the absence of specific recommendations from the Access Centre, disability support staff should communicate with departmental staff to identify learning support recommendations that are transferable to, and appropriate for, the placement area.

Working with students

- Disability support staff should discuss with and advise the student on the potential benefits of disclosure to the placement agency as well as the implications of not disclosing.
- Disability support staff have a role in advising the academic department on involving students in discussions and/or disclosure of their disability to the placement agency.
- Disability support staff should clarify which member of academic staff will undertake responsibility for disclosure if the student wishes to disclose to placement staff but does not feel confident to do so. This also involves agreement as to what information about a student's disability can be disclosed and to whom.

Working with academic and placement staff

- Disability support staff should work with the academic department to establish mechanisms to ensure that students' needs are considered prior to a placement being selected.
- Disability support staff support and advise academic staff in identifying and delivering appropriate reasonable adjustments in the placement agency.
- Disability support services need to provide advice on additional funding for supportive technology and/or other aids and adaptations for the placement – whether supplied through the GSCC or other sources.
- Disability support staff could contribute to training programmes aimed at practice assessors/teachers.

Institutional policy and procedures

- Disability support staff need to make explicit and clarify their own institution's confidentiality policy and its stance on disclosure of disability and whether that includes (or not) disclosure to the placement agency.
- Disability support staff may provide guidance to institutional committees responsible for developing guidance documents on placement learning.
- Disability support staff have a role in developing procedures which outline the university's approach to managing disclosure to external agencies and developing and delivering reasonable adjustments on placement.

Staff development and training

- Disability support staff should obtain information on the learning approaches and assessment methods that take place in social work placements.
- Disability support staff should familiarise themselves with the requirements of professional regulatory bodies such as the GSCC including National Occupational Standards and issues relating to fitness to practice.

6.5: Summary of recommendations

Many of these recommendations are based upon the examples given to us by students and staff. It is evident that some institutions had addressed the issues of disabled social work students in more detail than others. These final summary recommendations bring together common themes in best practice and identify those areas where support can be clarified and enhanced:

- There is a need to break down the stigma that inhibits early disclosure: this ultimately assists with planning and may lead to fewer placement breakdowns for disabled students. Students need to be informed at an early stage of the benefits of disclosure: such benefits need to be specific and deliverable, for example, assistance with IT, flexibility regarding placement timing, hours or assessment.
- Pre-placement planning is essential for disabled students on placement, this entails ensuring reasonable adjustments are in place and placement staff are briefed (with consent from the disabled student). It also includes 'finding out' what the student needs and what impact their disability has on them and their practice (one dyslexic student for example, is not the same as another).
- Confidentiality needs to be maintained for disabled students by establishing 'who needs to know' and achieving clarity about who informs the placement of a student's disability.
- There is a need for a consistent approach to fitness to practice issues between the university departments and the General Social Care Council. Such an approach could offer guidance and support on distinguishing between competence and disability.
- Social work academics and practice assessors/teachers need more training on disability awareness, knowledge of approaches to supporting students with specific disabilities and understanding of the impact disability can have on a student's placement learning.
- Social work programmes and partner agencies need to develop policies and guidelines to assist in supporting disabled students. Such policies should identify communication channels between different stakeholder groups as well as responsibilities.

6.6: Conclusion

The comments, concerns and issues identified by participants in this project have been a consistent feature of the research literature for the last decade as documented in the first part of this report. This study has provided a voice for disabled social work students to make their views on future provision and support heard. Improving support has never been more important given new disability legislation discussed earlier. It is now for professional bodies, social work programmes and placement providers to develop policies and action plans that are grounded in the views of disabled students presented here.

