**‘A significant positive impact’: Delivering the End Point Assessment for the Social Work Degree Apprenticeship.**

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**Key Words**

Degree Apprenticeship; Assessment; End Point Assessment; Social Work Education;

**Abstract**

Social Work Degree Apprenticeships were launched in England as a new pathway to professional qualification in 2019, offering an alternative to the established Undergraduate and Post graduate social work training routes. The first cohorts of apprentices have now completed their End Point Assessment (EPA) but with assessment formats having been disputed from the inception of the English Degree, the pressure on those institutions and staff delivering the EPA remains considerable, particularly with changes already planned. Apprentices who experienced this process for the first time may also have faced greater uncertainty, than peers on more traditional qualifying programmes.

The UoC was one of the first English universities to offer the Social Work Degree Apprenticeship and accordingly is one of the first to complete the EPA. This article, authored by the Lead Assessor and the Employer Relationships Manager for the Social Work Degree Apprenticeship describes the process of delivery in depth, as well as discussing lessons learned and areas for development. A review has found no existing literature on the EPA and this article is thereby intended as a contribution to this gap, as well as providing an opportunity to share lessons from the experience with those who may be delivering the EPA in the future.

**Introduction**

This article reflects on the experience of delivering the End Point Assessment (EPA), the final assessment stage in the new English Social Work Degree Apprenticeship. The host institution (UoC) was one of the first English universities to offer the Social Work Degree Apprenticeship and consequently is also one of the first to deliver the EPA, which was completed in June 2022. A review completed by the authors has shown limited literature on the Social Work Degree Apprenticeship and nothing at all on the End Point Assessment. A new book (Stone and Shannon, 2022) which focusses closely on every aspect of the new Social Work Degree Apprenticeship nevertheless omits the End Point Assessment (Beesley, 2022) ,leaving those trying to implement this complex new process, requiring support on how to achieve this most effectively. Accordingly, this article, authored by the Lead EPA Assessor and the Employer Relationships Manager for the SW Degree Apprenticeship is intended as a helpful addition to the literature, combining an opportunity to encourage discussion and to share lessons from the experience, with those who may be delivering the EPA in the future.

**The Social Work Degree Apprenticeship**

In England, social worker is a protected title, making it illegal to use the professional designation without having completed the required training and registered with the relevant regulator (Social Work England, 2022). Between 2001 and 2012, regulation in England was directed by the General Social Care Council (GSCC) which was then replaced by the Health Professions Council, which changed its name to the Health Care Professions Council (HCPC) in recognition of its new remit (McLaughlin et al, 2016). Social workers were the largest professional group to be regulated by the HCPC and in 2018 the Social Workers Regulations Act created a new professional regulator, Social Work England, solely responsible for social work regulation in England (Gov.UK, 2018)

These changes reflect the ways in which political agendas and differences in Government have always impacted on the social work profession, as well as the professional qualifying routes (McLaughlin,et al, 2016), leading Hanley (2022b, p.408) to remark that ‘social work in England is seemingly always in some form of crisis.’ The Social Work Degree Apprenticeship is no exception to this roller coaster of English social work provision , with Higgs (2022) describing the Award as part of a neo-liberal context for social work education which has increased and arguably weakened the potential qualifying routes.

Social work was first validated as a degree level profession in the UK, in 2004 (Higgs, 2022). Initially, an Undergraduate BA route which had not previously been available was created alongside the more traditional post graduate MA route. ‘Fast track’ post graduate programmes including ‘Step Up’, Think Ahead and Frontline, were later established as a means of attracting graduates to the profession in an effort to create ‘exemplary’ training (Cooper et al, 2016) based on the notion that existing social work education was inadequate (Higgs, 2022; Hanley, 2022a). Many of these later ‘fast track’ programmes are contested (Hanley, 2021), as is the increasingly congested landscape, with Bamford (2015) warning against mounting managerial and employer involvement in social work education. Hanley (2022a) supports Bamford’s view in a comprehensive examination of fast-track programmes which concludes that, whilst they undoubtedly provide new opportunities, the segregation into different routes is damaging social work education rather than enhancing it

The increased employer involvement which Bamford (2015) and Hanley (2022a) both caution against is however, at the heart of the English Social Work Degree Apprenticeship which was launched as a new pathway to professional qualification in 2019. The design of the programme shares the combining of work-based learning with time spent in an academic setting, which as Higgs (2022) describes is conventional for social work education and also consistent with international models. The Social Work Degree Apprenticeship, is designed to add democratisation to University education by increasing access for non-traditional students whilst concomitantly allowing for greater workforce planning and increased diversity within the profession (Higgs, 2022). This is in direct contrast with a more elitist model of University education provided by the fast track programmes which have traditionally favoured those with class and financial privileges (Hanley, 2022a).

