**Practice Education Network for Social Work (PENSW): Evaluation of an Online Resource**

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**Abstract**

The Practice Education Network for Social Work (PENSW) is an online resource for networking and sharing knowledge and information that is accessed by all the professionals and partner agencies involved in providing social work placements and supervising social work students at the University of Suffolk (UOS) in the United Kingdom (UK). This research has explored the ease in which such networks can be set up as well as providing an evaluation from network members. Ultimately in the face of limited national resources and with the need to provide more localised resources; this evaluation demonstrates the real importance of providing an easily accessible virtual space for organisations and professionals to access resources, network and share best practice. The findings have clearly supported the view that all social work training programmes need to consider providing a localised network to support the social work placement process not least to ensure that supervisors of social work students have access to the documentation, research, information and resources that they need and to ensure they can effectively fulfil their roles alongside being able to stay connected to the programme provider and other professionals involved in social work student practice placements.

**Introduction**

This evaluative research examines the use and purpose of the Practice Education Network for Social Work (PENSW) within the context of practice learning in the United Kingdom, although the learning from this evaluation can be internationally and also for professions other than social work such as nursing. Essentially PENSW is an online resource for practice educators, on-site supervisors, university tutors, social work placement managers and partner provider agencies within the statutory and private/voluntary/independent sectors that are involved in providing practice placements for and supervising social work students. Within the UK, a practice educator will be a registered social worker who has, or is planning to undertake a post-qualifying qualification to enable them to assess and provide supervision to social work students. An on-site supervisor, often referred to as a practice supervisor, could also be a qualified social worker, but may not have undertaken the necessary qualifications to operate as a practice educator. However, nationally and internationally such educators may be described using terms such as ‘field educator’ ‘placement supervisor’ etc. and may have subtle differences in the level of professional qualifications held.

There are numerous organisations and professionals involved in managing placements and supervising students that regularly change over-time and it is important that all of these organisations and professionals have a meeting point where they can network, gather information, book onto training workshops, access resources and share best practice.

For the majority of HEI’s and Colleges it is not possible to provide all the organisations and professionals that work with students on social work practice placements with access to their internal intranet as they are not registered as students or staff members. Equally when working with so many employer agencies and organisations that have different IT operating systems it is impossible to connect and share information. This means it is not always possible to provide access to electronic information and resources or to provide a dedicated space for networking (in one place). On full time social work training programmes there can be anywhere between 100 and 300 or more different professionals at any one time involved in student social work placements and it was from this premise that the idea of PENSW was born. PENSW bridges this gap by providing an online information resource for all Practice Educators and On-Site Supervisors working with University of Suffolk (UOS) social work students. It also provides a platform for placement providers, employer agencies and representatives that work in partnership with UOS. It has long been recognised that supervising students in practice placements can be a very isolating role (Plenty and Gower, 2013) and whilst teaching and learning workshops and group supervision are provided at the university, there are times in between when communicating with other supervisors and the university can be incredibly helpful and supportive (Plenty and Gower, 2013). HEIs also have an important role to play here in terms of providing good quality practice educator training and support including accessibility to materials and resources that consider the connections between academic teaching and learning and the placement experience (Preston-Shoot et al., 1997). Equally, partners of UOS operating from a variety of different systems may find it useful to have a shared space in which to communicate and collaborate. The Network is therefore intended to create a teaching and learning environment for the purpose of gaining information and sharing practice experiences and resources.

The Practice Education Network for Social Work was in the process of being developed during the 2013 re-validation of the BA (Hons) Social Work Programme at UOS. During this process the Health Care and Professional Council (HCPC, 2012) awarded a commendation for the project and were keen to see published results at some point in the future once the network had gone live and had been made use of over a period of time. They viewed the network as a creative and innovative area of practice development that could potentially be adopted by other HEI’s running social work training programmes. PENSW will shortly be approaching a full year cycle and the members have grown from 25 initially to over 160 with new members joining the site on a weekly basis. This article will explain how to set up an online system and will discuss the evaluation through the use of a survey questionnaire posted out via the network. It will demonstrate how we made use of the quantitative and qualitative data in an attempt to identify just how members make use of the network and will hopefully encourage other social work training and education providers to adopt a similar system in their locality.

