



Assessment methods in youth work education and their impact on students in placement

Mark McFeeters, Ulster University

ABSTRACT

This action research project explores the perceptions of students and placement agencies regarding the suitability and relevance of current assessment methods used in community youth work placements. In the context of professional youth work education, where academic learning is tested in complex, real-world environments, ensuring alignment between assessment strategies and workplace expectations is crucial. In such settings, assessment plays a critical role in shaping learning, signalling professional expectations, and evidencing competence. However, concerns persist regarding how effectively placement assessment captures students' practice-based learning and developmental progression, and how well it aligns with the expectations of placement agencies. Using a qualitative action research approach, data were generated through semi-structured interviews with placement supervisors and focus groups with students. The study sought to understand stakeholder perspectives and identify opportunities for enhancement within an existing assessment framework. The findings highlight strong support for reflective and dialogical assessment approaches, particularly the use of structured critical questions and tripartite review processes. However, participants identified tensions relating to the authenticity of some assessment tasks, limited opportunities for observed practice, insufficient developmental differentiation across academic levels, and the marginalisation of practice teachers' voices within assessment decision-making. Concerns were also raised about assessment equity, particularly for part-time and neurodiverse students. This study therefore, contributes to wider conversations in higher education about improving work-based learning by offering a model of collaborative, critically engaged assessment that prepares students not only for academic success, but for effective, ethical, and sustainable youth work practice and highlights the potential for co-produced, context-sensitive assessment strategies to bridge the gap between the academia and youth work practice.

Keywords: Practice learning, placement, action research, youth work, work-based learning, assessment

Context

Practice placements are a defining feature of professional youth work education, offering students a critical space in which academic learning is tested, challenged, and developed through engagement with complex, real-world practice contexts. Within these settings, assessment functions not only as a mechanism for academic judgement, but also as a key driver of learning, professional identity formation, and readiness for professional practice. Despite the centrality of placement assessment within youth work programmes, questions persist regarding how effectively current assessment frameworks capture the complexity and developmental nature of practice-based learning. Concerns have been raised about the extent to which assessment tasks reflect the realities of contemporary youth work practice, support progression across academic levels, and provide equitable opportunities for diverse learners to demonstrate competence.

There is also increasing recognition that placement supervisors play a critical role in student learning, yet their professional judgement is often marginalised within formal assessment processes.

This study responds to these challenges by examining the suitability and relevance of assessment methods used within community youth work placements, with a particular focus on the experiences of students and supervisors regarding fairness, relevance, and alignment with professional practice demands. The study was informed by an initial systematic scoping of literature, undertaken to situate the research problem within existing debates and to identify areas requiring further investigation. While White (2017) suggests that research questions may emerge inductively through engagement with literature, Thomas (2017) argues that questions should be articulated early to guide a purposeful review and avoid uncritical accumulation of sources. Adopting a pragmatic position between these perspectives, the scoping process was used both to refine the research focus and to ensure alignment with established scholarship. This approach highlighted key themes relevant to placement assessment, including the value of authentic and competency-based assessment, the role of formative feedback in professional learning, and the importance of experiential and reflective pedagogies. Notably, gaps were identified in relation to the limited presence of student and placement supervisor voices, and the relative lack of empirical research examining how assessment frameworks operate in practice.

Assessment within youth work placements occupies a particularly complex space, where theoretical knowledge, professional values, and relational practice are enacted within unpredictable community settings. When assessment frameworks fail to reflect workplace realities or to recognise students' evolving capacities, their effectiveness as developmental tools is diminished. This tension reflects long-standing debates within youth work education concerning the relationship between academic and practice-based paradigms (Ord, 2016; de St Croix, 2017). Indeed, as Cooper (2024) observes, youth work education continues to negotiate questions of professional formation, including the role of pracademic pedagogies, the recognition of experiential learning, and the integration of competency-based and academic assessment approaches.

In this context, this study seeks to contribute to applied academic practice by exploring how placement assessment might more fully reflect the distinctive value base of youth work, including its commitment to informal education, participation, anti-oppressive practice, and critical reflection. The research is aligned with the National Occupational Standards for Youth Work (National Youth Agency, 2020) and the QAA Benchmark Statement for Youth and Community Work (QAA, 2019) and aims to inform assessment design that is context-sensitive, socially just, and pedagogically robust. The paper begins with a review of literature relating to assessment in work-based learning and youth work education, with particular attention to authenticity, progression, and equity. It then outlines the action research methodology employed in the study, followed by a thematic presentation of findings drawn from student focus groups and placement supervisor interviews. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of these findings for academic practice.

