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**“An active conversation each week in supervision” – Practice Educator experiences of the Professional Capabilities Framework and holistic assessment**

**Abstract**

Since the academic year 2013-14 within England, Practice Educators (PEs) have been required to assess social work students during field placements using the framework of the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) and according to the principles of holistic assessment. Whilst the adoption of the PCF as part of the national change agenda is currently being scrutinised and debated, there has been little research or analysis regarding the practice assessment of social work students on placement and in particular, the views and experiences of PEs charged with this responsibility. This article will discuss the implementation of the PCF in relation to PEs practice assessment, based on a small scale study of PEs (n=43) from two UK universities, University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) and Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU). The article will consider some of the complexities and challenges involved in holistic assessment using the PCF and posit areas for further consideration and debate.

**Key words**

Professional Capabilities Framework, competence, capability, Practice Educator, holistic assessment, field placement

## Introduction

The Social Work Reform Board (SWRB, 2011) prompted far reaching reforms to social work education and training within England, a key change being the introduction of the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) as the overarching framework of standards and professional development in social work. The PCF consists of 9 domains of practice and knowledge that outline the expected levels of capability expected at each stage of a social worker's career. In relation to prequalifying social work students these levels include thresholds of progression prior to first placement (readiness for direct practice), at the end of first placement and at the end of final placement (TCSW, 2012a). From the academic year 2013-4, Practice Educators (PEs), who teach, supervise and assess social work students on placement, have been required to assess students holistically using the relevant level of the PCF. The adoption of the PCF as part of the change agenda is currently being scrutinised and debated (Taylor and Bogo, 2014; Burgess et al., 2014) and indeed, the PCF itself is being revised in 2015 (TCSW, 2014). TCSW will close in September 2015 (TCSW, 2015) and the new home and location of the PCF has yet to be announced. This article will discuss the implementation of the PCF in relation to PEs assessment of social work students, through the exploration of the views and experiences of PEs (n=43) from two UK universities, University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) and Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU), using the PCF to holistically assess students during the academic year 2013-14. The article will consider some of the complexities and challenges involved and raise questions for further consideration and debate.

The use of the PCF to assess social work students on placement represents a significant shift from the previous established framework of the National Occupational Standards (NOS) (TOPPS England 2002) that pertained from 2003 – 2012 and represented a competency framework of assessment. Whilst the pivotal role of the PE as *assessor* of social work students remains, it is suggested that the PCF offers a “different conceptual approach to the assessment of students on placement” (TCSW, UNDATED (a), p.2), promoting an holistic

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assessment of student practice, a focus on the development of student overall capability and a retreat from a “micro focus on competence” (TCSW, UNDATED (a), p.3). The introduction of the PCF was heralded as bringing benefits to the PE, including giving greater scope to PEs’ judgments about the quality of student practice and their suitability, with less reliance on the provision of documentary evidence from the student; providing PEs with clearer national standards about levels of capability expected of students at different points in their training and enabling PEs to more clearly identify weaker elements of student practice and areas for improvement and development (TCSW, UNDATED(a)).

#### The PCF - National requirements, local portfolio variations

Holistic assessment under the PCF was introduced from the academic year 2013-14 and PEs were required to assess and to make holistic judgements about prequalifying student’s progress and development whilst on a first or final placement (TCSW, 2012a). TCSW outlined that local collaborative partnerships should agree arrangements for coordinated student placement assessment strategies and portfolio requirements and that additional training be provided for PEs newly undertaking the new approach to assessment. The choice and combination of assessment methods was left to local partnerships, although direct observation and feedback from service users and other professionals was stipulated (TCSW, UNDATED(a)).

Such variations in local implementation also allowed some qualifying social work programmes to introduce holistic assessment of practice according to the PCF simultaneously for all students, while others introduced it as students started their degrees in 2013.

Thus, whilst the PCF is the basis on which formative and summative assessment of student progress is made, student portfolio requirements and the means by which PEs can gather and judge evidence of student learning and progression on placement may vary.

Study aims – the PE perspective

From a PE perspective, the move to holistic assessment represented a change in the manner of assessment and potentially a significant shift in role and responsibility for PEs. This, in addition to the differing local requirements of implementation, prompted our decision to undertake this small scale research project.

