

Launching the Social Work Apprenticeship Degree: Stakeholder Views

In September 2019, Coventry University began its 'SWAD' – the Social Work Apprenticeship Degree. As an innovative 'day-release' work-based learning course, it has arguably bridged the 'education versus training' debate in contemporary social work. The SWAD maintains academic oversight and a three-year degree pathway with learners who are rooted in local authority services. The central reflective-learning model ensures that every single week, people on the course are directly applying study into their practice contexts. This article captures the initial thoughts of key stakeholders of the apprenticeship, a pillar of the West Midlands Teaching Partnership which works to support social work education.

APPRENTICE PERSPECTIVE: Theresa Harrington, Birmingham City Council, Diane Deehan, Coventry City Council, Colette Perkins, Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council and Stephen Downey, Warwickshire County Council

As a group of adult and children social care workers from across 4 different local authorities, we were all initially apprehensive about what the social work apprenticeship would involve. However, we all agree it has been an amazing opportunity for us so far. From the outset Coventry University and our individual authorities have been so supportive. We spend 80% of our working week 'on the job' in our current roles, and 20% is spent 'off the job' on university teaching and learning. The whole programme has been well planned and thought out.

We were quite anxious about spending a full day at university, but this something we look forward to, having met so many other colleagues from across a range of roles within social care. Academic staff have offered so much support as they understand that for many of us, going back to study is a challenge. Our confidence in academic writing is growing! It's not all about being able to write an academic assignment though. The learning has helped us all develop our skills and knowledge within our current roles. Working in small groups, we've been able to reflect each week on how our learning has fed into the work we do. There's no denying that it's challenging, studying for a full time degree and working 4 days a week too. It takes a great deal of commitment alongside good time management skills to balance work, study and your personal life. Covid 19 has also created some additional pressures for us, but again Coventry University have adapted to online teaching to enable us to continue with our studies.

All of us would say, take this opportunity if you're offered it. There will be highs and lows but the outcome will hopefully be worth it all.

EMPLOYER PERSPECTIVE: Julia Parfitt, Principal Social Worker, Birmingham City Council, Lee-Pardy-McLaughlin, Principal Social Worker, Coventry City Council, Angela Whitford, Workforce Development Lead, Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council and Andrew Gambrill, Social Work Learning Practitioner, Warwickshire County Council.

Julia: We started a Social Care and Health apprenticeship programme in 2016 to offer a different route into social work, largely for school and college leavers. It naturally followed to continue this offer, as part of a whole apprenticeship pathway. The scheme is highly beneficial to the City - the focus on practical reflection and development of social work skills and knowledge has been really positive for the candidates and the teams alike. It has given an opportunity to staff members who could not gain the social work qualification any other way, as well as demonstrating a commitment from the Council to support and develop its workforce.

Lee: The input from regional employers into the SWAD has been really strong, and has led to helpful insight into the shared workforce needs. This has given opportunities to some excellent colleagues who may not have been able to afford the time and resources to study a social work degree. Coventry and I have been really pleased to have been involved as a leading local partner from the outset of the development of the model, and are excited to help the development of the SWAD as part of our diverse approach to supporting people into social work practice.'

Angela: Birmingham, Coventry, Solihull and Warwickshire have all continued to work together in a positive partnership model and this has enabled the success of the program to date. Regular meetings are arranged and decisions jointly made. The course is positive yet also challenging for the apprentices and for each authority in supporting them – but definitely worth it! Our 2019 apprentices are all of a really high standard. We will be running joint interviews for 2020 with local authority, university and service user representation. Well done to all in the present success and in continuing to work well together!

Andrew: Whilst it is early days, the level of commitment by the apprentices has been exactly what we anticipated. They set the standard for themselves at the interview stage and have fully lived up to that promise. Questioning themselves, questioning the status quo and revising their world view constantly. Values are being reaffirmed and being given a more structured and researched framework. As a group they have quickly gelled and the support they provide each other is wonderful to see.

LIVED EXPERIENCE PERSPECTIVE: Yusuf McCormack and Sue Williams

Yusuf: The idea of an apprenticeship model which allows people already in the sector of social care the opportunity to develop & expand their career has to be a positive one. My thoughts are simply this, the apprenticeship scheme provides an opportunity for those people who have life experience, work experience & usually understand the bureaucracy wheels they will have to work in. It potentially increases better outcomes through consistency, commitment, sustainability, stickability & longevity, all areas which are often highlighted as failings by those that use the service. Those who apply for this scheme usually have a better understanding regarding the importance of relationships & tend to be more settled professionally. More importantly, they understand the 'why' regarding their reasons for wanting to become a social worker, which I feel can only increase the rate of success. As

a person with lived experience I want to know that the person working for me isn't only qualified but they are confident and have my interests at heart.

Sue: The reflective learning model is beneficial to both the active learner and eventually service user. For example, a service user with lived experience of social workers can be directly involved in group work discussions, the learning of which can then be applied into day to day practise of a new co-working model every week for people. Listening and sharing between both parties each week increases collaborative working and the ability to handle sensitive issues.

UNIVERSITY PERSPECTIVE: Luke Tibbits, Coventry University

Our experiences from the first six months of the course have been intensely positive. The learners themselves have proved to be open to ongoing self-development - it has been so exciting for us as facilitators to hear how models, theories and methods have been used to enhance work with people in challenging practice contexts. Participants in the SWAD work in reflective learning groups with colleagues from different authorities and in different practice backgrounds. This enables a cross-fertilisation of learning and development. In the recent troubling times, it has also enabled peer-support through the incredibly challenging working realities of the Coronavirus period.

There were initial fears in the national social work press that the apprenticeship model would become a simplistic 'training programme' whereby people would become 'clones' of their employers. What has been clear from the engagement with local authorities has been that this is far from the truth – employer colleagues have consistently encouraged us to continue to develop analytical thinking and criticality. It is very much hoped that the first graduates from the course in 2022 will go on to be excellent social workers – they have been incredibly impressive people to learn with and from.