

CRCF RESEARCH REPORT



PRACTICE EDUCATOR TRAINING LANDSCAPE: A NATIONAL SCOPING REVIEW

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June 2025

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the many practice educators, course leads, and practice education leads who generously gave up their time to participate in this scoping review. Academic staff at the University of Ulster were particularly generous in taking time to explain the structure of practice educator training in Northern Ireland, for which we are very grateful. We would also like to thank colleagues at Social Work England, particularly Jenny Ross, who along with the regional engagement leads helped to promote interest in the project.

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Executive summary

This report outlines the findings from a national scoping review of practice educator training in the United Kingdom (UK), with a particular focus on provision in England. The practice education system in England is complex. Previous research on practice education has shown an appetite for greater recognition of the practice educator role (Cook et al., 2024), including the prospect of the role being annotated on the Social Work England register. Social Work England is currently reviewing its role in relation to practice education, and better understanding the current landscape of practice educator training forms part of this work. This review was funded by Social Work England as part of its ongoing work on practice education. The review was carried out by a research team from the University of East Anglia's (UEA) School of Social Work and Centre for Research on Children and Families.

Aims of the review

The overarching aim of the review was to provide a comprehensive picture of the provision of practice educator training. Within this, a number of further aims were identified:

- To provide an overview of existing practice educator training courses in England, to include information such as:
 - Entry requirements and selection criteria
 - Mode of delivery
 - Costs of the course
 - Academic level and number of credits awarded
 - Course duration
 - Course content
- To explore similarities and differences in the provision of training between and across the regions of England, including identifying non-accredited practice educator training routes
- To establish what models are used for practice educator training in Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales, and to explore the role of the regulator in practice educator training in these nations
- To understand the relationship between practice educator training and career progression for social workers, including information on how practice educator training does (or does not) contribute towards achieving post-qualifying awards

Methods

The review was carried out between late March and June 2025. The following methods were used to gather information for the review:

- A rapid review of the existing empirical literature related to practice educator training
- A desk-based analysis of existing practice educator training courses in England
- A desk-based analysis of the provision of practice educator training in the other nations of the United Kingdom
- Focus groups with practice educators, course providers, and practice education leads from across the regions of England

Key findings

In total, information was gathered from 54 higher education institutions (HEIs) involved in practice educator training, and 72 individuals participated in the focus groups. Drawing together the accumulated data from the desk-based research and focus groups, the following key findings were identified:

- While content and entry requirements for practice educator training courses are largely similar across England, there are diverse approaches to how learning is delivered
- There are a range of HEI accredited courses available which provide academic credits towards a qualification, along with non-accredited courses not leading to a formal qualification delivered by local authorities or HEIs in partnership with local authorities
- There is variability in course duration and mode of delivery
- There is also variability in whether providers offer a single combined course covering the 2 levels of the Practice Educator Professional Standard (PEPS) (the current training standards for practice educators, currently owned by the British Association of Social Workers (BASW)), or offer separate courses for each stage of the PEPS
- Regional partnerships are an important part of the delivery of practice educator training, ensuring that local needs are met and sufficiency of practice educators and practice placements is maintained
- Variation of delivery and differing local approaches to providing practice educator training could mean inconsistency and a lack of quality assurance in the provision of practice educator training
- The other nations of the UK have greater input from the regulator into the approval and quality assurance of practice educator training and, in some cases, clearer post-qualifying pathways that incorporate practice educator training
- Practice educator training plays an important role in social workers' career development, providing opportunities to move up into senior/advanced practitioner or management roles, to move internally to practice development roles, or to move into social work education
- There is an appetite for greater standardisation and quality assurance of practice educator training in England, but there is little consensus about what this should look like
- Stakeholders are concerned about the impact of greater regulation of practice educator training on workload and feel it could disincentivise social workers from becoming practice educators
- There are, however, useful models from within England, and learning to be taken from the other UK nations that can helpfully inform future delivery of practice educator training in England

Introduction

Social Work England has been the regulator for social work in England since 2019 and currently its main involvement in practice education is through its standards for social work education and training (Social Work England, 2021), which outline placement learning requirements for social work students on qualifying programmes, along with providing information on expectations for the registration, currency, and skills of practice educators.

Social Work England does not currently have regulatory oversight of practice education beyond its education and training standards and the need for practice educators to maintain their social work registration, which includes ensuring that they adhere to Social Work England's professional standards and that they undertake regular continuing professional development (CPD). Over recent years, Social Work England has sought to gain a better understanding of the practice education landscape in England to inform its future relationship with practice educators. This work has included engagement with stakeholders, and professional bodies with an interest in practice education, and ongoing work with the Practice Education Development Group and Education and Training Advisory Forum to seek input from stakeholders on the current and future direction of practice education in England. Social Work England has also commissioned previous research by Cook et al. (2024) to better understand how the practice education system operates and is experienced in England.

Practice education is a foundational part of training for social work students; it provides them with crucial opportunities to apply and embed theoretical knowledge gained from their academic study to practice situations. Routes into social work in England have diversified in recent years, including the introduction of fast-track schemes and degree apprenticeships, which come with their own apprenticeship standard specifying the knowledge, skills, and behaviours that apprentices are expected to demonstrate during their apprenticeship. This has added to the complexity of the practice educator role as they have to navigate the differing needs, structures, and – in the case of degree apprenticeships – standards that accompany students on different qualifying routes. Despite the central role practice educators play across these different forms of social work education, previous research (Cook et al., 2024) found that there has been relatively little investment in both research on practice education and in practice educators more broadly.

Guidance for practice educator training currently comes from the Practice Educator Professional Standards (PEPS), which are owned by the British Association of Social Workers (BASW). Since BASW is a professional body and not a regulator, the PEPS have the status of guidance as opposed to providing a regulatory framework. BASW does not have a role in approving or quality assuring practice educator training or maintaining a register of practice educators. The PEPS were refreshed by BASW in 2022. The PEPS specify that social workers undertaking training to become a practice educator must have 2 years of post-qualifying experience (2022). The PEPS can be broken down into 2 stages of training. At stage one (often referred to as PEPS 1), trainee practice educators oversee the learning of one student with support and oversight from an experienced practice educator as a mentor. Once qualified, PEPS 1 practice educators can support and assess a student's first placement (usually 70 days) but must have oversight of an experienced practice educator for a student's second placement (usually 100 days), who will sign off their assessment decisions. At stage 2 (often known as PEPS 2), practice educators need to have overseen the learning of 2 learners and, once qualified, can

independently assess both first and second placements. The PEPS consist of 4 domains, which act as guidance for the training and assessment of new practice educators, and maintaining the currency of qualified practice educators.

The PEPS domains

These domains are central to the BASW guidance (BASW, 2022) on the provision of practice educator training, and on maintaining currency for existing practice educators. Assessment of trainee practice educators includes a requirement for them to show how they have evidenced the PEPS domains.

- Domain A: Working with others to organise an effective learning environment
- Domain B: Teaching, facilitating and supporting learning and professional development in practice
- Domain C: Managing the fair and transparent assessment of students in practice
- Domain D: Developing knowledge and continuing performance as a practice educator

Practice educator is not an annotated role on the Social Work England register in the way that Best Interests Assessor (BIA) and Approved Mental Health Practitioner (AMHP) roles are. As the previously commissioned research showed (Cook et al., 2024), oversight and management of practice educators is managed locally, with local authorities and course providers maintaining lists of practice educators who can support and assess students on placement. However, this information is often piecemeal and patchy, and reliant on single individuals to maintain (Cook et al., 2024).

As part of Social Work England's efforts to understand the practice education landscape to inform its role in practice learning and assessment, the University of East Anglia was commissioned by Social Work England to undertake this review of practice educator training in England. The broad aims of the project were to gather information about current practice educator training courses in England, to understand how practice educator training is delivered and regulated in the other nations of the United Kingdom, and to understand the relationship between practice education training and career development for social workers.

Methods

To undertake the scoping review, various workstreams were devised and methods used to gather information about practice educator training in England. Data collection took place between late March and June 2025. Below is a summary of the approaches used to data collection:

- A rapid scoping review of existing empirical literature on practice educator training in the UK
- Desk-based research (for example, mining websites and undertaking web searches) to gather information on existing practice educator training courses
- Direct contact with providers of practice educator training courses to gather additional information

- Desk-based research to gather information about the provision of practice educator training in the other nations of the UK, including information on the involvement of the national regulators
- Focus groups with practice educators, placement providers, and training providers

The focus groups and work on the desk-based research on practice educator training courses took place using a regional approach to enable the research team to explore local arrangements and any variations that may exist within and across the regions of England.

CHAPTER ONE: Practice educator training – existing evidence

A rapid scoping review of existing empirical research on practice educator training was undertaken to understand the current evidence-base for the delivery of training to new practice educators. Previous research on practice education in England highlighted that the existing empirical evidence was often small-scale, and, at times, lacking in methodological rigour (Cook et al., 2024). There is also a general paucity of relevant research on practice education in the UK (Gregory et al., 2025).

1.1 Literature review search strategy

Searches for literature on practice educator training were kept broad to identify as much literature as possible. The only exclusion criteria were that studies had to take place in the UK, had to include empirical data with relevance to practice educator training, and were carried out post-2000. Searches took place in March 2025 using EBSCO (via the University of East Anglia's online library search) and Scopus. Search terms used were: practice educator or practice education or practice teaching or practice teacher or practice assessor AND training or education or course or program or programme AND social work. Searches were carried out in the abstracts of peer-reviewed journal articles. Figure A presents a diagram of the literature search process.

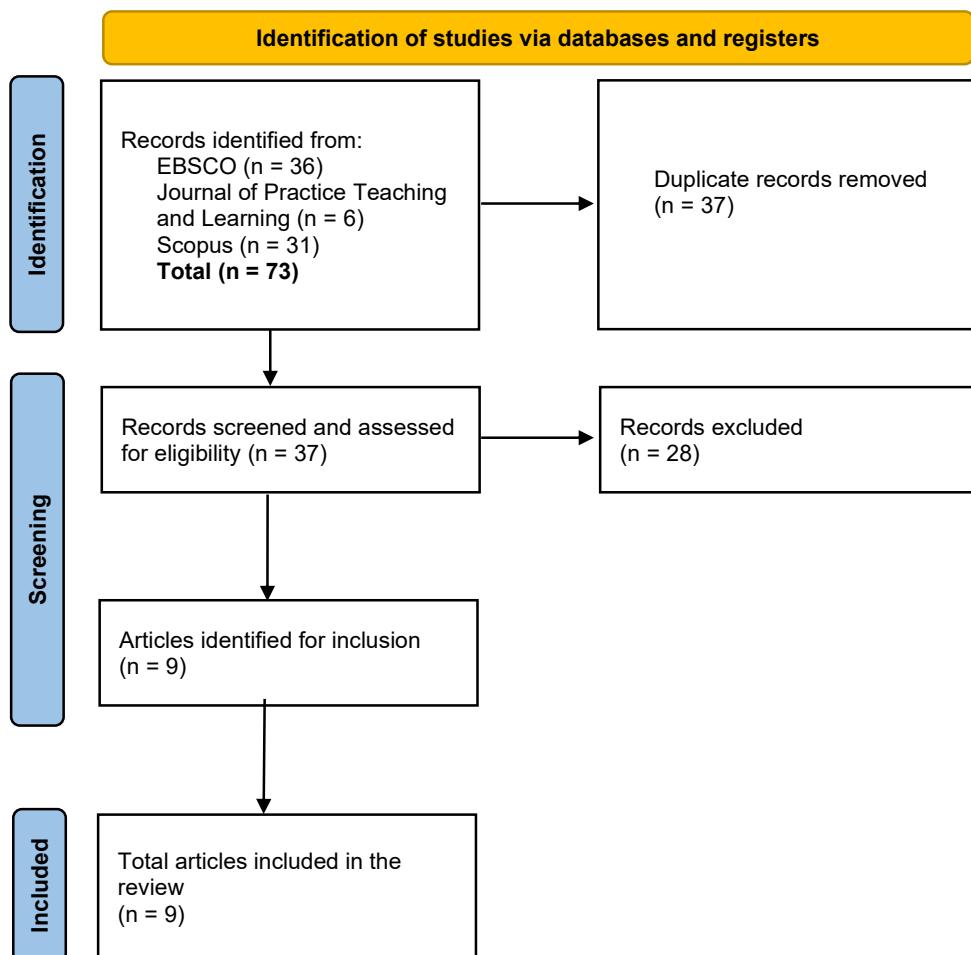


Figure A: Process diagram of scoping review of empirical literature

Unsurprisingly, research literature on practice educator training was more limited than on practice education in the UK more generally (Gregory et al., 2025). Most of the studies included were not specifically about practice educator training but included at least some findings that were relevant. As with the previous review (Cook et al., 2024), most studies were localised and small-scale, which limits the generalisability of their findings.

Once the 9 included studies had been identified, full text reads were undertaken by 2 members of the research team, studies were summarised in a table, and the findings analysed to identify themes across the literature. The following themes were identified: supporting learning and development, assessing practice, and organisational contexts.

1.2 Overview of existing evidence

The literature on practice educator training is scant and most studies include data about other aspects of practice learning. For example, while Apeah-Kubi's (2021) research involved participants who were trainee practice educators, the focus of the research was more on their experiences of supervising fast-track students than on their own experiences of their practice educator training. Other studies (Torry et al., 2005; Douglas & Magee, 2006; Waterhouse et al., 2011; Plenty & Gower, 2013) have more of a focus on ongoing training and support for practice educators than on initial training, though with some relevant findings or messages for initial practice educator training.

It is notable that most of the included studies are old, with only 3 articles published in the 2020s, 3 in the 2010s, and 3 in the 2000s; only 4 studies took place within the last 10 years. This suggests a lack of focus on practice education in the sphere of social work research in recent times. Given the paucity of recent research, the absence of specific attention to initial training, and the general small-scale and localised nature of the research, the evidence-base around practice educator training is severely lacking.

Supporting learning and development

Literature on practice educator training courses highlights the importance of ongoing learning opportunities beyond completion of the academic course. This includes peer group learning, mentoring, and ongoing topic-based workshops.

Waterhouse et al. (2011) conducted research on what is needed for practice educators to remain in their role. The study followed a triangulated methodology, firstly applying an expert sampling technique and sending a questionnaire to practice educators known to have completed their training in the last 3 years. This was followed by group discussions, Delphi forecasting and interviews. 42 questionnaires were returned, individual interviews then took place with 12 practice educators, followed by 12 participants joining small group interviews. The researchers also joined 2 social work forums to discuss their findings. Participants were a mixture of independent and on-site practice educators based in Wales and the West Midlands. The research found that the ongoing needs of practice educators differed according to their level of experience. Those who were more experienced valued more 'intrinsic' support, for example being part of support networks and having more support from their team. They also said that they would value attending conferences on practice education. Less experienced practice educators valued more 'extrinsic' support, which was organisational and

structural. This cohort required practical support as well as more supervision and mentoring.

Research by Keen et al. (2010) evaluated the piloting of the Practice Educator Framework, which was published in 2009, in 15 pilot sites. Data from tender documents, project reports and feedback forms from 300 candidates were analysed. In addition, telephone or email follow-up interviews took place with representatives from 12 HEIs and 12 employers. Feedback on the new practice educator training courses indicated that participants wanted more peer support, valued peer discussion, and wanted more mentoring opportunities.

Burton's (2020) research explored experiences of practice educators both before and after the implementation of the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) which was brought in in 2012. 12 participants who were qualified (or about to become) practice educators took part in small group interviews. They were then invited to individual interviews 6 months later. The data was then shared with 2 social work forums. Appreciative Inquiry was used to assess participants' experiences. Again, participants stressed the importance of peer support, supervision and mentoring. Specifically, practice educators felt that they needed support when screening for unsuitable social work students, and when working with a failing student. They felt that the whole team approach would facilitate a triangulated assessment.

Group supervision and mentoring was recognised as being helpful in research conducted by Plenty and Gower (2013). The research study evaluated the embedding of the PCF and the Standards of Proficiency for Social Work among 48 practice educators. Practice educators were positive about regular workshops offered to them, which provided an open forum and an opportunity to share practice experience. These workshops were provided by the university, and covered practical skills such as supervision, interviewing, managing boundaries, anti-oppressive practice, and critical thinking, motivational interviewing, failing and marginalised students and dealing with disclosures. The workshops were useful for networking and for helping practice educators feel less isolated.

Douglas and Magee (2016) evaluated a re-accreditation framework in Northern Ireland designed to assure quality and improve competence among practice educators. Practice educators were required to attend an annual refresher training which is tailored to a training needs analysis. The researchers found that practice educators were more likely to attend training events and access support groups if they had been involved in identifying the learning needs that should be covered, if they were given opportunities to share good practice and develop innovative ways to deliver practice learning, and if training considered diversity and service user and community involvement.