Rationale

This study originated from a series of reflective observations and conversations with students, placement supervisors, and academic colleagues. Emerging patterns and concerns about the equity, coherence, and

developmental relevance of placement assessment prompted a formal inquiry. The project provided an opportunity to explore these concerns systematically through an action research methodology. Using qualitative methods, including interviews and focus groups, the research captured the insights of key stakeholders. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019) was then employed to uncover both the challenges and strengths within current practices, generating a holistic view of assessment as experienced by those most affected by it. Rather than responding to a single, defined problem, this inquiry fostered a process of critical reflection and developmental learning. It served as a vehicle to explore and enhance the placement model, contributing to a broader agenda of curriculum improvement and pedagogy within higher education. In doing so, the research supports the alignment of assessment strategies with student learning trajectories, placement supervisor engagement, institutional frameworks, and the evolving requirements of professionally endorsed programmes. It reaffirms the value of practitioner-led inquiry in surfacing complex, everyday dynamics in youth work education—reflecting Cooper’s (2024) call for nuanced and participatory approaches to professional learning design.

This study sought to address the extent to which existing placement assessment frameworks captured and supported students’ professional development and learning. A persistent lack of clarity regarding the relationship between assessment criteria, developmental stages, and the expectations of placement agencies presented barriers to effective learning and validation. The research therefore aimed to investigate the experiences of both students and supervisors, with a view to identifying enhancements that would ensure stronger alignment between academic assessment, professional endorsement, and sectoral requirements. The research also stimulates wider conversations about how placement assessment could be made more inclusive, developmental, and aligned with contemporary youth work practice. These discussions have the potential to inform current programme enhancement efforts, which aim to centre principles of equity, critical reflection, and learner empowerment. The intervention is underpinned by a robust body of literature that informed the analysis and recommendations. Research on authentic assessment shaped the study’s emphasis on aligning assessment tasks with real-world youth work contexts (Gulikers et al., 2004). The work of Carless and Boud (2018) on assessment literacy informed recommendations around guidance, co-construction of rubrics, and shared understanding of expectations among students, educators, and workplace mentors. The study also draws on inclusive assessment frameworks (Hockings et al, 2012) to evaluate how current processes serve diverse learners and uphold youth work’s values of access, inclusion, and participation. Ultimately, the findings offer a timely and practical contribution to the enhancement of youth work education within higher education, aiming to balance academic demands with the values, competencies, and relational practices embedded within the profession.

Scoping review of literature: Assessment in work-based youth work education

Given the breadth and conceptual complexity of assessment within placement-based youth work education, a scoping review was adopted as the most appropriate approach to reviewing the literature. Scoping reviews are particularly suited to areas where evidence is heterogeneous, dispersed across academic, professional, and policy sources, and where the purpose is not to determine effectiveness but to map key concepts, debates, and gaps (Arksey & O’Malley, 2005; Levac et al., 2010). In contrast to systematic reviews, which prioritise depth, methodological appraisal, and narrowly defined research questions, this study required a flexible approach capable of capturing the diverse forms of knowledge that shape youth work pedagogy and assessment practice. The review was guided by two overarching questions: first, how

assessment of student placements in youth work is conceptualised and enacted; and second, what evidence exists regarding stakeholder perceptions and identified best practices in placement-based assessment. These questions necessitated engagement not only with empirical research but also with professional standards, policy frameworks, and sector guidance, reflecting the practice-oriented nature of youth work as a professionally endorsed discipline.

The literature search combined structured database searching with snowball sampling (citation chaining) to ensure both breadth and relevance. Initial searches were conducted using key terms, combined through Boolean operators to refine results. This strategy was intentionally inclusive, recognising that relevant literature often spans education, social work, informal learning, and professional practice domains. Snowball sampling was subsequently employed to identify influential texts, policy documents, and sector reports that were not consistently indexed within academic databases but were central to shaping practice and assessment discourse.

