

General Social Care Council
Goldings House
2 Hay's Lane
London SE1 2HB

Tel: 020 7397 5100
www.gsccl.org.uk

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What works in 'Grow Your Own' initiatives for social work?

Executive summary



Joint University Council
Social Work Education Committee



The Open
University



Foreword

I am pleased to introduce this research, which is the outcome of one of the first projects to be supported by government following the Langlands Report's recommendations (2005) for addressing barriers to entering a range of professions.

The project took place over two years against a backdrop of radical changes in social care service delivery, social work education and workforce supply and demand. We are grateful to all those who contributed to this highly collaborative project.

The General Social Care Council (GSCC) welcomes the study's confirmation that Grow Your Own activity, when well planned and supported, can generate positive outcomes for both employers and those entering the social work profession.

The report is valuable in analysing the benefits, costs and challenges of different types of Grow Your Own schemes and their impact on higher education course provision, student progression, and recruitment and retention.

In particular it examines what works well when there are close relationships between employers and Higher Education Institutions, which are essential to achieving better outcomes in social work education.

The report also highlights the government's commitment to widening access to the social work profession, not least through the establishment of flexible routes to training and qualification and options for employers to more effectively plan for and meet workforce needs within their local communities.

The research has already led to the Children’s Workforce Development Council’s pilot to support local authorities to sponsor graduate students through qualifying social work training and to evaluate the outcomes. We will watch this development with interest and will welcome its first graduates.

Collaborative working was essential to the success of this project and mirrors its importance at a time when social work education is under particular scrutiny. I would like to extend my thanks to members of the project board for their commitment to and interest in the study. The GSCC is committed to a partnership approach to ensure the quality of the social care workforce through the provision of high-quality education and training and the strong involvement of employers and people who use services.

The GSCC looks forward to working with all the stakeholders involved in this study to ensure the development of strategies that support students to access training, thereby building the size and quality of the social work workforce.

Mike Wardle

Chief Executive, General Social Care Council

Introduction

The definition of Grow Your Own (GYO) initiatives used by this project is:

“Approaches by local authorities and the independent sector to support their employees, or potential employees, to qualify as social workers.”

Project aims and funding

This project was one of the first to be supported by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) in response to the recommendations in the ‘Gateways to the Professions’ Langlands Report (published in November 2005). It was developed, co-funded and overseen by a wide group of stakeholders involved in social work and social work education and led by the General Social Care Council (GSCC).

The Social Care Workforce Research Unit at King’s College London undertook this research project to examine the nature and impact of ‘Grow Your Own’ schemes, with particular focus on their role in widening access to the social work profession. The full project report is available at: www.gsccl.org.uk.

The findings from the project have been used to develop a toolkit aimed at sharing good practice for the development of GYO schemes. The toolkit will be available in early 2009.

About the project

The project adopted a mixed methodology, drawing on 75 interviews across the nine English regions with employers including local authorities and independent sector organisations; higher and further education institutions (HEIs); and current or recently graduated GYO students. Wider input was received via national and regional consultation events and written submissions. This was complemented by the analysis of anonymised GSCC data records of the demographic profile and progression rates of the 41,000 students who were enrolled for social work qualifications from 1998 to 2007.

Overview of the findings

This study has confirmed that GYO activity, when well planned and supported, can generate positive outcomes for all involved and is highly regarded for the ways it enhances the skills and commitment of people entering the profession.

Employers value the acquisition of staff members familiar with the realities of social work practice and loyal to the organisation, and also value the wider potential benefits of GYO for organisational culture and workforce planning.

Students are grateful for the opportunity to qualify while employed and to receive additional support and mentoring, often where financial and caring commitments would otherwise have precluded this career development.

HEIs value GYO for bringing additional students with – importantly – guaranteed placements, increased progression rates and higher levels of social care experience to share in classroom settings, and an overall strengthening of relationships with employer organisations.

This snapshot needs to be set against the wider and rapidly evolving contexts of social work and social work education. The separation of local authority children's services and adult services, and the transition from the Diploma in Social Work (DipSW) to the new social work degree, have both been distinct forces shaping recent levels of, and trends in, GYO.