MacDermott and Harkin-MacDermott (2021) looked specifically at the experiences of practice educators based in Northern Ireland completing their Specialist Award during Covid-19. This research was conducted at a specific time when face to face teaching and learning experiences were curtailed by Covid-19 restrictions. However, this study still gives insight into what can help practice educators to fulfil their role effectively. Participants' experiences during Covid-19 highlight the need for innovation and creativity and a recognition that online and hybrid learning is 'here to stay'. The research recommends the introduction of the Peer Learning Bubble Model (Support, Learn, Participate and Develop) which can be delivered via an online learning hub. Online supervision was a new experience for both trainee practice educators and their own practice assessors, and

participants reported feeling that they did not have the required skills to undertake observations online (MacDermott & Harkin-MacDermott, 2021). Participants suggested that practice educator training courses should encompass some of the long-lasting impacts of the pandemic, such as a greater emphasis on hybrid working and the need to carry out assessments of practice (and of practice educators) in online spaces (MacDermott & Harkin-MacDermott, 2021).

Overall, the literature highlights particular forms of support that trainee practice educators and their more experienced colleagues value. Peer support and mentoring are particularly valued aspects of support and learning for trainee and experienced practice educators (Keen et al., 2010; Waterhouse et al., 2011; Burton, 2020) along with the provision of workshops that are tailored to meet the needs of trainee, new, and experienced practice educators (Plenty & Gower, 2013; Douglas & Magee, 2016). Practice educator training also needs to be responsive to shifts and changes in the practice education landscape, such as moves to increased hybrid working and greater use of online platforms following the Covid-19 pandemic (MacDermott & Harkin-MacDermott, 2021).

Assessing practice

For social workers who are undertaking practice educator training, the process of assessment is multi-layered; trainee practice educators experience their own practice being assessed while simultaneously learning to assess the development of the student learner they are supporting. The research looking at assessing practice included studies exploring the implementation of the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) and how this implementation was supported for existing and trainee practice educators (Burton, 2020), the structure, accreditation, and assessment of practice educator training programmes (Keen et al., 2010), and how trainee practice educators were impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic (MacDermott and Harkin-MacDermott, 2021)

Previous research on practice education has highlighted the challenge of having multiple frameworks for assessing the practice of social work students and the extra burden this can place on practice educators (Cook et al., 2024). Since the turn of the century, social workers and practice educators have experienced a lot of change in the regulatory landscape and in practice frameworks. Three different regulatory bodies – the General Social Care Council, the Health and Care Professions Council, and Social Work England – have been responsible for the regulation of the profession. Social Work England as the regulator since 2019 also has its own set of professional standards, which entrants into the profession must adhere to. These professional standards are embedded into HEI and fast-track courses that are accredited by Social Work England. Other professional standards for social work have also changed over time, moving from the National Occupational Standards to assess social work students on placement to the PCF in 2012. The PCF was originally published by The College of Social Work as part of the work of the Social Work Reform Board, before oversight of the PCF was taken over by BASW after The College of Social Work ceased to exist. More recently, the Knowledge and Skills Statements (KSS) – owned by the Department of Health and Social Care for adult social workers and the Department for Education for children and families social workers – and the aforementioned apprenticeship standard have also been incorporated into practice education assessment frameworks.

For trainee practice educators, an additional framework in the PEPS is also a consideration, as they

have to ensure that their own practice aligns with the PEPS while at the same time assessing the practice of their students against other frameworks, such as Social Work England's professional standards, the PCF, and the KSS (Burton, 2020). Burton (2020) found that implementing new frameworks for assessing practice was a challenge for practice educators; though practice educators were generally positive about the PCF, they noted that its more value-based approach could come into conflict with the more procedural KSS. Trainee practice educators in the study reported that they felt that had received better information, induction, and support in using the PCF in assessment in contrast to more experienced practice educators for whom the PCF was not part of their practice educator training (Burton, 2020). One of the 4 domains of the PEPS relates to the assessment of students' practice, and so trainee practice educators completing PEPS training felt that they were given good opportunities to learn about the PCF and how to use it in assessing students as part of their own learning and assessment (Burton, 2020).

As training for new practice educators is currently based on guidance and standards as opposed to regulation, there are different possible approaches to the delivery of practice educator training. Keen et al. (2010) found that the majority of the 15 pilots they explored were running HEI-accredited courses and mainly at master's level. Participants in the study felt generally positive about their training, though highlighted more mentoring as one area of improvement (Keen et al., 2010). Keen et al. (2010) also found that participants valued observations and reflective accounts as effective forms of assessment for trainee practice educators. The use of observations of supervision mirrors the direct observations that practice educators undertake of students' practice, while reflective accounts similarly mirror some of the written work that social work students are expected to undertake while on placement. This blending of the learner/assessor components of being a trainee practice educator was something that participants appreciated (Keen et al., 2010).

The use of observations of practice is key in social work and practice educator training, and the Covid-19 pandemic posed challenges for ensuring meaningful opportunities for observations of practice were available. MacDermott and Harkin-MacDermott's (2021) research highlighted that practice observations – an important part of both student and trainee practice educator assessment – were disrupted by the pandemic (MacDermott and Harkin-MacDermott, 2021). Carrying out observations online was a new experience for trainee practice educators and their own practice education assessors, and participants reported feeling that they did not have the requisite skills for undertaking observations online (MacDermott and Harkin-MacDermott, 2021). Participants suggested that practice educator training could benefit from shifting to reflect some of the long-lasting impacts of the pandemic, such as a greater emphasis on hybrid working and the need to carry out assessments of practice (and of practice educators) in online spaces (MacDermott and Harkin-MacDermott, 2021).

The literature highlights the complexity for trainee practice educators of being both an assessor and being assessed. This is reflected in the need to understand and navigate a variety of practice and assessment frameworks (Burton, 2020), giving feedback on student reflections and practice observations while being subject to these assessment processes themselves (Keen et al., 2010), and needing to adapt to assessing and being assessed in virtual spaces due to a shift in working practices during and post-pandemic (MacDermott and Harkin-MacDermott, 2021). Simplification and integration of practice and assessment frameworks (Burton, 2020), the use of assessments of

trainee practice educators that mirror practice educators' assessments of student practice (Keen et al., 2010), and greater training on how to observe and assess in an online environment (MacDermott and Harkin-MacDermott, 2021) are all means to overcome some of these challenges and complexities.

Organisational contexts

The existing research shows that practice educators identify the importance of practical support to help them in their role and this is a common theme in much of the available research. Torry et al. (2005) conducted a short-term, small-scale research project in one region in England to ascertain the factors which enhance the experience of or act as structural barriers to practice teaching, and to identify measures to improve the support available to practice educators. Participants from 6 different social work agencies (voluntary, statutory, and private) participated in a questionnaire, semi-structured interviews, and a focus group. More than half of the participants felt they were inadequately supported by their agency, citing lack of support for formal study, no workload adjustment for taking on a student, not being given time off in lieu, and lack of financial reward as barriers to becoming a practice educator and continuing in the role. Similarly, Keen et al. (2010) conclude that study leave and workload adjustment needs to be given to practice educators to ensure that they are supported with both training and maintaining their currency as practice educators.

In the research conducted by Waterhouse et al. (2011) on what helps and what hinders practitioners when training to become practice educators and what support they need to remain in the role, participants put a high value on support from employers which includes workload relief and salary increments. Participants cited barriers such as workload pressure and lack of time as preventing them from providing practice learning opportunities. This was particularly true for less experienced practice educators. One recommendation from this research is to have better senior management engagement and workload adjustments to better support practice educators (Waterhouse et al., 2011).

Practice educators describe their experience as being enhanced when there is a positive relationship between their HEI and their employer (Waterhouse et al., 2011). In their evaluation of the Graduate Certificate set up between West Sussex Social Care and the University of Chichester, Awcock et al. (2007) found that there was a higher than average number of practice educators taking on a second student, and that this was due in part to good communication between the HEI and social work organisations. This included a local authority training officer taking on the role of module leader, helping to ensure that the course fits with trainee practice educators' other work commitments. The HEI in turn provides an academic member of staff to lead the programme and work closely with the module organiser from the local authority.

Organisational support is key to ensuring that trainee and experienced practice educators feel adequately equipped to complete their training and to continue taking on students. Commonly cited barriers are the lack of workload relief for trainee and experienced practice educators, a lack of time off for study or to reflect the additional work needed to support students, and poor remuneration for the practice educator role (Torry et al., 2005; Keen et al., 2010; Waterhouse et al., 2011). Unsurprisingly, recommendations are made for protected study time, enhanced workload

relief, and greater financial rewards associated with the role (Keen et al., 2010; Waterhouse et al., 2011). There is some evidence that close and effective partnership working between HEIs and local authorities can enhance the experience of trainee practice educators and lead to improved outcomes, such as increased likelihood of new practice educators taking on further students (Awcock et al., 2007).

Chapter One – Summary

There is limited literature exploring practice educator training in the UK.

- Existing research is mainly small-scale and localised, meaning findings may not be readily transferrable to other contexts
- The majority of studies are more than a decade old at the time of the review; this means much of the research is not current and conclusions drawn from findings should be treated with caution
- Research does show that there are some valued and innovative approaches to supporting the learning of both trainee practice educators and the students they are working with
- Trainee and experienced practice educators value support through the provision of mentoring, peer support, and tailored workshops
- Assessment practices for trainee practice educators that mirror the kinds of assessment they undertake of students are seen as valuable
- Support when new frameworks are implemented is appreciated, and training should also respond to practice developments, such as increased hybrid working
- Organisational support for trainee and existing practice educators is often lacking, particularly in terms of workload relief
- Close partnership working can enhance the experience of trainee practice educators and increase the likelihood of them taking further students

CHAPTER 2: Overview of practice educator training

This chapter provides a comprehensive summary of the existing provision of practice educator training in England, providing an overview of the national picture, a regional breakdown of course provision, and a summary of practice educator training in the other nations of the United Kingdom.

2.1 Methods for the desktop review

The desktop review took place between March and June 2025. 3 members of the research team worked on gathering information on practice educator training. Information about course entry requirements, academic level and credits, duration and number of teaching days, fees, course content, and whether refresher courses for practice educators were also offered was gathered and recorded. Information on whether combined or split stage one and stage 2 PEPS courses were offered by providers was also sought.

The initial approach involved accessing the websites of providers of social work education (n=76). Further internet searches were then undertaken to see if information could be found on other providers of practice educator training, for example, private training organisations or teaching partnerships, which are regional partnerships between local authorities and HEIs that work together on issues such as social work education and practice learning and assessment.

In most instances, at least some information on practice educator training could be found on course providers' websites. In some cases, all of the information required was available via the online course profile. Where information was incomplete, an email was sent to the course provider – usually an identified key contact, such as the practice educator training course lead – to request further information. Follow up emails were sent in April and May to chase up missing information.

The emails sometimes yielded valuable information about local arrangements that could not have been found through web-based research. For example, some HEIs worked in partnership with local authorities in their region to co-deliver or quality assure practice educator training for those organisations. Further information about these local arrangements was gathered during the focus groups and, where appropriate, this information has been incorporated into the regional summaries in section 2.3.

2.2 Practice educator training in England – a national overview

This section will provide an overview of practice educator training across England. In total, we gathered information on 45 practice educator training programmes offering a full stage 2 qualification, including 3 programmes provided by Teaching Partnerships and one scheme offered by the Frontline Organisation/Approach Social Work as part of their consultant social worker role. The review process and information gathered through focus groups provided a comprehensive picture of the practice educator training landscape, however given the existence of some localised approaches that would not have been uncovered through desk-based research alone, it is possible that the review has not captured every course offered across England.

Data from our research indicates that the landscape of practice educator training in England is perhaps becoming increasingly varied and influenced by local and regional contexts. For example,

through follow-up contact with providers as part of our desk-based research and in our focus groups (see Chapter 3) we became aware of several examples of partnerships between HEIs and local authorities (or other social work employers) that differ from partnership to partnership. Some providers offer a 'split' delivery model whereby employers run stage one (or PEPS 1) practice educator training in-house (potentially with some HEI support) and access HEI-run courses for their stage 2 (or PEPS 2) candidates. A smaller number of local authorities run in-house delivery for both stages, often with HEI support, for example for part-delivery and portfolio moderation. In some regions, a partnership model is used where a number of local authorities and HEIs work together to align delivery, with HEIs primarily providing additional support and learning rather than delivering the PEPS qualifying course directly. We also found limited examples of non-qualifying practice educator courses; for example, the Open University currently offers refresher training only and not training for new practice educators (for this reason, information on their training is not included in the data below).

We include some examples of these in our regional breakdown of practice educator training in section 2.3. However, for a number of practical reasons, a more detailed and systematic overview of these courses was beyond the scope of this review – not least because in-house courses often lack the public-facing online content that would make them practical to be included in desk-based research. As a result, the data in this section focuses on programmes run by HEIs, Teaching Partnerships and the Frontline Organisation/Approach Social Work.

Our research identified a total of 54 HEIs involved in either directly running or contributing to PEPS qualification offers, including 10 different universities contributing to 3 Teaching Partnerships offers: the Greater Manchester Social Work Academy (4 HEIs), Chester and Merseyside Teaching Partnership (4 HEIs) and Leeds and Wakefield Teaching Partnership (2 HEIs). For the purposes of presenting data on the 45 programmes featured below, we counted courses offering stages one and 2 separately as one offer but did differentiate between differently priced courses at the same institution if they awarded varying credit levels or followed different course structures (for example, if a HEI ran both a combined course for stages one and 2 with lower fees and another, more expensive course with separate units for each stage, these counted as 2 offers).

We gathered a range of characteristics for the 45 courses with HEI involvement identified, which were:

- (1) Whether courses offered qualification of both PEPS stages as either separate or as combined modules
- (2) Delivery modes of courses
- (3) The costs of completing practice educator training
- (4) Whether courses award academic credits (and if so, how many)
- (5) Duration of courses
- (6) Numbers of teaching days involved to reach PEPS stage 2

Further information was also gathered on entry requirements and selection, number of days of teaching offered, as well as on course content and refresher training offers. We were able to gather information on all 6 of the above data points from just over half of the included HEIs, with a further

third providing information on at least 4 of the data points. This meant we were able to gather a significant amount of information, though the data was somewhat 'messy' because of the diversity of approaches on offer and the variety of ways that information was presented either online or in response to follow-up emails.

Selection and entry requirements

Entry requirements across courses generally follow the PEPS standards (BASW, 2022), with candidates for practice educator training requiring 2 years' practice experience following their social work qualification (including their Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE)). The standards also call for demonstrated ability to practice at the PCF level of Experienced Social Worker, along with interest in and commitment to practice learning by supporting student learners or new staff (BASW, 2022). Courses identified reiterate these criteria to varying extents, while several also specify employer support for hosting students on placement and/or provision of a practice educator mentor/assessor to support the trainee practice educator. Selection processes are also varied, with limited information available for some courses, but most HEI-run courses offer direct application options to independent candidates alongside employer nominations in principle. However, in practice, HEIs report that a majority of candidates are put forward by employers, with some providers reserving block-booked spaces for key local employers (usually local authorities) as part of the arrangements that ensure the supply of social work student placements.

Delivery of training by PEPS stages

PEPS stages offered	Courses
PEPS 1 and 2 - separate	26
PEPS 1 and 2 - combined	12
PEPS 2 only	7
Total	45

Table 1: Number of courses delivering staged or combined PEPS training

The diversity of practice educator training across England is reflected in how providers structure offers for the 2 PEPS stages. 26 of the 45 courses identified (58%) offer both PEPS 1 and PEPS 2 training as separate modules, while for only 27% candidates obtain a qualification through a combined course. Only 7 courses identified (15%) provide a stage 2 qualification only; these courses are likely to primarily be in areas where stage one training is delivered by a local authority partner or teaching partnership, with the HEI offering the stage 2 'top up'.