The study sought the views and the experiences of PEs of MA students, using the PCF to assess their first placement (70 days) in the academic year 2013 -14. As two universities within the North West, but each part of different local partnership arrangements, we had implemented the changes slightly differently, including differing portfolio requirements. We hoped that collaboration would provide valuable data and the opportunity to compare and contrast views and experiences. Only MA first placement students were selected for study. Within MMU, a

cohort of 55 MA students, in the academic year 2013-14, was the first and only cohort to be assessed under the PCF, using revised portfolio documentation, thus they were the only cohort available for study. ~~was the first cohort to be assessed under the PCF, using revised~~

~~portfolio documentation.~~ At UCLan, a cohort of 89 MA students also embarked on their first placement and were assessed under the PCF during the academic year 2013-14. However, at UCLan, a previous final year cohort had already been assessed under the PCF, so for many of the placement providers and PEs this was not the first experience of the new frameworks and

portfolio. In choosing this sample, it was acknowledged that variations in PE experience of using the PCF might be present. The study was intended to be as exploratory and open as possible, and this factor was one among several that we felt may yield themes and differences of interest. For this reason, PEs were specifically asked about their previous experience.

The study aims were as follows:

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- To gain PEs views and experiences of using the PCF to assess students, with a focus on the benefits and challenges.
- To gain PEs views on the portfolio elements and requirements and their usefulness in underpinning the PE judgment.
- To gain PEs views on the effectiveness of the PCF for identifying and assessing weaker aspects of a student's practice.

### **Methodology**

Purposive sampling was used and only current PEs of first placement MA Social work students during the academic year 2013-14 were invited to participate. For MMU, invitations to participate were sent to 36 PEs; for UCLan, invitations were sent to 56 PEs.

Data collection involved 2 methods:

- 1) the use of a semi-structured questionnaire, completed electronically and anonymously. PEs only identified themselves by email address if they wished to be invited to the focus group, after the completion of the questionnaire. PEs in both samples were sent an Information Sheet about the study and invited to participate, along with an electronic link. The same questionnaire was used for each sample although the electronic link was different and the data collected separately from each sample. The questionnaire asked for basic information from each PE regarding status, experience of being a PE and assessing under the PCF and general exploratory questions about their overall experiences and views of the process and efficacy of using the PCF to holistically assess students. This was followed by more detailed questions in relation to the particular areas of interest outlined within the study, e.g. usefulness in identifying, assessing and addressing weaker aspects of the students practice and their views and experiences of the impact and influence of the included

elements and requirements of the student portfolio. ~~Both the exploratory and~~

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~~detailed questions included space for free text responses. Both the exploratory and~~

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detailed questions included statements requiring Likert item responses but also included space for free text responses and explanatory narrative. The questionnaire was devised by the authors, primarily based on the benefits of holistic assessment outlined by TCSW (UNDATED(a)), but also inviting comment on the possible challenges we identified from our discussions with PEs at our training events and workshops. We asked an experienced PE to review the questionnaire before dissemination.

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- 2) a focus group, to which those PEs who indicated a willingness on the completed electronic questionnaire were invited. A focus group was held at MMU for MMU PEs and at UCLan, for UCLan PEs. Focus group prompt questions were prepared, based on an initial analysis of the questionnaire responses, and were sent to each participant. The prompt questions included questions relating to the use of supervision; how the PCF assists the PE in identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the student's practice; how helpful (or not) were the included elements in the student portfolio in supporting the student's learning and development and underpinning the PE assessment of the student. Each focus group was recorded and fully transcribed for analytical purposes.

Issues of consent and confidentiality were addressed in both the Information Sheet (regarding the study and the completion of the electronic questionnaire); in the Focus Group Participant Information Sheet and at the beginning of both focus groups. Ethical approval was sought and agreed from both UCLan and MMU approval committees.