Inclusion criteria prioritised sources published within the past 10–15 years to ensure contemporary relevance, while allowing for the inclusion of seminal theoretical works that continue to inform youth work pedagogy. Materials were selected based on relevance rather than methodological hierarchy, reflecting the scoping review's emphasis on mapping the field rather than evaluating evidence quality. As such, the review incorporated peer-reviewed research, theoretical literature, professional standards, and grey literature. Key sources included sector-defining frameworks such as the QAA Subject Benchmark Statement for Youth Work (QAA, 2019), QAA guidance on assessment and work-based learning, National Occupational Standards, Jisc principles on assessment and inclusion, and professional endorsement requirements. These were complemented by scholarly contributions on practice learning and youth work pedagogy, including work on differentiated teaching and learning within youth work education. Rather than producing a cumulative synthesis, the review sought to illuminate patterns, tensions, and absences in the literature, particularly in relation to how assessment practices align with the relational, situated, and dialogical nature of youth work learning. This scoping approach therefore provided a robust conceptual foundation for the empirical component of the study and informed the interpretation of findings presented in subsequent sections.

Competency, progression and professional development

A central concern within placement assessment literature is how competence and progression are conceptualised and assessed over time. Competency-based assessments focus on evaluating specific skills and behaviours required in professional contexts. In placement settings, these assessments are designed to measure student competence in areas such as communication, ethical decision-making, and professional conduct (Barrie, 2007). Structured frameworks, such as the Competency-Based Assessment (CBA) model, offer clear criteria for assessing competencies at various levels.

Professional education frameworks, including the QAA Benchmark Statement for Youth and Community Work (QAA, 2019) and the National Occupational Standards for Youth Work (National Youth Agency, 2020), emphasise the development of knowledge, skills, and values aligned with professional practice. These competency frameworks provide important reference points for assessment design, offering clarity and consistency across programmes. At the same time, scholars caution against reductive interpretations of competency that prioritise technical performance over critical reflection, ethical judgement, and creativity (Banks, 2010; Ord, 2016). In youth work education, where professional identity formation is ongoing and

relational, assessment frameworks must accommodate ambiguity, growth, and context-specific learning. Constructive alignment theory underscores the importance of coherence between learning outcomes, assessment tasks, and criteria, with increasing levels of complexity and autonomy as students' progress (Biggs & Tang, 2015). Research suggests that when placement assessment structures remain static across academic levels, students may struggle to recognise their own development or to understand shifting expectations (Carless & Boud, 2018). Conversely, assessment approaches that are explicitly developmental can support both academic skills attainment and professional learning, particularly when expectations are clearly linked to practice contexts.

Feedback, assessment literacy and dialogic practice

The literature consistently highlights formative feedback as a critical component of learning in placement contexts. Formative assessments provide ongoing feedback during the placement period, helping students identify areas for improvement and adjust their learning strategies. Summative assessments, such as final reports or supervisor evaluations, measure overall performance and learning outcomes. Research shows that formative assessments are particularly effective in work-based learning as they support continuous learning and skill development (Knight & Yorke, 2003).

Feedback is a critical component of assessment in placement modules. Studies highlight the importance of timely, specific, and constructive feedback in enhancing student learning and development (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Reflection, often facilitated through reflective journals or debriefing sessions, helps students integrate feedback and connect their experiences to theoretical concepts (Boud et al., 1985). Dialogic approaches to feedback—characterised by ongoing conversation, reflection, and shared understanding—are particularly valued in professional education (Boud & Molloy, 2012). Within youth work placements, feedback often occurs through supervision, mentoring, and review meetings, blurring the boundaries between assessment and pedagogy. Carless and Boud's (2018) work on assessment literacy emphasises the importance of students, educators, and workplace mentors sharing an understanding of assessment purposes, criteria, and standards. Without such shared understanding, assessment risks becoming opaque or performative, rather than developmental. The literature suggests that greater transparency and co-construction of assessment expectations can enhance student agency and support more meaningful engagement with feedback processes.