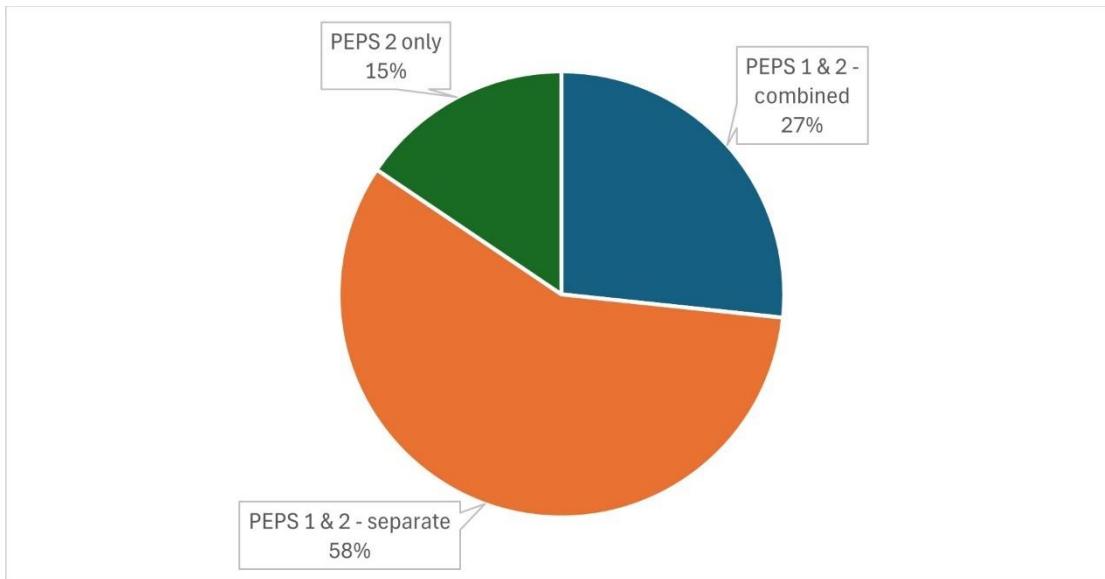


Figure B: Breakdown of courses offering combined or stages PEPS training

Delivery mode

Data on delivery modes was available for 41 out of the 45 courses identified. 49% of practice educator training courses use hybrid and blended delivery modes, while 46% are held as in-person sessions, with only 5% hosted fully online. Focus group data suggests that providers balance the practicalities of online delivery (such as fitting learning into busy practice roles that continue to feature hybrid working as a norm for many) with the added value of mutual exchange and informal peer learning afforded by face-to-face groups. The lasting impact of Covid-19 on working practices can be seen in this regard, prompting both an increase in hybrid and flexible offers while also reinforcing, for some, the benefits of a deliberate choice to return to in-person learning.

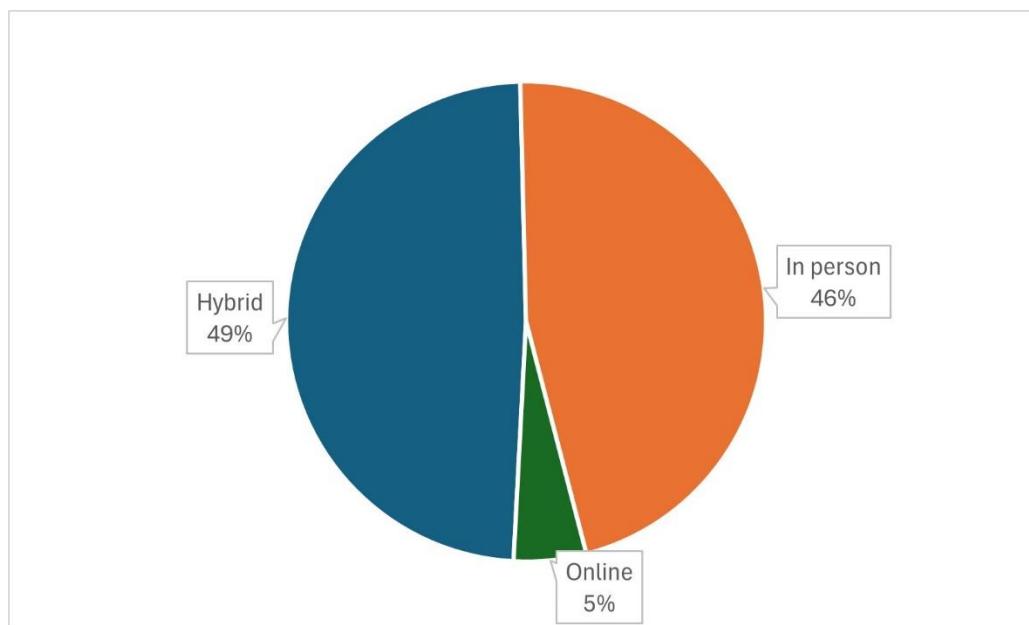


Figure C: Delivery modes of practice educator courses

Costs of training

So that like for like costs can be compared, in this section, we focus on data for the 38 courses providing both PEPS 1 and 2 stages (for details on stage 2-only courses, please see the regional breakdowns in section 2.3). Data for this was available for 33 such programmes. Figures vary significantly across providers and regions, ranging from courses advertised as free through to just under £4,000 for a small number of courses offering a Postgraduate Certificate (PGCert) upon completion. Some HEIs offer heavily discounted fees (of up to 100%) if candidates support their social work students on placement. It is important to highlight that advertised costs do not always correspond to costs borne by candidates themselves, particularly where their employer has an existing arrangement with the HEI. However, the figures do indicate that, particularly for independent practice educator candidates, training can involve significant costs. Similarly, focus group data suggests that cost reduction may be a rationale for some employers deciding to offer PEPS training in-house.

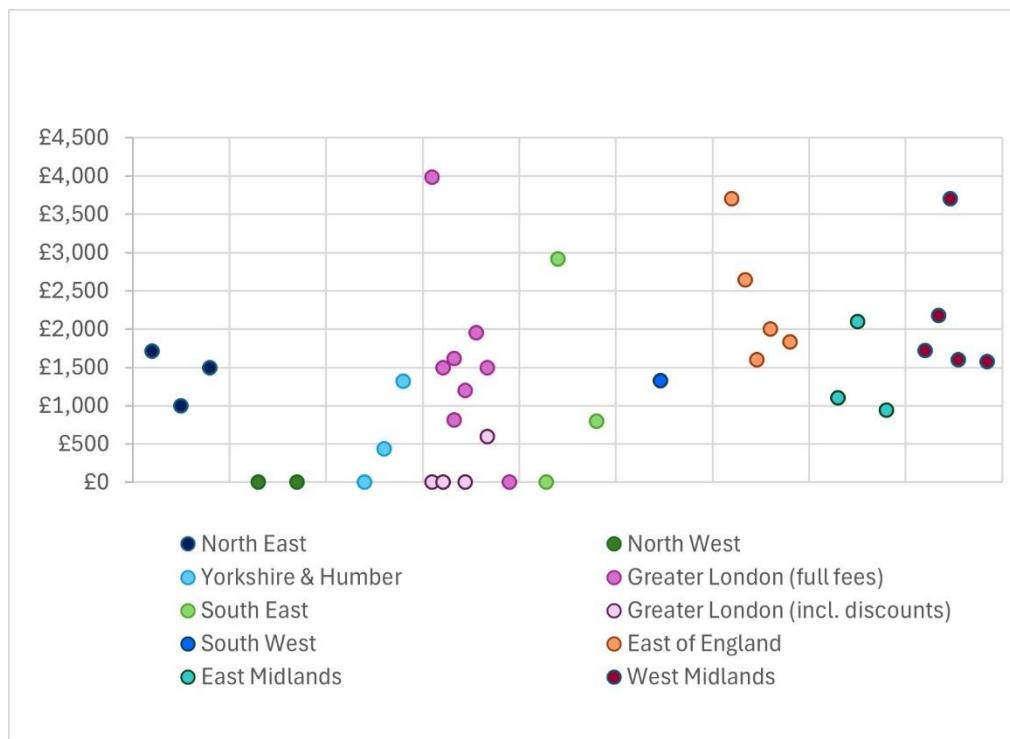


Figure D: Scatter diagram of practice educator training costs by region

Academic credits and links to post-qualifying awards

Data on academic credit award was available for 37 out of the 38 courses that involve completion of both stages of practice educator training. For credit-bearing courses, credits are awarded at post-graduate level (FHEQ level 7). The number of credits awarded across the courses varied significantly, ranging from no credits to 60 credits. Where training was offered by teaching partnerships, the relationship with HEIs was more one of quality assurance and support with delivery, and as such, these courses were not ordinarily academically accredited. Similarly, where we found that there were regional approaches where local authorities or informal partnerships of local authorities and HEIs delivered practice educator training, these courses were also non-accredited. More than half of the

courses identified (53%) offered 40 or 60 credits, suggesting a high degree of academic rigour and a significant number of effort hours in order to complete training at this level. An outlier is the University of Lincoln with 45 combined credits advertised for practice educator training as part of an Advanced Social Work Master's course.

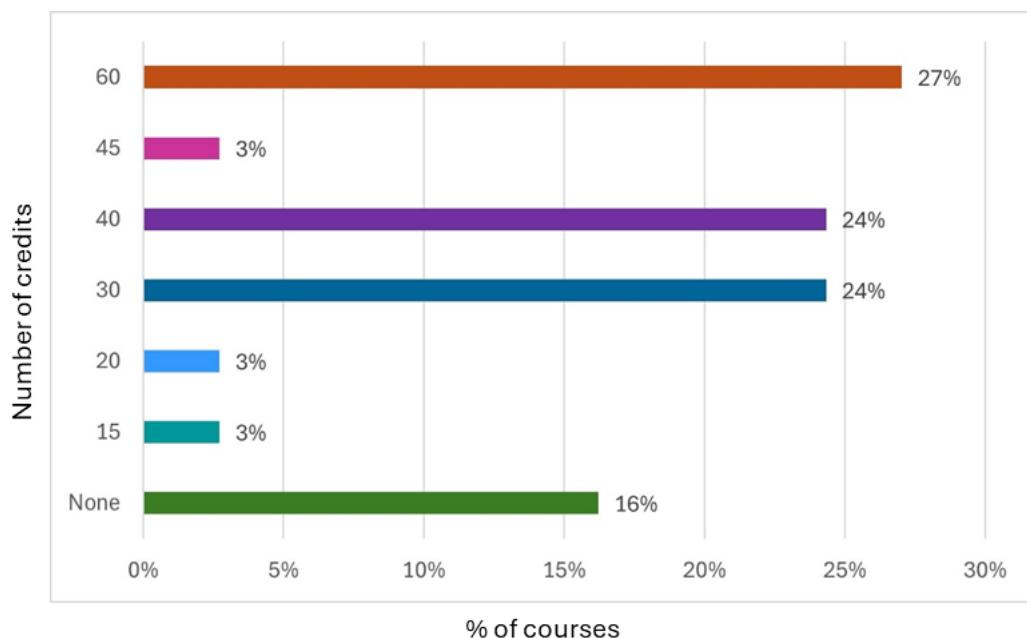


Figure E: Academic credits offered for practice educator courses (rounded percentages)

The national picture of the relationship between practice educator training and further post-qualifying awards is complex, with varied approaches being evident and information not always being available. Several universities offer standalone PGCert awards for successfully completing all of their practice educator training. For example, Coventry University, Anglia Ruskin University, and University of Winchester all offer modules that combine to provide 60 credits that lead to the award of a PGCert in practice education.

Some other HEIs that offer a 60 credit practice educator course do not offer a standalone qualification in practice education; the University of East Anglia, for example, includes its practice educator module within its suite of modules for the MA in Advanced Social Work. Practice educator students can, if they wish, achieve a PGCert in Advanced Social Work if they do not want to undertake further study. The approach of credits for practice educator training being used towards a higher academic award is also evident elsewhere, for example Nottingham Trent University, the University of Hertfordshire, University of Lincoln, Middlesex University, and Kingston University all offer master's qualifications in Advanced Social Work or similarly titled courses. Credits from practice educator training courses offered by these universities can be used towards a full master's (180 credits), or towards a PGCert, or Postgraduate Diploma ((PGDip) 120 credits).

Interestingly, the University of Manchester offers a MSc in Advanced Leadership for Professional Practice (Social Work) that does not include the provision of practice educator training. This may be because practice educator training in the Greater Manchester area is delivered primarily by the

teaching partnership and is not accredited; this model is explored further in the regional breakdown of training in section 2.3.

It was difficult to ascertain whether all HEIs offering accredited courses also offer exit awards; these are not always advertised externally as they are often targeted at regional partners. However, many HEIs do offer post-qualifying awards and most of these will also have processes in place to recognise accredited courses undertaken at other HEIs. This means that anyone undertaking accredited practice educator training at a HEI that does not offer an award can, in principle, use these credits towards an award at another HEI that does offer a post-qualifying master's, PGDip, or PGCert.

Duration of practice educator training and number of teaching days

As with costs and academic credit awards, the time it takes to qualify as a practice educator also varies across providers. Data on duration and number of teaching days was available for 34 out of the 38 courses involving completion of both stages. Course duration and number of teaching days did not necessarily correlate with the number of academic credits on offer. For example, in one region, one HEI provided 19 days of teaching across 16 months for 40 credits to achieve full PEPS 2 qualification, while another HEI offered the same number of credits for the full qualification over just 9 months and 8 days of teaching. A combined PEPS 1 and PEPS 2 PGCert could take between 12 and 24 months to complete depending on the provider, though with most offering between 9 and 12 days of teaching.

With some stipulated durations, it was not entirely clear whether the placement periods of students that trainee practice educators support were fully included or not. A period of between 6 months and a year is most common (50% of programmes identified), with 44 % delivering both stages over more than 12 months. A course length of 5 months or less was an outlier for a course in one Teaching Partnership. A flexible and variable duration, allowing candidates to largely complete learning at their own pace, was found for the Greater Manchester Social Work Academy (see section 2.3 for further details). Overall, many courses offering stages one and 2 as a combined course tend to run over shorter periods compared to those involving separate units.

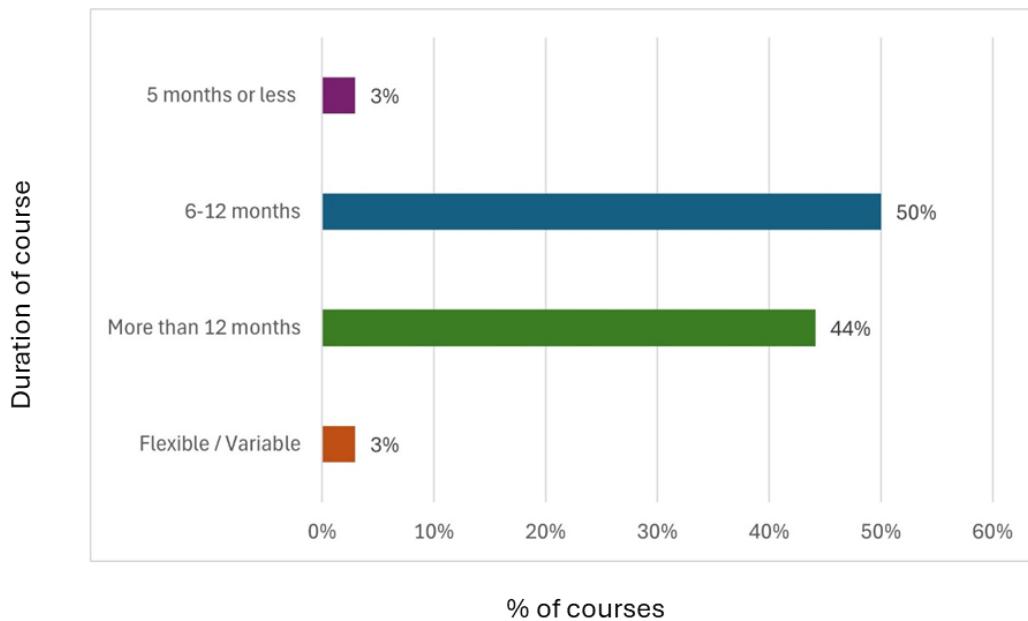


Figure f: Course duration in months (rounded percentages)

We found similar variation for the numbers of teaching days across practice educator training, considering only those courses which offered both PEPS 1 and 2 as either combined or separate options (with data available for 36 out of 38 offers). The majority of courses (64%) require attendance of between 6 and 10 in person or online teaching days (depending on the delivery method) for candidates to qualify as practice educators, while 36% involve eleven days or more.