**Literature Review**

We have seen the growing emergence of the internet and use of information technology since the late 1980’s with it dramatically descending upon social work practice in the late 1990’s. During this period we saw the introduction of internet resources, e-mail, chatrooms, news groups and networking sites and the IT revolution has continued to dominate all aspects of personal and professional life in most parts of the world not least in public services such as social work (Grant and Grobman, 1998, Schoech, 1999, Martinez and Clark, 2000).

The positives and the risks for social work students engaging in social media networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter has been widely discussed (Mukherjee and Clark 2012, Fang et al 2014, Kimball and Kim 2013, and BASW 2012). The role that social media can play in social work education is also being explored in both this country and internationally (Duncan-Daston, Huner-Sloan and Fullmer 2013, Robbins and Singer 2014, Westwood in Bellinger and Ford 2016).

Within the literature, the focus tends to be on the use of students engaging with others, or the engagement between students and social work educators (Robbins and Singer 2014). Little has been written about the use of social media as a forum to support social work educators and PENSW provides this opportunity through the use of networking via the chat room, discussion forum and sharing of resources and best practice.

On a national scale whilst there are numerous websites and resources available for student social workers, access to information and resources for social work practice educators and placement providers is however, rather limited and this can contribute to the feelings of isolation experienced by those supervising students (Schaub and Dalrymple 2013). In 2015 we saw the demise of the College of Social Work despite it providing us with the Professional Capabilities Framework for Social Work and the Practice Educator Standards for Social Work (TCSW, 2012) and beginning to build a useful resource for social work and social work practice education. The British Association of Social Workers have taken over some of the responsibilities of the College although the resources available on the site currently are geared more towards social work generally and there is not a dedicated area for practice education. Equally the government have just announced that they plan to launch a new body to take responsibility for social work standards and regulation (Stevenson, 2016) so during this time of turbulent and continuous change, it is not yet known how information and resources for social work practice educators will develop, if at all. Skills for Care used to provide a dedicated area for social work practice education which is no longer available and The Higher Education Academy provide some links to research more generally (The Higher Education Academy, 2016). The National Organisation for Practice Teaching in England has links to policy and practice but again no specific resources for practice educators. Some local authorities such as Coventry have set up a social care learning forum that contains a ‘support for practice educators’ section although the forum is generally dedicated to all areas of social care.

It is not known whether or not other HEI’s delivering social work training programmes have dedicated online resources that allow all their social work placement providers and supervisors to network as they do not appear through a general internet search. PENSW also would not show up on a general search of the internet due to it being a network for a specific locality but it may well be the only network of its kind currently in the UK. Suffice to say it is possible to open up the network to internet searches and to link it to other media sites. We also need to be aware that even if information and resources do become more readily available through national networks, they will not be able to provide detailed information about social work training programme policy and procedure in each area, neither are they likely to provide tailor-made resources for practice educators and supervisors, or have the facility to maintain a forum to encourage networking on a localised basis. It therefore falls to HEI’s and their partner agencies to develop networks that meet this purpose.