Equity, inclusion and the recognition of practice knowledge

Concerns about equity and inclusion feature prominently in contemporary assessment debates. Research indicates that traditional assessment formats can advantage students with strong academic writing skills while disadvantaging those whose strengths lie in relational, practical, or experiential domains (Waterfield & West, 2006). In work-based learning, this raises fundamental questions about whose knowledge is recognised and how competence is evidenced. Inclusive assessment frameworks advocate for multiple modes of demonstrating learning, including observed practice, creative outputs, and supervisor feedback, to support diverse learners while maintaining academic standards (Hockings et al., 2012; CAST, 2024). Within youth work education, this aligns with longstanding critiques regarding the marginalisation of practice wisdom and the limited formal recognition of placement supervisors' professional judgement (de St Croix, 2017; Ord, 2016).

The literature further highlights challenges associated with collaborative assessment models, including inconsistencies across placement sites, institutional constraints, and concerns about reliability and accountability (Cooper & Ord, 2014; Trede & McEwen, 2012). Nevertheless, there is growing consensus that stronger partnership working between higher education providers and placement agencies can enhance assessment credibility, support professional learning, and better reflect the values underpinning youth work practice. Taken together, the literature highlights persistent challenges in designing assessment for work-based learning that is authentic, developmental, and equitable. While there is broad agreement on the value of reflective and practice-based assessment, tensions remain around alignment with workplace realities, progression across academic levels, and the recognition of practice educators' expertise. Notably, there is limited empirical research that foregrounds the perspectives of both students and placement supervisors in examining how assessment is experienced within youth work placements. This study responds to this gap by exploring stakeholder perceptions of placement assessment within a community youth work programme. By examining how assessment is understood and enacted by those directly involved in placement learning, the research seeks to inform the enhancement of assessment practices that are pedagogically robust, professionally credible, and aligned with the principles of applied academic practice.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative action research methodology (Norton, 2019), selected for its participatory, iterative approach to addressing real-world problems in applied educational contexts. Action research is particularly suited to youth work education, where collaboration between stakeholders—students, educators, and placement agencies—is essential for meaningful change. Its cyclical structure of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting allows assessment practices to be continuously evaluated and refined, ensuring that research contributes directly to practice improvement. Data was gathered through individual, semi-structured interviews with placement agencies. This was to understand agency perspectives on student readiness and the alignment of assessments with workplace expectations. Data was also gathered via focus groups with students to capture their perceptions of relevance, fairness, and areas for improvement in assessment methods. Finally, desk-based research allowed for the reviewing of current assessment frameworks, their intended objectives and subsequent alignment with institutional, sectoral and Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRB) standards.

A qualitative, interpretive approach was adopted to understand lived experiences from within the placement context (Flick, 2009; Hammersley, 2009). The study was grounded in a constructivist epistemology, recognising that meaning is co-constructed in specific social and professional contexts (Flick, 2009; Hammersley, 2009). In line with action research principles, the study supported reflective practitioner inquiry, seeking not to test a predefined intervention but to explore lived experience, surface underrepresented perspectives, and inform meaningful enhancement of assessment practices (Cooper, 2024). Three methods were employed to triangulate perspectives and data sources: semi-structured interviews with placement supervisors, focus groups with final-year students, and desk-based analysis of institutional assessment documentation. Together, these methods facilitated a holistic understanding of the alignment, or misalignment, between academic assessment and professional practice.

Reflexivity and positionality

As placement and module coordinator, the researcher adopted an *insider-practitioner* perspective, bringing both advantages and challenges to the study. Professional proximity provided rich contextual insight, credibility with participants, and a deep understanding of placement structures, student trajectories, and institutional processes. This insider knowledge enabled the development of meaningful questions and interpretation of data that was attuned to practical realities. At the same time, the dual role posed risks of bias, including the potential to unconsciously seek validation for existing structures or to over-empathise with familiar challenges. To address this, the researcher engaged in ongoing critical reflection, interrogating assumptions and interpretations continuously. Findings were discussed with colleagues, external examiners, and research supervisors, providing a form of analytic triangulation that tested interpretations against alternative perspectives. Additionally, triangulation across multiple data sources—including student focus groups, supervisor interviews, and document analysis—reinforced the credibility of findings. The action research framework supported this reflexivity by emphasising iterative cycles of inquiry and co-construction of knowledge, balancing the advantages of insider insight with disciplined reflective practice.

