



Executive summary: Evidence scope regarding the use of practice observation methods as part of the assessment of social work practice

The scope

This evidence scope, a collaborative effort by Sussex University and Research in Practice, was undertaken to support the thinking of colleagues within Department for Education, KPMG and their consortium partners in developing an accreditation framework for children's social work.

It is not a systematic review. It is a rapid scope of the research relating to practice observation methods, in social work and also in other relevant professions.

This scope seeks to answer the following overarching question:

What do we know about the use and efficacy of practice observation as a method of assessing professional capability in social work and other professional settings, both at qualifying level and beyond?

The review is structured around seven key questions, devised by the commissioner, and outlined below. It draws on knowledge from the following sources:

- Literature searches of the role of observation in social work and related professional domains.
- Focus groups: Local Authority practitioners (incl. ASYEs), practice educators, managers, workforce development; HEI Practice Learning colleagues; social work doctoral students and researchers.
- Academic colleagues with practice and research expertise in the field.
- Academic colleagues utilising direct observation as an assessment method.
- Social work students' perspectives on participating in an Objective Structured Clinical Exam (OSCE) assessment.
- Practice colleagues across the sector that are using innovative approaches to observation for the assessment of professional competence.



Context

The Chief Social Worker for Children and Families has introduced Knowledge and Skills Statements for the tripartite practice-based career pathway – Approved Children and Families Practitioner, Practice Supervisor and Practice Leader. This relatively new initiative aims to assess and accredit the capability of the professional workforce across the career continuum; it has prompted significant policy-led activity around how the capability of practitioners and managers across the career trajectory can be assessed.

The Department for Education and the Chief Social Worker for Children and Families have commissioned a consortium, led by KPMG to devise a 'digital solution' to assess professional capability. The digital solution will be comprised of a range of simulated practice scenarios and exercises with sophisticated response pathways to assess practitioners' knowledge and skills.

Why does practice observation matter?

Unlike other human services professions such as health clinicians in clinical settings or teachers in schools, a high percentage of social work practice happens 'invisibly', that is in the privacy of people's homes, and is statutory in nature.

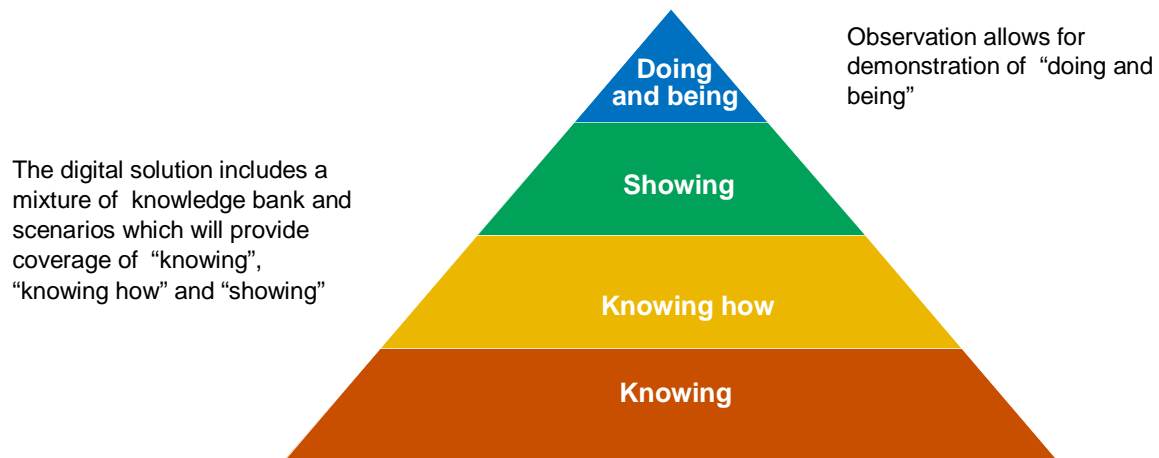
It is wise, therefore, to consider how reliably and comprehensively a single method assessment strategy can capture all aspects of professional social work practice and capability. Interest has been expressed in the extent to which the creation of a multi-faceted assessment strategy, that includes some form of observation of practice, would complement the digital solution.

In particular, consideration needs to be given to assessing the complex constituents of social work skills, referred to in the literature as 'meta-competences', that a digital approach on its own would be less able to capture.

The following diagram illustrates how a combination of assessment methods would allow for a more comprehensive exploration of professional competencies and capabilities:



Pyramid of professional capabilities and competencies
(adapted from Miller 1990)



Clarifying terms

Professional *competence* usually refers to a relatively narrow range of knowledge, skills and values that are evident in a particular professional context and which are relatively easily captured and measured. In contrast, professional *capability* is understood in a more holistic sense as a broader mix of knowledge, skills and values, some of which are quite subtle and difficult to capture in straightforward, visible ways. For the purposes of this evidence scope the term professional capability is used to emphasise the complexity and diversity of professional social work practice that will be assessed and accredited.

