Contents

Executive summary

The report documents findings from a study on practice assessment panels and focuses on decision making around social work students deemed to have failed their practice placements. The report briefly documents major developments in English social work education as well as the current context of practice learning within England. The report goes on to highlight concerns around the robustness of practice education, in particular the apparent reluctance by practice educators to fail social work students in practice learning settings and details how the research under discussion emerged out of this existing research. The practice assessment panel, a feature on many UK social work education programmes, is often a key site of decision making but to date, has not been the subject of any academic inquiry. The report documents original research which aimed to explore practices around PAPs as well as decision-making processes when issues of marginal or failing students arose. The research utilises a dual-strand methodology: an online survey sent to social work education providers in England and an ethnographic study.

Findings

Findings from the survey document a wide range of practices currently in operation and it is evident that many processes are robust. Nonetheless, decision making in respect of failed students raises a number of significant issues. These include concerns that centre on:

- struggling students;
- practice educators;
- poor quality placements;
- the emotional impact on practice educators when working with a struggling or failing student.

Key findings to emerge from the ethnographic part of the research include:

- the deferring of decisions;
- powerful voices dominating decision making;
- the role of service users and carers;
- the practice of "filling in the gaps";
- the unofficial grading of passes;
- the impact of the emotional climate on decision making.

Recommendations

The report offers possible ways forward in light of the findings. Recommendations include:

- preparing PAP members adequately for the task and acknowledging the emotional climate, the possible impact of failing students on PAP members and recognising the investment made by practice educators, tutors and students in the placement assessment process;
- ensuring the quality and consistency of practice educators' reports;
- strengthening processes prior to the placement, namely, admissions and readiness to practice;
- ensuring tutors manage the placement process in an effective and timely manner, ensuring university processes are adhered to and being available at PAPs;
- ensuring parity amongst panel members in terms of contributions and decision making and ensuring service users and carers are included in a meaningful and equitable way in decision making.

Further research

Given that exploration of decision making and practices within PAPs has not been subject to academic scrutiny, the report suggests possible avenues of future research. These include:

- a larger, more representational ethnographic study of PAPs across England and indeed, across the UK for comparative purposes;
- consideration of the extent of the problem of variability in the standards and quality of practice educator's reports and implications;
- the voices and perspectives of students, particularly failing students;
- the experience of being a PAP member and in particular, a focus on service users and carers contributions;
- consideration of the extent of disagreements in recommendations by work based supervisors and off site practice educators and explore the reasons for this.

The report that concludes that PAP processes are robust, with a high percentage of portfolios being reviewed but that failing students pose particular challenges in terms of decision making. The dual nature of the PAP, for example quality assurance and a quasi-assessment function, may also pose particular challenges for panel members.

Introduction

Undertaking an assessed period of learning in the field has long been a feature of social work training both in the United Kingdom (UK) and internationally (Finch and Taylor, 2013). Recent developments in the UK – as the report goes on to explore – have emphasised the centrality and importance of practice learning within qualifying social work programmes, however, concerns have been raised about the robustness and quality of practice learning and assessment. For example, particular concerns have arisen about the perception of low failure rates on social work programmes and, linked to this, practice educators' apparent reluctance or difficulty failing social work students in practice learning settings. While there is a growing international and multi-disciplinary research base that explores the issue of assessment within practice learning, it centres on practice educators and does not focus on other key sites of decision making within universities.

In the UK, the practice assessment panel (PAP) – a feature of social work training since the introduction of the Diploma in Social Work in 1991– has a number of distinct functions, including a quality assurance and quasi-assessment function of particular importance when issues of failing students arise. The empirical work undertaken thus aims at:

- exploring current PAP practice in universities in England;
- exploring the function, role and remit of PAPs;
- exploring the issues that emerge when failing students are under discussion;
- exploring the decision-making process in PAPs.

Regarding terminology: the term 'practice assessment panel' is used within this report as it is both the original term (in circulation since 1991), and is the most commonly used today (as revealed by the survey). However, as the report goes on to detail, it should be noted that a number of alternatives are currently used in England.

The importance of practice learning

The requirement for students to undertake assessed practice in the field has long been a feature of social work education in many countries (Hughes and Heycox 1996; Raymond 2000; Shardlow and Doel 2002; Finch *et al.* 2013). Indeed, assessed practice is a model utilised in a range of professions including: nursing, teaching, occupational therapy, and counselling psychology (to name but a few). Undertaking a practice placement gives students of many professions the opportunity to put into practice what they have learnt in classroom settings (Evans 1999; Raymond 2000; Furness and Gilligan 2004). It also enables students to become fully immersed into the culture, norms and practices of that particular profession (Shardlow and Doel 1996) and, most importantly, is a significant site of gatekeeping – ensuring that unsuitable, or not yet competent, students do not become qualified practitioners (Finch and Poletti 2013). This is of particular importance in social work given, as the report goes on to document, persistent concerns about the robustness of practice education and assessment.

The changing policy context of practice assessment

There have been a number of significant developments in social work education that have emphasised the importance and centrality of practice learning in qualifying social work programmes (Finch and Taylor 2013). The introduction of the degree in social work in 2003, for example, saw the number of placement days increased from 130 to 200 (Finch 2010) and practice educators were subsequently required to assess how social work students met a number of "key roles" set out in the newly devised National Occupational Standards for Social Work (TOPSS 2002). Indeed, Jacqui Smith, The Secretary of Health at the time of the introduction of the degree, commented on the need for students to

> … undertake much of their learning in practice settings and demonstrate their competence in practice. (DH 2002, p. i)

Additionally, post qualifying awards, including the Practice Teaching Award, were substantially revised (GSCC 2005; GSCC 2006) in 2007 and subsequently became postgraduate qualifications, with the practice education pathway only available at higher specialist level (Finch 2010).

Other developments – tangentially related to practice learning but important policy shifts – included registration requirements for both social work students and practitioners with one of the four regional care councils, introduced as a result of the Care Standards Act (2000). These were aimed, more generally, at increasing public trust and confidence in social work (Orme *et al.* 2007). Of course, it is important to note that in England, the General Social Care Council (GSCC) was abolished in August 2012 with most of its functions now managed by the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC).

A further tranche of developments followed intense media criticism of social work, and by implication social work education, after the death of Baby Peter (a child killed by his carers in the London Borough of Haringey). The Labour government subsequently established the Social Work Task Force (SWTF) which, in its final report (2010), recommended a single national reform programme of social work to be overseen by the Social Work Reform Board (SWRB). In 2010, the Coalition Government supported the work of the SWRB, and further changes continued to emphasise practice learning and assessment. For example, The College of Social Work (TCSW) launched a professional capability framework (PCF), implemented from September 2013, which replaced the National Occupational Standards for Social Work, (a competency model). Additionally, the practice educator frameworks have been revised, with the introduction of a requirement to undertake a two-part qualification in order to be able to assess final year social work students (TCSW 2012).

Concerns about practice learning

Despite these positive developments, concerns persist about practice learning and assessment. Indeed, the SWTF interim report (2009) commented that:

> Specific concerns have been raised about the … robustness and quality of assessment, with some students passing the social work degree who are not competent or suitable to practise on the frontline. (SWTF 2009, p. 24)

Other long-standing concerns raised by academics and employers centre on the quantity and quality of placements (Sharp and Danbury 1999; Kearney 2003; Skills for Care 2006), the rarity of placement failure, both in the UK and internationally (see for example, Coulshed 1980; Hughes and Heycox 1996; Finch 2005;) and misgivings about the apparent reluctance, inability and difficulties faced by practice educators in making fail recommendations (see for example, ; Schaub and Dalrymple 2011; ; Finch and Poletti 2013; Schaub and Dalrymple 2013). It is important to note that these concerns are not just levelled at social work education and training. The difficulties and challenges of failing students in practice learning settings has been commented upon in other professions, including nursing (Lankshear 1990; Duffy 2004), occupational therapy (Ilot and Murphy 1997), teaching (Knowles *et al.* 1995), and counselling psychology (Vacha-Haase *et al.* 2004; Hoffman *et al.* 2005; Johnson 2007).

Failing social work students

Ascertaining placement failure rates within social work education in England is difficult for a number of reasons although, in 2003-04, 2.6% of social work students failed a placement (GSCC 2007a, 2007b) and an unpublished study estimated the figure in Greater London to be around 2% to 3% (Finch 2005). This appears consistent with overall programme failure rates in 2006-07 which stood at 3.2% (GSCC 2008), and 2.5% in 2008-09 (GSCC 2010). Of course, taken alone, placement failure rates do not indicate a problem when it comes to failing students – the low figure may be suggestive of robust entry procedures and assessment. That said, there is a growing body of qualitative research that suggests that the experience of failing a student in a practice learning setting can be very challenging to the point where, some students may be assessed as competent when the evidence suggests otherwise (Finch 2010; Basnett and Shepherd 2010; Schaub and Dalrymple 2011). Within the extant research base, a number of reasons have been offered as to why practice educators may be reluctant, or find it difficult, to fail students.

