

Social Work Degree Apprenticeship – Direct Observations of Practice

Guidance for Mentors and Managers of Social Work Apprentices

Direct observations of a students' practice are an essential requirement of the social work degree apprenticeship. The observation reports form a key part of the evidence which shows how students' are developing as social workers over time and applying the relevant knowledge, skills and behaviours in the workplace.

They provide a formal and unique opportunity for individual formative feedback. When planned and implemented well they can provide valuable insights as students are encouraged to actively seek feedback and reflect on the scenario from multiple perspectives. Observations form part of the practice learning portfolio and are not graded but enable students, managers/mentors and the person/group they are working with to provide feedback *during the learning process*.

The intended outcome is for this to both positively affirm what they are doing well and to constructively identify development areas so any skill/knowledge gaps can be addressed. Observations can also provide a very useful opportunity to reflect on the purpose of the intervention, explore the context and the outcome to help identify ways to continuously improve their practice. This is why we ask students to complete observations at different stages of their learning journey over an 18 month period so that they are able to implement development goals, apply learning and to demonstrate progression over time.

What is a Direct Observation of Practice in Social Work?

Put simply it is a planned learning opportunity where the student, is formally observed by a qualified and experienced social work practitioner. It involves the student either leading or playing a key role in an intervention with an individual, family or group of people using social work services.

Many social work interventions can be appropriate for observations, some may arise naturally as part of case work or being on duty for e.g. a home visit, participating in a formal meeting, managing a crisis intervention. Others might require more thought and planning e.g. leading a group work session, undertaking direct work, participating in formal assessments such as child in need, capacity etc. It is critically important that any opportunity for observation is negotiated between students and their manager/workplace mentor to ensure that it is appropriate, any potential risks have been assessed and that it meets their current learning needs.

Remember that observations are a learning tool to help students on their journey to becoming a qualified practitioner and should be an opportunity to step outside their comfort zone, to take the opportunity to challenge themselves and develop their skills.

In the practice learning portfolio there is a timeline (page 3) to provide guidance on when direct observations should be completed. As a general rule you should be aiming to do these as listed below:

First Direct Observation – Month 6 to 12 (between the final submission for BA1 and the end of the Law, Rights & Safeguarding Unit halfway through BA2).

Second Direct Observation – Month 12 to 18 (between the Law, Rights & Safeguarding Exam and the start of BA3).

Third Direct Observation – Month 18 to 24 (between the start of BA3 and the start of the preparation for EPA)

This is the minimum requirement for the Social Work Degree Apprenticeship and we recognize that some employers may require students to complete more than this or at slightly different times for e.g. to fit in with a student being placed with another team as part of their contrasted learning. The timeframe in the portfolio is a guide to ensure that students complete learning opportunities in a timely way to maximise the benefits during their apprenticeship.

Good practice tips for Direct Observations

- During BA2 and BA3 observations should form a regular part of discussions in supervision and be clearly linked to areas of development within the apprenticeship standard. Apprenticeship review meetings will provide an opportunity to update on progress.
- Planning for observations should consider suitable types of activity, how service user consent will be obtained, any practical considerations such as timing/venue/seating arrangements, the aims of the session, intended learning goals, how to manage any challenges during the intervention – for e.g. at what point might an observer need to intervene? The length of the observation (generally no more than 30 to 60 minutes but this depends on the scenario and needs to be negotiated and agreed) and how feedback will be sought and given after the observation.
- Allow sufficient time for debrief and feedback after the observation. Consider using the ‘keep/change’ rule as part of reflection i.e. what might students keep doing and what might they want to change? Ask them to reflect on the observation before offering your feedback.
- Observers should provide timely and specific feedback as soon after the observation as possible. Observers should link feedback to examples/evidence and reference the apprenticeship standard.
- Own your own feedback – your thoughts, feelings and observations are valid.
- Enable students to spend time reflecting on the impact of their intervention from the service users perspective, encourage them to use any feedback from service users to continuously improve their approach.

Requirements for Direct Observations

- ***Evidence of at least three observations*** during BA2 and BA3 with two of these completed in BA2.
- At least two should be completed by the students' manager or workplace mentor.
- Observations should be completed by qualified and experienced social workers who are registered with Social Work England. Observers should wherever possible be practice educators. Where this is problematic students' should involve their skills coach in discussions to agree a suitable alternative plan.
- Consent from the person/group they are working with should be obtained and feedback sought after the observation.
- Work tasks appropriate to be used for observation should be planned, discussed and agreed collaboratively between the student and the observer.
- Observations must be recorded on the template provided and feedback should be clearly linked to the relevant sections of the Social Work apprenticeship standard.
- Feedback from observers must be specific and include at least two areas of positive affirmation (i.e. areas of strength) and at least one example of an area for development. It is expected that employers will support apprentices to identify further learning opportunities to help them address any areas for development.
- Observation reports should be completed in a timely manner as soon as practicable ***within two weeks*** of the observation and a copy of the report uploaded to the e-portfolio (PWP). ***It is the apprentices responsibility to ensure this is completed as it is a requirement for being able to successfully qualify on the Social Work Degree Apprenticeship.***