Observation of practice in the social work domain falls into three broad categories, which in some instances overlap:

- **Direct observation** (that is, observation of 'real' practice)
- **Simulated observation** (observation of a social worker responding to a simulated scenario)
- **Video/audio-recorded observation** (observing social workers' real practice and recording it, or using video/audio to simulate a scenario and observing the social worker approach within that scenario).

The term *reliability* refers to the ability of an observation assessment method to provide an accurate representation of what is involved in social work practice – how accurately it can replicate and capture/measure what social workers do in everyday encounters with individuals and families and in other professional contexts. To be deemed 'reliable' an assessment must endeavour to capture an accurate reflection of 'real' everyday practice.

The term *validity* refers to the extent to which the measures used to answer the question are the right measures and can provide a standardised response i.e. if

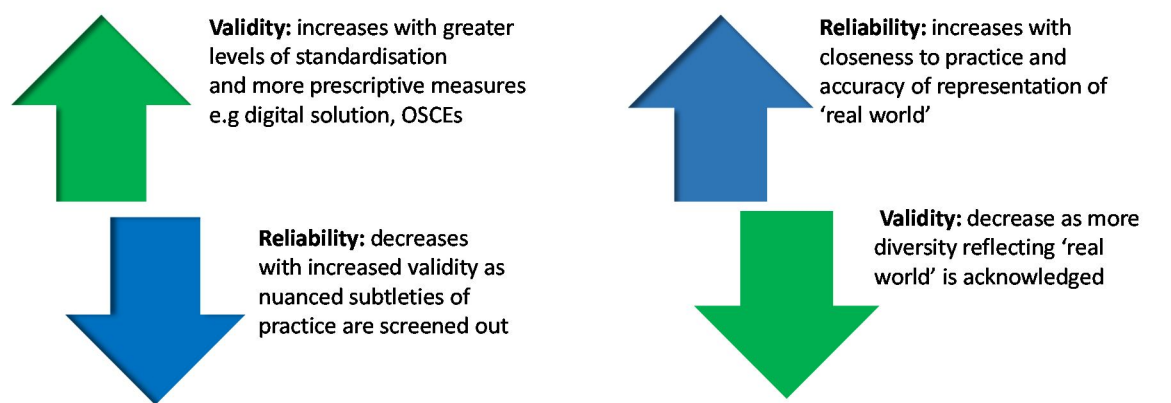


two different people observed the same piece of practice, how far they would replicate their findings. An approach rated highly in terms of its validity is associated with a high degree of standardisation and use of standardised measures, which can be repeatedly administered in a consistent manner.

The dilemma

Applying standardised measures for assessing capability means that validity increases, but at the expense of being able to capture the subtlety and nuance of complex practice scenarios which are considered more reliable. Conversely, more complex and subtle measurement criteria make the assessment method potentially more accurate and hence reliable, but simultaneously less valid.

The diagram below illustrates the complex inter-relationship:



Therefore, the digital solution can offer a higher degree of validity and practice observation, in particular direct observation, can offer a higher level of reliability; two combined methods enhance the credibility of assessment and accreditation strategy.

How is practice observation applied in social work?

Predominantly, direct practice observation is the most widely used observation assessment method in social work, with some exceptions (for example, using simulated scenarios to screen entrants to practice learning programmes). In this country, direct observation is required to assess capability at qualifying level, and in assessing those becoming practice educators, but is much less widely used for qualified practitioners. In Canada, the OSCE model has been adapted for social work contexts and uses quantitative standardised measurement inventories plus qualitative reflective accounts and dialogues focused on the ability to conceptualise practice. However, an important feature of the Canadian context for practice learning is that *it does not have a mandatory requirement to include direct observation of practice* at qualifying level as is the case in the UK. Consequently OSCEs are the closest that practice educators can get to 'real practice'.



Key messages:

- Direct observations of 'real practice' are a primary mechanism for assessing social work capability at qualifying level.
- Most assessment of the capability of *qualified practitioners* does not involve direct observation.
- OSCEs have potential for assessing practice capability but their use in social work requires more testing regarding their validity and reliability.
- Alternative observation approaches for assessment purposes are not widely used and as yet have not been reliably tested.
- The evidence for video/audio observation as a method for assessing professional capability is scant. Recording of direct practice is not an appropriate method for assessing certain significant aspects of practice and could raise serious ethical considerations, including issues around data protection and the potential for recordings to be used for other purposes, such as in court proceedings. Conversely, it may be more suited to assessment of Practice Supervisors particularly in supervision settings.