Skills for Care (2019) described the introduction of the new Social Work Degree Apprenticeship as a channel for producing ‘a capable and confident social worker with the skills, knowledge and behaviours ready to work with and support some of the most vulnerable people in society’. However, despite this positivity, the initial introduction of the new programmes was delayed from the very beginning by ‘wrangling over assessment formats’ (Turner, 2018) highlighting the difficulties associated with the EPA from inception. However, the Social Work Apprenticeship standard and the End Point Assessment (EPA) developed by the Social Work Trailblazer group were finally given approval by the Institute for Apprentices and Technical Education in 2018 (IFA, 2018).

At the time of the launch in 2018, Jane Hanrahan, Chair of the ‘Trailblazer ‘group consisting of local authorities and Universities who developed the Programmes, anticipated their “significant positive impact” on encouraging people to enter the Social Work profession, thereby improving recruitment (Turner, 2018b). The Chief Social Worker for Children and Families, Isabelle Trowler added to this stating:

“This will further broaden the entry routes into one of the most rewarding professions – helping to bring in a diverse cohort of talented individuals, and equipping them with the knowledge and skills they need to be outstanding social workers,” (Turner, 2018b)

The Social Work Degree Apprenticeship is a more recent addition to a long UK history of work-based learning although traditionally Apprenticeships have been associated with manual trades such as hairdressing, or construction, and therefore arguably viewed as less prestigious than University Awards (Stone and Worsley, 2021, Higgs, 2022). However, in 2012 ‘The Richard Review’ raised the public profile of Apprenticeships by associating them with University provision, such as undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, stating that the degree status would signal ‘ to the world that this person has accomplished something real and meaningful’ (Richard, 2012, p. 9; Stone and Worsley, 2021).

The Government ‘s apprenticeship reforms also created the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IFA) an employer-led independent organization, with a Board appointed by the Secretary of State for Education (Stone and Worsley, 2021) .

Since the introduction of the new Apprenticeship Standard for England in 2014, there continues to be development across the knowledge, skills and behaviours and the associated assessment plans. These changes are led by the Trailblazer group and they discuss developments to the standard and the EPA alongside current academic practice, collaboration with industry partners and feedback from key stakeholders. Proposals for changes to the Apprenticeship Standard and/or End Point Assessment Plans are then put out to consultation, to gather feedback from training providers and other key stakeholders as to the viability and practicality of proposed changes. The feedback will contribute to a wider debate as to the practicalities of delivering the proposed new standard and/or assessment in academic degrees, which will then identify potential changes to course structures and module content. Importantly, the purpose of the consultation is to ensure that the agreed and published standard and assessment plan has the required elements that meet the future needs of industry, and prepares apprentices for the challenges of new ways of working both in industry practice and in varied forms of engagement.

The UoC was one of the first Higher Education Institutions to adopt Social Work Degree Apprentices, with the first cohort starting in 2019. As with all Social Work Degree Apprentice programmes, the UoC programme centres around work-based learning, with apprentices attending university for one day’s teaching per week, with the other four days spent in the workplace (Higgs, 2022). Teaching includes lectures, seminars, practical workshops, small group discussions and web-based learning, with a blend of group and independent study.

Whilst employment conditions vary according to employer, in general apprentices are entitled to the same rights as other employees, including a contract of employment and paid holidays per year, with additional bank holidays.

The course costs are met by the employer, via the apprenticeship levy scheme. This requires any employer who pays over £3million per annum in wages , to use the associated levy tax exclusively on Social Work apprenticeship fees. At present, employers are able to spend a total of £23,000 per Social Work Degree apprentice from the levy account. In the event that a participating University should charge more than this, the employer is required to make up the extra amount themselves, rendering the programme potentially expensive particularly when competing with other practice pressures (Stone and Worsley, 2021) .

The national funding regulations for Apprenticeships specifically state that apprentices cannot be asked to contribute financially to the cost of training, on programme or end-point assessment (Gov.UK, 2022). If at any time, an Apprentice should decide to leave the programme, costs already paid cannot be recouped from them, however, the impact of leaving the programme on the apprentice’s employment is dependent on agreed terms with their employer. If they have been recruited as an apprentice and long-term employment is reliant on successful completion, then this may have a detrimental impact on their future with that employer (Gov.UK, 2022).

Employers have to meet the salary of each individual apprentice, enable work-based placements and factor in the cost of the time spent in University (Stone and Worsley, 2021). These factors create pressure to succeed on the University and the local authorities, as well as the apprentice themselves, since the investment of both time and money can make the achievement of success almost compulsory. Accordingly, the pressure on the End Point Assessment (EPA) is intense since it represents the last stage of the Degree Apprenticeship and the student’s final opportunity to achieve a desired grade.