Response rate and data collected

The table below indicates the response rate and basic information regarding the PEs status and experience for each sample. Explanatory notes are given where appropriate:

| MMU sample  | MMU sample  | UCLAN sample   | UCLAN sample   |
|---|---|--|--|
| <b>Invitation to participate sent to</b>  | 36 PEs  | <b>Invitation to participate sent to</b>   | 56 PEs   |
| <b>Completed questionnaires received</b><br><i>(fully completed answers that formed the basis of the analysed responses; 27 responses were received in total but 4 PEs completed basic information only or partially completed the questionnaire)</i>                                   | N = 23 (66% response rate)                                    | <b>Completed questionnaires received</b><br><i>(fully completed answers that formed the basis of the analysed responses ; 24 responses were received in total but 4 PEs completed basic information only or partially completed the questionnaire)</i> | N = 20 (36% response rate)                                   |
| <b>Experience as a PE:</b><br>5-10 students<br>More than 10 students  | N=6 (22%)<br>N= 13 (48%)                                      | <b>Experience as a PE:</b><br>5-10 students<br>More than 10 students   | N=6 (25%)<br>N=10 (41%)                                      |
| <b>Experience as a PE:</b><br>Stage 2 accredited<br><br>Working towards Stage 2<br><br>Stage 1<br><br>Working towards Stage 1   | N=17 (63%)<br><br>N=4 (15%)<br><br>N=4 (15%)<br><br>N=3 (11%) | <b>Experience as a PE:</b><br>Stage 2 accredited<br><br>Working towards Stage 2<br><br>Stage 1<br><br>Working towards Stage 1  | N=8 (33%)<br><br>N=3 (13%)<br><br>N=11 (46%)<br><br>N=2 (8%) |
| <u>(Practice Educator Professional Standards for social work (PEPS) (TCSW, 2013) outline two stages of progression for PEs – at Stage 1, PEs can supervise and assess first placement social work students; at Stage 2, PEs can also supervise and assess final placement students.</u> |   | <i>(During the academic year 2013-14 the transitional arrangements as outlined in the PEPS (2013) pertained, hence some PEs for first placement students could be Stage 1 or working towards Stage 1 status)</i>                                       | Formatted: Font color: Red                                   |
| <i>During the academic year 2013-14 the transitional arrangements as outlined in the PEPS (2013) pertained, hence some PEs for first placement students could be Stage 1 or working towards Stage 1 status)</i>   |   |  | Formatted: Font color: Red<br>Formatted: No underline        |

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| <p><b>On site or off site PE:</b></p> <p>Off site PE</p> <p>On site PE</p> <p><i>(Some PEs could have been on site and off site PEs simultaneously, for different placements)</i></p>   | <p>N=19 (70%)</p> <p>N=10 (37%)</p>  | <p><b>On site or off site PE:</b></p> <p>Off site PE</p> <p>On site PE</p>   | <p>N=7 (29%)</p> <p>N=18 (75%)</p>  |
| <p><b>Experience of assessing under the PCF:</b></p> <p>First experience of assessing under the PCF</p> <p>Had assessed under the PCF previously</p> <p><i>(For MMU, 2013-14 was the first academic year in which students were assessed under the PCF. However, some off site PEs were working for other universities who had implemented the PCF earlier and for their final year cohorts, hence their previous experience)</i></p> | <p>N=20 (74%)</p> <p>N=7 (26%)</p> <p><i>(of these PEs, 4 had assessed 2-4 students previously under the PCF and 3 PEs had assessed over 5 students under the PCF)</i></p> | <p><b>Experience of assessing under the PCF:</b></p> <p>First experience of assessing under the PCF</p> <p>Had assessed under the PCF previously</p> <p><i>(UCLAN implemented assessment under the PCF for their final year student cohort from 2012-13 and for all cohorts from 2013-14, hence the greater number of PEs who had assessed under the PCF previously)</i></p> | <p>N=4 (17%)</p> <p>N=20 (83%)</p> <p><i>(of these PEs, 8 had assessed 1 student under the PCF previously, 7 had assessed 2-4 students previously under the PCF and 5 PEs had assessed over 5 students under the PCF)</i></p> |
| <p><b>Outcome of the current MA1 placement they were assessing:</b></p> <p>Pass</p> <p>Not yet completed</p> <p>Fail</p>  | <p>N=14 (52%)</p> <p>N=13 (48%)</p> <p>N=0</p>   | <p><b>Outcome of the current MA1 placement they were assessing:</b></p> <p>Pass</p> <p>Not yet completed</p> <p>Fail</p>   | <p>N=10 (42%)</p> <p>N=14 (58%)</p> <p>N=0</p>  |
| <p><b>Focus group attendance</b></p> <p><i>(invitations were sent to those PEs who completed the questionnaire and indicated a willingness to attend the focus group)</i></p>   | <p>N=9</p>   | <p><b>Focus group attendance</b></p>   | <p>N=3</p>  |

