

Education and Training Inspectorate

University of Ulster

An Evaluation of the Community Youth Work Degree Course

September 2010

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In this report, proportions may be described as percentages, common fractions and in more general quantitative terms. Where more general terms are used, they should be interpreted as follows:

Almost/nearly all	-	more than 90%
Most	-	75%-90%
A majority	-	50%-74%
A significant minority	-	30%-49%
A minority	-	10%-29%
Very few/a small number	-	less than 10%

In assessing the various features of the provision, Inspectors relate their evaluations to six descriptors as set out below:

DESCRIPTOR
Outstanding
Very Good
Good
Satisfactory
Inadequate
Unsatisfactory

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The focus of the evaluation was the Bachelor of Science (BSc) (Hons) Community Youth Work degree course, which is in its third year of operation. The degree can be taken in its current form as a three-year full-time or four-year part-time course and is designed for those who want to become professional youth and community workers. The course provides initial training for the majority of the professional youth workers in Northern Ireland, who, from 2010, will have to have a recognised youth work qualification at degree level. This was the first occasion on which the Community Youth Work degree course in the University of Ulster was evaluated.

1.2 In arriving at an evaluation of the levels of competence of trainee youth workers, the Education and Training Inspectorate (the Inspectorate) evaluated:

- how well the students are achieving; and
- the quality of provision for learning

which together comprised a single summary level for the overall effectiveness of the provision (quality and outcomes). The inspection team also evaluated and reported on the effectiveness of the leadership and management.

2. THE EVIDENCE BASE FOR INSPECTION

2.1 Throughout 2009-2010 a team of inspectors visited the University of Ulster's Community Youth Work degree course on both the Jordanstown and Magee campuses and a sample of first and third year students during their placement experience. The inspectors held discussions with the Head of Subject, the heads of year and other lecturers, and with individuals from the youth sector who are, or have been, involved with the course as it has developed. There were observations of 18 teaching sessions and five presentation sessions by the students, across the three year groups. The inspectors read policy, planning and evaluation documents, including reports from external examiners and annual subject monitoring reports; reviewed the resources, including the provision for on-line learning; and looked at a range of the students' marked assessments across the year groups. The inspectors also spoke with a representative group of students from the three full-time year groups and a group from the part-time course. They visited ten students during their placements in a range of different organisations; they spoke with placement supervisors and, where appropriate, observed the student leading a youth work session. They were also present at a few tri-partite meetings both at the beginning and the end of the placement.

3. BACKGROUND TO THE COURSE

3.1 The Community Youth Work degree course has been designed as a programme of initial training for those who want to work in youth-related professions such as in the statutory or voluntary youth sectors, or in the fields of youth justice or social work-related professions. In assessing the needs within the market, and in order to prepare the students for a possible range of work, the course has been adapted to provide a sound grounding in community youth work, but also to provide a range of employment opportunities outside of the education field.

3.2 The course attracts applicants from a variety of educational and social backgrounds. Every year, significantly, large numbers of students apply for a small number of places. In the current year, out of 450 applicants, 120 students were interviewed for an intake of 25-30 places. The course tutors place a high degree of importance on the interview process, which involves using practitioners from the youth sector. In the last intake, the course attracted approximately 50% more female than male students. Similar patterns of enrolment have been identified consistently over the history of the part-time and full-time youth work courses.

3.3 In addition to those students with traditional level three academic qualifications, such as the General Certificate of Education at Advanced Level, the degree course, under an Assessment or Accreditation of Prior and Experiential Learning route, accepts applicants with level two and/or level three qualifications from, for example, the Open College Network, supported by a work-based portfolio. The practical experience of youth work, which most of the students bring to the course, provides them with a sound foundation on which to build their theoretical knowledge. In addition, each student is required to undertake and to pass three ten-week placements, one in each year. The course tutors are aware of the various entry levels of the students and ensure that they are provided with any necessary additional support. It is appropriate that the University is considering other routes for students to access the course, and to continue to attract a variety of students, including those who return to study from non-traditional routes.

4. THE QUALITY OF PASTORAL CARE

4.1 The quality of pastoral care is outstanding. The Head of Subject and the staff team give the pastoral support of the students an appropriately high priority, which results in excellent retention rates. Through the student-focused pastoral approach, the effective tutor support and an appropriate amount of encouragement and challenge, the course team harnesses and develops the high levels of motivation of the students. Although they come from a broad range of academic backgrounds, the students have demonstrated consistently high rates of achievement and success.

4.2 The designation of named staff members with the responsibility for a year group or a particular group, in addition to the individual tutor role assigned to all full-time staff, results in very good and effective relationships between staff and students. They know each other well and the students appreciate the support and encouragement which they receive from staff. The strong ethos of collegiality among the staff, and the mutual support for one another and for the students, is a feature of the course provision.