For example, a thematic literature review by Finch (2010), further explored in Finch and Taylor (2013), and Finch and Poletti (2013), identified five reasons why practice educators appeared to find it difficult to fail students. First, a lack of confidence or inability to use a competency model of assessment (Williamson *et al*, 1985; Walker *et al.* 1995; Hughes and Heycock 1996) and associated with this, not dealing with concerns in a timely or constructive fashion (Burgess *et al.* 1998a, 1998b; Ilott and Murphy 1997; Duffy 2004; Kaslow *et al.* 2007; Finch 2010; Schaub and Dalrymple 2013); with a perception of little support or advice from the university (Burgess *et al.* 1998a, 1998b; Vacha-Haase 2004; Finch 2010; Schaub and Dalrymple 2013).

Second, the fear of litigation, especially in a North American context (Cole 1991; Cole and Lewis 1993; Raymond 2000; Royse 2000) which was found to be a significant factor in the reluctance of practice educators or supervisors to fail students. Third, the idea of role strain or confusion, namely, that the practice educator

role encompasses two potentially conflicting elements, an enabler of learning versus an assessor of learning (Fisher 1990; Proctor 1993; Shardlow and Doel 1996; Hoffman *et al*, 2004). Fourth, the challenge around defining minimum standards of practice, especially in social work where what is, or should be, good social work practice is contested (Sharp and Danbury 1999; Lafrance *et al.* 2004; Skinner and Whyte 2004; Finch 2010). Finally, the emotional pain that emerges due to failing students has been noted as a significant factor in the literature (Samec 1995; Gizara and Forest, 2004; Bogo *et al.* 2007; Finch 2010; Basnett and Shepherd 2010; Finch and Taylor 2013). It is this theme that has influenced the empirical work under discussion and will be returned to later. Additionally, the research has largely focused on the experience of the practice educator (or equivalent in comparator professions), and to a lesser extent, the university tutor. Consequently, other key decision-making processes within the higher education institution (HEI) have not been the subject of academic exploration to date, which appears a serious omission in furthering understanding of this important issue.

The research under discussion thus builds on the existing research by focusing on the decision-making processes that centre on students who are struggling or failing the placement. The focus of the empirical work under discussion, moves away from practice educators and critically explores the PAP – a key site of decision making in many universities in England. A further aim is to open up a discussion about what is or ought to be the remit, roles, functions and operations of PAPs, and to explore different practices currently in operation.

Practice assessment panels

The introduction of PAPs as a feature of qualifying social work programmes, occurred alongside the introduction of the two year Diploma in Social Work in 1991. This new qualification replaced the two former qualifications available, the Certificate of Social Services, and the Certificate of Qualified Social Work (Lyons 1999). The regulatory body for social work education at that time –the Central Council for the Education and Training of Social Work (CCETSW) – issued guidance on the rules and requirements of the Diploma in Social Work (CCETSW 1991) part of which included the need for a PAP. Higham (2008) comments that the process was originally envisaged as a panel made up of "practice teachers" (now known as practice educators) whose task was one of quality assurance. The relationship of the PAP to the university assessment or examination boards, however, was rather unclear, and traces of this lack of clarity emerge today as the findings reveal. Higham (2008) comments further that, at the time, a mistaken view emerged that university assessment boards could not challenge the recommendations of the practice educator. Further developments at the time, however, were that practice educators' recommendations were given greater status and "should stand in its own right" (2008, p. 165). This development contrasted significantly to the situation documented in 1979, for example, which suggested that the tutor was the significant voice in the decision-making process concerning passed or failed placements, usually at the university assessment board (Brandon and Davies 1979). Alongside the changes required for the Diploma in Social Work, students were assessed against a competency model for the first time. Practice Teachers, formerly known as supervisors, were also required to undertake a qualification for the first time – the Practice Teaching Award. Important for this discussion, however, is that

the PAP became established as a common practice on social work qualifying programmes across the UK, yet their function and purpose remains contested and, as the findings go on to document, distinct practices have emerged as well as a number of roles. The report now goes on to detail the empirical work undertaken.

Aims of the research

The research aims to explore the PAP process in universities in England as well as critically consider decision-making processes within PAPs. The research is centred on the issue of failing students and, as these incidences highlight all too starkly, decision-making processes and the challenges of assessment within practice learning. Further, the research has developed out of existing research that focused on practice educators' experiences of failing social work students in practice learning settings (Finch 2010) as well as tutors' experiences of working with students failing in practice learning settings (Finch, under review). It thus seems imperative that as part of an exploration of the issue of the challenges in failing social work students, the PAP is also considered, given its clear importance in decision making.

Methodology and methods

The research utilised a dual-strand methodology, using both quantitative and qualitative methods of data gathering. In terms of the quantitative strand of the research, an online survey was devised. The link was emailed to Heads of Social Work in universities in England. One response per university was requested. The link was also posted on an online social work education bulletin board. The research was advertised on Twitter, although the link was not posted, as there was a need to manage the responses. Fifty requests were sent out and the response rate was 60% (30 completed questionnaires). The survey contained 20 questions (see Appendix 1).

The qualitative strand to the research was ethnographic in design, and was also influenced by practitioner research paradigms (Shaw and Gould 2002; Shaw and Lunt 2011) as well as practice-near approaches (Briggs and Hingley-Jones 2012). These promote a highly reflexive approach to the research task. The method used to gather data was non-participant observation (Bailey 2007).

Sites of ethnographic research

Practice assessment panels were observed in four universities across England. A mixture of old and new universities were observed. In two of the sites of research, both the pre-meeting and formal meeting discussions were observed. In the remaining two observations, only the formal meeting was observed. The sites were recruited through professional networks. In two of the formal parts of the panel meetings, an audio recording was made and later transcribed. Additionally, observation notes were taken during the pre-panel and formal meeting discussions that were observed. The resulting transcripts and field notes were analysed using the thematic analysis approach advocated by Braun and Clark (2006) as well as practice-near approaches (Briggs and Hingley Jones 2012).

Ethical considerations

The research was approved by a university research ethics committee and the usual ethical considerations guided the research undertaken, namely: confidentiality, anonymity, privacy, gaining informed consent, and the avoidance of harm. The second strand of the empirical work undertaken raised additional ethical considerations, such as gaining informed consent of the PAP participants in advance of the meeting, ensuring the confidentiality of the students under discussion in the meetings, paying particular attention to privacy issues given the very small sample size, and negotiating access to the PAP meetings.

Findings – online survey

Name of the panel

"Practice Assessment Panel" was the most frequently used term (63.3%). Other names given to the panel included: Practice Learning Advisory Panel, Practice Assurance Panel, Placement Review Panel, Practice Quality Panel, Practice Reading Groups, Practice Assessment Examination Committee, Practice Standard Panel and Practice Assurance Sub Committee. Differences in names might well account for differences in roles and remits of the panels although this was difficult to ascertain with any degree of confidence.

Remit of the panel

Respondents were asked to consider the scope and remit of the panels.

Figure 1.: Survey responses on the scope and remit of the panels
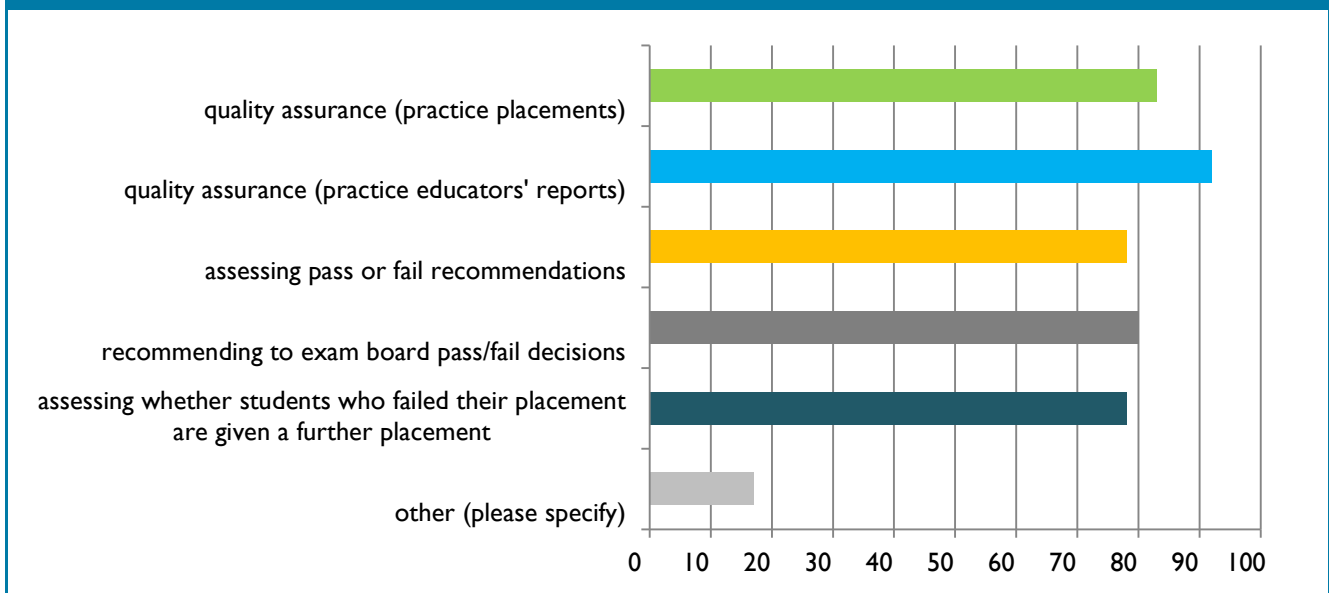
Other responses included: "moderation of pass and fails", "makes final decisions on disputes", "reviews quality of evidence", "identifies issues for programme", "to hear student representations", "to meet the practice learning team to explore decisions", "grade student performance and make recommendations to improve practice learning documentation and processes".