These are accompanied by other factors such as changes in social worker vacancy levels, increased emphasis on workforce planning, debates over the role of and future levels of need for social workers and the shift towards the personalisation of services. It is too early to judge the long-term impact of these recent trends on levels and prioritising of particular models of GYO.

Summary findings

Models and trends in GYO

- GYO activity can be broadly categorised into two main GYO models: **secondments** and **traineeships**. Employers may run schemes in parallel or select elements from each model in order to better target different organisational priorities. Overall levels of GYO activity in England steadily increased during the final six years of the DipSW, peaking sharply in the last year, 2003–04. Then, after a one-year drop, numbers have returned to previous levels. There are significant regional variations in level and trends of GYO, with the highest levels in regions with the highest vacancy rates. Local variations are also affected by a range of factors and pressures, including policy and funding shifts, vacancy levels and recent changes within local authorities.

Profile of GYO students

- GYO students are more likely to be white UK, less likely to be black and are less likely to report any disability than non-GYO cohorts. They are more likely to be male and older than non-GYO students and these differential profiles have been increasing since the introduction of the new degree. GYO students overall tend to bring more social care experience to their student role and are perceived to have a realistic overview of the profession. Strikingly, GYO students used to include a higher proportion of those with the lowest qualifications on entry. By contrast, since the new degree they have tended to be more qualified than both previous DipSW cohorts and current non-GYO students.

Impact on employer recruitment, retention and workforce diversity

- GYO is widely valued by employers and students for recruiting social workers who can ‘hit the ground running’, both due to practical familiarity with the sponsoring organisation and greater confidence and experience in integrating theoretical learning with practice. However, there are concerns that schemes may prioritise preparation for the employer organisation, or a particular role within it, and not equip students with the breadth of experience and the tools to challenge poor practice.
- Increased staff retention rates are seen as a successful outcome of GYO, although many employers do not systematically collect data. Internal social care staff are reportedly less likely to move on, with ties to the local area positively linked to higher retention rates.
- Students view ties to employers upon qualifying as a reasonable obligation. However, ties to a particular work setting are more controversial. Students more readily accept specific work settings if they are made an explicit condition of recruitment. Many employers successfully match student and organisation preferences at graduation, but this flexibility seems to be declining.

- Many GYO schemes are shaped by habit or economy, with only one-third of schemes integrated into workforce development strategies, although this is an increasing trend and is associated with greater corporate support for successful GYO activity.
- GYO investment is not predominantly used to address gaps in workforce diversity, although many schemes include some element of widening access to the profession, one-third by supporting students without previous educational attainment. Most employers had not considered the potential of GYO to address the balance of gender, ethnicity or people with disabilities in the workforce. ‘Positive Action’ schemes targeting under-represented minority ethnic groups are successful but rare.
- Most GYO students confirmed that they would not have accessed qualifying training without the opportunity offered by GYO, although this was more commonly due to financial and caring commitments rather than a lack of academic qualifications.

Impact on HEIs

- GYO activity secures HEIs guaranteed practice placements, expands student numbers and strengthens partnerships with employers, which can generate additional teaching resources. GYO students are more likely to pass on time and less likely to withdraw from their courses than non-GYO students.
- HEI Foundation or equivalent courses that can be credited on to the degree using Accreditation for Prior Learning (APL) are significant GYO recruitment routes to enable potential GYO candidates to gain study skills and meet the Department of Health (DH) requirements for the social work degree. Since the establishment of the degree, the minimal opportunities for Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (AP(E)L) have not enabled GYO schemes to fast-track experienced social care workers through qualifying routes.

- HEIs emphasised that, while GYO students' level of previous educational attainment has historically been lower than that of direct entry students, the rigour of courses and quality of students' work were consistent with other students'.

Running a GYO scheme

- Employers describe the success of schemes as dependent on rigorous selection processes, with criteria including social care experience, values, motivation, communication skills, ability to combine work with study, the endorsement of managers and commitment to the organisation, as well as previous academic achievement.
- HEIs and employers have a broad range of agreements, often unwritten, about collaborating over GYO activity. These are increasingly formalised, focusing on practice placements and information-sharing about students. Commitments to funding an agreed number of students are desirable for HEIs but often seen as impractical given local authority funding cycles. HEIs are primarily selected by employers for proximity, the option of distance learning or due to established partnerships.