**Setting up an online Practice Education in Social Work Resource**

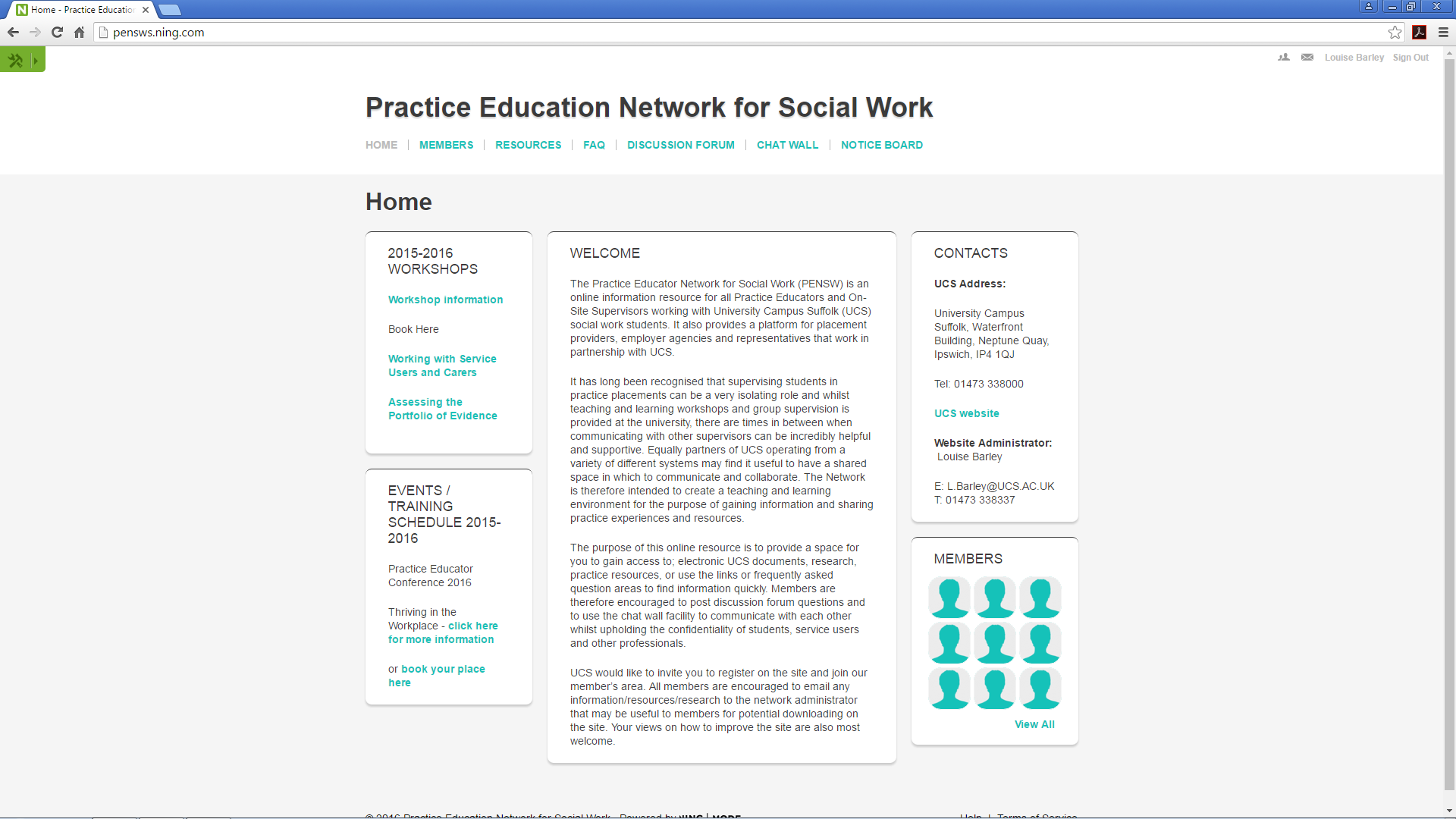
The journey towards setting up PENSW began with meetings with our IT department, where we established it was not possible to give access to all the professionals and employer agencies and organisations to our university intranet. Neither did we have an internal programme that we could open up as a network that would allow us to upload information and resources as well as having a discussion forum, chat wall and online training/workshop booking facility. We therefore had to look to outside organisations from whom we could buy a programme. UOS already used a Media Corporation to set up an international network for our students in the UK as well as students and staff at other universities worldwide to develop a shared understanding of the importance of international social work. We therefore approached the Media Corporation again as the platform for PENSW.

Ning Media provided a platform with easy to use tools that allowed us to build PENSW for an annual cost of £216.00. This has proved to be incredibly cost effective with the network cutting down the amount of administrative time used to communicate and connect with the vast array of professionals and placement providers by more than 80%. With everything that placement providers, tutors and supervisors need uploaded onto the network, telephone, email and face to face communications and meetings have been greatly reduced. Although UOS has found the network to be incredibly economical and will continue to fund our main employer agencies have also been agreeable to funding the resource if this became necessary in the future, valuing the effectiveness of the network.