The employer focussed model is firmly in line with the Government reforms of 2015 and the establishment of Trailblazer Groups. However, the extent of control given to the employers has been the subject of some contention, with Stone and Worsley (2021) suggesting that the model may be ‘inward-looking,’ and McNicoll (2017) reporting a view of the Social Work Degree Apprenticeship as ‘parochial’ with student apprentices effectively ‘one trick ponies’, trained only to work for their sponsoring employer.

Nevertheless, given the recruitment and retention issues in social work, particularly following Covid -19, the Social Work Degree Apprenticeship represents a positive means of enabling people to enter the profession, without facing large student debt and associated wellbeing issues (Ravalier, 2022)

**The Social Work Apprenticeship Standard**

The Trailblazer groups created by the 2015 Government reforms, gave employers considerable authority and control over designing the Apprenticeship Standard and assessments (Tovey, 2017; Stone and Worsley, 2021). The Apprentice Standard is specific to the Social Work Degree Apprenticeship for England and establish the skills, knowledge and behaviours that an apprentice should be able to demonstrate at the end of their undergraduate degree. However, even before the programmes were launched, there were disputes about the means of assessment, with employers and higher education institutions entering into debate over the IFA plans to include observation as part of the final ‘end-point’ assessments (EPA). Whilst the IFA pushed for observation in the interests of rigorous assessment, the Trailblazer groups in turn felt that in practice this approach would be “impractical and inappropriate” (Turner, 2018a).

The final agreement for the EPA, signed off in 2018, afforded it a value of 60 credits, corresponding to the place of a final dissertation within a more traditional Undergraduate or Postgraduate Degree, although Employers and partner universities also retained the choice to include a dissertation if they chose (Turner, 2018b).

Prior to eligibility for the EPA, the apprentice must complete and pass practical placements in two contrasting settings, one with a focus on statutory work. In order to be eligible for the EPA, apprentices must also have been awarded 300 academic credits, 120 at level four, 120 at level five and 60 at level 6 with a provisional grade. Apprentices must also be able to communicate at Level 7 of the International English Language Testing System. Finally, apprentices must hold, and be able to evidence a pass certificate for English and maths at level two, with a grade C/level 4 or above. As set out in the ESFA Funding Rules, apprentices can commence their apprenticeship and their practical course, with employer approval, without these level two qualifications, but must pass these before the EPA period. To facilitate this, most training providers will offer functional skills training and assessment opportunities for these apprentices during the course to enable apprentices to attain these prior to EPA Gateway.

As the apprentices progress through their apprenticeship, they will advance their knowledge, develop and employ their skills and behaviours in a variety of key areas. The Apprenticeship Standard is the bedrock of the final qualification and the University of C BA Social Work undergraduate degree is itself mapped to these, to ensure that apprentices are given the opportunity to make significant progress through the course towards the completion of the practical period, the undergraduate degree and the end point assessment.

To manage the process effectively, progress reviews are scheduled at key points in the degree and in each academic year. These provide the opportunity for the apprentice to meet with the training provider and their employer in a formal discursive environment, to discuss progress so far, identify any areas for development, or from existing or new action planning as well as accounting for key compliance data, namely the evidencing of off the job (OTJ) training hours. These meetings do not exclusively exist to provide a single place for stakeholder communication but enhance what is already a progressive and collaborative discussion between all three parties. They are opportunities to review the training plan and record progress, and to enable to apprentice to take responsibility for their own professional and educational development alongside the responsibilities of the training provider to manage their learning and for the employer to enhance their workplace experiences, by identifying additional workplace opportunities to enhance the competence and confidence of apprentices to the knowledge, skills and behaviours of the Apprenticeship Standard.

At the point of End Point Assessment, the apprentice will attend an EPA Gateway Review meeting, which at the University of C takes place within a progress review meeting. The reasoning for this is that apprentices will be finalising their off the job training hours as the EPA period signifies the end of the practical period of the degree. The requirements of the EPA Gateway Review are set out in the apprenticeship assessment plan and ensure the apprentice is ready to enter the EPA, has passed and evidenced the appropriate qualifications, and has achieved the necessary undergraduate credits. It is again worth noting that prior to this EPA Gateway Review, and specifically at the University of C, the apprentice may have been completing additional qualifications in English and Maths, though this will already be part of their action plan from previous progress reviews.