4.3 The course provides very good, comprehensive child protection training through Youthnet. The majority of the students have also received child protection training through their previous involvement within the youth sector. Training in the child protection procedures of the organisations in which they complete their placements is part of the induction process.

5. THE QUALITY OF LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

5.1 The well-informed and supportive Head of Subject has developed and sustained good working links with the community youth field. The members of the course team use well their knowledge of the profile of the youth sector, and data detailing the employment destinations of former students, to inform future planning of the course, and thereby enhance

the employability prospects of the students. The awareness of the needs of the sector is informed by the staff's membership of a range of working groups, meetings with a course consultative committee, which represents the spectrum of youth provision, and regular focus groups with practitioners, including with student representatives from each year group.

5.2 The Head of Subject and the teaching team work effectively together to plan the design and delivery of the course, in order to best meet the needs of the students and of the wider youth and community sector. The course team has responded positively to the evaluations of the external examiners and to the views of the student representatives. There are effective links with colleagues in other departments within the University, and with a range of practitioners from the field of youth work, who make a valuable contribution to the course.

5.3 The well-qualified full-time staff team brings a range of experience and research specialisms in the field of youth and community work, to enhance the learning of the students. The significant connections with key stakeholders in the sector keep them well-informed and up-to-date with developments in the youth and community sector. The use of associate and visiting lecturers, along with visits and presentations from a range of organisations and speakers, provide the students with a good introduction to the variety of provision across the community youth sector. It also ensures that the course team is aware of contemporary developments and issues within the youth field. The links to the recent developments in the revised curriculum for schools, are less evident, and the inclusion of more reference to the similarities between the skills-based school curriculum and the skills promoted within 'Youth Work: A Model for Effective Practice' is an area for consideration.

5.4 There are induction sessions for visiting lecturers with module co-ordinators, using the coursework handbook from which they develop session plans and individual plans. The full-time staff hold regular meetings before and at the end of sessions with visiting tutors; students and lecturers are both involved in module evaluations.

5.5 The main elements of the course programme take place in an annexe of the University, which was part of the original building. The accommodation is adequate, with access to a suite of refurbished lecture rooms and a computer suite for the students.

5.6 The strengths of the leadership and management include:

- the involvement, knowledge and engagement of the course team with the youth sector;
- the effective use of a range of stakeholders, including external examiners, to inform the course content; and
- the range of experience and research specialisms of the course team which enhances the learning of the students.

The quality of the strategic leadership and management of the course is very good.

6. THE QUALITY OF PROVISION FOR LEARNING

6.1 The structure of the curriculum content is coherent and progressive. It is plotted against the competences in the National Occupational Standards for youth work. Each module sets out clearly the expected learning, through knowledge and understanding, intellectual qualities, professional and practical skills, and transferable skills. The course builds progressively on the development of the student as a critical thinker. An appropriate

balance of theory and practice builds on and extends the range of experience and youth work backgrounds from which the students come. In the first year, the students are introduced to the links between their own experiences or practice and the theory of youth work, through areas such as sociology and social policy. A feature of the course is the Youth to Adult Development module, which provides the students with the opportunity to share, and to develop, their knowledge of the various cultural perspectives of the young people with whom they may work. In the second and third years, the students develop further their role as reflective practitioners; the greater depth of analysis and the move towards more independent learning are evident in both the written work and the presentations by the students. As part of the progression, the final piece of work is a Study of Applied Practice, which is usually based on the specialism chosen by the student for his or her final placement.

6.2 The modules within the course aim to build on the experiences which the students bring from a wide range of youth work experience, ranging from voluntary or statutory provision to faith-based groups and detached work. The staff plan a variety of challenging well-focused activities for the students during their time on the course. The teaching links academic theory to the thinking, practice and writing of the students. There are good opportunities within modules for the students to demonstrate their understanding of the theory, through making presentations to their fellow students in a variety of ways, and to develop the skills of critical reflection by assessing their own work and that of others. The students also have the opportunity both through their elected year representatives, and for some modules through the webCT, to provide an analysis of the quality of the content and delivery of the course.

6.3 Most of the teaching in the sessions observed was good or better, with a significant minority of the teaching being very good and a few sessions outstanding. In the most effective teaching, the tutors use a range of appropriate strategies modelled on good youth work. The sessions are well-paced; there is clear development of the topic with coherence and a flexibility to reflect the different experiences and stages of development of the students; and there is effective use of paired and group work, with good opportunities for the students to link the theory to their practice. Through the use of effective questioning, the staff encourage the students to be more reflective, to develop their responses and their thinking, and to link them more fully to academic theories. There are examples of the effective transfer of quite complex ideologies to the context of youth work and to the students' experiences. While the blend of students from traditional and non-traditional academic routes is a feature of the course, the mixed ability within the classes requires more differentiated teaching strategies.