It can be seen that the PEs in both sample sets were experienced PEs, the majority in each sample having had experience of more than 10 students. Differences between the sample sets were apparent – the MMU sample included a majority of Stage 2 PEs (or working towards Stage 2), who were off site PEs and for whom this was their first experience of assessing under the PCF; the UCLan sample set included an even split between Stage 1 and Stage 2/working towards Stage 2 PEs, the majority of respondents being on site PEs for whom this was not their first experience of assessing under the PCF.

Data was analysed thematically, following Braun and Clarke's six phase guide (2006). The phases outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) include: familiarisation with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing of themes; definition of themes and finally, the production of the report. Each author independently generated initial codes from the close reading and familiarisation with the data generated from the completed electronic questionnaires of their data set. We shared our list of codes as a method of refining initial themes and to provide prompt questions and areas of interest to be further explored within the focus groups. After transcription of the focus group data, each author read these closely, seeking initial and further codes and highlighting particular extracts from the questionnaire and the focus group discussions. Once all the data was initially coded and collated, we met again to identify and refine themes, across both data sets. Working with a large amount of data, we paid particular attention to the prevalence of the coded unit of data present across both data sets in order to ensure that our 'thematic map' accurately reflected the "meanings in the data set as a whole". (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.91). Further, Braun and Clarke (2006) also remind the researcher of the importance of retaining accounts "that depart from the dominant story in the analysis" (p.89) and we refer to these in the discussion section.

Four main shared themes emerged from the analysis of the data – the developmental nature of the PCF; the role of the PCF in the development of professional identity; reflection and the

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use of supervision and portfolio requirements. These were shared themes (across both data sets); there were also areas of difference between the two sets of PEs, which we will discuss within the shared themes.

### **Findings and analysis**

#### The context of the the 'tree of holistic assessment'

Before introducing the individual themes, we feel it important to locate these within the overall context of the findings, which indicated that holistic assessment under the PCF was well received by PEs across both data sets.

During and after the analysis of the data, the image of a tree felt helpful to us, growing upwards and outwards in response to sun and light and with sun shining through its branches, exemplified by the many positive comments made about the PCF. Such comments suggested that PEs feel 'freer' and enjoyed what the PCF and the emphasis of holistic assessment allowed them to do:

*'I have fully embraced the freedom of assessment under the PCF' (MMU PE)*

*'It has made the PE role more enjoyable and allows for more reflective and analytical supervisions with students' (UCLan PE)*

*'I think I may have picked up on more learning needs and great practice by letting go a little bit and just looking'(MMU PE)*

There were also many positive comments about the applicability and flexibility of the PCF within differing placement settings:

*'with the old key roles it was very much about tick boxing, wasn't it? And you're right that different placements didn't necessarily fit to those key role requirements. Whereas in every placement regardless of whether it's statutory, voluntary, in whatever field of social care, students are going to be doing some form of social work and PCF allows you to be far more flexible in assessing students in whatever setting they are' (UCLan PE)*

*'I think that the authenticity of the placement becomes more... important, you know? (MMU PE)*

Given that all of the PEs who participated in the study were PEs of MA first placement students, the majority of whom were not in statutory settings or roles, the flexibility offered by the PCF is taken to particularly apply to non-statutory, third sector social care settings although one PE spoke of the PCF applicability to 'non-social work' settings such as school placements.

Along with this 'freeing up' of PEs, there were also shared comments about the 'opening up' for students that assessing under the PCF permitted, allowing them more time and greater freedom to enjoy the placement :

*' I think, what the PCF allows the student to do, is just the freedom of enjoying their placement, and just demonstrating the work they're doing and their skills throughout, without having to keep thinking, I have to match what I'm doing to a key role for evidence' (MMU PE)*

However, challenges were acknowledged and posed in relation to assessing practice under the PCF, which we discuss within the discussion section. In relation to the image of the 'the tree of holistic assessment' such challenges would remind us that the trunk and the roots of the tree, that which supports holistic assessment, needs attention in order to ensure support and

nurture continued growth. Some of the particular benefits and challenges in relation to holistic assessment that emerged and which we will discuss are also assisted by this image of the tree, in that, whilst some features are exposed, others are obscured and / or obscure.