The key factor in successful progress reviews and EPA Gateway Review is up to date data that evidences compliance, together with a detailed SMART action plan that identifies the lead responsibility and agreed timeframe for completion. When all evidence has been confirmed, the employer and thetraining provider can then agree that the apprentice is ready to enter the EPA, as per the requirements of the assessment plan.The University will then take this information to an internal EPA Gateway Board to record that this has been completed in accordance to the Quality Handbook.

These requirements demonstrate the complexity of the Social Work Degree Apprenticeship and the integrated EPA, that run concurrently with the successful completion of the undergraduate degree. Once apprentices have fulfilled all the requirements and passed through the Gateway, they finally qualify for the End Point Assessment (EPA) which currently lasts for three months.

**Preparation for the End Point Assessment (EPA)**

Beesley (2022) states that the End Point Assessment (EPA) ‘requires a high level of comprehension and significant preparation from the student.’ In our experience of delivering the EPA, it requires concomitant comprehension and preparation from the Higher Education provider. Additionally, in their discussion of implementing the Social Work Degree Apprenticeship, Stone and Worsley (2021, p.688) suggest that to implement this new Programme, ‘Employers might need to develop their understanding of the educative role they must adopt.’ These descriptions all resonate with our experience at the start of the new academic year 2021/22, as whilst the two strands of the EPA may appear superficially straightforward, as we will describe in this section, the practicalities of delivering a complex and multi-layered assessment with no precedent to draw on were in reality, challenging.

At present, the End Point Assessment or EPA consists of two distinctive Strands, both comprising two separate components.

Strand One requires a Case Study of between 4,500 – 5,000 words , followed by an Executive Presentation of a maximum of twenty minutes, based on the Case Study and delivered to a panel consisting of the Lead EPA Assessor, Employer Representative and expert by Experience.

Strand Two also consists of two component parts, a video or role-played Exam Scenario and subsequent Professional Discussion. The scenario exercise is expected to containevolving, complex and challenging case scenarios, involving risk, abuse and/or exploitation, which also combine generic and specialist elementsin orderto produce generic workers, capable of working in specialist areas. In responding to the scenario, apprentices are required to show cultural competence, to be strengths based and also compliant with the Knowledge and Skills Statements (Department of Health, 2015; Department for Education, 2014) and Professional Capabilities Framework (BASW,2022).

To help prepare them for successful completion of both Strands, from the start of the new academic year in September 2021, the final year apprentices were provided with support sessions to set out the requirements of the End Point Assessment. This aligned the final year of the undergraduate (practical period) of the Degree Apprenticeship with the requirements of the Assessment Plan set out by the Apprenticeship Standard. These sessions provided the apprentices with the opportunity to discuss the assessment requirements, start to plan their case studies from their practice placements and begin to align evidence from their working practice to the knowledge, skills and behaviours of the Standard. The sessions were delivered by colleagues from the Social Work academic team, and were supported, in terms of assessment expectations, by the Apprenticeships Team.

Feedback on these sessions was very positive, as demonstrated by selected comments below:

‘Thanks once again to you both for your support. We all really enjoyed yesterday’s session and feel more confident in terms of the assignment and expectations.’

‘ We all found the session Informative and insightful. Thank-you for answering all our questions too and for all your dedication and hard work’

Hanley (2021) argues for the advantages of bringing students together in co-constructed learning, suggesting that those who find a topic more difficult are thereby supported by their peers in a way which generates benefits for both, as well as enhancing leadership capacity through collaboration. On the basis of the comments received, our experience echoes Hanley’s discussion, with the pre EPA sessions representing a positive and interactive opportunity for the apprentices to self-assess their progress and their readiness for the EPA. Additionally, they had the benefit of working with colleagues in the final year cohort to advance understanding through contextual and critical discussion. continuously emphasizing the apprentice’s self-determination and building their confidence to undertake this new and unfamiliar assessment process (Saville et al, 2019).

In preparation for the Strand Two video exam, the University commissioned a film production company and professional actors to produce four generic scenarios, combining specialist elements, in accordance with the Apprenticeship Standard. The case studies which underpinned the scenarios were discussed and signed off at the Local Authority Partners Meeting in October 2021. Those who could not attend the meeting were given the opportunity to meet and comment separately and their feedback was implemented. Feedback was invited through MSTeams meetings prior to the Local Authority Partners meeting and also via email.

Four video scenarios were filmed in one day at the end of the Autumn semester. Filming four scenarios allowed for a mock scenario to be made available, as well as a resit scenario, a main scenario and an alternative for the following academic year. A professional production company was commissioned to supply actors and a Director for the scenarios, which met the Apprenticeship Standard requirement to provide evolving, complex and challenging case scenarios, combining generic and specialist elements. Alongside the professional actors, university students were employed to play the parts of anyone under eighteen. This was due to the complex ethical and contractual issues involved in employing minors. Following the agreed guidance for the Case Studies, scenarios were improvised under professional direction to simulate social work practice.