We dedicated a social work administrator to work with the IT department initially alongside a senior lecturer in the social work team who provides training and support for supervisors of social work students. The tools provided to build the network were incredibly easy to use with the administrator being able to set up the network in a matter of hours with just a few brief meetings with the IT department. The administrator now takes the lead in updating and uploading resources onto the network as part of her role. Members are able to join the network by clicking on a link that is forwarded by the administrator and adding a few basic details at which point access is instant, free and will remain current for as long as they remain registered on the system. This allows the administrator to ensure that members added to the network are involved in providing social work placements and/or supervising social work students. The system was purposely set up with a registration process for access to ensure that members using it were involved with UOS, and to ensure it remained a site that was not open to students, a confidentiality statement is posted on the home page to ensure that members do not identify students and placements specifically when using the chat wall facility.

Figure 1: Provides a snapshot of the home page of PENSW, it provides a welcome address detailing the purpose of the network and contact details. There are also quick links to current training workshops that allow members to book onto in a matter of seconds; this information is fed through to the administrator, who can keep a register of attendees allowing us to forward plan workshops.

**Figure 1: Practice Education Network for Social Work – Homepage**



**Contents of the Site**

The tabs at the top of the home page provide links to resources that include training

exercises that can be used in supervision including guidance on setting up learning agreements, supervision, managing boundaries and writing reports. Training workshop material is also provided here for members that were unable to attend events that cover a variety of key subject areas, examples include theory to practice, values and ethics, anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice, working with service users, law and policy. Here members can also access electronic copies of placement documentation. There are also numerous research articles and useful links. The frequently asked questions session allows members to find answers to questions relating to placement process and procedure, which has significantly cut down on the need to contact the university for information.

The discussion forum and chat wall provide a networking space to debate current issues and share information and the notice board can be used by any members wishing to circulate information from their organisation. Equally on the home page events can be published. Currently the university is advertising their annual Social Work Practice Education conference that is open for direct booking. Both the look of and the content of the site can be set up in a variety of different ways to meet the needs of the member group.

**Methodology and Evaluation**

The aim of this project was to examine and evaluate the use and purpose of the Practice Education Network for Social Work (PENSW) with a clear purpose of identifying the range of participants (members) in relation to professional status, age and gender who access and

make use of PENSW, to identify how members make use of the network to establish key areas that work well, to consider areas for future development, to assess the overall usefulness of PENSW in relation to how it can be expanded and to ensure the continuation of future funding. Ethics approval was granted through the UOS Ethics Committee.

A survey was carried out using an online questionnaire posted via the PENSW network to all160 members active on the site at the time of posting. This method of data collection was chosen in order to reach as large a population as possible in the most cost effective way (Lune, Pumar and Koppel 2010). The questionnaire aimed to gather demographic quantitative data as well as statement/question scoring through the use of a Likert Scale that allowed participants to rate from 1 (strongly disagree with the statement) up to 5 (strongly agree with the statement). Further questions were added that asked participants to provide further comments on their use of PENSW and to suggest areas for development, thus providing some useful qualitative data. Participants were provided with an information/consent document prior to completing the questionnaire. In line with confidentiality, the questionnaires were not coded and did not require participants to provide their name or contact details. The questionnaires were returned electronically to the social work administrator who operates PENSW via the network, allowing the administrator to collate and process the data before sending this for analysis. 48 responses were received during the 6 week time-scale that the questionnaire was live on the network. Although we hoped to receive around a 50% response rate and only achieved around 30%, the questionnaire was active during the very busy mid-way social work placement process and shortly after the Christmas period which may have contributed to the lower response rate. The responses gathered have however provided a tremendous amount of useful information allowing for a successful evaluation.

**Results**

Figure 2 shows the age and gender of participants spanning a varied age range and with 81% being female and 19% male which fits with the imbalance of gender generally across the social work and social care sector (Galley, D and Parrish, M (2014). Figure 3 shows that the majority of participants were practice educators followed by, in much lower numbers, tutors, on-site supervisors and placement managers. The split between those who worked in the private voluntary/independent sector and those from the statutory sector was almost an even split, reflecting the vast array of placements and professionals who work within both domains. This highlights the reliance on having placement experiences from all sectors despite the continual push from Government across many years to increase statutory placement experience (Narey 2014). Given the breadth of such opportunities students can gain confidence in being able to apply for both statutory and non-statutory roles (Boafor, 2014).