Support for students

- The type and level of support offered to GYO students by their employer vary significantly between organisations and different models of GYO, including supervision and mentoring, financial aspects and study leave. In turn, depending on the supportiveness of their employer, students may require different levels of support from HEIs. Employers and HEIs agree that where GYO students are studying full-time and not in work they need less support because they are less likely to be juggling the roles of worker and student. Study skills provision is usually the responsibility of the HEI but GYO students do not necessarily have greater requirements than direct entry students.

- Half of GYO students interviewed were satisfied with the level of support received from their employer. Students draw on workforce development staff as the main source of employer support, with operational managers and work colleagues only sometimes supportive of the student role. The continuity and dedication of the GYO co-ordinator role are highly valued. They act as advocates for students, with varying degrees of influence depending on the scheme. Peer support is important, often facilitated by employers and HEIs. Half of students interviewed received financial assistance from their employers in addition to payment of fees and salaries, including travel, book and IT allowances, and there is wide variation in study leave allocation.

Messages from this study

GYO training of social workers is important because of the sizeable public funds invested via local authorities. This study was commissioned, therefore, to examine broadly untested assumptions about GYO activity.

- The evaluation found that both types of scheme (traineeships and secondments) include highly resourced models with significant levels of support, investment and responsiveness to the needs of the individual student, but that other models are strongly focused on immediate employer priorities. The better progression rates of GYO students may be due to the positive financial security, greater support and 'expectations' that most GYO models bring. However, there is pressure on some to complete courses while carrying significant workloads, and at times their student experience has not been valued and protected. GYO can be used to generate a generic pool of graduates, but increasingly, with the separation of children's and adult services and a reduction in overall vacancy levels, organisations are looking to GYO to target specific

workforce gaps. There is a risk that students may feel coerced into working in particular roles and not with their client group of choice. While some employers emphasise the opportunities of GYO to widen individuals' professional horizons, other employers restrict students' choice of course modules, placements and eventual job settings. These factors can undermine GYO students' loyalty to the employer, and therefore retention rates, so threatening one of the core motivations of employer investment in GYO. More broadly, employers who prioritise short-term organisational needs may jeopardise the quality of the education and the generic nature of the qualifying training.

- This evaluation shows that there is currently a trend towards bringing in externally recruited trainees. The perceived advantages of these highly competitive schemes are that they widen the pool of available recruits to the social work profession and increase the level of men and the educational attainment levels of people entering the profession. However, the positive, long-term staff retention rates associated with GYO are better evidenced with long-standing models seconding experienced members of the existing social care workforce, often with greater ties to the locality and more familiarity with the profession. The introduction of 'Newly Qualified Status' will particularly assist the increasing numbers of graduates with limited social care experience to consolidate their learning, but possibly undermine the need for new graduates to 'hit the ground running', a significant role of GYO investment.
- There is increasing emphasis on the need for effective workforce planning in local authorities. One obligation is to have a staff profile representative of the groups with which they work, and GYO offers a successful and under-used tool to target gaps in workforce diversity and to widen educational opportunities. However, these objectives require strategic direction and resource investment, and are not inevitable outcomes of all GYO activity. Social work education in England has considerable experience in meeting the dual policy aims of student quality and diversity

but trends indicate a decline in GYO's key role as an element of skills and career escalators within the social care profession.

- While employment-based routes have offered an important opportunity for increasing the portfolio of models for qualifying study, and for collaboration between employers and HEIs, the year-on-year uncertainty about GYO investment challenges and occasionally undermines HEIs' planning. These uncertainties appear to have recently led to a reduction in employment-based routes (EBRs), while some EBRs have been subsumed into college-based cohorts in order to minimise the planning risk. Therefore, the short-term nature of local authority funding cycles and investment in GYO has wider implications for the provision of a choice of flexible routes to qualifying and this may conflict with other policy goals for increasing access to the professions.
- In conclusion, social work training and workforce development activity will benefit if they share intelligence, devise joint objectives and construct and measure desired outcomes to exploit the full potential of GYO.