There appeared to be little in the way of a correlation between the roles and function of the PAPs and the name. It was interesting to note that the most common function of the PAP across universities was that of quality assurance with regard to the practice educators' reports (90%). The panels thus had both a quality assurance remit as well as a quasi-assessment remit, with 76% of panels having the ability to make decisions about pass or fail and the remit to offer a further placement opportunity or not as the case may be.

Frequency of PAPs

Most universities had a final PAP (89%) and 61% also had a mid-way PAP. Other systems included having a sub panel to manage issues of failing students, having structured reviews for each placement, fitness to practice panels, additional PAP meetings for post-qualifying students and chairs' action meetings as required. The number of PAP meetings held per academic year also varied considerably.


Figure 2.: Frequency of PAP meetings
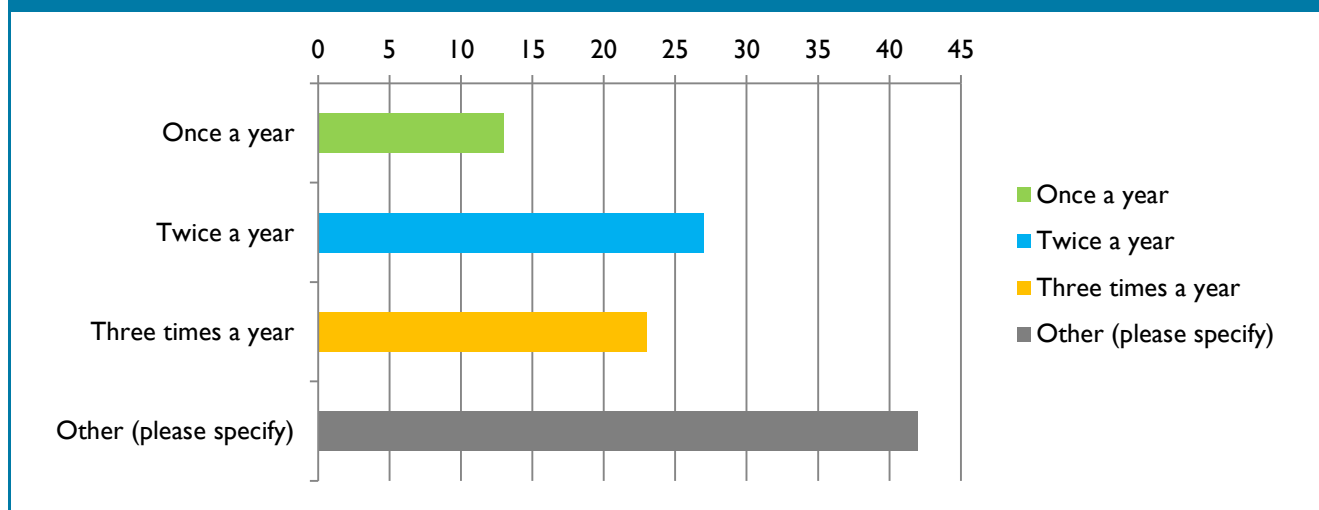
Other responses included: having PAPs most months; having structured reviews for each placement, additional re-sit or late finisher panels, fitness to practice panels, having PAPs four times a year plus a late finishers PAP, five times a year plus late finisher PAPs, one a year and when a student fails.

Of those universities which offered undergraduate and postgraduate social work training (75% of the sample), approximately half had separate PAPs – that is, an undergraduate and a postgraduate PAP – and the remaining half had PAPs where all students were discussed.

Panel membership

Panel membership overall comprised a wide range of people. This contrasted significantly with one panel that comprised only of the placement manager and practice educators. Student participation in panels was not typical and appeared to relate to attendance at panels only to make formal representation about fail decisions.

Figure 3.: Panel membership
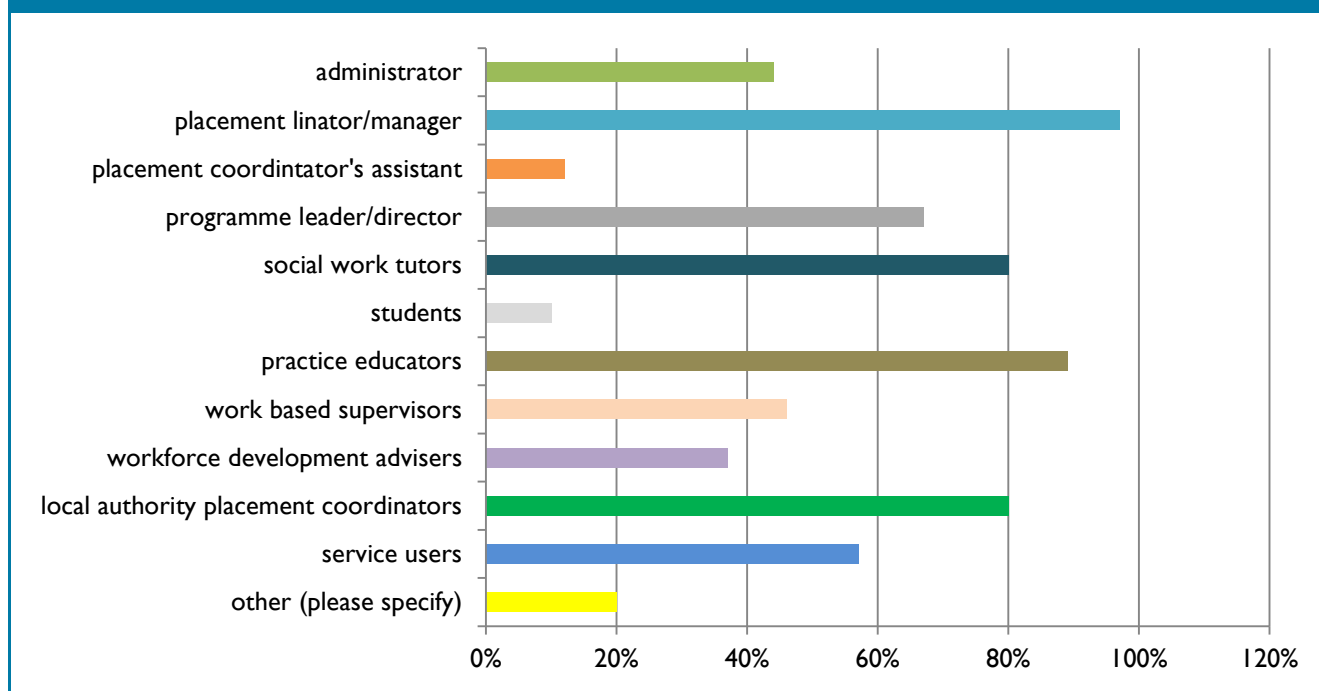
Other people in attendance at PAPs included: voluntary and private sector representatives, people directly involved in placements under review, independent practice educators, placement module leaders, service users and carers. It was noted that service users were included in panels in 57% of the universities who responded. The issue of service user and carer involvement is further explored in the ethnographic research.

Chair of panel

In the majority of responses (87%) a member of staff from the university chaired the PAP although the member of staff varied considerably. The members of staff included practice learning co-ordinators/managers and practice learning leaders (43%). Other staff members included a head of department, former heads of social work departments from other universities, a school quality assurance leader from another subject area, a director of learning and teaching, a programme director, and other non-specified staff members. In just three examples, members of staff from the local authority or independent sector chaired the panel. In one example, a service user jointly chaired the panel.