**Figure 2: Age and Gender of Participants**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Number of responses** | **Column Labels** |  |  |  |  |  |
| **Row Labels** | **26-39** | **40-54** | **55-64** | **65+** | **Grand Total** | **%** |
| Female | 5 | 22 | 7 | 1 | 35 | 81 |
| Male | 1 | 4 | 2 | 1 | 8 | 19 |
| **Grand Total** | **6** | **26** | **9** | **2** | **43** | 100 |
| % | 14 | 60 | 21 | 5 | 100 |  |

**Figure 3: Professional Status of Participants**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Row Labels** | **Number of responses** | **%** |
| Practice Educator | 30 | 70 |
| On-Site Supervisor | 4 | 9 |
| Placement Provider Manager | 3 | 7 |
| Tutor | 6 | 14 |
| **Grand Total** | **43** | 100 |

98% of participants agreed to strongly agree that PENSW was a useful and valuable site promoting networking and providing information and resources and that the registration process and gaining access were straightforward. 95% strongly agreed that the resources available were useful for supervision and that the training workshops were useful for continuing professional development alongside the workshop booking system being easy to use. There was a drop down to 78% strongly agreeing that the Frequency Asked Questions section was helpful and access to electronic copies of UOS placement documentation. Looking in more detail at this, it would seem that further questions need to be added to the Question and Answer section and that electronic handbooks need to be provided as word documents as well as PDF files as not everyone could open the PDF files. 93% agreed that PENSW has the potential to promote discussions around key topics and sharing best practice, and all participants with the vast majority strongly agreeing, stating that all university social work programmes should provide an online resource like PENSW. It is important to remember in relation to this last point that many practice educators and placement providers work with students from several university social work programmes that will all have different processes and requirements and they will therefore make comparisons.

We asked participants to tell us what they thought is the best thing about PENSW. Quotations included;

“*I have used all areas of PENSW and it is a fine and invaluable resource, particularly being able to gain access to electronic documents, booking onto training and using the resources/research*”

“*It really allows me to link with other practice educators and professionals and to keep in touch with the UOS programme….. ease of use…….website easy to navigate…Open 24 hours 7 days a week…….Having a resource at your fingertips that is open all hours…..As a new practice educator it has given me confidence in my role through its high quality, broad ranging resou*rces”

“*The workshops are excellent and you can access all the workshop content”*

*“It provides the opportunity to network and share resource*s”

These quotations demonstrate the need for supervisors to have easy access to information and resources and to feel connected to the university which is particularly important for independent practice educators who as noted earlier, are not usually located within an organisation that can provide training and support. Equally we need to be mindful that not all on-site supervisors have a background in social work practice so access to the network with all its information and other supervisors can go some way to providing them with the guidance and support that they need.

Other participants stated;

“*To be honest I am still working my around this resource and cannot say what is the best thing about it other than it does now exist”*

*“Not having had this as an option for so long I am presently aiming to bring this resource forward into my everyday conscious when looking for new and different resources rather than revert to my lever arch file of resources. “I have not really used it yet*”

The above quotations give an indication of why some of the percentage scores fell below a 100% and are largely linked to new members not having yet had time to make use of the resource. The issue of time limitations are well recognised within social work practice, social work practice educators may find they still have to manage a full case-load at the same time as supervising a student with limited time and space and nurture and support from their employers. Jasper (2014) refers to the educational task of the practice educator as the invisible ‘art and heart’ of placements, that quite often goes unacknowledged. We do however need to acknowledge the central role that supervisors play in the training of future social workers and with time seemingly continuing to be a problem the provision of online resources that can be accessed quickly and efficiently goes some way to providing information, support and resources as and when needed.