6.4 The staff members support one another effectively, and there were examples of effective team teaching observed during the course of the inspection. Through the shared responsibility for modules, or parts of modules, the staff have the opportunity to plan together and to provide peer feedback. The Head of Subject reports that there is a system of peer observations of teaching, with feedback three times a year.

6.5 There is a variation in the use of Information and Learning Technology (ILT) to enhance the teaching and learning. In the best practice, but in a minority of the sessions observed, the tutors used ILT effectively to present relevant and contemporary material to stimulate discussion and to illustrate theory. The use of webCT is being developed as a means of supporting the students beyond formal lectures, of providing them with access to extra material and, for those students who are spending their placement abroad, of keeping in touch with tutors and the University. In their annual subject reports, the tutors have recognised the need to extend the use of ILT in the department generally; the inspection findings endorse the further development of ILT by all of the staff, as a priority.

6.6 The course uses a range of appropriate, and on occasions, innovative, assessment methods to develop the students' critical self-reflection and to develop those skills of assessment which they may need professionally. The staff use the first essay in year one as part of the baseline assessment of the particular needs of students. At this stage, if they diagnose a learning need or if the students present with a difficulty themselves, a range of relevant support is put in place for the student.

6.7 The progressive development of the use of the reflective diary, which is introduced at an early stage in year one, is a feature of the course. Two other forms of assessment are at the pilot stage: the scrapbook in year two and the poster presentation in year three. They provide approaches which support the different ways of learning of the diverse range of students. These assessments also encourage the students to develop and build upon research methods, to be creative and to link the research to practical experiences. During the inspection, the students demonstrated their ability to work effectively with and to assess their peers, to present both sides of an argument with appropriate research, and to prioritise and present materials in a range of formats.

6.8 The staff share and explain the assessment criteria with the students; the assessment process is transparent at all stages and, as they proceed through the course the students have the opportunity to develop critical self- and peer- assessment skills. The staff underline consistently, the importance of these transferable skills for the students when they are employed in the field of community youth work.

6.9 There is evidence of diligent and encouraging marking by most of the tutors, with examples of detailed feedback and suggestions for improvement. The tutors guide the students clearly to the areas in which they need to improve, and provide effective support for the students. An analysis of the students' performance across the criteria provides the course team with feedback, which they use to adjust parts of the course or to provide additional support.

6.10 The strengths in the quality of provision include:

- the coherent and progressive structure of the curriculum content, which takes account of the different stages of development of the students;
- the effective links made between the theory, and the practice experienced by the students;
- the quality of the teaching observed, which was mostly good or better; and
- the variety of assessment methods which develop progressively the students' competences, as reflective practitioners.

6.11 Areas for improvement in relation to the quality of provision include:

- greater consistency in the use of ILT to support the learning and teaching; and
- the further development of more differentiated teaching strategies to take account of the range of ability of the students.

Placements for Practice

6.12 Each student is required to undertake and to pass three ten-week placements during the course. There is a good balance between the acquisition of knowledge and the opportunity to apply it practically in a youth work setting. There is progression in the type of placement from the centre-based work of the first placement, through the possibility of an international placement to a more specialist final placement. Progression is also evident in the different weightings applied to the core competences at each level. In line with the increasing focus on self-directed learning and independence, the year three placement is based on areas of specialism, and the students' individual career interests. The key areas for year three placements in the current year were schools, faith-based organisations, youth justice and detached work. Students are encouraged to cross boundaries, and to gain experience in an area of community youth work which is unfamiliar to them when selecting their placement. In addition, as an example of progression, the students take greater responsibility for the self-evaluation of their progress during the placement, with the year three students presenting evidence as to how well they have met the required competences.

6.13 There are very good and well-established working relationships between University of Ulster Jordanstown and the majority of the host organisations for the placements. A comprehensive placement book, which details the competencies expected to be developed by the student, supports the understanding of the placement supervisors and the students, and provides a focus for the placement. The areas of competence¹ are linked to the National Occupational Standards for youth work. There are two tri-partite meetings for the tutor, the placement supervisor and the placement student, one at the beginning and one at the end of the placement. The students take a lead in deciding the aims for the placement, with an appropriate amount of guidance and challenge from the course tutor. At the initial tri-partite meeting, the three individuals involved agree their respective expectations and responsibilities. The tutors prepare the students well for the placement through underlining the importance of creating clear aims and setting measurable objectives, the recording of evidence and self-reflection, and how to measure their progress against the competences.