#### The developmental nature of the PCF

Respondents identified the design of the PCF framework, with its clear progressive stages, helpful in supporting both learning and assessment of students. The developmental nature and focus of the PCF was considered helpful for students, raising awareness of the links to ongoing and future development as a social worker: this linked strongly to the second theme – relating to the student’s sense of their professional social work identity.

*‘it gives the opportunity to think more widely with students about their development as social workers’ (MMU PE)*

*‘and if the PCF means anything, it’s to say, we really try and focus on practice as it develops right the way through your career’ (UCLan PE)*

The majority in both samples found the PCF capability statements helpful or very helpful in assessing the progress and identifying the learning needs of the student; however, when considering the usefulness of the PCF in identifying areas of strengths or weakness, differences became apparent between the two sample groups. Of 21 UCLan PEs who responded to that question, 16 agreed or agreed strongly. Of 21 MMU PEs, only 10 agreed or agreed strongly. 8 were not sure and comments suggested that it was too early to say. This may have been because of their relative inexperience in using the PCF to assess students.

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The majority of responses from the UCLan PEs suggested that PEs felt able to help students analyse their strengths and weaknesses through the use of the capability statements to name and assess practice.

*'Helped me identify specific areas the student was struggling with' (UCLan PE)*

*'there is more scope to comment on the whole of the student's practice and look at areas of strength and areas for development in the context of the whole' (MMU PE)*

With the UCLan PEs there was a clear emergence of a confidence in identifying "development needs" as opposed to "weakness" – illustrated by the following quotation:

*'Some key roles were always much more difficult to evidence in certain placements, where using the PCF it is developmental and you can say that this is a learning need for their next placement. That doesn't mean it's something that the student's not done'*  
(UCLan PE)

#### The role of the PCF in the development of professional identity

It was considered that the PCF allowed the students increased opportunities to discover and consider their identity as a social worker. Responses suggested two major reasons for this. As discussed above, it was felt that students and PEs were able to maintain a focus on the location of the student in a developmental journey.

*'The PCF feels much more focussed on the continuous learning of the student after finishing the course rather than completing a course and no ongoing learning.'* (UCLan PE)

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However, a particular thread emerged within the findings. This was that holistic assessment and the application of the PCF permitted the student to consider their identity as a social worker in a fashion that maintained a focus on practice but was not solely task oriented, encouraged self-awareness and engagement in reflection and raised awareness of diversity and ethics.

*'I think it (the PCF) allowed the student to discover that they were practising. You know, this wasn't just how everybody does this...this was about thinking about how you interview... how you respect service users wishes..... I think (under the key roles) they were so busy with doing the key role and meeting competence that they weren't able to discover it' (MMU PE)*

#### Reflection and the use of supervision - the 'supporting trunk of the tree'

A shared and significant theme was the impact of holistic assessment on the use and PE experience of supervision. For MMU PEs, 18 of 24 respondents said their use of supervision had changed to some degree. For UCLan PEs, 14 out of 20 respondents indicated that their use of supervision had changed.

Overall, responses suggested that supervision is more enjoyable for the PE and the proposal that the PCF has allowed for a 'freeing up' is most clearly seen in relation to supervision:

*'In supervisions now with the PCF they've just allowed for more open discussions and exploration of values and ethics and critical analysis and I've enjoyed supervisions far more' (MMU PE)*

Beyond similar shared responses, a clear difference emerged between MMU PEs and UCLan PEs in relation to the content, focus and purpose of supervision, chiefly focussed upon and illustrated by the differences between the portfolio requirements of each partnership (further discussed in the final theme).