Others commented on the usefulness of having a virtual forum to communicate with and share resources with other supervisors as well as finding it helpful to find other supervisors who are geographically located within easy reach of each other. Equally one participant pointed out that the virtual function needs to be used more. This supports the incredibly isolating role that can be felt by supervisors (Plenty and Gower 2013) and their subsequent need to be able to communicate even if in a virtual space with others and indeed to use the member information to find other local supervisors with whom it may be possible to meet up. This is, however, an area of the network that is still in its early stages in terms of really taking off, as noted in the comment above. It has had a tendency to develop in ‘fits and starts’ around specific areas rather than a more continuous dialogue emerging. This can partly be attributed to it being a fairly new site, that has steadily grown in numbers, and it is hoped with the membership of the site having now grown quite considerably since its launch and with members becoming more familiar with the site that this will continue to develop as we move into the next academic year and have new cohorts of social work students starting out on placement.

We asked participants if they would find useful the addition on PENSW of bite-sized podcasts around various aspects of placement, such as setting up learning agreements, managing supervision, managing boundaries, failing and marginalised students, and making use of teaching and learning exercises. Apart from one or two less enthusiastic responses from experienced practice educators that did not think they would make use of such a resource, the responses were incredibly positive.

“*Excellent especially for new practice educators as well as refreshers for more experienced practice educators, especially when you sometimes have break in-between students”*

We also asked participants how PENSW could be further developed. There were many responses that referred to continuing to add more resources and links to research. A useful comment was made about receiving an email alert when something new had been added. There were also further comments on the need to promote the site more so that the discussion forum and chat wall was more consistent. This was also linked to a participant stating;

“*Perhaps a regular monthly or bi-monthly virtual peer group session on a topic would help increase Continued Professional Development options for those that cannot take the time/ or cannot justify the travel time to come to UOS. Perhaps an hourly webinar would also be useful*”.

This would certainly be an avenue worth exploring as supervisors often request the need to have regular group supervision or peer review and although attempts have been made to try and set this up at UOS after training workshops it has never really taken off to the extent we would have hoped for (Plenty and Gower, 2013). This is where the virtual nature of Ning Web platforms works well within this context in terms of providing an opportunity for supervisors to come together across a wide locality.

One participant suggested opening up the site to other regions to stimulate further discussion and debate. It is important to state that the site is open to all agencies and professionals working with UOS students that span the counties of Suffolk, Essex, Norfolk and parts of London.

We left space at the end of the questionnaire for participants to provide any other comments. Apart from one response that referred to needing a session on how to use the site due to limitations in IT skills, (which was provided on several occasions but would not have reached everyone accessing the site if they were not present during the demonstrations) the responses were very pleasing;

“*The network is a brilliant idea it really helps me feel connected with the university and other supervisors as the role can feel isolating, its networking capacity is great. I wish other universities I work with had an information portal like this one”.*

*“As a tutor I have been really proud to recommend PENSW to those who haven’t already found it and to hear positive comments from practice educators already using it”*

It is clear that the vast majority of participants really value and make use of PENSW and we remain aware of the need to keep promoting the site. As noted previously, new members join the site on a weekly basis which can be linked to some of the comments that referred to passing on knowledge of the site by word of mouth. When PENSW went ‘live’, UOS did email all of its placement and supervisor contacts, details were also placed in placement handbooks and tutors were given flyers to give out at learning agreement meetings. We anticipate that there are still around another 100 or more potential members that could make use of the site and that new agencies and professionals will become involved with the social work programme each year, so promotion of the site will be an ongoing process.

**Conclusion**

With information technology and the use of the internet set to continue to develop and dominate the way we communicate and access information we have no alternative but to embrace its presence and continue to find innovative ways of using it to develop teaching and learning and training and support on social work programmes as well as in the field. It is clear that PENSW has proved itself to be an invaluable resource for the vase majority of those who make use of it. The evaluation, although largely positive, has also as was hoped, provided feedback on how to further develop and continually improve the site so it remains fit for purpose. Ultimately, it has proven itself to be an incredibly efficient and cost effective resource that is capable of reaching all those professionals and organisations involved in social work practice placements. Future plans include developing bite-sized training podcasts and increasing the use of the discussion forum and chat room facilities

This kind of network can also be set up to support other programmes that work with a variety of professionals and organisations as a result of students needing to undertake field placements, examples include nursing, teacher training and public sector programmes and business studies. Ultimately it is hoped at the very least, that this evaluative research and guidance on setting up a network will encourage more HEI’s running social work training programmes to work with their partner agencies to develop similar localised networks.

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