Reviewing the portfolios

The vast majority of panel members (87%) were involved in reviewing the portfolios. The sample of portfolios that were reviewed varied to some degree as the following table reveals:

Figure 4.: Number of practice placement portfolios reviewed or moderated
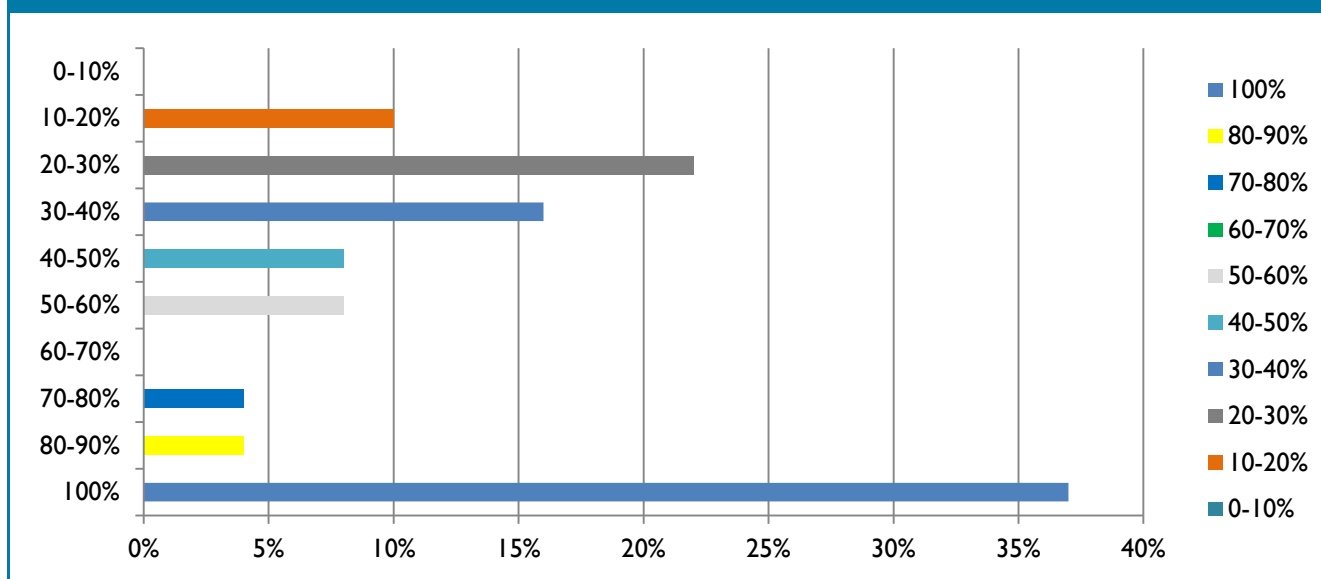
As it can be seen, in a third of cases, all the portfolios were reviewed or moderated. In a fifth of those that responded, at least 20-30% of the portfolios are moderated. It seems, therefore, that in many universities the moderation/reviewing process of the practice placement portfolios is robust and more are reviewed than might typically be the case for academic pieces of work.

The portfolios were sampled on the following basis:

Figure 5.: Breakdown of portfolios sampled
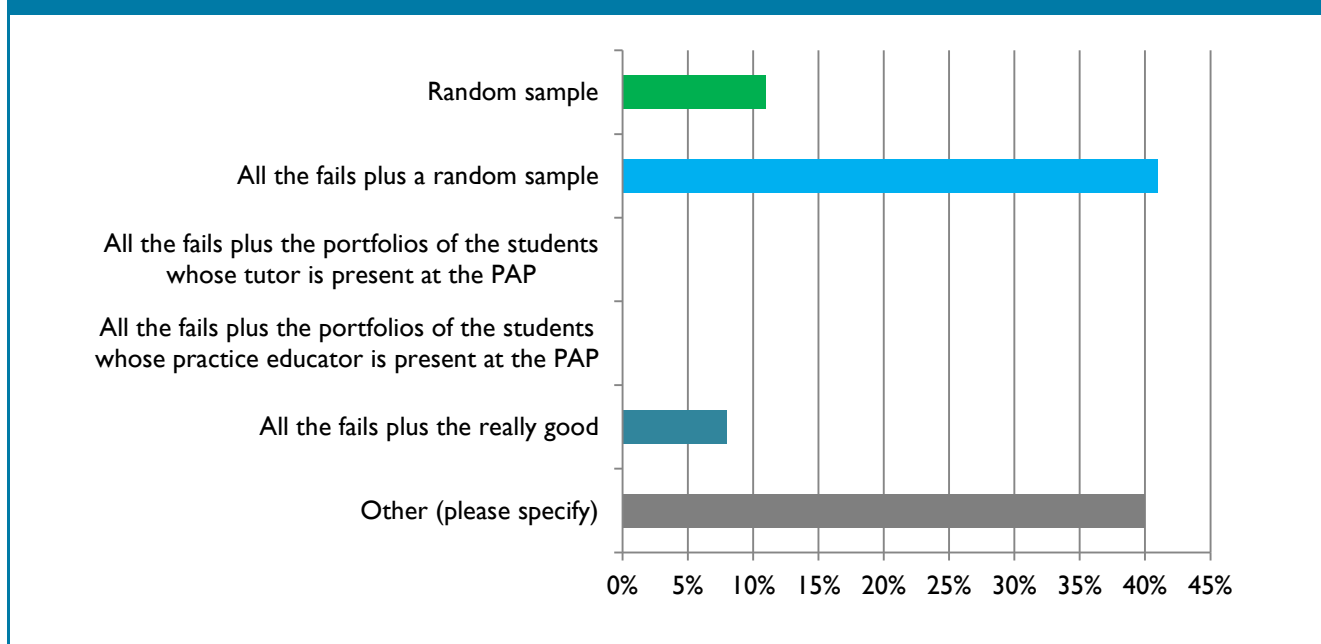
Other responses included: "all of the portfolios reviewed"; "random sample across all cohorts"; "fails and a third of all portfolios"; "portfolios moderated separately"; "all portfolios read and then second read if there is

a disagreement". Again it can be seen that the reading/moderation process is robust, with all fail portfolios being read by one or two people and usually, discussed at a PAP. The exceptions were where a small sub panel look at the fail decisions.

Decision making powers

Given the PAPs serve both a quality assurance role and hold an assessment role (albeit a quasi-assessment role), it was important to explore PAPs decision-making processes. This is particularly important in the context of a university where professional regulations and academic regulations can sometimes conflict (Finch, under review).   Respondents were therefore asked about the decision-making powers of the PAP.

Figure 6.: Decision-making powers of the PAP
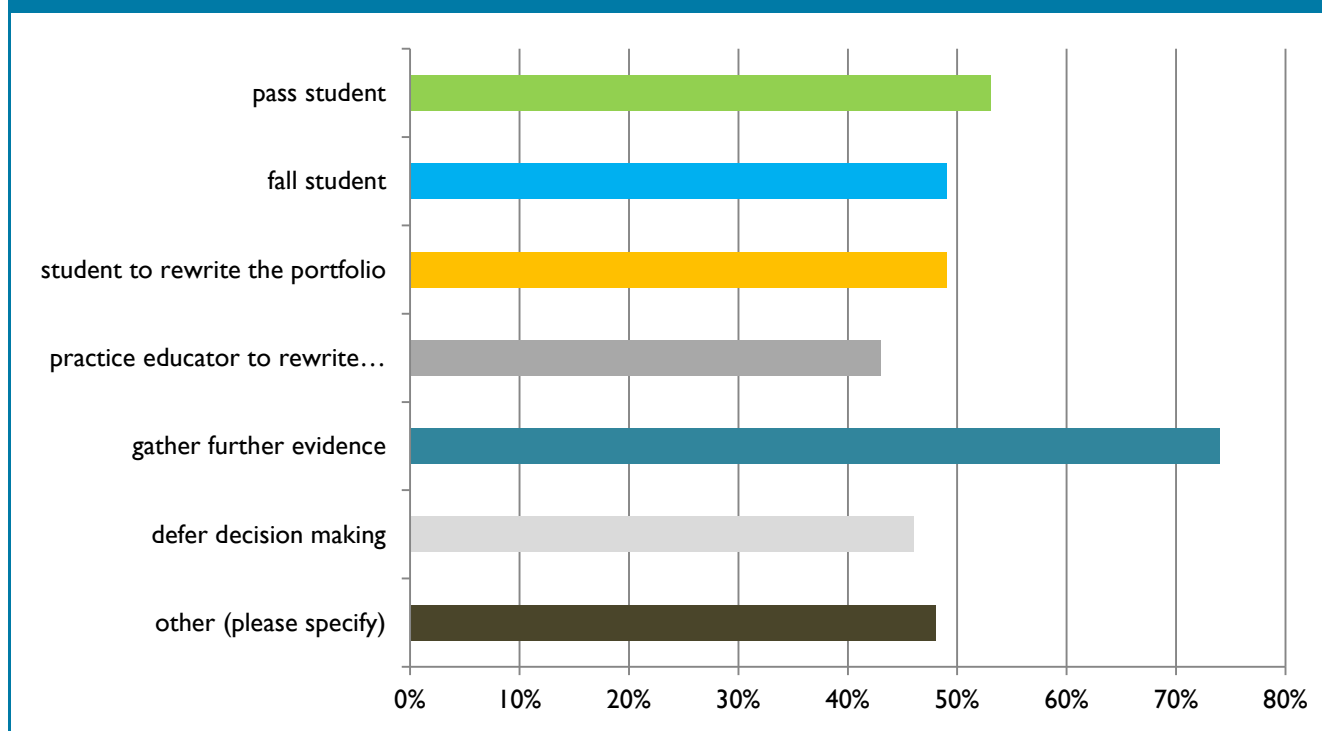
Other decision-making powers the PAPs held were: presenting recommendations to the progression and assessment boards, referring decisions to progress panel where decisions about further placement opportunities are made, and gathering further evidence to substantiate decisions but not overturn them.

Respondents were asked further about decision-making powers.

Figure 7.: Can the panel make a recommendation about whether to offer a failed student a further placement?