At the start of the Spring semester in January 2022, prior to commencement of the EPA period, and following a specific request from the apprenticeship cohort, a practice scenario exam was organised to take place during one of the scheduled workshop sessions (Saville et al, 2019). This provided an opportunity for the apprentices to rehearse the examination processes that they would experience in the final End Point Assessment and to produce a submission from an example social work scenario. The practice exam followed the specific requirements set out in the Assessment Plan, and also provided individual exam venues for apprentices with individual learning needs.

As Saville et al (2019) indicate, responding to the needs of apprentices in this way, using a strengths-based approach, can deliver exceptional assessment results. This was demonstrated by the work submitted for this practice exam, which was of a consistently high standard, with the apprentices demonstrating an impressive understanding of the knowledge, skills and behaviours required for assessment.

Following the practice exam, between March and April 2022, Tripartite and EPA Gateway Review meetings took place for all apprentices. These meetings formally started the EPA journey for each apprentice, signalling the start of their individual Strand 1 (Case Study) part of the EPA. The meetings also provided the opportunity for clarification of all aspects, deadlines and expectations of the assessment itself.

In preparation for delivering Strands One and two, panel packs were formulated which included suggested panel questions. These packs helped to prepare panel members for the focus of the presentations and professional discussions, with these mapped to the requirements of the assessment plan. The panels also benefitted from pre-assessment discussions about the exam submission (for the professional discussion) to enable more specific questioning to take place.

**Delivering Strand One**

The Case Study component of Strand One requires apprentices to identify a practice case for approval after being reviewed by an appropriate employer representative. Part of the approval process includes whether apprentices have recognised the ethical issues and whether a service user agreement or an ethical approval process is required. Criteria for selection of the Case study is that it has been started within the last six months, is consistent with organisational mission and sufficiently complex to allow the apprentice to demonstrate reflection on values, ethics, knowledge, skills, behaviour and equality, research techniques, multi-agency working, meaningful engagement, ability to address risk at the appropriate level, and finally a service improvement recommendation.

Prior to submitting the Case Study, apprentices are also required to complete a ‘Case Study Confirmation Statement’, which acts as a guarantee that all appropriate permissions and consents have been sought in advance. Although gaining consent seemed straightforward, in practice it was one of the first challenges that we faced in delivering the EPA. To ensure there was consent from the employers, we needed some form of written agreement. However, this also had to remain anonymous in terms of the detail in the form itself so the individuals or families discussed could not be identified. Ensuring this was suitable for all purposes involved our university legal team who produced a confirmation statement so that initials or references to cases could be used within case studies, where the consent of the people themselves had not been expressly given.

Following completion of their Case Study, each apprentice completed the second part of Strand One, an executive presentation entitled:  
‘A critical case analysis; evidence-based recommendations with references to existing research.’

The executive presentation was required to demonstrate and evidence all requisite areas of the Degree Apprenticeship Standard (knowledge, skills and behaviours) for the Case Study Presentation as set out in the assessment plan (IFA, 2022).

In delivering the EPA at the UoC , we decided to stage the case study presentations via MS Teams. Covid-19 created an immediate need to stay connected through online platforms (Author,2022) and many social workers and other professionals were rapidly upskilled in using digital technology. Crawford Lee and Moorwood (2019) discuss the importance of embedding digital skills within University Degree Apprenticeships, quoting the House of Commons Education Committee, which dubbed the developments in digital technology as the ‘ Fourth Industrial Revolution.’ Additionally, the first UK lockdown response to Covid-19 was simultaneous with the final report of the Digital Capabilities for Social Work project in March 2020 (BASW, 2020). The Digital Capabilities Statement was commissioned by NHS Digital and Health Education England and delivered by the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) and the British Association of Social Work (BASW). The Statement, encouraged and enabled social workers to develop and improve their skills and knowledge in using digital technology (Author, 2022).

The use of MS Teams for the Strand One Executive Presentation, consistent with the Digital Capabilities project, allowed apprentices the opportunity to showcase their ability to present using an online platform to an assessment panel. The Strand One written Case Studies were also submitted online, via the University Virtual Learning Environment, consistent with all previous written submissions during the Social Work Degree Apprenticeship.

Apprentices received individual marks and feedback for both parts of Strand One, together with a mark which was then aggregated to form the final mark of the EPA, once Strand Two was completed.

**Delivering Strand Two**

The final Strand Two Scenario Exam took place on site at the UoC in a Computer Room. The exam venues ensured that the technology, access to the video and use of headphones were all confirmed before the exam started in order to avoid technical difficulties.