Appendix One: Search terms used for literature review

1. Placements
2. Unseen disability
3. Social work students
4. Disabled
5. Placement learning
6. Practice placement
7. Mental health problems
8. Mental health difficulties
9. Anxiety / Stress / Psychosis
10. Depression
11. Disabled social workers
12. Disabled professionals
13. Dyslexia
14. Specific Learning difficulty
15. Dyscalculia
16. Dyspraxia
17. Hidden disability
18. Hidden/unseen impairment
19. Social care practitioner
20. Blind / visually impaired
21. Deaf/Hearing impaired
22. Mobility
23. Disability
24. Disclosure
25. Confidentiality
26. Psychiatric disability
27. Professional education
28. Attitudinal barriers
29. Environmental barriers
30. Disability support
31. Placement guidance
32. Disability support
33. Off-campus learning
34. Work based learning
35. Work experience
36. Hidden medical conditions
37. Asthma
38. Epilepsy
39. Chrohn's Disease
40. Fibromyalgia

Appendix Two: Sample consent form

A member of the project team will have contacted you to discuss the above project. Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed and for contributing your views. You are asked to sign this form to demonstrate that you understand the nature of the project and you provide your consent to participate.

All information will be confidential to the project team. However if information is received that may place you or others at risk of harm, then professional duty obliges us that this information be shared with the relevant person or body. The interview will be audio taped and then transcribed, unless you request otherwise. Tapes will be destroyed at the end of the project.

Your anonymity will be protected in any reports, publications and/or presentations following completion of the project.

You are free to withdraw from the research at any time (including during the taped interview). This will not affect your studies in any way.

"I agree to participate in this study, the nature of which has been explained to me by a member of the research team. I understand that participation in this study does not constitute disclosure of my disability to the University for the purposes of any anti-discrimination legislation. I understand that signing this form does not affect my right to withdraw from the study at any time."

Name.....

Date.....

Signature.....

I have explained the nature of the study.

Name.....Date.....
(Research Assistant)

Appendix Three: Interview schedules

- **Student**

1. What support, if any, are you receiving from the Disability Service at
2. How has the support been on placement? Can you give me a particular example when you have felt supported on placement?
 - **what sort of help did you receive?**
 - **who supported you?**
3. Can you give me an example of a placement experience when you have not felt supported?
 - **what happened?**
 - **what sort of support would have been of help to you?**
4. Have you ever felt that you have been treated differently because of your disability whilst on placement? If, yes, what happened to make you feel this? How did you react?
5. Do you feel that the placement and practice assessor/teacher (s) have fully understood the nature of your disability and acknowledged its impact?
 - **University/Dept**
6. Can you think of any benefits that your experience of having an unseen disability has brought to your placement?
7. What do you think are the key challenges that you will face in your placement as a direct result of your disability?
 - **impact on colleagues / clients**
8. Do you feel that your choice of placements has been limited because of your disability? If yes, in what way and by whom?
 - **For example, do you think you were placed with your particular practice assessor/teacher because they had experience of supervising students in the past with similar impairments?**
 - **Do you think this is fair?**
9. Are you aware of legislation and your rights as a disabled student in higher education?
10. Have you disclosed your disability on placement? How did this make you feel?
If no, what made you decide not to disclose? What might have helped you disclose?

11. Do you think placement staff need to know about your disability? - why?
 12. Who should be responsible for disclosing your disability to the placement area?
 - 13: Do you think staff involved in social work training need more training around supporting students with unseen disabilities on placement?
 14. When you finish your course and start applying for jobs, are you concerned that your disability may affect your chances for employment?
- If yes, in what way and how do you plan to manage this?**
15. Is there anything else you would like to contribute to this discussion?

- **b) Placement Co-ordinators**

1. How many students with unseen disabilities have you arranged support for on placement?
2. What type(s) of unseen disability did they have?
3. What challenges do you think students with unseen disabilities might face whilst on placement?
4. What benefits do you think a student with an unseen disability can bring to a placement?
5. Do you think your placement partners have sufficient resources and expertise to meet the needs of social work students with unseen disabilities?
6. Do you choose some placements/practice teachers in preference to others for a student with unseen disabilities?
7. Do you think supervising a student with an unseen disability entails more work for yourself? Can you describe what extra work you undertake?
8. Can you give me a specific example of in which you have supported a student with an unseen disability on placement?
 - **what were the students needs?**
 - **how did you support them?**
9. Did you have concerns relating to this particular students ability to achieve
 - a) core competencies
 - b) fitness to practice
10. Does the University/Social Work Dept provide opportunities for a student to disclose or discuss support needs prior to going on placement?
11. Has a student disclosed an unseen disability to you during a placement?
 - **what did you do? How did you react?**
 - **what do you think you would do?**