Answered: 30   Skipped: 0
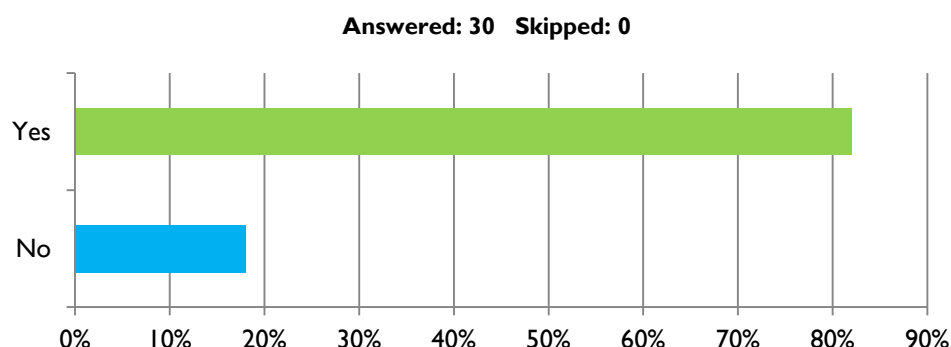
Figure 8.: Can the panel decide not to offer a failed student a further placement opportunity?

Answered: 30   Skipped: 0
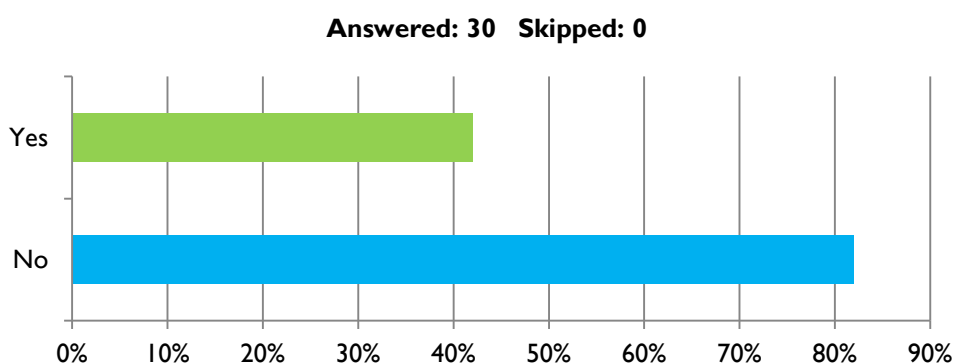
As can be seen, not all the panels had the power to make decisions *per se* but, more often than not, recommendations were made which had to be formally ratified at an assessment board. It was interesting to note that for 80% of respondents who answered yes, these decisions could be accommodated within the usual academic regulations within universities. It is important to note that for some panels, decisions about failing students were taken in small sub panels, although this accounted for a small number.

Evidence being drawn upon
Respondents were asked to consider the various sources of evidence used to make decisions or recommendations about students passing or failing the placement. The sources included:

Figure 9.: Sources of evidence used to make decisions or recommendations
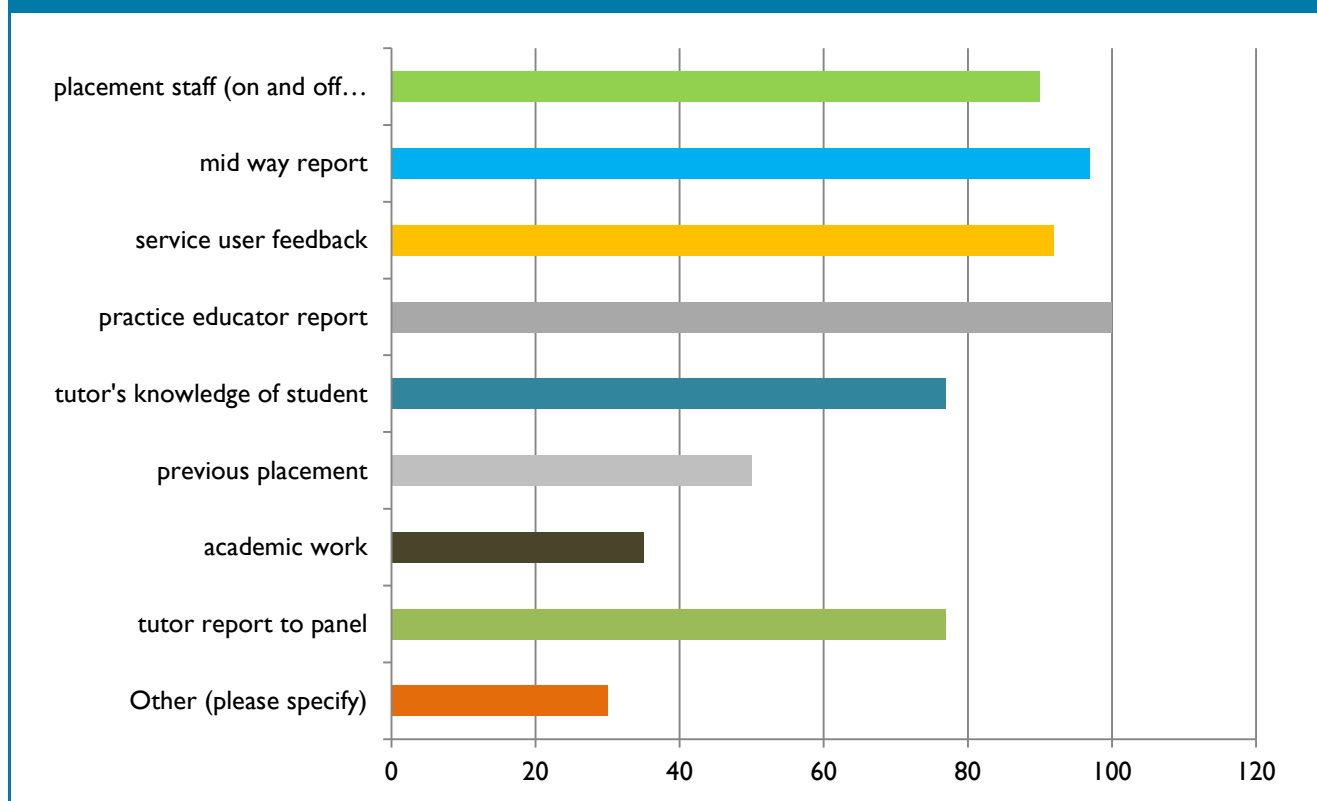
Other responses included: evidence or lack of evidence within the portfolio, student report or representation at the panel; cumulative concerns raised by practice educator, work based supervisor and tutor; breaches of confidentiality in the portfolio; significant missing sections in the portfolio and the panel report on a failed scenario".

What is clear is that while the portfolio – often containing students' input and the practice educator's report – is always used, evidence is drawn from other sources too, and this raises issues about transparency of the assessment (albeit often termed as a recommendation) processes and equity. For example, as the ethnographic strand of the research goes on to document, there are differing levels of often anecdotal knowledge about students under discussions in PAPs. Additionally, if tutors and practice educators of students under discussion are present at the PAP, or not, as the case may be, this could possibly impact on the decision-making process.

Challenges

Respondents were asked about disagreements among PAP members. Some disagreement was noted by 93% of respondents, who were also asked about the nature of these disagreements. Issues about which panel members experienced disagreements included:

Figure 10.: Issues about which panel members experienced disagreement

Issue	Value
Passing a struggling student	~51
Failing a struggling student	~59
Quality of practice educator reports	~59
Quality of practice placements	~42
Quality of evidence provided to make a decision	~87
Other (please specify)	~10
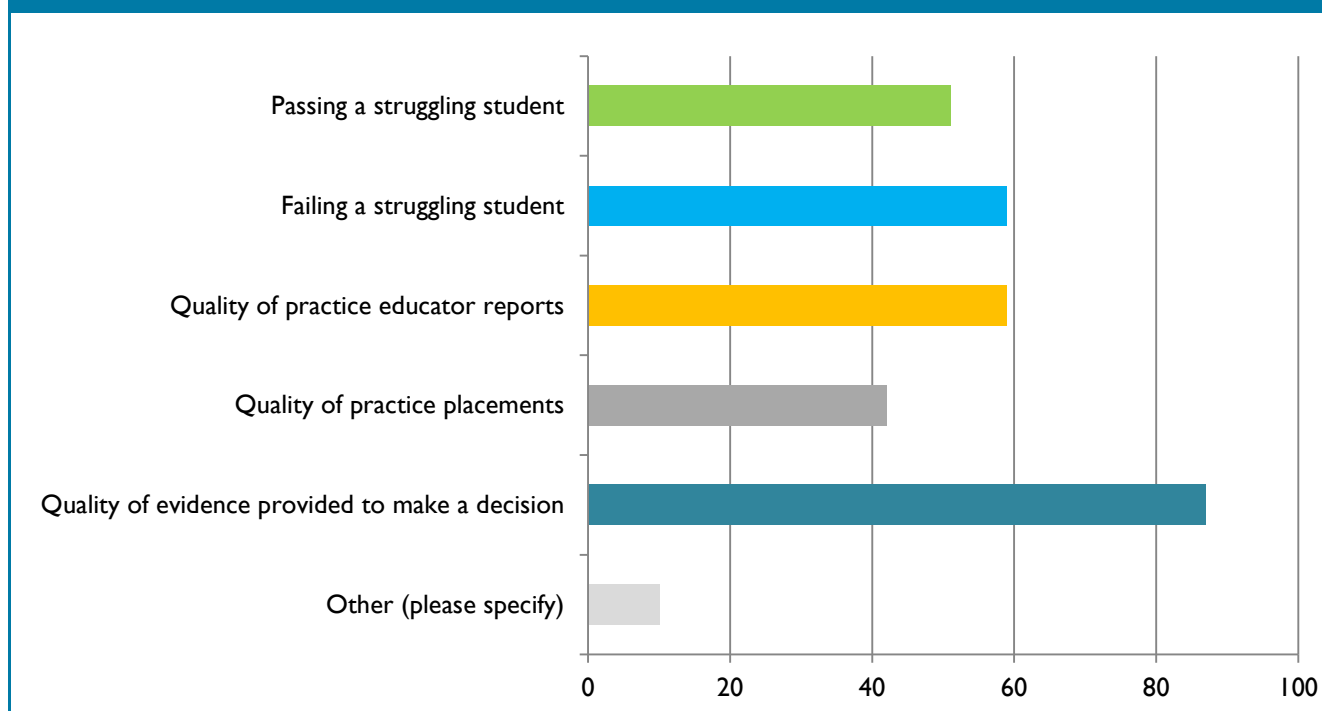
Other areas where there were disagreements included: recommendations about grades, diversity in the quality of evidence presented in the student's portfolio, disagreements about grading at the borders of degree classifications, and maintaining consistency with numerous markers.