To meet the needs of any students with reasonable adjustments, the video for the exam was fully captioned and a full transcript was made available. The video was viewed through Panopto, which is the University platform for storing and presenting academic content. Through this system, as with any commercially available system, the access to subtitles and transcripts are selected by the apprentice.

The scenario exam lasted for three hours, during which apprentices were required to write an initial analysis and a case record, as well as responding to two further written questions, using these to demonstrate additional knowledge and analytical skills.

Given the deadlines specified in the Apprenticeship Standard, the Professional Discussions began the day after the Scenario Exam. In order to facilitate this, all exam papers were downloaded and sent to the Lead EPA Assessor and all other panel representatives, in advance of the Professional Discussion. Due to the tight timescale, exam papers were not formally marked at this stage, but rather read and annotated.

The Professional Discussions were held face to face at the UoC to complement the Strand One Executive Presentation, by catering for different learning styles (Honey and Mumford, 1986).

The exam scenario was then followed by the final assessment of the EPA, a Professional Panel Discussion lasting 20-30 minutes, which was mandated to take place within three to five days of the exam. The Discussion panel took place in person and comprised an employer representative, experts by experience and was Chaired by the Lead EPA.

During the professional discussion the apprentice was able to refer to copies of their examined work from the Scenario Exercise, and other notes, as desired. As in Strand One, apprentices were required to demonstrate and evidence requisite areas of the Degree Apprenticeship Standard, including knowledge, skills and behaviours as set out in the assessment plan (IFA, 2022).

The presentations from both Strands One and Two were recorded, along with the follow up Q and A, and the recordings were made available to internal and external examiners as part of the rigorous moderation and marking process.

Following both Strands and final completion of the End Point Assessment, a review meeting took place to bring together employer and training provider insights. The purpose of this was to give a general overview of the EPA, discuss and confirm areas of enhancement and to identify areas in which the employers and University can work more closely for the next academic year on the EPA. The Experts by Experience who supported the Panel processes were also asked for feedback on the process.

**Discussion**

As the Social Work Degree Apprenticeships were only approved for delivery in 2018, this was the first cohort of apprentices to undertake the EPA at the UoC and one of the first nationally. In common with Stone and Worsley (2021) we identified many positive impacts from the programme and the EPA. The grades for our first ever Social Work Degree apprentices were exceptional across the majority of the cohort and we believe this testifies to the original aim of increasing staff proficiency, as the skills and knowledge acquired through close practice and academic synergies were obvious throughout the EPA (Barron, 2018)

These synergies were echoed in the relationships between the academic and apprenticeship teams, as delivering an apprenticeship alongside an undergraduate degree requires an open, respectful and progressive working relationship. As with all aspects of higher education, the degree must meet national subject benchmark standards alongside specific regulatory standards in addition to internal academic regulation, all of which are subject to a rigorous internal and external quality assurance process. The added element of the Apprenticeship Standard and an integrated EPA, which itself is mapped to the degree modules and learning outcomes is an extensive additional layer , needing attention to detail to ensure compliance. From the experience of designing the EPA process for the University of C social work degree, the valued relationship between the academic and apprenticeships team has ensured success, as well as contributing to the wider advice and support that the University of C has been able to give to other training providers approaching the final year of degree and their own End Point Assessment processes.

However, as well as these opportunities, there were also some difficulties in the provision of Social Work Degree Apprenticeship Programmes which we encountered within our delivery of the EPA. Higgs (2022) highlights the need to acknowledge the value of Degree apprentice’s life experience and to build confidence within an academic environment which may seem unfamiliar and even at odds with their working lives. Additionally, as Degree apprentices have often spent years in the workplace there may be a resistance to ‘unlearning’ in the face of new critical directions. We certainly encountered this in the provision of the EPA where a lack of confidence at times was responsible for a reluctance to consider other perspectives

This is related to the cohort’s pioneering status, which, in our judgement, led to an underlying feeling of anxiety throughout their programme of study. Winnicott suggested that anxiety was often the result of environmental and containment failures (Arbiser et al, 2013) and this resonates with Stone and Worsley’s reflection on the need for Universities to adapt existing practices to ‘make the most of the significant experience and academic strength apprentices bring’ (2021, p.688). Hanley (2021) highlights the need for students from all ability levels to collaborate on mutual learning, which we achieved through our pre-EPA workshops, gaining very favourable feedback. However, Higgs (2022) also focusses on planning closely for the additional support needs of Social Work Degree apprentices, which may be heightened by an academic environment which feels alien to them. However, in attempting to balance this need for containment with the requirements of the EPA itself, we have concluded that, at times, we attempted to ‘over contain’ Apprentices , in order to alleviate anxiety.