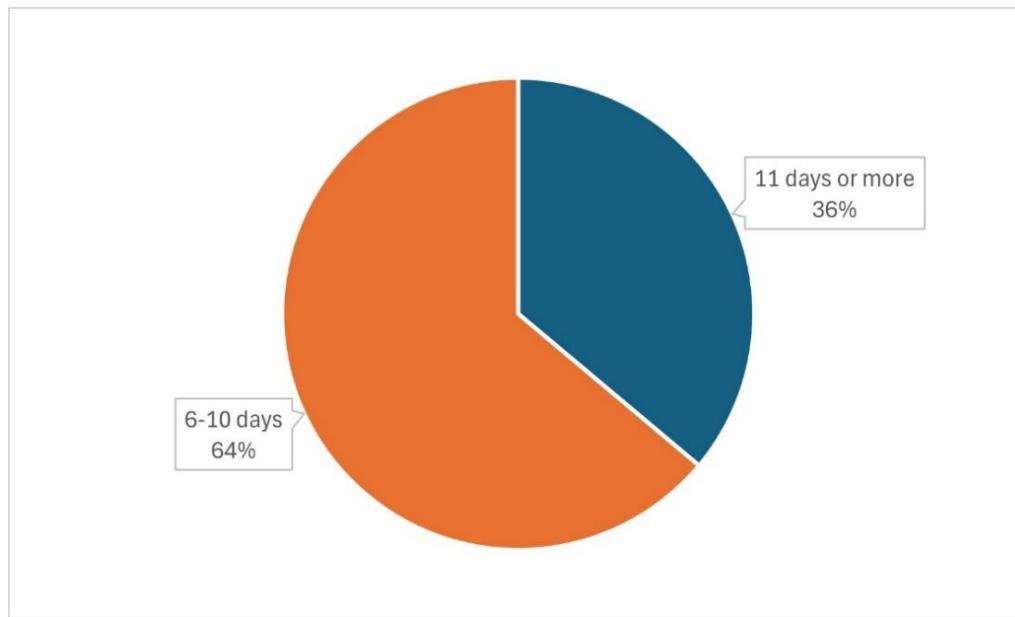


Figure G: Number of teaching days for both stages

Course content

Information on course content was provided by a majority of the HEIs, either online or through

follow-up emails. How the information was presented varied, with some providers offering a more detailed breakdown of how content was delivered – for example, through reflective discussion groups, through online workshops – while others provided a brief overview of the kinds of topics covered on the module(s) offered. Variability in delivery will be covered in the findings from the focus groups.

Indicative practice educator training curriculum

Though there are differences in teaching methods, most courses cover broadly similar content, drawing on the indicative curriculum outlined in the PEPS guidance in section 4.4.1 (BASW, 2022). The list of topics is comprehensive, but includes the following:

- Supervision and relationship-building
- Developing critical reflection and managing emotional demands of practice
- Equality, diversity, and anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice
- Adult learning theory and supporting diverse learners
- Developing a learning community within organisations
- Research-mindedness
- Assessing and supporting diverse learners, including those with lived experience, high achievers, and those at risk of not passing
- Knowledge of professional frameworks and their use in assessment
- Understanding and engaging with the voices of people with lived experience
- Self-reflection and developing professional leadership, particularly in relation to race, culture, and social justice

All providers ensured that course content enabled trainee practice educators to evidence the 4 domains of the PEPS. They also drew on the indicative curriculum offered by BASW in their PEPS guidance (BASW, 2022), which is summarised above. Views of stakeholders on the curriculum suggested in the PEPS guidance are shared in Chapter 3.

Section 2.2 – Summary

The national picture of practice educator training highlights that there is significant variability in how training courses are delivered. Across the 45 providers identified in the review, there was particular variability in areas such as course fees, number of credits awarded, and duration of training.

- The desk-based research highlighted 45 primarily HEI providers, but also uncovered a significant minority of local authorities involved in delivering practice educator training in-house or in conjunction with HEIs
- Offering 2 stages of training in line with PEPS 1 and PEPS 2 was the most common approach
- Course fees range widely, from free to £4000, and similarly, academic credits awarded range from zero to 60 credits. It is not possible to ascertain from the desk-based research whether this variation reflects differences in quality or rigour of training
- Course content, entry requirements, and selection criteria almost universally follow the PEPS guidance and there is little variation in these domains

2.3 Regional breakdown of practice educator training courses

This section will cover how practice educator training is delivered across the 9 regions of England, providing a commentary on variation between and across regions, and highlighting examples of novel approaches to the delivery of practice educator training. There is significant variance in the number and type of providers across England. Providers in London (n=9), the South East (n=12), the East Midlands (n=3), the East of England (n=5), and the North East (n=3) are all HEIs providing more traditional university-led courses. In the North West (n=3) and South West (n=4), regional partnerships between HEIs and local authorities are the dominant models with HEI-led delivery being offered in a minority of cases, while the West Midlands (n=6) primarily offers HEI-led courses, alongside one partnership model.

South East

Half of the 12 practice educator training providers identified in the South East region offer both PEPS 1 and PEPS 2 qualification. This includes 4 HEIs (the University of Winchester, Canterbury Christ Church University and Buckinghamshire New University) alongside one teaching partnership and one local authority in-house pilot programme. A 'split' delivery model is used in the Brighton & Hove and East Sussex area, with local authorities running in-house stage one courses while the Universities of Brighton and Sussex offer stage 2 courses only (see further details below). Desk-based research also indicates that offers at the Universities of Portsmouth and Chichester are for stage 2 only. Entry requirements for PEPS training in the region generally aligns with PEPS standards (registered social worker with a minimum of 2 years post-qualifying experience, including the ASYE) but some providers also suggest a flexible approach on a case-by-case or accredited prior learning basis. Practice at the

PCF Experienced Social Worker level is specified by some providers, as is experience of supervising or supporting learners.

Recruitment and selection processes vary in the South East region: while HEIs usually allow direct applications (including for independent candidates, for example at Winchester or Canterbury Christ Church Universities), the employer-nominated and supported route is also common (and exclusive for the in-house programmes). Course costs for completing both stages range from free (with some HEIs charging additional fees for credit-bearing assessments) to £2,900 for a PG Cert in one HEI. Courses offering PEPS 2 only ranged between £815 at the University of Brighton to £1,200 for 'single bookings' at the University of Portsmouth. Notably, not all HEI-run courses in the region offer academic credits, which is also the case for the in-house programmes identified as part of the research. The University of Sussex offers either 15 and 30 credit options for their PEPS 2 training, depending on written assignment word length and on course fees.

2 PG Cert qualifying courses were identified in the South East region, at the University of Winchester and Solent University respectively. Course duration for completing both PEPS stages ranges from one to 2 years, with teaching days varying between 7 and a half and 12 days where data on this could be obtained. Some in-house courses indicate more flexible delivery approaches (for example, specifying a minimum amount of hours required for completing PEPS training, or combining a mixture of mandatory and optional workshop elements). None of the providers in this region seem to offer specific refresher training courses, although some point to practice educator forums and other support sessions, potentially combined with additional observations. Further, where costs are low (or free), some practice educators may opt to re-take PEPS 2 modules as a refresher.

Case study

The Universities of Sussex and Brighton form a regional partnership with East Sussex County Council and Brighton and Hove City Council that involves a 'split' delivery model across PEPS stages 1 and 2. The local authorities deliver stage 1 in-house, followed by stage 2 courses at the 2 universities. All 4 partners work in close alignment to create a continuous pathway across the 2 stages. Aside from formal teaching, candidates engage in reflective group sessions at the beginning of each day which allows them to share 'live' issues from their work supporting students on placements.

Another feature of this collaboration is the paid involvement of people with lived experience in portfolio moderation panels, providing insights and views that are unique and different from professionals-only perspectives, something that is particularly valued by trainee practice educators and those supporting their learning.

South West

PEPS training in the South West region seems to be highly contextualised, with Bournemouth University, (via its National Centre for Cross Disciplinary Social Work) the only provider identified

running a more ‘traditional’ higher-education based programme. Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole council, via a Partnership Academy with Bournemouth University, supplement learning for local candidates through an additional development programme. Other HEIs across the region focus on contributing to in-house training programmes in local authorities, such as the regional group partnership featured in the case study below. Locally tailored offers in HEIs that support practice educators and on-site placement supervisors also supplement training provision.

The University of Gloucestershire and Gloucestershire County Council operate a ‘split’ model where PEPS 1 is delivered in-house with HEI support and subsequently candidates complete PEPS 2 at the university. Data from both the desk research and focus groups suggests that some of the other local authorities in the region ‘buy in’ to PEPS training via the Bournemouth University programme.

Entry requirements for courses identified in the region generally follow the PEPS specifications. The predominance of local or regional partnership approaches means that most practice education offers involve employer nominations and are free for candidates who support social work students on placement. For independent candidates, completing both stages at Bournemouth University costs £1,325, while other universities in the region also have some provision for self-funded candidates. Where HEIs run courses that contribute towards, but do not directly award a PEPS qualification, independent candidates can in some cases negotiate completion of their award with a local authority partner. The Bournemouth University programme was identified as the only credit-bearing offer in the South West (40 credits for both stages). Refresher training is offered by the University of Bath offers on a bespoke ‘as and when requested’ basis. Other providers in the region offer repeat access to their existing PEPS training provision for candidates needing to refresh their knowledge.

Case study

In the South West region, local and regional partnerships between HEIs and local authority employers are a key feature. One such partnership involves the Universities of the West of England, Bath and Bristol alongside several local authorities in the region whereby the universities run non-qualifying workshops, mapped to PEPS domains, that support local in-house practice educator training.

PEPS candidates obtain their awards with their local authority employers, while universities contribute their expertise through advice and portfolio moderation. A noteworthy feature of this model is that courses across different local authorities are aligned. This offers candidates some flexibility to move between local provisions if they miss a delivery day in their own area’s programme. The regional group leads to strong connections between HEIs and local authorities and functions as a panel for overall quality assurance. HEI partners provide support, guidance and consultation, contributing to reading and moderation of portfolios.

London

All of the 9 identified providers offering PEPS-qualifying courses in the London region support both

stages of practice education, either as separate modules (Brunel University, Kingston University, Middlesex University, Royal Holloway University, University of Greenwich, and Goldsmiths University) or combined courses (London Metropolitan University, London South Bank University, and University of East London – with Goldsmiths also listing a combined offer). Additionally, one non-qualifying programme of support via a Teaching Partnership was also identified. Entry requirements for most courses are aligned the PEPS specifications (being a registered social worker with a minimum of 2 years post-qualifying experience, with some specifying Experienced Social Work level additionally). Some PEPS 2 modules require 3 years post-qualifying experience (either at application or at award stage). A further specification for some courses is the need for employer agreement and support, for example, to provide qualified practice educator mentors/assessors and to allow trainee practice educators to support social work students on placement. Similarly, for PEPS candidates themselves, an expressed willingness, ability and commitment to support learners, and in some cases, being in permanent social work employment are also cited.

Most providers allow direct applications alongside employer nominations, but in practice, the majority of places appear to be allocated in partnership with employers. Course costs range from ‘free’ up to £3,988 for completing both stages as part of a PGCert in one ‘outlier’ HEI, with more typical figures in the £1,500-£2,000 range. However, most providers do offer significant discounts (up to 100%) if trainee practice educators support their own social work students on placement – and in practice those participants tend to be prioritised. Extra costs can be incurred for practice mentors/assessors if provided by HEIs directly.

There is a mixture of delivery modes across the region, with 5 providers indicating hybrid delivery while 3 use in-person formats. All PEPS qualifying courses in the region for which data were available offer credits for their training, ranging from 15 to 60. 3 providers (Kingston, Middlesex and Royal Holloway) offer a PGCert upon completion of practice educator training. Completing both PEPS stages can take from 4 months (combined course) through to 2 years (separate units) and involves between 9 and a half and 12 teaching days.

In terms of content, courses at London Southbank University and London Metropolitan University draw attention to the opportunities for trainee practice educators to be involved in facilitation of reflective practice groups, teaching on social work qualifying courses and interviews of prospective social work students. Limited information was found on refresher courses in this region, with some providers indicating ‘as and when requested’ offers within local partnerships, while others cited capacity or low uptake as barriers to continuing previously offered refresher courses.

A noteworthy approach in the region is the aforementioned ‘Developing Together’ programme, which offers support to practice educators and placement supervisors at all levels:

Case study

The South West London and Surrey Teaching Partnership offer a programme of non-qualifying practice education workshops as part of their 'Developing Together' scheme. These workshops are accessible to current on-site placement supervisors and trained practice educators within the partnership, while also supporting (but not awarding) trainee practice educator qualifications. The workshops can also be used as refresher training to help practice educators maintain currency. This form of programme delivery encourages shared learning and mutual support among participants with a range of experience levels (trainee practice educators, experienced practice educators and those returning to practice education after a break).

West Midlands

The West Midlands region has 6 universities currently offering PEPS qualifying courses all offering both stages either as separate units (Birmingham City University, the University of Birmingham and the University of Worcester) or as combined courses (Coventry University, Keele University and Staffordshire University). Entry requirements for those courses align with PEPS specifications. Several providers allow both direct and employer-nominated applications, but employer sponsorship is common. Costs for practice educator training in the region range from £1,600 to £3,700 in one programme, with costs in the region overall averaging below £2,000. All of the HEI providers in the region award academic credits for PEPS training, most commonly 40 credits (Birmingham City University and the Universities of Birmingham and Staffordshire) – with Coventry University offering a full PGCert (60 credits) and the University of Worcester offering 30 credits. Hybrid delivery is a common mode for PEPS training in the region, but both Birmingham City and Staffordshire University cite in-person attendance. Elements of self-guided study commonly complements formal teaching sessions. 4 of the 6 universities deliver the full PEPS course over 2 years, 2 enable candidates to gain PEPS 1 and 2 in one year.

A particular noteworthy delivery model in the region is the collaboration between Birmingham Children's Trust and Keele University to offer a more bespoke training offer that provides support and rewards for social workers undertaking PEPS training:

Case study

Birmingham Children's Trust work in collaboration with Keele University to offer split-stage PEPS training to social workers employed by the Trust. Stage one PEPS training is offered in house, with an option to undertake accredited stage 2 training in conjunction with Keele University. Practice educator training is embedded in wider career development opportunities, with the Trust offering the opportunity to commence practice educator training when employees enter their third year with the Trust having completed their 2-year Accredited Child and Family Practitioner programme.

The Trust also offer a range of supports and incentives to those wishing to become practice educators. Social workers who want to become practice educators are given a day of time off in lieu (TOIL) for supporting a first placement student placement, and 2 days of TOIL for a second placement, to recognise the work involved in supporting and assessing student learning. Financial rewards of £300 to £750 are also offered to practice educators offering student placements.

This approach combines working with a local HEI to offer an accredited qualification with workload relief and financial benefits and a defined career pathway to promote practice education within the Trust.

East Midlands

In the East Midlands region, 3 universities (the University of Lincoln, Nottingham Trent University and the University of Northampton) offer stages 1 and 2 of practice educator training, all as separate units. At the University of Lincoln the units form part of a wider MSc programme. At Nottingham Trent University, candidates can obtain a PGCert on completion of both modules or alternatively an MA Advanced Social Work Practice upon further studies. Data from focus groups (see Chapter 3) also suggests that some local authorities in the region (for example, Derbyshire County Council) run their own training in-house.

Entry requirements for HEI courses are aligned with the PEPS standards; additionally, at the University of Lincoln, applicants need to undertake a short written test if they do not meet a minimum 2:2 degree requirement and have not undertaken post-graduate level studies previously. All 3 programmes appear to allow direct applications for self-funded candidates, but there are indications that the majority of trainee practice educators are employer-funded. Delivery is hybrid at the University of Lincoln and in person at Northampton and Nottingham Trent universities. Costs for practice educator training across the 3 HEIs varies: the University of Northampton charges £940 course fees plus an additional £670 for provision of a practice mentor assessor over both stages, while undertaking both stages costs £1,100 as a PGCert (60 credits) at Nottingham Trent University. PEPS 1 and PEPS 2 are priced differently at the University of Lincoln, with an overall cost of £2,100.

Interestingly, the 2 units at Lincoln also seem to award different credit levels (30 and 15 respectively, leading to an overall award of 45 credits on completion of both modules), while Northampton appears to award 20 credits for both stages. Course duration appears similar for courses at Nottingham Trent and Northampton (between 9 and 10 months), with teaching days ranging from 8 to 10 days.

East of England

The East of England region has 5 universities offering PEPS qualification, with the University of East Anglia and the University of Hertfordshire offering a combined course for PEPS 1 and PEPS 2, while Anglia Ruskin University, the University of Bedfordshire and the University of Essex run training for each stage as separate modules. Entry requirements generally align with PEPS specifications and there are indications that most courses offer both employer-funded and self-funded options.

For course fees, costs of £900 at Anglia Ruskin University for 'statutory partners' are an outlier, with the remaining courses priced between £1,600 (University of East Anglia) through to £2,000 (University of Essex). All of the offers identified in this region award academic credits, with 3 courses of 60 credits available at the Universities of East Anglia and Bedfordshire and at Anglia Ruskin University, while the remaining 2 offer 30 credits for completion of both stages. Delivery modes vary across the region, with 2 in-person offers (Anglia Ruskin and the University of Essex), 2 hybrid and blended programmes (offering a mix of in person, online, and self-directed learning), and the University of Hertfordshire's course online. Course duration for 4 out of the 5 offers in this region is one year, except for a 2-year programme at the University of Bedfordshire. Teaching days range from 8 to 12 days.

The University of East Anglia offers a refresher course worth 20 credits on an 'as and when requested' basis. Learners on this course are invited to join sessions on this provider's existing practice educator course, allowing them to benefit from revisiting relevant material and engaging in peer learning. The course fee is £650 and it is open to independent as well as employer-supported practice educators wishing to maintain or regain currency.