Recommendations

For policy makers

- National government commitments to widening access to the social work profession could be beneficially reinforced through highlighting the potential for performance management, workforce planning and equalities benefits from strategic GYO investment.

For GSCC and sector skills councils

- They should take into account the benefits of and support needs for GYO schemes when considering any revision to the regulatory framework, standards and requirements for social work education.

- They should address current uncertainty and promote employer support for GYO outside the statutory sector, consolidating information on funding sources for GYO activity, including access for non-statutory organisations to local authority and other funding from central government.

For employers

- GYO schemes require high-level endorsement of their priorities to be successful.
- Employers could make greater use of targeted GYO activity to address the profile and diversity of their workforce. All decisions for GYO planning need to be clear about the different requirements and outcomes of schemes, and the likely impact on the age, gender, disability, previous educational attainment and ethnicity of students. Plans to establish or re-model GYO could usefully include an Equalities Impact Assessment. This should assist employers to establish the profile of their GYO candidates and the potential impact of targeted GYO recruitment or any alterations to scheme support or funding.
- GYO schemes have the potential for fostering an organisational culture that promotes staff development opportunities, including practice learning, as part of a wider 'learning organisation'. All schemes need to be integrated into employers' workforce development or recruitment and retention strategies if they are to be clear about their objectives. Feedback on the application process to unsuccessful internal candidates and their line managers can assist individuals to achieve the necessary qualifications or experience to be successful with a subsequent application, or to be directed to an alternative source of training and development.
- As part of a whole-organisation approach to GYO, adults and children's departments should maximise their co-ordination of GYO activity in order to reduce administrative duplication and to benefit from practice learning exchange, as well as the possible need for reciprocal arrangements to accommodate GYO graduates seeking employment in other settings.

- Employers should maintain data on the retention rates and profiles of GYO and non-GYO recruits in their workforce, and on the relative success of different GYO models, as part of the evaluation of GYO investment. This may also include exit interviews on experiences of GYO; reasons for leaving the scheme or the organisation; and subsequent employment plans. This will establish if GYO is generating recruits for the sponsoring organisation; for the wider locality; for the social work profession as a whole; or whether people are leaving the profession.
- Reciprocal arrangements for placements between employer organisations are successful mechanisms for ensuring that GYO students gain experience outside their normal work setting. This is particularly important for smaller organisations that cannot offer a range of placement settings and are vulnerable to the loss of sponsored students from the workplace.

For HEIs

- HEIs, in discussions with national and/or local employers and the GSCC, should consider maintaining or extending the choice of routes to qualifying, including opportunities to access distinct employment-based routes, blended learning and flexible provision.
- The potential for appropriately experienced staff from sponsoring agencies to claim AP(E)L in accessing the social work degree should be explored as part of the current review of rules and requirements.
- HEIs should continue to develop joint information and recruitment sessions with sponsoring agencies to discuss the benefits, challenges and support mechanisms needed for a GYO route.

For students

- Students can maximise their preparation for and support throughout study by talking to past students on similar routes, maintaining peer support networks, and clarifying their aspirations and opportunities, for employer and HEI support.

- Students need to take on some responsibility for briefing their colleagues and therefore enabling them to accommodate their change in role to student status.

For all

Good practice recommendations on GYO schemes work best if made explicit in clear contractual arrangements between employers, students and HEIs, including:

- payment of fees, salaries and additional costs;
- consideration of and agreements over study leave allowance and flexibility over caseloads and other responsibilities throughout study;
- opportunities for practice learning;
- availability of consistent and dedicated co-ordination/mentoring outside operational line management and practice supervision;
- provision of study skills support if required;
- information sharing, including consideration of data protection waivers;
- redeployment or alternative provision for students failing to complete schemes;
- job allocation procedures on graduation and the types of work opportunities available;
- student tie-ins to employers, including the payback of costs; and
- the promotion of a comprehensive learning experience for all GYO students.