There were clearly felt and perceived changes to the focus and content within supervision – greater emphasis on practice and the flow of student learning; more discussion and talking through interventions and scenarios with supervision offering a reflective space to do this:

*‘I feel my supervision sessions with my students have been more fluid and introspective’ (MMU PE)*

*‘more time looking at reflective skills and analysis rather than ensuring key roles are completed’ (UCLan PE)*

For MMU PEs in particular, the use of teaching tools and models used within supervision aided discussion and reflection. 12 of the 21 respondents to the question within the online questionnaire referred to tools and models used, including the Kolb learning cycle (Kolb, 1984) and the Collingwood ‘theory circle’ (Collingwood et al., 2008).

*‘theory circle – helped student gain deeper understanding of work with service users but also offered a focus for discussion and evidence of student work and ability to relate theory to practice’ (MMU PE)*

Responses from both sets of PEs also emphasised reliance on supervision to underpin PE assessment. For the UCLan PEs, this was particularly in relation to the use of supervision for reflection and deeper analysis of practice, aided by the use of the Critical Analysis of Practice (CAP) pieces required within the student’s portfolio. The centrality of the CAPs in encouraging

deeper and broader conversations about the integrated nature of practice, suggested that the portfolio became an integral part of supervision. The CAP comprises a structured template with a series of headings relating to elements of practice that encourages students to consider a holistic approach incorporating the ASPIRE process (Sutton, 1999) but also exploring aspects such as “tuning in”, ethics and values etc. These templates are intended to be used to describe and analyse all major pieces of work undertaken by the student, as they progress through the placement, and are to be brought to supervision by the student to inform ongoing discussion with the PE about their thinking and analysis.

*‘so it (the CAP) is much more... linked to practice than (the previous assignment) was , because it’s an active conversation each week in your supervision’ (UCLan PE)*

For the MMU PEs, supervision was noted as a vehicle to ‘document’ student learning and progress.

*(The PE) ‘gathering of ‘evidence’ in supervision now becomes more critical’ (MMU PE)*

*‘I’ve relied heavily on supervision and a reflective log of my own to assess my student’ (MMU PE)*

Interestingly, three of the PEs in the MMU focus group, off site PEs, said that they required the student to provide them with an additional ‘log of evidence’, a collection of examples of work the students had undertaken on placement which they found useful in reading through prior to writing their final report. As the previous table has indicated, the majority of the MMU PEs were off site PEs; therefore their access to concrete evidence was likely to be limited and their reliance on discursive and feedback evidence greater. PEs across both data sets commented on the length of the first placement as ‘too short’ (at 70 day) and it may be that, for MMU PEs, responses relating to the need to ‘document’ student learning and progress were related to

the shorter length of the placement along with their limited experience of previous assessment under the PCF.

#### Portfolio requirements – A learning partnership or onerous paperwork?

Holistic assessment places a greater emphasis on the PE's professional judgement of capability, rather than student production of evidence. Whilst this was seen as positive recognition of the PE role and the attention it placed on the responsibility, autonomy and accountability of the PE was welcomed, differences in portfolio requirements impacted upon PE experiences within each data set.

MMU PEs commented that the 'paperwork' and the 'forms' required for the student's portfolio – the interim assessment report; direct observation reports; final assessment report - were time consuming, lengthy and repetitive and involved *'an increased written requirement (for PEs) in the portfolio'* (MMU PE). They considered that the diminished focus on the student production of evidence, whilst reducing the potential for the 'tick box' approach to practice and development that was associated with the NOS, meant that the majority of the 'work' presented in the portfolio was provided by the PE, as indicated within the following comment:

*'Because it made me feel at the end it was 'my' portfolio. You know, that I, [laughs], and this might be entirely wrong, but I felt...; ~~and my students – they were both really great, I mean, fairly capable~~ – I got the feeling that, yeah, my interim assessment did the work. It said, 'this is what you achieved'. My final report did the work. It said, in very particular detail, this is what you did and this is how I know you did it.'* (MMU PE)

The impact of increased reliance on the PE assessment and associated written work within the portfolio was considered to have a corresponding effect on students and, for MMU PEs, there

was a strongly felt perception that the students had limited engagement with the PCF and their portfolio:

*'the student does not provide any evidence themselves: this leaves them unclear about how they are doing in relation to the PCF and risks them becoming rather passive' (MMU PE)*

By contrast, for the UCLan PEs, there was reference to their portfolio requirements encouraging partnership with the student, particularly in relation to the Critical Analyses of Practice required. The nature of the CAPs and the way in which they develop throughout placement is intended to underpin and evidence the critical and reflective development of the student. Within the UCLan responses there was a clear perception that the development and production of the CAPs for the portfolio, along with the Mid Point Development Plan, both supported student learning and engagement with the PCF and led to an enhanced learning partnership between PE and student.

