

# PBPL

Practice-based Professional  
Learning Centre



The Open  
University

## Understanding student learning in practice settings

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### Aim

This project investigated the practice development of paraprofessional workers in health and social care through the vocational foundation degree (FD). It focused on the in workplace conditions, home life and student characteristics influence learning and practice development.

### Method

19 students, 10 in the theory course and 9 in the practice-based course were interviewed twice, once at the beginning of the course and once at the end.

### Results

#### Study and role

In their professional role, the students emphasised the need for capacities such as building enabling relationships, having insight into others in order to meet their needs, flexibility and reflexivity. The importance of having a sense of vocation for, and commitment to, supporting others in difficulty was emphasised. Placing the student's learning in the context of this role, study promoted the capacities needed for their work – it promoted greater understanding of and empathy for the service users, changed the way they thought about problems and the way they approached their work. The underpinning 'whys' and premises of practice became clearer.

However, while the vocational nature of their study resonated with their practice, students had difficulties getting to grips with the unfamiliarity of the academic process – the conventions of academic writing, of working through course material or relating theory to practice. In addition, the workplace relevance could mean that study

represented intrusion of the workplace into the home life. Thus for many students, study was an ambivalent experience.

### **Workplace conditions and support learning**

Most students operated in tight networks of workplace support. This had mixed effects on their study. Some found their workplaces supported their study by providing moral support, opportunities to discuss course concepts with colleagues, or the provision of feedback on written assignments. At the same time, the networks could undermine study by circulating demoralising negative attitudes about study, suggesting demotivating surface approaches to learning and erroneous information. Others wanted more opportunities to discuss ideas from study with supervisors. Thus, while on the surface, workplace conditions may appear supportive (e.g. regular supervision, tight social networks), a deeper examination suggests they can undermine as much as support the experience.

### **Career progression**

Many participants described fragmented careers - taking whatever work they could to get by or drifting from job to job. Some had little sense of progression into senior posts within a field and others found their career trajectory had been thwarted by various obstacles (family pressure, family demands, unemployment). Despite this fragmentation, participants reported a vocation for their work, and drive to find a fit between their personal qualities and their work. Although, many saw the FD as an opportunity to progress into professional roles, this trajectory had a precarious quality – some had little understanding of the path ahead, others had a sense that any long term planning was impossible in a financially volatile environment. Some were not sure they could cope long time with the intense demands of study. Thus, while more information on career development is required, it is important to recognise that structural features may exert a greater effect on opportunities for progression which itself may impact on engagement with learning opportunities.