In terms of managing these disagreements, the strategy most employed was that of discussion until a consensus was agreed (66%). In some cases the chair made a decision (17%). Other strategies included having a further meeting, independent review of evidence, discussion with reference to the university's rules and regulations and taking the issue to the programme leader.

Common issues to emerge in panels in relation to failing students

Respondents were asked to consider what issues arise in panels when discussing failing students. Respondents reported the following:

Figure 11.: Common issues to emerge in panels in relation to failing students

Issue	Value
lack of appropriate learning opportunities	80
personality clash between practice educator and students	83
poor quality practice educator reports that do not provide sufficent evidence	70
tutors not visiting placements or addressing concerns in a timely fashion	27
fear that student will appeal….	20
student did not finish placement	46
Other (please specify)	34
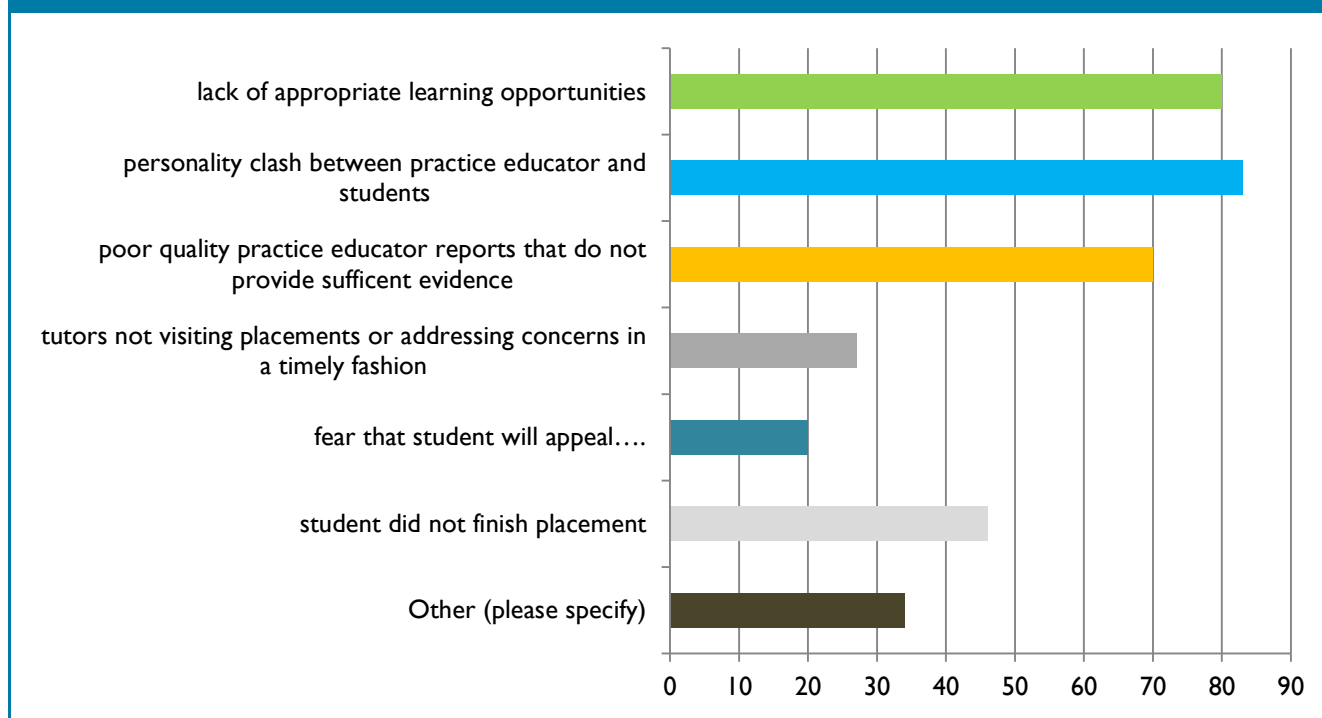
A wide range of other concerns were discussed in the survey. These centred around three areas: students, placements, and practice educators – although the majority of concerns centred on students. In relation to students, concerns raised included: students struggling with personal issues; struggling to engage with the supervision; issues of fitness to practice; specific learning difficulties and students' needs (specifically, timely identification); students' conduct on placement (e.g. attendance); and students not being able to manage the personal and professional split. Issues about placements concerned changes in placements that impacted adversely on a student's performance. Concern was also raised about the impact of a failing student on a practice educator.

Findings – ethnographic study

The PAPs – students under discussion
As the online survey revealed, there were a number of models of PAPs. The PAPs observed all looked at different cohorts of students, that is, BA and Master students, and first and second placements. This was a noticeable difference about the various ways PAPs were organised. One of the PAPs observed for the study discussed all students, that is, those undertaking first and final placements and both BA and Masters social work qualifying programme. Two PAPs discussed BA final placement students only and the remaining PAP discussed Masters level year one and two students.

The PAPs – participants and other characteristics
The findings of the online survey revealed that the participants of the meetings (overall) included: practice learning managers; tutors (both permanent tutors and hourly paid or associate tutors); programme directors;

practice educators (both freelance and those working for various agencies); workforce development advisors and/or practice learning co-ordinators within local authorities; service users and carers. Numbers varied quite widely across the four PAPs observed, with the biggest panel comprising 27 people and another comprising ten members. The numbers of students discussed did not seem to correlate to the number of PAP members. What was common, however, was the length of the meetings. Typically PAP members read the portfolios in the morning before going into the formal meeting – usually in the afternoon. It can be seen, therefore, that the PAP process is resource intensive. The amount of portfolios moderated by PAP members, as the online survey indicated, was varied. For example, in one PAP, all the portfolios in the cohort under discussion were read by at least two PAP members compared with another PAP where a sample of all students (BA and MA, both placements) were read.

Numbers of failing students discussed

The PAPs between them discussed nine students where the practice educator and/or work-based supervisor recommended the student fail their placement. Of these nine, however, there were three differences of opinion between the work-based supervisor and the practice educator. In two cases, the work-based supervisor recommended a fail and the practice educator a pass. In one case, the practice educator recommended a pass and the work-based supervisor a fail.

PAP decisions

In terms of PAP decisions made in respect of the nine recommendations of a fail, one case was upheld with no further placement opportunity offered. In two cases the fail decision was upheld, with a repeat placement opportunity. In one case this was 60 days (half the usual placement days for this particular university) and in the other, the detail of the length of placement was not discussed in the PAP. In three of the fail situations, the panel felt that not enough evidence had been provided (by practice educator, student or tutor) to make a clear decision and so the matter was deferred until the next PAP meeting. In two cases, where there were recommendations of a fail, there was no statement that the fails had been upheld or indeed, whether a repeat placement was to be offered. This might be related, of course, to the remit of the particular panel at that university, rather than an avoidance of decision making.

In one further, case, while the fail recommendation was upheld, the decision to offer a further placement was also deferred. Instead, the student was advised to take a year off with some provisos, one of which was to write a reflective statement. Overall, in two thirds of the cases (six out of nine) where a practice educator or work-based supervisor had made a recommendation of a fail, there was a sense of the decision making being deferred.