North East

In the North East, 3 universities (Teesside University, Durham University and the University of Sunderland) provide practice educator training at stages one and 2 as separate modules. Entry requirements follow the PEPS guidance, with additional requirements for candidates' employers to provide qualified practice education mentors/assessors and a minimum 2:2 degree requirement at Durham University. Candidates tend to be put forward and funded by their employers based on their supporting a student on placement. Course costs range from £1,000 at Durham University for completion of both stages to £1,710 at the other providers in the region. Credit awards are similar across the region (40 at Teesside and Sunderland; 30 at Durham) and these can be counted towards a post-qualifying MA degree.

Delivery modes are hybrid for the Durham course and in-person at the other 2 universities. An interesting feature of the course at Durham University is that for stage 2, set formal teaching is replaced by bespoke sessions with varying and unique content depending on the needs of the study cohort group – for example, additional sessions on direct observation or other chosen topics. This

means that trainee practice educators are supported individually by their practice education mentor and through support sessions that are timed to coincide with key stages of placements.

Teesside University offers a one-day non-credit bearing refresher course at a cost of £110 in line with PEPS specifications which focuses on creating effective learning environments, supporting struggling learners, the use of theory in supervision, models of reflection as well as reflexivity and addressing power dynamics.

North West

Practice education provision in the North West is characterised by 2 major partnerships – the Chester and Merseyside Social Work Teaching Partnership (including Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool John Moore University, University of Chester and Edge Hill University) on the one hand, and the Greater Manchester Social Work Teaching Academy (Bolton University, Salford University, Manchester University and Manchester Metropolitan University) on the other. Lancaster University, another HEI in the region, does not run a course directly but instead contributes to practice educator training that is organised and hosted by local authority partners (specifically Lancashire County Council), by reviewing content, delivering aspects of the training and helping to moderate portfolios.

Entry requirements for training programmes in the region follow the PEPS standards and candidates require employer approval and/or nomination. Employers also support candidates through study leave days. The collaborative relationship between employers and HEIs in these partnerships mean that practice educator training is free to partnership members. Delivery is hybrid and blended for all providers across the region, involving e-learning and in-person workshops in Greater Manchester (see more details below) and mainly in-person attendance with a pre-course online session in Chester and Merseyside. None of the programmes identified in the region appear to offer any academic credits. Completing both stages of practice educator training involves around 6 teaching days over 5 months for the Chester and Merseyside programme, while the Greater Manchester Social Work Teaching Academy course is based on the same number of days with a more flexible time frame. Lancaster University supports programmes encompassing 4 teaching days over 4 months. Alongside formal practice educator training, the Greater Manchester and Chester and Merseyside partnerships also offer additional support via practice educator forums and refresher training courses.

Case study

The Greater Manchester Social Work Teaching Academy's programme was developed in response to impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, replacing more traditional models with a flexible learning approach that allows candidates to learn at their own pace and in ways that suit their learning styles. The programme is a collaboration between 4 universities and 10 local authorities in the region. Trainee practice educators complete 11 online modules over stages 1 and 2, with audiovisual content, activities and quiz elements. A workbook prompts candidates to record notes and reflections and provides thematic tools and topic guides.

After completion of these flexible elements, trainee practice educators attend a one-day in-person interactive workshop for each PEPS stage, focused on a number of themes (e.g. reflective supervision, supporting struggling students, issues of power and anti-discriminatory practice) while also providing an opportunity to consolidate learning collaboratively through group activities, reflections and being able to ask questions.

This flexible approach has helped local authorities in the area cope with demand for practice educator training, replacing an earlier 'queueing system' for training places.

Yorkshire and Humberside

Across Yorkshire and Humberside, we found practice educator training offered by Sheffield Hallam University, the Universities of York, Huddersfield and Hull, as well as the Leeds and Wakefield Social Work Teaching Partnership (including Leeds and Leeds Beckett Universities). Apart from the University of Hull, which offers a combined course, programmes in the region offer stages one and 2 as separate units. Entry requirements align with PEPS specifications across the region, with the teaching partnership course focused on employer-nominated candidates. Data from focus groups indicates that in the South Yorkshire area, Sheffield Hallam University and the University of Sheffield have both been involved in supporting practice educator training over some time, but with social work degree provision falling away at the latter HEI, the partnership faces the challenge of reconfiguring its regional provision. Practice education in this partnership has also sought to develop content that offers career progression options towards higher education teaching careers (see further details in Chapter 3).

Costs for both stages of practice educator training (where this information was available) are free for partner candidates within the Leeds and Wakefield partnership, £440 at Sheffield Hallam University and £1,320 at the University of Huddersfield. Delivery modes are generally hybrid for most courses, with the University of Hull programme involving in-person teaching. Academic credits are only awarded for programmes at the University of York (40 credits) and at the University of Huddersfield (30 credits). Course duration for completing both stages varies between 8 months and 2 academic

years, involving around 8 to 10 teaching days. The University of York offer refresher training provision as part of the general support sessions provided to practice educators supporting its social work students.

Section 2.3 – Summary

The regional breakdown of practice educator training highlights that different approaches to the delivery of training courses exist both within and between the regions. There are some novel approaches that have been developed in different parts of England, usually through collaborative working from a number of local authorities and HEIs, though sometimes through a single partnership.

There are big variations regionally; in both the North West and South West, practice educator training is almost exclusively non-accredited and delivered by local authorities with input and support from HEIs. In London, the East of England, the East Midlands, and the North East, training is delivered via more 'traditional' accredited HEI courses. The West Midlands, the South East, and Yorkshire and Humberside, meanwhile, have a mix of regional partnerships delivering non-accredited courses, and more 'traditional' accredited HEI routes.

2.4 Practice educator training in other nations of the United Kingdom

This section will provide an overview of how practice educator training is delivered across the 3 other nations of the United Kingdom. Approaches across Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland have both similarities and differences in comparison to the provision of practice educator training in England. A breakdown of the involvement of the regulator in practice educator training, the standards used and how these are administered, providers of training in the other UK nations, and other relevant information will be offered.

Scotland

The social work profession in Scotland is regulated by the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC). In addition to overseeing the registration of social workers and the approval of social work qualifying programmes, the SSSC also approves practice educator training programmes. The SSSC is a statutory body established by the Regulation of Care (Scotland) Act 2001.

Training standards

The SSSC advises course providers and supports them through the course development process. Once courses are approved, the SSSC monitors them annually to ensure they continue to meet the rules and requirements. The SSSC works with providers to make sure that courses meet the [Rules and Requirements for Specialist Training for Social Service Workers in Scotland 2005](#). A Practice Learning Graduate Certificate course should be at Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework level 10 (which is roughly the equivalent of level 7 in higher education in England) and it must include people with lived experience in design and delivery. Course providers must make sure that the course follows the

SSSC Code of Practice.

Course providers should use the [SSSC Handbook for Quality Assurance and Enhancement](#) which outlines the quality assurance and enhancement responsibilities for courses. The purpose of the handbook is to give guidance on who is involved and advise on the best approach to developing course content. Before a Practice Learning (Social Services) Graduate Certificate course is approved by the SSSC, the course provider has to demonstrate that it has satisfied the Quality Assurance Agency, the Scottish Qualifications Authority, or another nationally recognised quality assurance or awarding body that its procedures, processes and standards meet relevant quality assurance requirements (see [Rules and Requirements for Specialist Training for Social Service Workers in Scotland 2005](#)).

From 2020, all social work programmes were required to embed the revised Standards in Social Work Education (SiSWE) throughout taught courses. Practice educator programme providers must also ensure that they meet the Scottish Requirements for Social Work Education. The key principles are that any award must:

- Integrate observed, assessed practice and learning
- Support safe and effective care that aims to enhance the wellbeing of individuals
- Reflect the standards of practice, values and behaviour that are consistent with the SSSC Code of Practice for Social Service Workers.

Any award must also:

- Include direct observation of naturally occurring practice throughout the assessment process
- Be based on National Occupational Standards (NOS)
- Be accredited by regulated, approved and quality assured awarding bodies
- Be included at the relevant level through either the:
 - Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF)
 - Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF) for England Wales and Northern Ireland and endorsed by Skills for Care

Training providers

Information gathered from the desk-based research highlighted 4 Scottish universities and 2 other centres currently delivering the Practice Learning (Social Services) Graduate Certificate or the Professional Development Award, which are accredited at SCQF level 10 and approved by both the Scottish Qualifications Agency and SSSC. Entry requirements are an SCQF level 9 (equivalent of bachelor's degree) qualification, minimum of 2 years qualified as social worker, and current experience in social work practice. Candidates must be registered with the SSSC and most providers require endorsement by the employer.

There is limited information available online on course providers' methods of delivery. Edinburgh Napier University offers different blended learning opportunities which include small group learning, individual learning, role play, and scenario-based learning. Practice educators are required to submit

2 assignments – one is a reflective piece, and the other is a practice assessor report which is based on observations. For students at Edinburgh Napier University, their portfolio should include feedback from social work students and colleagues, 2 observed supervision sessions, and the 2 assignments. The cost for attending the course at Edinburgh Napier University is £1500 and is paid for by the local authority.

University of Stirling offers a 60 credit programme at SCQF level 11. The blended teaching is offered flexibly over 12 to 36 months, covering group learning, direct teaching, self-directed learning, seminar teaching and experiential learning. The course is split into 3 modules, with the cost of the course being £1056 per module. The modules break down as follows:

- Module 1: practice curriculum; learning agreements and partnerships; learning theories and styles; creating and using learning opportunities
- Module 2: supervision theories and skills; how to promote reflective and analytical thinking and writing skills; supporting integration of knowledge as well as skills and values in practice
- Module 3: practice educator student placement.

Robert Gordon University offer either self-funded places, or places endorsed and funded by the local authority (no fee information available). The course runs for 12 to 15 months with one study day for each module. Learning covers evidence-based practice, leadership, supporting the learning of others, and assessing learners. The University of the Highlands and Islands also offers a practice educator training course but no information could be found about the course through our desk-based research. The Scottish Qualifications Agency was unable to give details of the 2 centres providing training as they did not have consent to share this information and details could not be found online.

Northern Ireland

The Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC) is the regulator for the social work profession in Northern Ireland and is also responsible for the regulation of the practice teacher programme in Northern Ireland. Regulations for the provision of Practice Teacher Specialist Awards are laid out in the NISCC's [Rules for the Approval of Post Qualifying Education and Training for Social Workers and the Recognition of the Attainment of Standards of Proficiency](#).

Training standards

Practice educator training courses must meet the following criteria in order to be approved for delivery by the NISCC:

- Collaborative arrangements between employers and providers
- Resources available for the delivery of the course
- At postgraduate level
- Range of stakeholders (including people with lived experience, students, carers, education and training providers) are involved in design, delivery and evaluation of course
- Course meets relevant policy requirements and standards
- External scrutiny of assessment process

- Evidence that the assessment is carried out by registered social workers approved by the course provider
- There is a complaints, appeals, and termination procedure
- Accessible information available to candidates and employers (including course content, time commitments, assessment methods)
- A quality assurance system within the course structure

Every year the course provider must provide to the NISCC:

- Current course handbook
- Annual monitoring report
- Quality assurance processes
- External examiner reports

Programme delivery

The Professional in Practice Framework (PiP) is outlined in the Rules for the Approval of Post Qualifying Education and Training or Social Workers. This framework specifies the standards of proficiency to be attained by social workers through different learning pathways, including practice education, and it supports the professional development needs of social workers at all stages of their career and in all professional settings and contexts. The framework is used to support practitioners to work towards a range of professional awards, one of which – the NI Specialist Award in Social Work – specifically relates to practice education. Prospective practice educators must be enrolled on the specialist award in order to undertake a practice educator training course.

Candidates who undertake the practice educator programme receive a Practice Teacher Specialist Award. The development of the NI Practice Teacher Specialist Award is delegated to the NI Degree in Social Work Partnership (NIDSWP). The NIDSWP is made up of universities, and voluntary, community and local authority organisations. The NIDSWP facilitates regional policies and consistent approaches in areas such as student selection, course content, delivery placement expectations, assessment standards, and practice learning provision. The NIDSWP agrees how many student placements and therefore how many practice educators are needed each year, and this determines numbers of students who undertake the Practice Teacher Specialist Award, which is usually around 50 per year. The partnership also matches students with practice educators.

The University of Ulster is the only provider of the Practice Teacher programme in Northern Ireland and they offer a MSc in Professional Development: NI Practice Teacher Training Programme (Specialist Award in Social Work). There are 2 modules on the course; the first covers induction and preparation for student learning, the second covers the supervisory relationship, evidence-based practice, and using research. The majority of teaching takes place from September to January, and then the practice educator is assigned a student for 100 days.

The modules are assessed by a combination of academic assignments and practice-based tasks, such as submission of reports the trainee practice educator has written for the student they have on placement. 90 credits at master's level are awarded across the 2 modules. There are 9 taught days and a further day for peer learning. Fees are paid for by the employer and the total cost of the course

is £2913 for a full academic year.

The programme is developed and delivered by University of Ulster academics and by social work practitioners and the programme is coordinated by both an employer and an academic co-ordinator. The academic coordinator supports with developing and delivering materials, the reading list, and pedagogy. The employer coordinator's focus is very much on the work-based elements of the assessment and providing support to Practice Assessors (who assess practice educators undertaking the course); this includes quality assuring Practice Assessor reports. There are joint management board meetings twice a year which both coordinators attend, and they look at what's working and not working from both the employer and the academic perspective.

The NISSC contains useful resources for practice educators including a toolkit and supervision guidance (please see [Documents – NIDSWP](#)). These may be of use to practice educators in other nations.

Wales

Social Care Wales is the professional regulator of social work education and training in Wales. It sets out standards for social work training and the Social Care Wales Regulations and Standard Committee regulates social work courses and produces an annual report.

Training standards

Social Care Wales oversees training standards through The Approval and Inspection of Post-Qualifying Courses for Social Workers (Wales) Rules 2018. This provides the requirements and criteria for the approval and regulation of post-qualifying education and training. Training standards are set out in the [Specified named course requirements: Practice learning and assessment of social work students](#). Standards include demonstration that there is commitment to anti-oppressive practice and Welsh language policy. For practice educator training courses to be approved, they must meet these standards.

Courses must also cover the [National Occupational Standards](#), which set out the values and principles for all social workers practicing in Wales. The [Code of Professional Practice for Social Care](#) should also be embedded in learning. Practice educator training course providers must also uphold the principles stated in the [Standards for practice learning](#). Providers must also involve service users and carers in the development of programmes. If the course provider is not itself an employer of social workers then it must be in a partnership agreement with a local authority. All universities must be affiliated with at least 3 local authorities and all local authorities with at least one university.

Training providers

The Social Care Wales Regulations and Standard Committee produces the [Quality assurance of social work education and training annual report](#), which provides data on the student cohort and courses available. The annual report for 2023/24 states that one university closed its post-qualifying certificate (Cardiff University) and the committee approved four Assessing and Supervising Student courses (Bangor University, Swansea University, University of South Wales, and Cardiff Metropolitan University).

Only some information was available through the web-based research and email correspondence. The University of South Wales and Cardiff Metropolitan University both award a level 6 and 7 qualification which offers 30 credits at master's level. Both courses cost around £800 and there are 6 taught days with a mixture of teaching, including group work, direct observations, online learning, and role play. The University of South Wales requires one critical reflection assignment (4000 words) as coursework, while Cardiff Metropolitan University requires 2 assignments. Both universities require students to be 2 years qualified – Cardiff Metropolitan University also requires that the local authority supports the application and provides a practice assessor. Topics taught at Cardiff Metropolitan University include adult learning, supervision, the Welsh context, anti-oppressive practice, enabling students with specific learning needs, and enabling students who are having challenges demonstrating their competencies.

Swansea University requires trainee practice educators to complete 35 hours of taught time. The cost of their course is £775 and the course is worth 30 credits at level 7 (master's). Bangor University requires its students to be 3 years qualified as social workers and they can only apply through their local authority. There are only 3 taught days on their course. Bangor University works in partnership with 6 local authorities in Wales. All of the universities in Wales require trainee practice educators to have one student on placement for between 80 and 100 days.

There is extensive guidance for practice educators available through [Social Care Wales](#), which may be useful for practice educators working in other comparable national contexts.

Conclusion

The other nations of the UK have differing approaches to the provision and oversight of practice educator training, though what is notable is that in Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales, practice educator training is overseen nationally with involvement from the national regulators. In practice, delivery of training is not dissimilar to in many parts of England, with accredited courses run by HEIs offering opportunities for social workers to qualify as practice educators and, in some cases, to work towards a post-qualifying award. This was a noteworthy feature of the approach in Northern Ireland, where the practice educator role was embedded within a specialist award and formed part of a clearly defined career pathway.