6.14 The course tutors do not observe the students' practice during the placements. The main contact between the students and the tutors is during regular review days and the tri-partite meetings. The tutors facilitated well the review sessions observed; there were useful opportunities for the students to exchange experiences. The students demonstrated the ability to talk about how the different types of placement, including in some instances within the formal education sector, allowed them to transfer and develop their youth work skills. The staff made good links between the theory itself, and how it would inform practice. There were also practical sessions in areas such as interpersonal skills development, which were informed by the practical experiences of the students during the placement. In the final tri-partite, which assesses the progress made by the student, the University is dependent on the assessment and the evidence made by the placement supervisor and the student, using a comprehensive matrix of competencies. Although they have not observed the student's practice, the course tutor makes the final decision on the grade awarded to the student. The majority of the placement supervisors are experienced and prepare and support the students well in the placement and, in particular, in the weekly feedback sessions.

¹ The areas of competence include: supporting the core values, principles and ethical conduct for youth work; developing interpersonal skills and self awareness; understanding the youth sector, the agency, its workers and the community; recording, evaluating, supervision and assessment; and self-planning, organising, administering and managing.

6.15 In recent annual subject reports to the University, the course team has identified appropriately, the need to develop more formal training for placement supervisors. The inspection findings endorse the need for more formal support as a priority. For new host organisations, and for students going to placements in areas of expertise which are unfamiliar to them and for whom youth work practice is unfamiliar, there is a need for more thorough preparation in advance of the placement.

6.16 The strengths of the placements include:

- the range of placements available to the students, which reflect well the employment opportunities in the field of youth work;
- the quality of the practice of the students observed, which was always good;
- the thorough preparation by students for their practice, particularly in relation to group work;
- the willingness of students to participate in a range of youth work experiences;
- the opportunities for students to avail of international experiences;
- the ongoing support from the university tutors to the students during the placements; and
- the commitment of the host placement organisations to the partnership with the University.

6.17 Areas for improvement in relation to the placements include:

- the need to review the procedures for the quality assurance and assessment of the students while on placement, and the more formal professional development of placement supervisors.

The quality of provision for learning, including placements, is good.

7. ACHIEVEMENTS AND STANDARDS

7.1 The students are well-motivated, reflective and committed to community youth work. They come to the course with a strong sense of vocation and, in most cases, with a good knowledge and experience of their particular part of the youth sector. The course broadens their experience of different types of youth and community work. They are encouraged to have high expectations of themselves. As they work in groups for presentations, they are tasked to discuss, generate and justify ideas. Many of the projects and presentations demonstrate good levels of work, supported with appropriate references to reading, research and an increasing understanding of social policy. In addition to developing a greater understanding of a range of social problems, they develop wider skills such as peer co-operation, effective listening and how to evaluate critically the key elements of group dynamics.

7.2 During the course, the students become more confident with self-directed learning, and demonstrate well the ability to reflect critically on their learning experiences. They have a good focus on their future career options and match, where possible, the placement opportunities to their employment aspirations. The students are articulate; they work

effectively together supporting one another and they display good levels of confidence and maturity. As they progress through the course, they are able to reflect with more depth and maturity on their performance, and how they might improve it, and to take critical feedback from their peers.

7.3 By the end of the course, the students have had a rich and varied learning experience, and most have benefited from working in areas of youth and community work which were unfamiliar to them. They are able to apply the theory learned to the practical work, with which many of them continue to be involved throughout the course. There is evidence across the year groups of a development in the maturity of the students' thinking and discussion, which is reflected well in their writing, and, in particular, in the preparation for the study of applied practice which is the final assessment.

7.4 The BSc Community Youth Work degree course is a very good initial training course for those who want to make an effective contribution to the young people in their community by working with them and supporting others in similar work. While many of the new practitioners will be supported in the next steps of their professional development by the organisations with which they work, there remains the need for more formal continuing professional development for those who work in the field of community youth work.

7.5 The strengths in relation to achievements and standards include:

- the well-developed sense of vocation of the students and their commitment to community youth work;
- the progressive development of research skills and a wider perspective on youth work;
- the development of the ability by most of the students to organise their own learning and to be critically reflective of themselves and others; and
- the progressive development of the students to use theory to enhance further their own practice.

The quality of standards and achievements is very good.

8. CONCLUSION

8.1 The strengths of the provision include:

- the collegiality of the well-qualified and experienced team, who have a student-centred approach to their work;
- the outstanding quality of the pastoral and tutor support provided for the students and the very good working relationships between the staff and the students;
- the planning of the course topics, and the different means of assessment, to take account of the stage of development of the students;
- the positive response of the students, and the good standards attained by most of them, including their development as reflective and critical practitioners;

- the well-informed and supportive Head of Subject and the good working links which have been developed with the youth work field.

8.2 Overall, the quality of provision in the BSc (Hons) Community Youth Work degree course is very good.

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