Deferring of decisions

The deferring of decisions took a number of forms. In three cases, concern was raised by panel members that there was not enough evidence to be able to make a decision. In one of these cases, for example, a revealing comment was made that it was an "unsafe pass and an unsafe fail". In this example, the student had not

undertaken the required number of days as the placement had been terminated a week before the end of the placement, although it is interesting to note that this significant fact did not emerge in the panel discussions for some time. The situation was also complicated by a disagreement between the work-based supervisor and the practice educator – the work-based supervisor recommended a fail and the practice educator a pass. The practice educator's report was described as "thin". There had been no account provided of the difficulties on placement, or any real evidence provided of what occupational standards had been met, if any. Equally, the student's sections of the portfolio appeared weak, but with some positive feedback from colleagues and service users. The work-based assessor's reports contained more in the way of evidence of concerns about the student. The student in turn, had made an official complaint about bullying within the agency. The decision making appeared fraught within the panel, perhaps reflecting or mirroring the troubled placement, with panel members moving rapidly between the two dichotomous positions (i.e. pass or fail). The decision was taken to send the report back to the practice educator for further work with a recommendation to provide clear evidence of the pass recommendation, formally account for the difficulties in the placement and explore the different recommendations. This raises questions about the tutor's management of this situation and the matter was then deferred to another panel. It was a concern that in three cases there were disagreements between the work-based supervisor and the practice educator and this seems an area worthy of further research in terms of extent of the phenomena as well as exploring how this splitting develops in practice. It was reassuring to note that pass recommendations with limited or poor evidence were also returned for further work, indeed, this was seen on three occasions in different panels. This was also seen as an issue in the online survey, where 70% of respondents reported poor quality practice educators' reports as an issue that often came up in panels. This raises a question about whether all poor quality practice educators' reports are returned for further work and, if not, why not, and begs the question as to whether the very real and pressing concerns about timely student progression may mean that some students are passed despite a poor or, perhaps, poorly evidenced practice educator's report. This might imply, although further research is clearly required in this area, that perhaps weaker students may be "getting through" on the basis of poorly evidenced practice educators' reports.

Other ways in which it appeared the decision was "deferred" concerned a situation where the recommendation of a fail was rather reluctantly and perhaps guiltily upheld, and the decision about a further placement was effectively deferred for a year. Vague conditions were suggested, for example, that the student take a year off and write a reflective statement, but there was no indication of what might need to change in the student's personal situation to enable the placement to take place. Questions about assessment regulations, and having the authority to insist a student take a year off, appeared to be ignored as the panel instead focused on offering various hypotheses as to why the student had behaved the way she did. What is termed here as "filling in the gaps" will be explored in further on in the report. The tutor appeared quite powerful and persuasive in this case, effectively and very decisively overturning the perspective of the earlier consideration of the report by three panel members. The tutor also appeared to "fall on her sword"

somewhat, lamenting her poor management of the situation. Indeed the emotional climate of the PAPs is a theme that will be returned to later.

Powerful voices

As discussed in the example above, in the various PAPs observed, there were powerful and strong voices, usually university staff, and in key moments of decision making, tutors of failing students. This raises potential issues of transparency and equity, as not all the tutors of students under discussion were present. In the example explored above, the perspective presented by the sub-group reading the portfolio appeared very compelling, namely that the student should fail and should not be offered a further placement opportunity. The student had clearly struggled throughout the course and her progression through the programme had been very slow. The student had experienced a number of personal issues and had been advised to defer, yet had chosen to defer from the academic component of the course only and continued with the placement. The evidence presented in the practice educator's report was compelling and indicative of a fail recommendation. Additionally the student had not engaged with attempts to make a representation at the panel or, indeed, meet with university staff. The student portfolio was largely incomplete. It appeared that the panel members moved from the first position offered, which was to uphold the fail with no repeat placement, to one of feeling sorry for the student and engaged "filling in the gaps" discussions.

There were other examples of powerful voices dominating the decision-making process. For example, the interjection of a programme leader appeared decisive in a particular situation in one panel, and in another, the rather avoidant stance of the programme leader also seemed powerful in stifling debate. In contrast to the powerful voices were the quiet voices, most often service users but also practice educators.

Service users

Since the introduction of the degree in social work in 2003, the involvement of service users and carers in all aspects of a social work programme was emphasised within Department of Health (DH) requirements for social work training (DH 2002). The online survey revealed that for 57% of the universities who responded, service users were panel members. Service users and carers were present at all the panels observed, yet at times, their voices felt "quiet". One panel had a relatively higher proportion of service users and carers (three out of 12 panel members), and their views and perspectives were given equal time. Some panel chairs actively sought out service users and carers' views but in one case, the panel appeared to be dominated by key university staff and representatives from the local authority, and it felt difficult for all participants to have their voice heard. These tentative observations suggest a line of further inquiry: in what ways do service users and carers actively contribute to such discussions and how can university staff ensure their views and perspectives are given equal status – both in a general sense and as it relates to decisions about failing students?

Filling in the gaps

Panel members often developed narratives about the student being discussed. These narratives attempted to explain why the student had behaved the way they did and were often narratives of potential mitigation. This

was particularly the case when there were gaps or unknowns in the information presented about students – either because tutors were not present at the PAP or because the written evidence presented was confusing or ambiguous. Panel members, therefore, attempted to "fill in the gaps" with hypotheses and suppositions which served to prolong discussions, appeared to make the decision-making process more difficult, and caused further splitting and disagreement among panel members. This may have also served to ensure students were given the benefit of the doubt, a phenomena noted in an old but seminal study that highlighted the key issues involved in the assessment of social work students on placement (Brandon and Davies, 1979).

The observations also revealed that the portfolios were not the only source of information on which panel members drew in order to reach their conclusions. Indeed, this was highlighted in the online survey, where it was acknowledged that decisions about students are informed by a range of sources. These other sources observed in the PAPS included: practice educators' written reports and verbal representation at the panels and tutors' knowledge of the student – both of the placement under discussion and other information such as academic performance and issues that may have arisen on previous placements. This is another way, in which panel members engaged in "filling in the gaps". In one example, the collective knowledge of the student was used as a further justification for the decision to uphold the fail and not offer a further placement opportunity. There were significant differences, however, in the levels of collective knowledge about particular students across panels, and this largely depended upon whether the tutor of the student was present. Indeed, the numbers of tutors in attendance at the PAPs differed quite significantly in the different panels observed. This clearly raises issues about equity. It also raises potential issues about transparency that is, the use of "unofficial" sources of information about students that *may* have an impact on decisions made.

Unofficial grading of passes

While the research focuses on decision making around fails, it is relevant to note the various ways both 'fail' and 'pass' recommendations were described by panel members. There were various terms used around pass recommendations, one of which was "bare passes". Bare passes caused panel members some consternation and were given either because practice educators reports were poor or weak, or because the students' contributions in both the placement and the portfolio were weak. In particular, writing about practice in a weak, superficial and un-theorised way caused panel members disquiet. It was positive to note that the quality of writing was thoroughly examined and commented upon by the full range of panel members, including service users. One panel discussed a pass recommendation that caused some panel members to express unease about a particular student, although these worries appeared ill-defined and vague.

Other descriptions of passes included the term "a satisfactory pass", a "good pass" and "an excellent pass". Linked to the scale of passes, placements were also described in various ways, namely "good" or "very good". It was positive to note that the quality assurance function of PAPs was in evidence in all the observations, and concerns about poor quality placements or inadequate practice education were raised by all panel members. As discussed earlier, practice educators' reports that were not sufficiently evidenced or of a high enough

standard were returned to the authors for further work although this accounted for a very small number across the four PAPs observed.

The somewhat arbitrary self-grading of portfolios may suggest that panel members may have their own unacknowledged standards and expectations about the quality of reports from both practice educators and students. While some reports were returned to practice educators for further work, one example of a practice educator's report that was suspected of being 'cut and pasted' from another student's report was not returned. In two panels, the use of a pro-forma to guide panel member readings and comments appeared helpful to focus the panel members on the important issues and helped ensure a degree of coherency and standardisation. This seems a good model for all universities to consider adopting.

The impact of the emotional climate

As alluded to in other sections of this report, the emotional climate appeared significant at times, in both the decision making and in the comments made by panel members. Social work staff and practice educators appeared genuinely pleased and proud when students had made significant progress and development. Students' accounts of practice, when written well, were also commented upon, as were students' achievements on placements. Particular mention was given to students who had challenged poor or inadequate practice, or who had managed difficult and challenging placements.

Decision making around failing students appeared to split panels at times. The climate became fraught and a sense of guilt pervaded the panel. For example, in the discussions around one student who had failed a repeat placement, and so had in effect failed the social work programme, the panel appeared visibly relieved when it was stated that the student would be entitled to an exit award, namely, a degree in another subject. The panel seemed unable to acknowledge their feelings around the failed placement, express their unacknowledged disappointment, and perhaps express their own feelings of failings. Indeed, this is a phenomena identified in previous research (Finch 2010) that highlights practice educators' tendency to internalise the students failings as their own and this may have particular implications for tutors of failed students.

In one of the examples discussed earlier – where the student had a difficult progression throughout their time on the programme, had failed the placement, and had not engaged with university staff – despite attempts by other panel members to uphold the fail, there appeared to be active resistance from the tutor. The tutor acknowledged her own failings in the management of the placement and in her wider dealings with the student more generally (evidence perhaps of an internalisation of failure), with the result that the tutor did not appear able to let this student fail. The tutor's own guilt may have got in the way of a fair and just decision. Indeed, the student's own behaviour suggested that she did not want to pursue the course and perhaps needed to be "let go", and for other people to make a painful and difficult decision.