Some other notable similarities were the partnership working between HEIs and service providers, such as local authorities and trusts. In Northern Ireland, quality assurance processes for practice educator training were co-run as part of a partnership that oversees practice learning and assessment in Northern Ireland more generally. Similar approaches have been observed in England, for example in the Greater Manchester Teaching Partnership, however these are more local and not overseen at a national level. That is to perhaps be expected given the difference in size and population of Northern Ireland in comparison with England.

One feature of practice educator training and support in the other nations of the UK is the provision of guidance, often from the regulator or bodies working alongside the regulator, and useful resources to support practice. In England, the PEPS and supporting documentation are presently owned by BASW, whereas the regulation of social workers and of social work education is the remit of Social Work England. This creates complications for the way in which practice education currently operates

in England, a complication exacerbated by the increasing prevalence of degree apprenticeships that have their own apprenticeship standard. In the other nations of the UK, there is greater alignment between the regulator, the standards for the profession and for social work education.

Notwithstanding the unique challenges of the practice education landscape in England, there could be learning to be taken from the different approaches in the other UK nations, particularly in the provision of guidance and support, and the quality assurance of practice educator training courses.

Section 2.4 – Summary

Practice educator training in Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales has both similarities and differences in comparison with the English context.

- Entry requirements for courses, number of academic credits, and course content had many similarities across the UK nations
- There is greater involvement of the social work regulators in the other UK nations, with ownership of standards and some degree of regulation and approval being evident in all of the other UK nations
- Potentially as a result of this, there is less divergence in how courses are delivered in the other UK nations in comparison with England, where there are significant local and regional differences
- Partnership working is well-embedded, particularly in Northern Ireland and Wales where service providers (such as local authorities) work closely with HEIs in the delivery and quality assurance of practice educator training
- There are examples of regulators providing useful guidance of practice educators, and such resources may be of use to others
- In Northern Ireland, practice education is well-embedded in wider career development, with a specialist post-qualifying pathway in place for social workers who wish to become practice educators

CHAPTER 3: The perspectives of key stakeholders

This chapter provides an overview of the findings from six focus groups undertaken with key stakeholders in order to better understand the practice educator training landscape across England.

3.1 Methods and sample for the focus groups

Focus groups were divided up regionally across three dates in mid-May. This was useful for helping us to explore similarities and differences within and between the regions, and this approach helped us to identify some of the novel ways that local approaches to practice educator training have developed within the regions of England. Some of the approaches discussed in the focus groups have been incorporated into the regional break down and case studies presented in Chapter 2 and information about these approaches would have been difficult to access by desk-based methods alone. A breakdown of the focus groups is provided in Table 3 below.

Focus group	Regions represented	Number of participants
Focus group 1 – 13 May 2025	North East, North West, and Yorkshire and Humber	17
Focus group 2 – 14 May 2025	East Midlands, West Midlands, and East of England	27
Focus group 3 – 16 May 2025	South East, South West, and London	28

Table 2: Focus group breakdown and number of participants

The majority of participants were employed by organisations providing social work services (local authorities, trusts, and national organisations such as CAFCASS); in total, 51 participants worked in social work organisations, 20 were employed by course providers (HEIs or fast-track programmes), and one was an independent practice educator. The first focus group had an almost even split of participants from course providers (n=8) and social work organisations (n=9), while the second and third focus groups had a significantly higher number of those working for social work organisations (n=20 and 22) compared to those working for a HEI or fast-track provider (n=7 and 5). Those working for HEIs or fast-track providers were ordinarily involved in the delivery of practice educator training, and those employed by social work organisations had a range of roles, from practitioners who are also practice educators (including a small number currently undertaking practice educator training), to team managers, to individuals working in learning and development roles related to practice education.

Focus groups took place on Microsoft Teams and were recorded and auto-transcribed. As there were a large number of participants, each focus group had a main room and a breakout room with at least one member of the research team facilitating each group. These smaller groups ranged from 7 to 16 participants. As well as contributing verbally to the discussion, participants were encouraged to use the chat function, and comments made in the chat were added to the transcripts and included as data for analysis.

The focus groups covered 3 main topics: experiences of practice educator training, including strengths and weaknesses; the relationship between practice educator training and career progression for social workers; and views on the future of practice educator training. The auto-generated transcripts were checked for accuracy and anonymised by members of the research team,

who then analysed the transcripts thematically under the 3 broad topic areas. Analytic summaries of the transcripts were written up and the research team compared these for similarities and differences. Themes were then combined and refined after comparing the team's analysis of the focus group transcripts.

3.2 Views on existing practice educator training provision

In discussing the current provision of practice educator training, participants identified key strengths in approaches, and limitations of the existing provision of training. Four broad themes were identified in relation to experiences of practice educator training: structure and content; flexible regional working; support and sufficiency; and consistency and quality assurance.

Structure and content

Participants were generally positive about the value of the PEPS for providing guidance to course providers on what they need to cover:

*The PEPS are brilliant when it comes to understanding what we need to be delivering, what people need to be evidencing. The value statements are fantastic, really clear, anti-discriminatory, anti-racist points going through all of the values ...
And I think it's a far stronger emphasis now on adult learning and teaching.*

A number of participants echoed this sentiment; the focus on anti-discriminatory practice and having a set of guidelines that prioritised values were seen as being particular strengths of the existing PEPS framework:

I think it's excellent that the BASW PEPS took steps to clearly establish a set of values for practice education.

There was also praise for the structure and clarity offered by the PEPS and the value of this structure and clarity for promoting the development of practice educators, and ensuring that quality is maintained in practice educator training:

[A] structured and standardised framework (clear and consistent) PEPS helps to ensure quality, accountability, professional development of both educators and students.

As well as appreciating having a framework around which to scaffold practice educator training, participants highlighted that the design of practice educator training also helps to promote peer learning and support:

And I think another aspect of it is we do a lot of peer learning ... So the ability for students to share that within teaching sessions and to facilitate those dialogues between practitioners as they're working out what it means to be a practice educator, and there in context, I think is quite a useful way forward.

This aspect of practice educator training was seen as particularly beneficial for trainee practice

educators who work in settings that are interdisciplinary and where social workers are not in the majority. One participant, who worked in an NHS trust, felt that the ability for social workers in her setting to be immersed in the values of the profession is a real strength of practice educator training:

I'm involved in PEPS programmes in mental health services where ... there's not always other social workers in the teams that people are supporting students in. So having that connection to social work and social values and the kind of lens of social work from other social workers is, I think, really, really important and really helpful.

Overall, there was a consensus that the PEPS refresh in 2022 had been beneficial in providing clear guidance for social workers, trainee practice educators, and those involved in delivering practice educator training. Having some structure but with scope for flexibility, prioritising values and anti-discriminatory practice, and offering opportunities for peer learning and reconnecting with social work as a professional discipline were seen as being particular strengths of the existing structure and content of practice educator training.

Flexible regional working

Participants in the focus groups felt that the current structure for practice educator training enabled them to forge local approaches that work well for the needs of themselves and their partner organisations. The ability to develop local approaches that meet local need was seen as a key strength of current practice educator training provision:

I think that's one of the benefits of it is that it is a flexible framework. So some of us are doing it in a HEI. Some of us also doing it in a partnership where we've kind of got a bit of a hybrid model. So I think that flexibility is really, really important.

This ability to work in different ways means that, in some areas, large models of delivery have been developed in collaboration between several HEIs and local authorities, in order to train large numbers of practice educators to meet local need:

A huge strength of our Regional Forum model is we consist of 7 local authorities and 3 HEIs, we are fairly unique as our model is not a teaching partnership model, however it has all the advantages of quality assurance and consultation with our HEI partners being members and part of the moderation process.

It was acknowledged more generally that there is a real divergence of approaches in how practice educator training is delivered across England, with some areas favouring a more traditional HEI-led academic course, and others utilising a more employer-led approach that may or may not be academically accredited. There were, however, many examples of HEIs and local authorities working together to deliver practice educator training:

There are certainly models in another part of the country where a teaching partnership have set up in collaboration with HEIs locally to share delivery of PEPs training.

Another area where the flexibility of practice educator training was appreciated was in the varying modes of delivery and scope to undertake either stage one and stage 2 PEPS training separately or as a combined course:

Practice educators have had different experiences of hybrid, in person, online, and I think that allows people to have different entry levels. You know, if you join us, having had students before, you can perhaps go in on a combined course. If you haven't, we'll take you through the stage one and stage 2 ... So I think the flexibility is a strength.

Participants were positive overall about their ability to deliver practice educator training flexibly to meet local need. There were good examples of close partnership working, which ranged from individual HEIs and local authorities working together to jointly deliver practice educator training, right up to larger regional partnerships involving several organisations collaborating to offer training that meets their local needs. There was a recognition that different individuals will have different circumstances, and so the ability to undertake staged or combined training, and for training to be delivered via different virtually as well as in person, was seen as a positive.

Consistency and quality assurance

Though participants were generally positive about the PEPS as a set of guidance for delivering practice educator training, and although participants also liked the flexibility that the current guidance allows, there were also concerns about maintaining consistency and quality assuring training courses. The nature of the PEPS being guidance as opposed to regulation means that, while it provides a valuable framework, it does not necessarily ensure consistent delivery of practice educator training:

There's consistency in terms of the [PEPS] framework, but obviously inconsistency in terms of the way it's delivered.

There was concern that the flexibility, which was often framed as a positive of current provision, could also lead to a lack of quality assurance. While BASW currently own the PEPS, they have no mechanism to ensure that the guidance is followed or to have oversight of whether courses purporting to follow the PEPS guidance are doing so in a sufficiently robust way:

It's not quality assured in any way, so the quality of the training isn't assessed, it's not governed. It's not clear, the requirements of what must be included.

Throughout the focus groups, there was a degree of ambivalence in a number of areas. Here, flexibility and inconsistency were two contrasting sides of the same coin. Similarly, while the PEPS were praised by some participants for providing clarity, their status as guidance means that they cannot provide a set of enforceable guidelines that can ensure the quality of delivery across all of the various practice educator courses. The more positive view that the PEPS helps to support tailored local delivery was therefore tempered by worries that this inevitably means that course provision will be inconsistent across the country:

[I]t's very inconsistent nationally, isn't it? I think people deliver it very differently.

Some participants went further and highlighted that, even within regional partnerships, there are variations in what is taught to trainee practice educators, and how much practice educator training costs the employing agency:

[There's a] lack of consistency across the partnership in terms of curriculum and I know they're not regulated, and quite a difference in price as well.

Differences in the price of courses can be explained by a range of factors. The desk-based research highlighted that many HEIs heavily discount – sometimes down to zero – their course fees for regional partners on the basis that trainee practice educators will take students from them. The variation in academic credits offered by HEIs may also explain variations in cost; as a general rule, the higher the number of academic credits, the higher the cost. Similarly, a larger award of academic credits often means more effort hours and a larger amount of assessed work in order to ensure that the number of credits awarded are warranted. Reflecting on their own experiences, one participant highlighted the inconsistency between different practice educator training courses:

How well we can really ensure that that's a consistent experience that people are getting? ... What I had to produce was way over and above what most of the practice educators in the area have to produce.

There are issues of both fairness and rigour at play when training is not consistent and where quality assurance is not properly overseen. There was evidently concern from participants that the current system – while largely working well – is vulnerable because of the potential for significant differences in the delivery of practice educator training. The issue of consistency and quality assurance will be returned to below in section 3.4.

Support and sufficiency

Another challenge identified by participants was in supporting trainee practice educators to complete both stages of their training. Some participants saw this as being a flaw in the two-stage process used in their region; dropout rates between stage one and stage 2 were seen as problematic for ensuring sufficient numbers of qualified practice educators are available to supervise and assess students:

People are reluctant ... after PEPS 1 to then continue with PEPS 2 and that's due to workload that's due to sometimes teams and managers saying they can't possibly have another student in short succession, so that there's a lot of obstacles because of the length it takes as well.

The pressures of heavy workloads and team and organisational factors did not only impact on the ability of trainee practice educators to complete both stages of their training, as one participant noted, but on completion rates for each stage:

I think the challenge is getting them through to the end and getting their portfolios submitted ... that's their biggest challenge with conflicting priorities with their day

job I guess, and sometimes lack of support from management.

An absence of meaningful support for social workers who wanted to become practice educators was something of a recurring theme. While employers often have policies in place relating to workload relief for practice educators, a busy and demanding practice context means that this kind of relief is often lacking, and this then has a knock-on effect on trainee practice educators supporting student placements, and on qualified practice educators continuing to offer placements:

There's a theory around you have reduced workload or what's called workload relief if you have a student. But I think we would all recognise that that's very much a theory and not a practice.

There was no indication that workload relief and support for practice educators was wilfully withheld, but rather that the busyness and complexity of contemporary practice makes it difficult to provide the support and relief needed. Social work teams and organisations also face other pressures, such as increasing demand for services in a context where local authority budgets have faced real-terms cuts over a prolonged period. These demands can lead to instability in the workforce, which in turn can influence the ability of organisations to prioritise practice learning:

Workforce change and churn can be problematic in planning for student placements ... many are facing currency issues due to challenges around team stability and not able to take a student in the team.

A further knock-on effect of insufficient staffing, particularly in smaller organisations, is the ability to train enough new practice educators:

We can't run our own in house programme we simply don't have the number of staff to be able to do that ... we've not been able to support as many practice educators as we could otherwise.

Sufficiency and support are closely related, to ensure that enough practice educators are trained to meet placement demand, and to ensure enough practice educators maintain currency and go on to become mentors for trainee practice educators, there needs to be support to enable them to flourish in their role. While most participants focused on the absence of workload relief and support from employers as key barriers to training and retaining practice educators, some also felt that ongoing support tailored to practice educators is also lacking:

There is a lack, once you've done your PEPS training, of a sense of community and support for practice ... how do we foster and support and nurture that within the wider professional context?

It was not just a lack of incentives, but a lack of a sense of a community of practice that was seen as potentially influencing practice educators to not continue in their roles. This absence of structured support and a sense that practice educators are not always valued means that sustaining a pipeline of sufficient numbers of practice educators is a challenge.

Section 3.2 – Summary

Existing practice educator training was generally viewed positively by participants, though with some notable caveats.

- Participants generally liked the PEPS and felt it provided a useful, value-based framework to support the development of practice educator training
- There was positive feedback about the scope within existing arrangements to develop courses that meet local need and to explore flexible delivery options
- One adverse consequence of flexibility was inconsistency and a lack of robust quality assurance across different courses
- A lack of workload relief can impact on people completing both stages of practice educator training or remaining in the practice educator workforce

3.3 The relationship between practice educator training and career progression

There was a consensus amongst participants that practice educator training plays a role in the career development and progression of social workers. There are different ways in which practice educator training supports career development. As practice educator training ordinarily includes training on supervision, it is often seen as a route to supervisory posts. However, it can also lead to alternative career progression routes. The role of practice educator training in promoting career progression is, however, not seen as an unmitigated positive, instead it creates some challenges for both HEIs and local authorities in retaining practice educators to meet demand for student placements.

Linear progression

The notion of practice educator training providing a logical step on the journey from being a social worker to advancing into a supervisory role – either as a senior or advanced practitioner, or as a team manager – was highlighted by participants:

I think that it is a bit of a stepping stone ... into sort of management.

There were examples in the focus groups where practice educator training had been formally incorporated into progression routes, with there being an expectation that in order to progress to a senior role, social workers would first undertake or commit to undertaking practice educator training:

So we have recently just set up a professional development panel whereby social workers who want to become senior social workers, they will work towards the PE qualification as part of their role.

There was some ambivalence expressed about this from participants, with some feeling that by coupling practice educator training to career progression, there is a risk that people would undertake the training without any real desire to become a practice educator. This risks making practice educator training instrumental to wider career progression for individuals and their employers, and

this could in turn impact on student experience if they were to be supervised and assessed by someone with little interest in being a practice educator. One way around this is to have less formal links between progression and practice educator training, with there being an expectation of some involvement in student learning as opposed to a strict requirement to undertake practice educator training:

For anybody progressing to advanced social worker, there is an expectation that they would have some experience of supporting students or be a practice educator.

These looser requirements potentially address concerns about trainee practice educators undertaking training for the wrong reasons, while still recognising that the experience of supporting students on placement is a valuable learning experience for social workers who wish to progress into supervisory roles.

Though discussion in the focus groups largely focused on progression upwards to senior or advanced practitioner roles and then to management roles, some local authorities offered alternative routes for career progression. One of these examples nicely highlighted how practice education can be recognised and valued in organisations through offering specialist progression routes for practice educators:

We've got a kind of journey up through [our organisation]. So you can be practice educator, you can be an advanced practice educator, be a team manager in the practice education team ... you can go up to the management route or you can stay in practice. You've got a number of different roles in the council which kind of works quite well ... there's lots of ways in which you can use PEPS 2 within those roles.