Observation methods as a predictor of actual performance

Research raises important questions regarding the predictive strength of any observation assessment method and emphasises the importance of supportive and development organisational contexts for maximising practitioner potential and for raising practice standards. Those working to test the evidence caution against the conflation of the reliability and validity of an assessment method with predictability of performance.

Key messages:

- Measuring the reliability and validity of the different methods of observation for assessing professional capability - direct observation, OSCEs or video/audio-recorded observations - is highly complex.
- Reliability and validity of observation methods offer no guarantee of predicting future professional capability.
- Whilst emergent research evidence suggests that simulated assessments of practice *appear to compare favourably* with assessment of real practice, this is unconfirmed.
- Validity and reliability issues impede the ability of observation measures to predict performance.
- The creation of standardised assessment and reflective recording templates is essential for the reliability and validity of any observation method.
- The reliability and validity of the different observation methods varies depending on whether it is used for summative or formative assessment purposes.



What can social work learn from the practice observation methods of other related professions?

It is crucial to reiterate the distinctiveness of social work compared with other disciplinary practice. There are few comparable activities in social work that need to be applied to the same standard consistently and have scientific evidence underpinning them such as the use of medication, injections, blood pressure taking etc. Furthermore, social work evidence is predominantly qualitative in nature. Caution is therefore needed before 'importing' OSCEs to social work assessment in the UK before they have been tested more widely.

Direct observation of classroom teaching has a long history in education. The distinctive features of practice in educational settings as opposed to social work settings impede the direct transferability of assessment approaches across the two professional domains. However there may well be useful learning from the way that education professionals routinely observe each other and operate in a culture where direct observation is usual.

In other professions, the use of experiential learning is rated highly and tools such as role play, simulated and non-simulated service users/clients/patients, vignettes and video recording are all used as feedback tools – however, these observation methods are largely *formative and developmental*, whereas within the context of the accreditation and assessment observation will also, if not exclusively, be *summative and judgemental*.

Key messages:

- Comparing assessment strategies from other professional domains must be undertaken with caution given the distinctive nature of social work practice.
- Medicine and nursing rely on OSCEs as the primary tool for assessing initial and on-going professional capability, with some OSCE derivative methods also used (eg in transferring to UK having trained and qualified overseas).
- Education involves multiple observations by practice educators/ assessors/peers and argues for triangulated observation methods which include immediate, positive, corrective and specific feedback in order to maximise credibility and effectiveness of the observation method.
- Psychotherapy and counselling include some evidence of using video/ audio-recording of practice, for developmental purposes.
- Allied Health (occupational therapists, physiotherapists etc) suggest direct observation is preferable and emphasise the importance of allowing time for changes to happen.
- The challenge of developing assessment methods and tools that are both valid and reliable is an issue across *all* the professional domains.



- Evidence to suggest that some independence of the practice educator/assessor enhances the validity of the assessment process but equally an on-going educator-student/practice assessor-practitioner relationship can add continuity and potentially greater reliability over time.
- Complex inter-relationship between methods used for formative and summative assessments and ways to maximise their accuracy.
- The number of observations assessed and the quality/speed of feedback for improvements in practice are an indicator of assessment impact.
- It is important that any observation method includes a reflective dialogical component.
- Learners across professional disciplines acquire and maintain new behaviours when they receive feedback that is immediate, positive, corrective and specific.

Incorporating practice observation most effectively alongside a digital test

The evidence of efficacy for direct observation and OSCEs is limited and both have incomplete research evidence bases. The digital test offers higher validity, and has the potential for fairly sophisticated simulation. The diversity and complexity of social work practice means the need to achieve reliability in assessing capabilities is high. On balance, taking into account these factors, direct observation offers the most additional value as an observation method to accompany the digital test.

Key messages:

- Research suggests that the assessment of professional capability requires multi-faceted assessment strategies that triangulate different sources of assessment data.
- Social work is a complex and challenging profession that involves a depth and breadth of knowledge and skills that need to be assessed using more than one method for accuracy and credibility.
- Social workers need to be differentially assessed on what they *know* in terms of knowledge, what they can *show* in terms of applying their knowledge and what they actually *do* in practice.
- Digital approaches and OSCEs are more suited to assessing professional knowledge.
- Direct observation is the optimal method for assessing professional skills as it is the method closest to 'real practice'.
- Given the digital solution involves practitioners engaging with simulated materials it seems appropriate that the observation component of the assessment strategy provides opportunities to assess practitioners in real life practice and not by other simulated (albeit not digital) approaches e.g. OSCEs.



How much observation is needed to ensure a credible assessment?