In observing the interactions and dynamics at play in the panels, there was often a sense of frustration that the decision-making process around failing students appeared so fraught, unnecessarily complicated and, at times,

included overly long, repetitive and torturous discussions. It felt that the decision-making capabilities in panel members became paralysed, which may account, in part, for the phenomena observed of deferring decision making. Indeed, Finch *et. al.* 2013 explores this particular issue further, utilising a key psychodynamic theory – projective identification – as one particular form of defence mechanism that can emerge when issues of failing students arise. At the very least, there would seem to be scope for panel chairs to acknowledge the emotional climate and challenging feelings that are very likely to emerge when failing students are discussed. Indeed, in one panel, a member tellingly commented, "It's just very hard to fail students."

Recommendations

In light of the findings, there are some key messages for HEIs about the operation of PAPs and a number of recommendations emerge from this study:

1. There appears to be a need to prepare PAP members adequately for the, at times, difficult and emotionally challenging decision-making role. There are several aspects to this; firstly chairs could usefully acknowledge the emotional climate that may emerge at PAPs to ensure that panel discussions are not mirroring placement concerns and could acknowledge the sadness and disappointment that ensues when a student fails their placement. The emotional investment in students by practice educators and university staff thus needs acknowledging. Secondly, reiterating the purpose of the PAP at the outset of each meeting could also offer reassurance and remind PAP members of their role, remit and function. In one PAP meeting observed, a sub-group of PAP members used the HEI's guidance around what decisions can be permitted (and in what circumstances) as a useful framework for making sense of what occurred during the placement, and subsequently in making a clear recommendation to the larger panel. It was noted, that the panel did not contest the recommendation. In another example, where this did not happen (in the same PAP), decision making became excessively prolonged and emotionally difficult with the result that positions became polarised and the subsequent decision may well have been out of line with the assessment regulations more generally. Thirdly, a related issue might be to explore the training and support needs of PAP members and consider the needs of new PAP members. There is scope to consider the skill level of PAP members and ensure those confident about decision making are present. The link to external examiners is also an important consideration and while not explored in this research, HEIs should consider how and when external examiners become involved in ratifying decisions that concern placements.

2. There appears to be an ongoing issue with the quality of practice educators' reports, which at times, made decision making difficult and, in some cases, resulted in a deferred decision. HEIs would therefore benefit from thinking about how standards of practice education could be further improved and how reports could be standardised. This leads to the consideration of developing or implementing clear policies and processes for managing concerns about practice educators in general and, specifically, in relation to poor

quality reports that do not provide an appropriate level of evidence to support either a pass or fail recommendation.

3. The important and vital role of the tutor in managing the placement in a timely and effective manner appears to be indicated by the research undertaken. The effective intervention of the tutor may appear to mitigate against abruptly terminated placements, disagreements between work-based assessors and practice educators and students not being made aware of concerns in a timely manner. It was noticeable that in deferred decision making about failed students, tutors were absent from the PAP and had not provided written information about the events of the placement. This would seem an important recommendation for HEIs to focus on, as well as good practice more generally.

4. Whilst failed placements were relatively rare in the PAPs observed, there remains the need to ensure that processes in place to identify students at risk of failing, via initial entry procedures and assessed readiness for direct practice requirements, are robust, and are having the desired effect in terms of gate keeping points.

5. There is perhaps a need to think about the optimum size of panels and panel membership, as well as critically consider how university staff may unintentionally dominate proceedings generally or in key decision-making moments. Independent chairs may be a good way forward in this respect.

Areas for further research

The results from the online survey and the ethnographic study, while acknowledging the small sample size and the subsequent impossibilities of generalisation, suggest new lines of enquiry which would assist in extending the present research base, in what is an under explored area of practice.

1. There seems justification in developing the ethnographic research to see if the emergent themes are indicative of wider concerns. Linked to this, a comparative study across the countries of the UK, might also expose hitherto taken for granted assumptions or highlight particular localised issues and concerns.

2. A concern to emerge in both the online survey and the ethnographic study, centred on the variability in the standards and quality of practice educators' reports. Further research into the prevalence of this concern and the implications of this appears to be indicated.

3. The voices and perspectives of students, particularly failing students, have not been considered in this research but seem important in studying the phenomena. These should be considered in general terms and in respect of how students conceptualise the PAP, their perspectives of this process, and how adequately their perspectives are represented if they have been deemed to have failed the placement.

4. There seems merit in exploring further the experience of being a PAP member and in particular, how service users and carers feel their contributions are being valued.

5. An important issue to emerge from the ethnographic aspect of the research concerns the three incidences of disagreement between the work-based supervisors and off-site practice educators. There seems a need to explore this further to consider the reasons for this and the role of the tutor in managing these differences.

6. There is a need to develop the theoretical analysis further and consider what theoretical frameworks may be illuminated when exploring this issue further. For example, psychology theories around group thinking may shed useful light on some of the phenomena observed. Likewise socio-legal theory around decision making, often in the context of how jurors make decisions, may also be useful in this context.

Concluding comments

The findings from both the online survey and the ethnographic study demonstrate the complexities and intricacies of the PAP process but also the important role it occupies within social work education – namely that of quality assurance and a quasi-assessment role. That it has both these roles adds another dimension of complexity that, for some panel members, including chairs, may be hard to navigate. PAPs, therefore, also appear to occupy an important liminal space between the agencies and the universities, often complex assessment regulations, which do not always sit comfortably within professional requirements (Finch, under review). It is acknowledged that while the ethnographic part of the research was very limited in sample size, nonetheless, the findings that emerge from this study are original and open up new lines for further enquiry and recommendations for good practice.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix 1: Survey questions

1. What is the name of your panel that examines student performance on placement?
   a. practice assessment panel
   b. practice support panel
   c. practice consultation panel
   d. practice development panel
   e. other …

2. What is the remit and scope of the panel? (tick all that apply)
   a. quality assurance (practice placements)
   b. quality assurance (practice educators reports)
   c. assessing pass or fail recommendations
   d. recommending to exam board, pass/fail decisions
   e. assessing whether students who failed their placement are given a further placement opportunity
   f. other …

3. Do you have the following: (tick all that apply)
   a. mid-way PAPs (or equivalent panel)
   b. final PAPs
   c. other …

4. How many times a year does the panel meet?
   a. once a year
   b. twice a year
   c. three times a year
   d. other …

5. If you offer both undergraduate and post graduate social work programmes, do you have separate panels?
   a. n/a (do not offer undergraduate and post graduate)
   b. yes
   c. no

6. Who are the members of the panel? (please tick all that apply)
   a. administrator
   b. placement co-ordinator/manager
   c. placement co-ordinator's assistant
   d. programme leader/director
   e. social work tutors
   f. students
   g. practice educators
   h. work based supervisors
   i. workforce development advisors
   j. local authority placement co co-ordinators
   k. service users
   l. other …

7. Who chairs the panel? (just write)

8. Does the panel members review the portfolios?
    a. yes
    b. no

9. If yes, what is the approximately percentage of portfolios that is reviewed?
    a. 00-10%
    b. 10-20%
    c. 20-30%
    d. 30-40%
    e. 40-50%
    f. 50-60%
    g. 60-70%
    h. 70-80%
    i. 80-90%
    j. 100%

10. On what basis are the portfolios reviewed? (tick the one that most applies)
    a. random sample
    b. all the fails plus a random sample
    c. all the fails plus the portfolios of the students whose tutors is present at the PAP
    d. all the fails plus the portfolios of the students whose practice educator is present at the PAP
    e. all the fails plus the really good ones
    f. other …

11. What decision making powers does the panel have? (tick all those that apply)
    a. pass student
    b. fail student
    c. student to rewrite the portfolio
    d. practice educator to rewrite report
    e. gather further evidence
    f. defer decision making
    g. other …

12. Can the panel make a recommendation about whether to offer a failed student a further placement?
    a. yes
    b. no

13. Can the panel decide not to offer a failed student a further placement opportunity?
    a. yes
    b. no

14. If yes to above – can this be accommodated within the universities assessment policies?
    a. yes
    b. no

15. What evidence is being drawn upon in making decisions about failing students? (tick all that apply)
    a. placement staff (on and off site)
    b. mid way report
    c. service user feedback
    d. practice educator report

    e.   tutor's knowledge of student

    f.   previous placement

    g.   academic work

    h.   tutor report to panel

    i.   other …

16. Are there disagreements amongst the panel members?
    a. never
    b. sometimes
    c. often

17. What are these disagreements about? (tick all that apply)
    a. passing a struggling student
    b. failing a struggling student
    c. quality of practice educator reports
    d. quality of practice placements
    e. quality of evidence provided to make a decision
    f. other …

18. How are these disagreements managed?
    a. the chair decides
    b. discussion till consensus is reached
    c. programme leader/director makes decision
    d. another meeting
    e. other …

19. What are some of the issues that come up in panels, particularly when discussing struggling or failing students? (tick all that apply)
    a. lack of appropriate learning opportunities on placement
    b. personality clash between student and PE
    c. poor quality practice educator reports that do not provide sufficient evidence
    d. tutors not visiting placements or addressing concerns in timely manner
    e. fear that student will appeal decision
    f. student did not finish placement
    g. other …

20. Anything else you want to say on the subject of practice assessment panels?