This provides a third-way between linear progression into supervisory and management roles, and moving across to alternative career pathways. Practice educators can progress as practice educators as well as using their skills and experience to support them to either remain in practice as experienced social workers, or to make the step into operational management if they wish. Whatever the specific routes available and whether expectations are written into job descriptions for senior roles or not, there was consensus that practice educator training is linked to career progression within social work teams and organisations.

Moving to different pathways

Internal progression was not seen as the only option available for social workers who had undertaken their practice educator training. One of the upshots of close working between HEIs and local authorities on practice educator training and practice learning more generally is that it creates alternative career pathways for practice educators, including making the transition into social work education:

It opens routes into university lecturer roles and other teaching placements.

Practice educators, as the name suggests, have an educative function and practice educator training ordinarily includes content on supporting adult learners, undertaking assessments, and linking theory

to practice. These areas of knowledge and practice skills are all equally applicable to working in social work education in a teaching or lecturing role, and this was seen by some participants as a potential avenue for practice educators who enjoy supporting the learning of social work students.

Some local authorities had recognised that there may be a desire for some practice educators to become more heavily involved in teaching and supporting the next generation of social workers and had devised additional training to support experienced practice educators to progress their careers:

We also have the PEPS 3 which is now directly is around gathering evidence and practice of devising and teaching sessions at a Level 7 at a university ... which allows you to put a portfolio together to go for fellowship, which is the recognised teaching certificate for universities and we've had a lot of success with that and a lot of people that have been now been able to go actually now work as lecturers because of that.

This was an example of an innovative approach and not typical of all agencies that employ practice educators, but it highlights the creative ways that practice education can be valued as a distinct and unique discipline and how it can then lead to social workers remaining and progressing in the profession in a number of different ways. Practice educators are supporters of learning as much as they are supervisors, so the ability to move laterally into social work education as well as linearly into supervisory or management roles is useful.

A double-edged sword

One participant nicely summed up how the career progression of newly trained practice educators has both upsides and downsides:

So it's always a great route for people because you become a great supervisor ... But then you tend to go into, for example, team management roles, which is likely to mean you can't then continue with your practice education. So it's a bit of a double edged sword if you like.

Many other participants expressed similar feelings about the downside of practice educators often progressing into management after completing their practice educator training, and then being unable to take on students as a result. For some, this led to a sense of frustration:

Too many people in the past have used this [as a] springboard into leadership and management to become team managers. So they do their mandatory practice education, they do their minimum 2 students, and then we never see them for dust because they get promoted into management.

This impacts on the issue of sufficiency, discussed above in section 3.2. If practice educators move on quickly after completing the training and are no longer able to take students as a result of their promotion, this means there are not enough fully qualified practice educators to support students on their second placements or to act as mentors for trainee practice educators. Participants noted that this could be quite a rapid pipeline, with a proportion of newly-trained practice educators making

rapid progression and not taking students beyond those they had supported during the course of their practice educator training:

Doing the PEPS training is often ... the first step into ... people who are wanting to move into management roles and then once they do that, then they're often not having students anymore. So we sort of lose them quite quickly.

Not all participants were despondent about the progression of practice educators into management roles. Some participants highlighted that having practice educators progressing into management roles can have benefits for both supervisory culture in the team, and how well recognised and supported practice education is:

Yes, across every cohort there will be people applying for management roles and getting them, but it helps add to the learning culture if a team manager is PE trained. And then there's ... more chance that they're going to support their PEs ... and that their supervision and management of their team will be informed by those value statements which really make practice education into what it is now.

Other participants simply accepted that the pipeline from practitioner to manager via practice educator training is somewhat inevitable, and that it is therefore important to prepare for this and to ensure that the pipeline has sufficient social workers being trained as practice educators to manage the drop off that is likely to occur post-training:

We know we will lose our practice educators into management, but we accept that that is all a part of that development. So that's why we have to continually have a really robust training process so that it's a continual stream of people coming through.

While there was widespread agreement that practice educator training's role in career progression is a double-edged sword because it then limits the capacity of some new practice educators to continue taking students, attitudes towards this were noticeably variable. Some saw it as positive that practice educators progress into management or other more senior roles, others viewed it as frustrating, whereas others saw it simply as something inevitable. Regardless of individuals' views of progression, the need to maintain a pipeline of new practice educators to balance out those moving into roles that prevented them from continuing as practice educators was seen as being important.

Section 3.3 – Summary

There was a consensus that practice educator training plays an important role in career progression for social workers.

- Practice educators often progress internally into management or senior/advanced practitioner roles; sometimes, practice educator training is a formal requirement for progression into these roles
- Alternative progression routes also exist, which include practice education related roles within organisations, or moves across into social work education
- Career progression often means new practice educators drop out of the practice educator workforce, which could have implications for sufficiency of practice educators in the workforce

3.4 Perspectives on the future of practice educator training

There were a range of views expressed about possible future directions for practice educator training. Participants spoke about priority areas for the content of practice educator training courses, shared views about accreditation of courses and whether they should be split into stages (as with PEPS 1 and PEPS 2) or offer a combined qualification, and discussed the pros and cons of greater standardisation of practice educator training.

Supporting diverse learners in a complex landscape

There were some significant areas of agreement on future directions for the delivery of practice educator training, particularly in relation to the content of courses and their role in supporting learners. In particular, the focus groups discussed the need for a greater focus on difference, and equipping trainee practice educators with the skills to support learners working in a challenging and complex placement environment.

One area of growing importance for participants was in better understanding neurodiversity and how to support students on placement who are neurodiverse:

We are getting more and more students with additional and complex needs and neurodiversity – PEs need training and support to be able to meet these and support the student as best they can.

There was broad agreement that the needs of students are changing and that a greater proportion of social work students are neurodiverse or have other needs which may impact them on placement; for example, specific learning difficulties, such as dyslexia or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Previous research has similarly highlighted that the needs of social work students have diversified and become more complex, and that trainee and experienced practice educators do not feel sufficiently well-equipped to support these kinds of needs (Cook et al., 2024).

Participants highlighted the need for training to help practice educators to support students with additional needs:

What we're finding is that where there is a student where they're not perfect, whether they're outside the norm, that's the bit that they need in the training, is how to make sure that they're not oppressive, that they're not judgmental. All those things that they would do without thinking about it as a social worker, transferring that to being a practice educator.

There was a strong emphasis from participants on the need to ensure that practice educator training promotes understanding of diversity and encourages practice educators to support students in ways that recognise difference and centre inclusive practices:

There needs to be a strong focus on applied anti-oppressive and anti-racist practice within training

Further research to understand the experiences of students from diverse backgrounds and their support needs while on placement would be beneficial to ensure that practice educator training meets the needs of an increasingly diverse student population.

Participants discussed a range of benefits and drawbacks to in person versus virtual or hybrid delivery of practice educator training. While many felt that holding training in person creates a richer learning environment and greater opportunities for peer-to-peer learning and support, others felt the flexibility of hybrid or virtual delivery is important. Having the option to participate in different ways was seen by one participant as being important in supporting trainee practice educators who may be neurodiverse and who may find classroom settings challenging:

I think [in person teaching is] a much richer learning experience. Its contributions are more forthcoming from experience, actually, although that doesn't always work for people with different neurodiverse needs. You might find, like the chat function here, beneficial. So I appreciate that.

In this respect, being aware of neurodiversity is not just something for course providers to consider in terms of the content of their course, but also in how they deliver to a diverse group of trainee practice educators. Diversity played a recurring role in discussions about course content, with many participants arguing for the need to centre anti-oppressive and anti-racist approaches in practice educator training:

There needs to be a strong focus on applied anti-oppressive and anti-racist practice within training.

One participant highlighted the need to consider intersectionality rather than focusing on individual aspects of a student's identity. Practice educators need to be mindful of the different ways in which students may experience discrimination or disadvantage as a result of intersecting characteristics such as ethnicity, disability, and gender:

So for me, the anti-racist element, thinking about intersectionality, white privilege, and neurodivergence is key.

Some participants noted that the increasing complexity of student needs and the need for trainee practice educators to be equipped with the skills to meet these needs is matched by an increasing degree of complexity in the workplace. Work with individuals and families is complex and many individuals and families who access services have a variety of needs, and this comes against a backdrop of cuts to support services available to individuals and families post-2009 as a result of austerity policies from central government:

What I think I've seen increasingly important is struggling students, so how you actually support students that are coming with very difficult situations, they're not necessarily prepared for social work in the same way. We're getting increasingly, I think, students coming with less levels of experience and the complexity of work in social work has increased massively ... And it's thinking about how do we support that?

Practice educators play a vital but challenging role, managing both increasing complexity in the needs of their students, and greater complexity in the work that they and their students are involved with. Equipping trainee practice educators with the knowledge and skills needed to manage this complexity and to support a diverse range of student needs was therefore seen as being a priority when thinking about the future delivery of practice educator training.

Accreditation and staging of training

Focus group participants held different views as to whether practice educator training should combine both stages of the PEPS into one course or whether there should be 2 separate stages to the training. Those who stated that the 2 stages should be combined within one course felt that this prevents potential confusion and makes it a more manageable and aligned programme:

My perspective being on both sides within the university and previously as a senior manager, there are huge benefits to it being combined, because of how busy everybody is and from a constructive alignment point of view, as in teaching the four areas of the PEPS.

As touched on in section 3.2, there are issues with trainee practice educators sometimes completing stage one training but not stage 2 training. Having 2 separate stages creates what one participant described as a “fracturing” of the training that may not be helpful:

I just wonder about those 2 levels [of PEPS] ... if one programme in some way, some sort of consolidation ... is actually the way to go. I wonder if that's actually creating some confusion and some fracturing and there's enough of that already in social work.

On the other hand, some participants felt that delivering the training in separate stages ensures that practice educators have a better opportunity to consolidate their learning before moving on to the next stage:

I do think that they continue to develop past stage 1 and we call them trainee PEs until they achieve stage 2 and then they are a qualified PE at stage 2.

Some participants commented that a gap or pause between completing a stage one course and a stage 2 course adds value, allowing for deeper learning for trainee practice educators:

The value of a separate PEP 1 and PEPS 2 is that the gap between allows time for consolidation of learning and practice.

Although the view was not held by all participants, many felt that practice educator training courses should be accredited, particularly if the role of practice educator is to be annotated:

If Social Work England eventually do annotate PEs as hoped, then surely there has to be a gold standard criteria? For me, that means having undertaken an accredited training.

Accreditation was also seen as providing consistency and quality assurance, and this will be discussed further below. However, for some participants, maintaining standards may also be achieved through insisting on an academic component to the training, with some participants stating that HEIs should be involved in delivering practice educator courses either in partnership or on their own. One advantage of this is the perceived status of undertaking training through a HEI:

I think having a HEI deliver it makes it more academic and perhaps even raises the profile of it slightly, makes it seem more credible.

Some participants were very keen to stress the importance of partnership working and were less keen to see the provision of practice educator training entirely handed over to HEIs:

It should be delivered [with HEIs] in partnership with local authorities, and I think there's some real strengths that each party bring, and each side can bring and having sort of a hybrid programme.

Other participants similarly highlighted concerns about HEI accredited courses being the main or only route for social workers to become practice educators, with one participant worrying that some individuals may be put off if this was the case:

I just think that we have to be careful if it's all going to go to university ... I don't want to close doors on people who would be excellent PEPS, but they just might not be university-ready again.

The range of views on accreditation and staging of training was diverse. What was evident was that many participants favoured an approach that most closely aligned with the existing delivery in their region; those participants who deliver or work with a two-stage process tended to favour this continuing, while those who preferred a combined course had usually experienced this themselves. Similarly, where regional partnerships offered non-accredited routes to becoming a practice educator, they were in favour of maintaining such an offer, whereas those who delivered or experienced accredited training saw value in training being accredited.

Standardisation: Consistency, quality assurance, and ongoing learning

Broadly, participants were positive about the prospect of some degree of standardisation of practice educator training. Echoing some of the concerns covered in section 3.2, participants acknowledged that the current system means that there is inconsistency and a lack of robust quality assurance of the delivery of practice educator training within and across the regions of England. A minority of participants were in favour of a rigorous approach to standardisation that would involve providers working to shared principles and content in delivering practice educator training:

We need a nationally agreed training curriculum because we want to be thinking about, you know, what modules are required ... like adult learning or assessment or supervision, we'd need agreed learning outcomes. Thinking about minimum contact hours and placement expectations. And [...] aligning to practice and the PCF and the Knowledge and Skills Statements and it's got to be consistent across all providers.

Most participants favoured some degree of standardisation, though not necessarily to the extent of having an agreed and standardised curriculum. One key benefit of having greater consistency across practice educator training courses is knowing that practice educators moving between employers have all experienced a similar quality of training:

I think you should be able to be in any part of the country and when coming across somebody with that qualification on their CV or as part of their email sign off, for it to be really clear that it means the same thing.

As noted above, views on accreditation of courses by HEIs were mixed overall, with some local authorities and HEIs feeling it should not be mandatory for courses to be accredited. In discussing standardisation, some participants felt that accreditation by HEIs would be one way of ensuring greater consistency in the delivery of practice educator training:

But to make it equitable and fair to the students, I think there should absolutely be consistency and accreditation against the course.

Participants also highlighted that another benefit of having a standardised approach that included accreditation of courses was that this would help with quality assurance. By using HEI processes for accrediting and reviewing courses, some participants felt that a more consistent benchmark of quality could be applied and assured:

Our feeling is that accredited is really beneficial and useful for that quality assurance process ... it makes sure there's consistent quality assurance processes.

Quality assurance was a recurring theme when discussing the benefits of greater standardisation of practice educator training. When thinking about what practice educator training might look like in the future, there was also discussion about practice education being given a similar footing to the AMHP or BIA role, both of which are annotated roles on the Social Work England register. There was a feeling from participants that giving practice educators similar standing would also help to improve

quality assurance processes:

I think it would be good if there was QA, bit like what happens with the AMHPs.

There was also discussion about other potential benefits of the practice educator role being annotated, in particular that this might mean a more robust training and support offer for practice educators after they have completed their practice educator training. If annotation came with additional CPD requirements, it was felt that this would support practice educators to continue developing and to maintain currency:

...in terms of CPD and making that more sort of compulsory and mandatory or whatever you want to call it in terms of currency is important.

Although there was significant support for the prospect of standardisation helping to drive up quality, ensure consistency, and make ongoing support more robust, it was also acknowledged that doing so is not an easy task:

I think the difficulty though is making sure that the people who are running the course are practice educators and understand what they are doing so that's a challenge in itself ... we also have to be really careful that the consistency and the quality is right as well, so that is a that's a challenge.

Practice educator training is currently delivered in a range of different ways and finding ways to standardise the myriad approaches to promote consistency is a significant challenge.

Standardisation: Avoiding upheaval and striking a balance

Many participants were wary about the prospect of too much upheaval if changes to how practice educator training is overseen and regulated are implemented. The desire for some degree of standardisation and for greater quality assurance and a more robust CPD offer for practice educators was tempered with concern about how such changes might disrupt existing delivery. Participants were also worried about whether change would mean an increased burden on both practice educators and those delivering practice educator training. For some, there were real concerns that anything which adds to existing workloads may pose a threat to the practice educator workforce:

If we make it even more unwieldy and challenging for PEs, even less will do it, especially when they receive a pittance in payment.

Some participants were particularly concerned that standardisation and regulation of practice educator training might mean the introduction of new frameworks and practice standards, in a profession that is already awash with a range of frameworks and practice standards. They urged caution on introducing new frameworks or adding additional work or burden, suggesting that such an approach could harm a fragile practice education system.

One of the big concerns was that aspects of a different approach to practice educator training could push people away rather than attract them to become practice educators. As mentioned previously, not all social workers want to re-engage with HEI-led courses that provide academic credits and require academic assessment, and so some participants worried that these social workers would be put off doing practice educator training if it means having to go back to a university setting. Some other participants were more worried about the potential administrative burden if there is greater regulation of practice educator training and the practice educator role more broadly:

... you're going to have to register, you're going to have to maintain, you're going to have to evidence your CPD ... it's just something else that's an administrative burden, really. Especially for the frontline workers and team managers. And you could have that risk of turning this role into a bit of a tick box exercise rather than a learning experience.

Again, the concern was that big changes to the system may have unintended consequences, including turning practitioners away from wanting to become practice educators. Many participants recognised the need for some change, but were keen to stress the need for pragmatism. One participant summed this up nicely:

We want it to be robust. We want to have really good quality practice educators. But what we I think we want to avoid is making it any more difficult to do ... So it is that balance, isn't it?

Striking a balance between keeping what currently works well and making changes that ensure quality and consistency across practice educator training programmes was viewed as being extremely important. Participants were almost universally positive about the current system allowing for a degree of flexibility and the development of regional ways of working that meet local need. Some participants were keen that moves towards greater standardisation do not come at the expense of allowing scope for responsiveness to regional issues or local demand:

If we're making it too rigid, you're all teaching the same sort of thing. That's fine, but then you haven't got the freedom, the flexibility to tailor it to what your region might need, or actually what your PEs might need, or to respond to certain things in your area.