*'It feels more like a joint effort between students and PE' (UCLan PE)*

*'It allows a closer working relationship between PE and student and allows the student to get to know the PE well and vice versa so as to work together in partnership on objectives' (UCLan PE)*

## **Discussion**

It is clear that, within this study, PEs embraced the introduction of the PCF and found the process of holistic assessment enjoyable and invigorating and the PCF helpful in identifying progress and student developmental needs. The PCF was considered to support student learning, providing space within the PE/student relationship for reflective, analytical

discussions regarding practice, knowledge and understanding. Student learning was promoted in a fashion that did not feel constrained by the production of 'evidence' within tightly defined criteria or behaviours. The attention on the journey, rather than the outcome, and the understanding of self – for both PE and student – was apparent and welcomed.

Within holistic assessment, maintaining the necessary focus on the 'bigger picture' – the student's holistic practice and understanding - whilst also being required to provide examples of evidence for each domain , particularly within the final report template, was noted as a challenge by PEs. Both sets of PEs considered that the final report template invited repetition and could detract from an emphasis on the student's holistic capability and overall achievements.

This aspect of the complexity of practice assessment – the balance between the holistic and the 'partial' (Doel et al, 2002, p.35) – was also voiced as a particular concern by a PE within both groups, in relation to what is hidden or obscured within the PCF, illustrated by the following quotations:

*' (the PCF) can feel too vague and broad – I worry that the key social work skills of assessment, of risk assessment, care planning and intervention along with communication skills are "buried" amongst a wide range of issues' (MMU PE)*

*'I have found it more difficult to be specific - because of the fairly general nature of the definitions' (UCLan PE)*

The issue of what social work professional education should develop and nurture, the primacy (or not) of skills and observable and tangible outcomes, and what is 'buried' within an holistic assessment framework such as the PCF, goes to the heart of longstanding debates about a competency based approach to assessment (Kelly and Horder, 2001; Skinner and Whyte, 2004; Evans, 1999). Such an approach to assessment, whilst dominant within social work education

from the DipSW (CCETSW, 1989) through to the Degree (DoH, 2002) has been subject to well-rehearsed criticisms of its deficiencies - that its focus on practice performance, often task specific, encourages a 'surface' approach to practice that is outcome focussed on a 'minimum' standard of competence/achievement and which can result in a 'cloak of competence' (Kelly and Horder, 2001, p.693) and that it promotes the gathering of 'evidence' ("I've done all my key roles...") above analysis and critical reflection on practice, thereby reducing or impeding learning (Evans, 1999; Mc Nay et al., 2009). It has also been claimed that competences do not differentiate levels of attainment or performance and thus are not only a rather blunt instrument by which to measure practice performance and skills - for example, what is 'good enough' practice or evidence (Furness and Gilligan, 2004, p.469) - but, as their assessment do require subjective and interpretative judgements to be made by the assessor, they are also not as 'objective' as is considered or assumed (Cowburn, et al., 2000). Further, both PE and student can view the tasks and work carried out on placement solely as a means to an end, thus engendering a reductionist approach to learning, practice and assessment. (McNay, et al., 2009).

However, it could be argued that these criticisms place blame on a very narrow view of competence, typified by the NOS, and that our understanding of the relationship between the demonstration of 'competence' (in the application of particular skills, underpinned by appropriate knowledge and values) and the wider concept of 'capability' needs to be revisited. Taylor and Bogo point to the "conceptually confused discussion of competence and capability in social work" (2014, p.1406) and refer to the CSWE (2008) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) and the work of Canadian researchers in attempting to locate a competency approach (defining skills, behaviours required) within a framework where 'metacompetencies' (Bogo et al., 2006; Bogo et al., 2011) such as analytical and reflective capacities that "reflect the ability of students to conceptualise their practice and identify the values, principles and ideas that underlie their judgements and actions" (Bogo, et al, 2011,

p.7) are also promoted and assessed. Doel et al. (2002) posit a similar argument, using different phraseology, suggesting that assessment of professional practice has to embrace the 'partial' (as represented by the competency approach) alongside the 'contextual', the student's understanding and application of knowledge and values. They consider the 'partial' and the 'contextual' to be "two sides to the same coin" (p.43) and that "a holistic approach is, therefore, not one which is in opposition to a partial approach, but one which encompasses it" (p.34).