The limited evidence base (from all professional contexts) concerning the reliability and validity of different observation methods indicates that more observations per practitioner may help to enhance the credibility of any one method. The number of observations assessed and quality/speed of feedback for improvements in practice are significant indicators of the assessment method's impact and credibility.

This then challenges the idea that 'the tougher the test the more accurate the result.' Rather it suggests that the best assessment and accreditation systems should *complement* and *be complemented by* workplace practices, i.e. observation should be part of everyday practice and not an unfamiliar experience. Such systems, then, whilst assessing capability, will provide an opportunity for those being assessed to demonstrate practice that most accurately reflects their professional capability and are more likely to be positively experienced as both judging and developmental.

Key messages:

- Most of the existing measures of professional capability are focussed on social work students and frontline practitioners, with little evidence of use of observation with the Practice Supervisor level and non-existent evidence base for use with the Practice Leader level.
- The Knowledge and Skills Statements do not contain any information to suggest that one specific observation method is more appropriate for a particular career level, and no evidence exists to indicate how frequently observations should be taken with Practice Supervisors or Practice Leaders.
- The importance of the quality of practice assessor is equally applicable across all three career levels, but is more complex at the Practice Leader level.
- To maximise the credibility and minimise the disruption of the digital and observational assessment methods in practice, they need to be embedded in everyday practice across the organisational hierarchy.
- Research indicates that in formative contexts with frontline practitioners more observations increase their reliability and credibility.
- No evidence exists to indicate how frequently observations should be taken when used as summative assessment artefact.
- The number and frequency of observations depends on the summative-formative balance of the observation task.



Issues for wholesale implementation

Numerous permutations of using different methods alongside the digital solution exist but there is no evidence to say which is best, other than that a combination of methods will increase both the validity and reliability of all the different methods employed. The more methods used, however, will have significant implications for the overall costs incurred and logistical complexities of implementing and delivering the assessment strategy.

The following are important components of any model to maximise its credibility:

- **Context:** implications for the design and number of practice scenarios associated with the diversity of social work settings and the range of practice approaches requiring different knowledge and skills
- **Specificity:** high level of specificity with regard to the measurement criteria required in order to accurately capture subtlety of all aspects of social workers' knowledge and skills, including the 'meta-competencies'
- **Skill definition:** require definitions and methods that capture the holistic nature of practice; what type of knowledge is used and how it is used (internal cognitive and emotional processes that contribute to decision making and performance; 'meta-competencies').

Key messages:

- Without full details of the variables informing the assessment strategy, for example how the assessment thresholds and pathways will be configured and their implications for the number of observations that are being considered, any detailed financial recommendations cannot be calculated, but modelling based on unit cost can be undertaken.
- Any proposals must ensure that appropriate quality assurance mechanisms are in place to safeguard the practice educator/assessor role and performance.
- Potential benefits of summative assessment methods can be enhanced by embedding similar assessment methods in a formative capacity into organisational contexts.
- Important for cost effectiveness purposes and workforce demands to streamline proposals with existing processes e.g. the HCPC requirements/timeframes for re-registration.



Summary and conclusion

The design of an observation strategy for social work must reconcile the competing need for it to be both developmental and judgemental in order for the chosen assessment strategy to be effective. The role and skills of the practice educator/assessor are pivotal to effective assessment.

To maximise the reliability and credibility of summative observation assessment strategies they need to be undertaken in ways which are experienced as developmental, constructive and formative – and to be embedded in the culture of the profession. To maximise validity, tools should be developed that are standardised but avoid prescription.

Service users are an integral component of formative assessment strategies, providing feedback on their experience and views of practice. Their expertise could add value to summative assessment strategies.

Key messages:

- Assessment and accreditation systems of professional capability in social work cannot be scientifically evidence-based but can be evidence-informed.
- Validity vs reliability: a digital solution can offer a higher degree of validity, and practice observation can offer a higher level of reliability; incorporating the two assessment methods into an assessment and accreditation system will enhance its credibility.
- On balance, in this context, direct observation is likely to offer most additional value to the digital test.
- Assessment and accreditation systems involving practice observation must be embedded in wider organisational cultures of informal observation in everyday practices across the professional hierarchy.
- It is important to attend to the summative and formative dimensions in the design of the assessment and accreditation system to maximise its positive impact on practice quality standards and workforce morale.
- Quality of assessors is a key issue for all three methods and career levels.
- Careful consideration needs to be paid to the frequency and number of observations.
- Determining the capability thresholds for observation and the digital test has serious implications for how the assessment strategy works in practice and for the stability as well as the quality of the workforce.
- Reflective components and manner in which they are conducted are critical constituents of effective observation process.