These worries were genuine and widely expressed, however one participant was able to counter some of the concerns about potential regulation or standardisation by highlighting that there are divergent ways of delivering social work qualifying programmes, despite these being regulated and adhering to the same education and training standards (Social Work England, 2021). This would suggest that it is possible find a pathway that ensures consistency in the quality of social work training, without being so prescriptive and rigid as to stifle individual approaches to delivery of training:

I think it needs to be responsive to local need and if there was a mechanism to have

a standardised course with some flexibility ... I think part of having the PEPS framework is that its flexibility enables people to deliver their training around that framework and that's what offers us the standardisation ... If it was a set course, I mean, even universities don't run a set social work course. You know they're different, aren't they? So I think that sort of difference with some quality assurance built in would be the best way forward.

The general consensus across the focus groups was that it is essential to find a balance between improved quality assurance, maintaining consistency, and offering ongoing support on the one hand, and not making wholesale changes, increasing the burden on the practice education system, or preventing flexibility in how courses are delivered on the other hand. Existing regulation of social work qualifying programmes and AMHP and BIA training may provide a template for how this balance can be struck.

Section 3.4 – Summary

There was broad agreement on some aspects of content that should be included in practice educator, and, generally, participants also agreed that some standardisation of practice educator training would be beneficial, though this needed to be balanced with avoiding wholesale change.

- Equipping trainee practice educators to meet the diverse needs of students in an increasingly complex practice context was seen as being essential
- Views on accreditation and staging of training diverged significantly, with no real consensus on a favoured approach
- Standardisation was seen as being useful for ensuring greater consistency, more robust quality assurance, and for ongoing CPD for practice educators
- Moves to standardise training need to be pragmatic and should avoid additional burden and preserve some degree of flexibility

Conclusion

The review found that a total of 54 HEIs had some involvement in delivering or supporting the delivery of practice educator training in England, with 45 of those offering courses that lead to qualification at PEPS 2 level. In addition to this, local arrangements have developed that involve teaching partnerships (whether formal or informal) or local authorities co-delivering or running courses in-house. It is clear that there is significant variation within and across the regions of England in how practice educator training is delivered.

We found useful information on some regional approaches in England, and in approaches in the other nations of the UK that could contribute to shaping the future of practice educator training in England. In particular, some models of partnership working, supported by effective quality assurance and clear standards from the regulator, may provide one way forward. Some useful local approaches for ongoing support of practice educators were also identified in the desk-based research and could be replicated to ensure that practice educators have access to high quality CPD post-qualifying.

Our consultation with 72 stakeholders involved in the focus groups revealed some degree of appetite for change, tempered with caution that change needs to be handled sensitively to reduce burden on practice educators and the practice education system. Greater standardisation should also not completely stifle creativity and flexibility, which stakeholders saw as being important for responding to local and regional need. Existing approval and reapproval of social work qualifying programmes in England, as noted by one participant, has not created a 'one size fits all' approach to the delivery of social work education, and so it is possible to assure quality in the delivery of practice educator training while maintaining flexibility and room for development of individual approaches. Many participants felt that the PEPS, particularly following their 2022 refresh, offer this combination of consistency and flexibility, while also noting that their status as guidance limits their capacity to quality assure courses.

The complexity and diversity of the delivery of practice educator training creates some challenges for attempts to introduce greater standardisation. Indeed, trying to standardise the information gathered for this review was itself a challenge because of the significant variation in approaches. Questions over whether to combine stage one and stage 2 of the PEPS into a single qualification or to maintain the staged approach, whether courses should be academically accredited, and whether courses should be delivered by HEIs, local authorities, or a combination of the two will need to be considered in any proposed changes to the delivery of practice educator training. There are varied approaches currently and many stakeholders were wedded to the approach they currently adopt, meaning there is no clear consensus on what standardisation of practice educator training should ultimately mean. However, learning can be taken from some of the innovative approaches that currently exist in England, from the other nations of the UK where the structures around practice educator training seem well-established, and from existing regulation of social work qualifying, AMHP, and BIA courses in England.

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Appendix 1: SWOT analysis

Strengths

Many strengths in the existing provision of practice educator training have been highlighted in the review. The desk-based research and focus groups have revealed strong regional partnership working between HEIs and local authorities, with these localised approaches evolving to meet the particular needs within that geographic area. In many areas, the current provision of practice educator training helps to ensure a sufficient pipeline of new practice educators, and in some areas, there are interesting approaches to how practice education fits into career progression for social workers. As was also evident in previous research (Cook et al., 2024) when integrated well, practice educator training can form part of a career pathway and post-qualifying qualification route that could ultimately support staff retention. Views about the PEPS were also largely positive; it provides a useful framework that provides some consistency in areas like entry requirements and course content.

Strengths of practice educator training

- Flexibility in delivery has meant that HEIs and local authorities have been able to develop strong regional partnerships, which have enabled practice educator training to be shaped and delivered collaboratively
- The ability to be responsive to local need in delivering practice educator training helps to ensure that sufficiency of practice educators is maintained
- Practice educator training supports career development by offering pathways into management, development, or education roles
- In many cases, practice educator training can contribute to attaining a post-qualifying award at PGCert, PGDip, or master's
- Where local authorities lead on delivering some or all of their practice educator training, input from HEIs helps to ensure quality assurance of the training offered
- There are some good examples of structured partnership working and effective quality assurance to draw on from the other nations of the UK
- The existing PEPS framework is viewed positively and is seen as striking a balance between standardisation and flexibility in delivery. The focus on values and anti-racist practice in the PEPS are also seen as strengths
- The PEPS also generally help to provide consistency across entry requirements and course content across the courses we found

Weaknesses

There are also some weaknesses in existing ways of delivering practice educator training. These

include workload and workforce pressures making it difficult for trainee practice educators to complete their training, an issue that is exacerbated where staged approaches to training are used and dropout rates between PEPS 1 and PEPS 2 training are an issue. While the flexibility that the current system allows has many positive aspects, one significant downside is that it can lead to inconsistency in the delivery of practice educator training, and potentially in the quality and rigour of the training offered. One flipside of the role that practice educator training plays in career development is that some practice educators do not continue in their role as practice educators post-qualifying. One additional consequence of this is that it can be a struggle to ensure sufficiency of experienced practice educators to mentor new trainee practice educators.

Weaknesses of practice educator training

- Challenging practice contexts, including high individual workloads and workforce turnover, mean that trainee practice educators can struggle to complete their training
- This issue is exacerbated by both a lack of workload relief for trainee (and existing) practice educators
- The issue of completion of training is also compounded where staged approaches to practice educator training exist, as trainee practice educators drop-out between their PEPS 1 and PEPS 2 courses
- The diverse range of approaches to delivery of practice educator training risks inconsistency and may impact on ensuring quality and rigour of courses
- While viewed as useful by participants, the PEPS lack enforceability and this limits their capacity to quality assure the delivery of practice educator training
- Practice educator training being used for career progression can mean trainee practice educators are not motivated to be practice educators and quickly leave the workforce once their training is complete
- Where practice educator training is closely aligned to career progression, it may impact student experience if the trainee practice educator is only undertaking the training to tick a box

Opportunities

There are significant opportunities for the future of practice educator training. There is an appetite for change (with some caveats) amongst those involved in practice educator training and the practice educator system more widely. It is evident that those working within practice education feel that there is a need for greater recognition of the role, and that this will inevitably entail some degree of oversight and regulation. There is positivity about how existing frameworks – the PEPS in practice education and the education and training standards for qualifying programmes – ensure a degree of standardisation while also allowing for some flexibility in course delivery. Furthermore, there are some interesting approaches to the delivery of practice educator training, and to

integrating practice educator training into career development, that have evolved locally. These approaches offer scope for increased partnership working between HEIs and local authorities, and for exploring ways that practice education can contribute to career progression without impacting on sufficiency of practice educators. There are also useful examples from the other nations of the UK that might help to shape how practice educator training is delivered, how local partnerships can be formalised, and how the practice educator role can be better integrated into post-qualifying career pathways.

Opportunities for practice educator training

- Stakeholders are generally supportive of change and want to see greater consistency and quality assurance of practice educator training
- Existing frameworks may provide a useful template for how changes to practice educator training can be delivered in a way that does not unduly increase workload or stifle flexible and creative local approaches
- Practice educator training plays a valuable role in career progression and some local approaches provide useful insights into ways that practice education can provide its own distinct career pathway without losing practice educators to management roles
- There are some excellent examples of partnership working, including co-delivery, between HEIs and local authorities that could be built on as exemplars of effective joint working in social work education
- There are also useful examples of regulatory oversight, partnership working, and support for practice educators in the other nations of the UK that could helpfully inform any changes in England

Threats

Previous research on the practice educator workforce highlighted that the practice education system is delicate and precarious (Cook et al., 2024). These concerns persist and there are worries from those within the practice education system that changes need to be managed carefully so that the system does not break. Currently, there is a high level of reliance on the motivation of individual practitioners to become practice educators, particularly in light of a lack of financial reward and workload relief for undertaking the role. If becoming a practice educator and maintaining currency becomes too arduous, there is a risk that the pipeline of new practice educators will be impacted, meaning insufficient practice educators in the system to manage the demand for student placements. Sufficiency of practice educators and experienced practice educators who can mentor trainee practice educators is a concern, particularly since the role of practice educator training in career progression can lead to new practice educators rapidly dropping out of the practice educator workforce. There is, however, no clear consensus about what the future of practice educator training should look like, in particular how it can be made more consistent and robust without compromising prized aspects of the status quo. Effective partnership working in the regions may also be threatened by the discontinuation of teaching partnership funding.

Threats to practice educator training

- The prospect of changes to how practice educator training is delivered and overseen may negatively impact recruitment of new practice educators; increased administrative burden and having to undertake a HEI accredited qualification were highlighted as 2 potential disincentives
- The practice educator pipeline largely works currently, however if practitioners are put off completing practice educator training, this will impact sufficiency
- Retaining experienced practice educators is an issue, since they are needed to act as mentors for trainee practice educators
- There is no clear consensus on whether practice educator training should be accredited, nor whether it should be a staged or combined offer. The lack of consensus will make it challenging to implement change in a way that pleases everyone
- Implementing similar approaches to other UK nations may be difficult due to the significantly larger population of England and the sheer number of organisations involved in practice education
- While there is good regional partnership working between HEIs and local authorities, smaller organisations may be at risk of being lost in bespoke delivery designed by and for larger organisations
- The absence of ongoing funding for formal teaching partnerships may pose a threat to local partnership working

Appendix 2: List of practice educator training courses identified

Course provider	Region	PEPS stage	Cost (excl. discounts)	Credits	Delivery mode	Duration	Teaching days
Teesside University	NE	PEPS 1 & 2 - separate	£1,710	40	In person	>12 months	6-10 days
University of Durham	NE	PEPS 1 & 2 - separate	£1,000	30	Hybrid	>12 months	> 10 days
University of Sunderland	NE	PEPS 1 & 2 - separate	£1,500	40		6-12 months	6-10 days
CMSW teaching partnership	NW	PEPS 1 & 2 - combined	free	None	Hybrid	5 months or less	6-10 days
Greater Manchester Social Work Teaching Academy	NW	PEPS 1 & 2 - separate	free	None	Hybrid	Flexible / Variable	6-10 days
Lancaster University and Lancashire County Council	NW	PEPS 1 & 2 - separate		None			
Leeds & Wakefield teaching partnership (Leeds Beckett & Leeds Universities)	YH	PEPS 1 & 2 - separate	free	None	Hybrid	6-12 months	
Sheffield Hallam University	YH	PEPS 1 & 2 - separate	£440	None	Hybrid		6-10 days
University of Huddersfield	YH	PEPS 1 & 2 - separate	£1,320	30	Hybrid	>12 months	
University of York	YH	PEPS 1 & 2 - separate		40		>12 months	6-10 days
University of Hull	YH	PEPS 1 & 2 - combined		None	In person	6-12 months	6-10 days
Kingston University	GL	PEPS 1 & 2 - separate	£3,988	60	Hybrid	>12 months	6-10 days
Brunel University London	GL	PEPS 1 & 2 - separate	£1,500	30	Hybrid	>12 months	> 10 days
Goldsmiths, University of London	GL	PEPS 1 & 2 - separate	£1,620	30	In person		6-10 days
Goldsmiths, University of London	GL	PEPS 1 & 2 - combined	£810	15	In person		6-10 days
London Metropolitan University	GL	PEPS 1 & 2 - combined	£1,200	30	Hybrid	6-12 months	> 10 days
London South Bank University	GL	PEPS 1 & 2 - combined		40	In person	6-12 months	> 10 days
Middlesex University	GL	PEPS 1 & 2 - separate	£1,956	60	Hybrid	6-12 months	6-10 days
Royal Holloway, University of London	GL	PEPS 1 & 2 - separate	£1,500	60	In person	>12 months	6-10 days
University of East London	GL	PEPS 1 & 2 - combined	free	40	Hybrid	6-12 months	> 10 days
University of Greenwich	GL	PEPS 1 & 2 - separate	free	30	In person	>12 months	> 10 days
Canterbury Christ Church University	SE	PEPS 1 & 2 - separate	free	None	Hybrid	>12 months	> 10 days

Course provider	Region	PEPS stage	Cost (excl. discounts)	Credits	Delivery mode	Duration	Teaching days
Kent and Medway Teaching Partnership	SE	PEPS 1 & 2 - combined				>12 months	> 10 days
University of Portsmouth	SE	PEPS 2 only	£1,200		In person		
University of Winchester	SE	PEPS 1 & 2 - separate	£2,920	60	Online	6-12 months	> 10 days
University of Chichester	SE	PEPS 2 only					
Solent University	SE	PEPS 1 & 2 - combined	£800	60	In person	6-12 months	
University of Brighton	SE	PEPS 2 only	£822	20	In person		
University of Sussex	SE	PEPS 2 only	£850	15	In person		
University of Sussex	SE	PEPS 2 only	£1,175	30	In person		
East Sussex County Council (in-house)	SE	PEPS 1 only		None			
Brighton & Hove City Council (in-house)	SE	PEPS 1 only		None			
Oxfordshire County Council in-house	SE	PEPS 1 & 2 - combined		None	Hybrid	>12 months	6-10 days
Bournemouth University	SW	PEPS 1 & 2 - separate	£1,325	40	Online	>12 months	6-10 days
University of Gloucestershire and Gloucestershire County Council (in-house)	SW	PEPS 1 only	free	None	In person		
University of Gloucestershire	SW	PEPS 2 only	free	15	In person		
South West regional partnership - Universities of Bath, Bristol and the West of England (Bristol) and regional local authorities (in-house)	SW						
Anglia Ruskin University	EE	PEPS 1 & 2 - separate	£3,700	60	In person	6-12 months	
University of Bedfordshire	EE	PEPS 1 & 2 - separate	£2,648	60	Hybrid	>12 months	> 10 days
University of East Anglia	EE	PEPS 1 & 2 - combined	£1,600	60	Hybrid	6-12 months	6-10 days
University of Essex	EE	PEPS 1 & 2 - separate	£2,000	30	In person	6-12 months	6-10 days
University of Hertfordshire	EE	PEPS 1 & 2 - combined	£1,830	30	Hybrid	6-12 months	6-10 days
Nottingham Trent University	EM	PEPS 1 & 2 - separate	£1,100	60	In person	6-12 months	6-10 days
University of Lincoln	EM	PEPS 1 & 2 - separate	£2,100	45	Hybrid		
University of Northampton	EM	PEPS 1 & 2 - separate	£940	20	In person	6-12 months	6-10 days

Course provider	Region	PEPS stage	Cost (excl. discounts)	Credits	Delivery mode	Duration	Teaching days
Derbyshire County Council (in-house)	EM				In person		
Birmingham City University	WM	PEPS 1 & 2 - separate	£1,720	40	Hybrid	>12 months	> 10 days
University of Birmingham	WM	PEPS 1 & 2 - separate	£2,180	40	Hybrid	>12 months	6-10 days
Birmingham Children's Trust and Keele University (in-house)	WM				Hybrid		
Coventry University	WM	PEPS 1 & 2 - combined	£3,700	60	In person	>12 months	6-10 days
Keele University	WM	PEPS 1 & 2 - combined	£1,600		Hybrid	6-12 months	6-10 days
Staffordshire University	WM	PEPS 1 & 2 - combined		40	In person	6-12 months	> 10 days
University of Worcester	WM	PEPS 1 & 2 - combined	£1,576	30	Hybrid	>12 months	6-10 days
The Frontline Organisation / Approach Social Work		PEPS 2 only					