One way in which we believe this over containment manifested itself was in the provision of the mock exam. We provided this in line with our generally strengths-based approach to the EPA (Saville, 2019) and in response to cohort feedback. However, the provision of the exam created anxieties, rather than alleviating them, and some apprentices became worried about their performance and any potential hitches in the actual exam itself. Higgs (2022) suggests that Degree apprentices are more likely to doubt their academic ability than traditional students and our experience supports this. Given that the provision of the mock exam was highly cost and resource intensive and seemed to heighten anxiety rather than alleviating it, we decided that moving forward we will not provide a mock exam, but will instead use the EPA Workshops to help apprentices, outside a more formal exam environment. This will provide a further opportunity for group discussion, alignment and mapping of the scenario to the Apprenticeship Standard and the opportunity for questions.

Anxiety also expressed itself through the involvement of employers, who had nominated students for the Degree Apprenticeship, and were therefore understandably invested in their success. Higgs (2022) discusses the pressures on employers to succeed in delivering Apprenticeships at a time of excoriating austerity and in our experience of delivering the EPA much of this anxiety and pressure manifested itself during the assessment period.

At times there was also a tension between the University as the traditional purveyor of knowledge and the role of the employers who had invested substantively in the success of their apprentices (Higgs, 2022). These tensions presented themselves throughout, but perhaps most notably as concern about equal opportunities for apprentices working in Adult’s as well as Children’s services, particularly through the Strand Two video Exam. The Standard specifies that the exam scenario should contain evolving, complex and challenging case scenarios, which also combine generic and specialist elements, but nevertheless there was repeated anxiety expressed by employers that some apprentices were being disadvantaged. In the final grades however, students working in both Adults and Children’s services were evenly represented across the grading bands, achieving equal success throughout. These conflicts over adults and childrens social work reflect ongoing divisions in the profession itself , following the Narey Report in 2014 (Gov.UK, 2014) with Beck (2015) arguing that splitting children and adults in social work education is ‘nonsense.’ Higgins (2016) extends these debates into a search for the ‘soul of social work,’ which he argues has been compromised by a dominant model of state, statutory social work. This links to the anxiety and challenges that we encountered in adapting to deliver an employer-led programme. This can, as Saville et al (2019, p.659 ) suggest creates, new ‘challenges in designing curricula and assessing students based on the strengths and skills required for their employment, rather than university mandated learning outcomes’.

Working together to deliver the EPA has required employers and the University to learn new ways of collaborating, as well as being aware of conflicts of interests and potential power struggles, which mirror the wider arguments made by Higgins (2016) . These both manifested themselves in the panels for Strands One and two, which comprised an employer representative, an expert by experience and the lead EPA assessor. It was difficult at times for employers who had been so closely involved with apprentices to step outside of this connection and understand the perspectives of others on the panels. It was noted from the employers that for next year, the employer representative ideally needed to be independent of the apprentice, and not the immediate line manager, in order to avoid any potential conflicts of interest.

This developing relationship with the employers has been a significant factor in how much has been achieved during the first cohort completing their practical period and their End Point Assessment. As with many organisations, there are many levels of management and responsibility and it was difficult at times to be able to confirm key logistical aspects of EPA delivery and assessment. The post EPA review has identified areas for development in communications and a closer working relationship between the training provider and the employer for the next cohort undertaking the EPA from March 2023. As identified, this will avoid any potential conflicts of interest, maximise the participation of key management and social work practitioners on assessment panels and avoid confusions in communication, especially when dealing with final assessment of undergraduate degrees and apprenticeships.

Higgs (2022) highlights how the role of the university providers is absent from much of the written policy and publicity material produced by the Government and other agencies, suggesting that traditional academic attributes such as critical thinking and analysis may be reduced under pressure to recruit to certain posts or authorities. Managing this potential conflict between traditional social work education curricula and the needs of a work based led apprenticeship is a key lesson from our delivery of the EPA.

One way in which we have tried to manage this is via a Stakeholder meeting involving representatives from the training provider and from all employers across all levels of the Social Work Apprenticeship. Developments in the EPA have fed into this meeting, enabling all employers to be updated on progress with assessment and the keydevelopments for the next and subsequent academic years. The stakeholder meeting also included members from the Trailblazer group which informed the discussion and enabled any development to remain consistent with the Apprenticeship Standard and the assessment plan.

Despite some of the drawbacks involved in delivering a pioneering Social work programme, there were also significant opportunities.