12. Do you think placement staff should be informed about a student's unseen disability?

13. Who should be responsible for informing the placement?

The DDA has been extended to cover education which basically means that Universities/Departments are responsible for ensuring that the needs of disabled students are met, this includes on placement.

14 . Were you aware of this change in legislation?

15. Does your dept have a specific policy for meeting the support needs of disabled social work students on placement

- **is it part of the audit process?**
- **does it form part of the placement contract/learning agreement?**
- **equal opps policy ref to disability, confidentiality, disclosure**

16 . Who do you think should have overall responsibility for ensuring that the needs of social work students are met on placement?

17. Who is best placed to deliver support on placement? **you, dis services, prac teacher, personal supervisor?**

18. What further training do you feel think that you and your colleagues need to be able to meet the needs of students with unseen disabilities?

- **c) Practice Assessors/Teachers**

1. Are you aware of any students with unseen disabilities that you have supported on placement? If so, how many?

2. What type(s) of unseen disability did they have?

3. What challenges do you think students with unseen disabilities might face whilst on placement?

4. What benefits do you think a student with an unseen disability can bring to a placement?

5. Do you think supervising a student with an unseen disability entails more work for yourself? Can you describe what extra work you undertake?

6: Can you give me a specific example in which you have supported a student with an unseen disability on placement?

- **what were the students needs?**
- **how did you support them?**
- **did you feel supported by the University?**

7. Did you have concerns relating to this particular students ability to achieve

- a) core competencies
- b) fitness to practice

-If yes, what were your concerns

8. Has a student disclosed an unseen disability to you during a placement?

- **what did you do? How did you react?**
- **what do you think you would do?**

9. Do you think you should be informed about a student's unseen disability?

who should be responsible for informing you?

10. Does your agency/team have an equal opportunities policy that includes specific reference to disability, confidentiality and disclosure?

11. Who should have responsibility for providing support on placement for social work students with unseen disabilities?

12. What further training do you think that you and your colleagues need to better meet the needs of social work students with unseen disabilities?

- **d) Disability support staff**

1. Have you/your service provided support to social work students with unseen disabilities on placement? Can you provide an approximate figure of how many?

2. What types of unseen disability did they have?

3. What challenges do you think social work students with unseen disabilities might face whilst on placement?

4. What benefits do you think a social work student with an unseen disability can bring to a placement?

I would like to explore a specific example/examples of support you have offered to social work students with unseen disabilities undertaking placements.....

5. Can you give me a specific example in which you have supported a social work student with an unseen disability on placement;

- **what were their needs?**
- **were any reasonable adjustments put in place?**
- **were the placement staff helpful?**
- **was the social work dept helpful?**
- **any other examples?**

6. Do you think placement staff should be informed about a social work student's unseen disability?

who should be responsible for informing the placement?

7. Does the University/Social Work Dept provide opportunities for a social work student to discuss their support needs prior to going on placement?

8. Does Disability Services reassess social work students' needs prior to them going on placement?

NO - do you think you should? If not you then whom?

9. If a student needs additional support on placement, who ought to provide and pay for that support?

10. Does your service and/or your institution have a written policy/guidelines for students undertaking placements?

- **is this general guide for placements?**
- **Is there a specific one for disabled students?**

11. What further training do you feel that you and your colleagues need to be able to meet the needs of social work students with unseen disabilities on placement?

12. From your point of view, are you and your service meeting the needs of social work students on placement?

13. In an 'ideal' world how do you think social work students' needs on placement might better be met?

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