The link between the 'partial' and the holistic and the required balance and integration between them is further articulated within the ~~recent~~ publication of Knowledge and Skills Statements (KSSW) for both Child and Families Social workers and Adult social workers (DfE, 2014; DoH,2014 ). The KSSW guidance for both areas of practice are particular in noting the primacy of skills required – for example, the KSSW for Child and Family Social workers sets out 10 areas of knowledge and skills and "describes what a child and family social worker should be able to do" (DfE, 2014, p.11). The publication of these KSSW has prompted some general concerns about the retreat from education for generic social work practice (see BASW, 2014a, 2014b). Particular concerns have also been raised regarding the applicability of their content to newly qualified social workers working outside of the statutory sector (or for those within specialist areas of practice within it and the combination of the PCF, HCPC and KSSW requirements generating an increasingly complex assessment structure within professional social work education. ~~The latter consideration underlies~~ The College of Social ~~Work-Work~~ ~~has now also announced the PCF will be reviewed in 2015's review of the PCF~~-(TCSW, 2014). ~~We hope that the views and experiences of PEs are a key part of this review, given that they have direct experience of this assessment structure and have been so intricately involved in its implementation in the field.~~

~~In the meantime and w~~Whilst this complex and changing landscape shifts around them, PEs will continue to assess students according to the PCF and for many PEs of final year students, the current academic year 2014-15 will be their first experience of assessing under the PCF. The PEs in this study highlighted numerous positive views and experiences of assessing under the PCF within first placement, 70 day settings. Final placements will be 100 days in length, within settings that prepare students for the statutory aspects of a social worker's role including formal assessment processes, application and understanding of legal frameworks, analysis of risk and multi-agency working (TCSW, UNDATED (b)) and will be assessed at the final placement level of the PCF (mapped against the Standards of Proficiency (HCPC, 2012). Such placements are often in statutory settings, which are more rigorously and procedurally driven, and it remains to be seen if the 'freeing up' for PEs and the 'opening up' for students is felt by PEs assessing students at final level.

### Conclusion

This was a small scale study capturing and analysing the experiences of 43 PEs and there are limitations to the generalisability of the findings. In particular, the student voice is absent and we are aware that PEs experiences and their views of practice assessment under the PCF may not be shared by those who they are assessing. Further research might helpfully explore the experiences of students with additional needs, or with English not as their first language. The tutor perspective is also not explored and again, such a perspective may offer a different view of holistic assessment under the PCF.

The findings and analysis of this study indicate that, within practice assessment, the essence of professional practice and the 'contextual' is well supported by and within the PCF domains. Understanding and applying the content of the PCF domains to practice requires discussion and exploration with students and to this extent, the PCF has made explicit and exposed elements of practice and understanding that were tacit or underexplored within the previous

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assessment structure. However, in the light of the PEs' concern about the development of particular 'key social work skills' and thus what is 'buried' within the PCF, we find some merit in the repositioning of the place of the 'partial' within (holistic) practice assessment.

Consideration of the 'partial' and the demonstration and assessment of key skills should not detract from or deny the importance of 'process over outcome' signified within holistic assessment and underlying many of the positive aspects of the PEs experiences in this study.

Such demonstration and assessment of key skills (for example, through the rigorous and thoughtful use of student direct observation) can affirm and offer additional evidence and assist PEs' in their assessment of the student's *practice* alongside their wider understanding, reflections and location of the professional role. As has been indicated within this study, these latter considerations can be aided through the use of effective tools, such as the CAP, within supervision

and as a key part of portfolio requirements. We hope the findings from this study can prompt further discussion amongst key stakeholders, stakeholders and partnerships regarding portfolio requirements and the 'balance' of ownership and partnership required between student and PE in the task of holistic assessment.

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