As the UoC was one of the first HEI’s to deliver the End Point Assessment we became a critical friend and first port of call for other universities seeking further support and guidance as they approached their own EPA assessment period. Many of the proformas we developed throughout the process have been shared as guidance with other universities who continue to consult on a weekly basis as they undertake their own EPA assessment process. The informal consultation which we provided to other providers became the impetus for this article which we believe to be the first contribution solely focussed on delivering the Social Work Degree Apprenticeship End Point Assessment.

The videos which we commissioned and managed have been procured by other universities on a licence agreement for the delivery of their own Strand 2 EPA assessments. Other providers have adapted their own assessment around these videos and offered us exceptional feedback about the range of scenarios and their appropriate content related to the requirements of the EPA Assessment Plan.

This networking has been mutually beneficial since delivering the EPA can feel very separate from the mainstream social work provision and at times quite isolating, thereby actually mirroring the experiences of some Degree apprentices (Higgs, 2022) . Building a community with other providers of the EPA has helped alleviate these feelings as the challenges, opportunities, hopes and fears could be shared across EPA providers in a collaborative spirit which mirrors social work values and ethics (BASW, 2021). Additionally, the inclusion of an expert by experience on both Strands allowed the voice of those who use services to form an inclusive and central part of the process in line with Social Work England Standards (2020).

Stone and Worsley (2021) note that the relative novelty of the new Social Work Degree Apprenticeship results in a dearth of research as to its success in achieving the original aims of improving workforce standards and retention. Similarly, more research is needed on how the Social Work Degree Apprenticeship is being experienced by employers, Universities and apprentices themselves (Higgs, 2022). Our own experience of delivering the EPA adds in a small way to this body of knowledge. From the initial anxieties experienced by all those involved, through the commissioning of a professional production company, to the bringing together of panel members from a variety of professional experiences, the entire process was daunting, occasionally isolating and overall exhausting. However, having now completed all stages of the EPA process, we have been impressed by the rigour of the completed assessment and the ways in which the different Strands allowed the apprentices to showcase their individual skills and experiences. Our experience endorses the original argument made by Skills for Care that the Social work Degree Apprenticeship is highly robust (2019). We see the final grades from the EPA as a testimony to the success of the assessment and its methods, as well as to the original aims of enhancing the professional workforce through bringing together academic learning and practice, through a variety of robust and innovative assessment methods. This was perfectly summarised in feedback received by one of the experts by experience involved with the panel process:

I found the complex family safeguarding video, specifically produced for students, with actors, as part of their assessment, a wonderfully realistic scenario and fabulous student resource. The questions allowed students to showcase their theoretical learning across the spectrum of adult/child social work and apply it to practice.

**Conclusion**

The relative novelty of Social Work Degree Apprenticeships within established university provision results in an existing dearth of literature and research (Stone and Worsley, 2021) whilst an initial literature search found no results for the Social Work Degree Apprenticeship End Point Assessment (EPA). A new book devoted to the Social Work Degree Apprenticeship also omits discussion of the EPA (Beesley, 2022). Consequently, in this article, we have set out to contribute to this gap in the literature and support future providers by sharing our experiences of delivering the End Point Assessment for the Social Work Degree Apprenticeship.

At the time of writing, a new apprenticeship standard for the social work degree apprenticeship has been approved for delivery from January 2023. For the University of C this will come into effect with the cohort due to start their apprenticeship in September 2023, while the existing cohorts will complete the existing process.

With the changes, the EPA remains an integrated element of the apprenticeship, but the changes agreed for the EPA are that the award of the degree effectively becomes the EPA point. Training providers, upon awarding the undergraduate degree to apprentices will confirm that apprentices have met the knowledge, skills and behaviours of the apprenticeship standard and so have passed the EPA.

The degree will still need to provide an authentic final assessment that enables apprentices to demonstrate connected application of the areas of knowledge, skills and behaviours through a workplace setting. This is likely to be achieved through a dissertation, final major workplace project or a combination of the two during a revised final year of the undergraduate degree.

Despite the changes, we are confident that the learning described in this paper will prepare us for delivery of the EPA changes. The intricacies of the existing End Point Assessment, together with the close participation of stakeholders not usually involved with university educational provision have rendered the delivery of the EPA both complex and resource intensive and we anticipate that this will remain the same into the future. In our experience this complexity and intensity coalesced with apprehensions about delivering an entirely new and complex programme and there were considerable anxieties over the end results. However, the final grades were excellent across students in both children and adult services, and all involved with directly delivering the EPA were impressed by the rigour of the two Strand process. Accordingly, based on our experience the Social Work Degree Apprenticeship is meeting its initial aim of making a ‘significant positive impact’ to those entering the social work profession (Turner, 2018b) and, despite its intensity, the rigour of the EPA is a significant factor in achieving this.

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