Participants and sampling

Participants were purposively selected to ensure that they had direct and sustained experience of placement learning and assessment, generating rich, information-driven insights (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Rea & Parker, 2005). Inclusion criteria guided participant selection:

- **Placement supervisors** had to have hosted at least one student on placement within the programme during the previous academic year.
- **Students** had to have recently completed, or were in the final stages of, their placement experience to ensure familiarity with assessment processes.

This process yielded two stakeholder groups: seven placement supervisors and ten final-year students from undergraduate and postgraduate youth work pathways. Purposive sampling ensured the participants were information-rich and contextually relevant, while maintaining some homogeneity to focus on shared experiences of placement assessment (Smith et al., 2009).

Methods of data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with placement supervisors, a format that allowed participants to elaborate on issues they deemed most significant while enabling the researcher to probe and clarify emerging ideas (Smith et al, 2009; Novick, 2008). Interviews lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and were audio-recorded with consent.

Focus groups were conducted with final-year students, a format that encouraged peer discussion and reflection, surfacing both shared concerns and differing perspectives, consistent with relational pedagogies in youth work (Cohen et al., 2011; Creswell, 2007). Sessions were guided by a semi-structured schedule but allowed participants to shape the conversation dynamically.

Analysis of data

Data from interviews, focus groups, and document analysis were examined using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019), which recognises the researcher's active role in interpreting meaning and promotes a reflective, iterative approach to data engagement. Analysis began with repeated reading of

transcripts to achieve immersion and capture subtle nuances in participant accounts. Relevant features of the data were identified and coded systematically in NVivo, and codes were iteratively grouped into broader themes that reflected recurring patterns across stakeholders. The analysis paid careful attention to convergences and divergences between student and supervisor perspectives, revealing tensions, alignments, and innovative practices within placement assessment. This interpretive process illuminated the interplay between formal assessment frameworks and lived placement realities, capturing both the intended purpose and practical impact of assessment. Reflexivity was maintained throughout, ensuring that the researcher's perspective informed rather than dominated the interpretation, resulting in a nuanced, contextually grounded understanding of assessment practices.

Ethical considerations

Ethical oversight and participant welfare were central to the study. Approval was obtained from the university Research Ethics Committee, and all participants received written information detailing the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. Informed consent was obtained in writing, and measures were taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity, including the use of pseudonyms and secure, password-protected storage of data. Attention was given to power dynamics between the researcher and student participants. Participation was explicitly decoupled from academic assessment outcomes, and interactions were conducted with sensitivity to potential authority imbalances. While risks were minimal, participants were informed of support services should distress arise during interviews or focus groups, and the researcher maintained a duty of care regarding disclosures of harm, abuse, or criminal activity. By integrating transparency, reflexivity, and sensitivity into ethical practice, the study safeguarded participant well-being while strengthening the credibility and integrity of the research process.

Findings

Dialogical learning sits at the heart of youth work pedagogy, foregrounding dialogue as a central educational practice rather than a supplementary technique. Indeed, Hammond and McArdle (2023) conceptualise youth work as a *pedagogy of informal education*, in which knowledge and meaning are co-constructed through conversation, critical questioning, and engagement with lived experience. Learning is therefore relational, emergent, and contextually grounded, challenging transmissive models of teaching and assessment. This pedagogical orientation aligns with assessment practices that are reflective, dialogical, and co-produced, including tripartite reviews, reflective portfolios, and negotiated learning goals, which recognise learners as active participants in the assessment process.

Drawing on Lave and Wenger's (1998) theory of situated learning, youth work pedagogy understands learning as embedded within *communities of practice*. Professional placements become critical pedagogical spaces where students learn through participation, observation, and relational engagement with young people, colleagues, and organisational cultures. From this perspective, learning cannot be fully captured through decontextualised or purely written forms of assessment. Instead, assessment practices must attend to learning as it unfolds in practice, incorporating supervisor feedback, structured observation, and engagement with authentic professional tasks. Indeed, as Bradley et al (2024: p8) argue "the pedagogy [of youth work] is grounded in transformative learning", where professional formation is a *journey*, rather than a destination.

Youth work education further emphasises the development of reflective practitioners who can connect theory and practice in ethically and politically informed ways. Influenced by Freire's (1970) notion of *praxis*, this pedagogical tradition values the dynamic integration of reflection and action as a means of fostering critical consciousness and social transformation. This conceptual framing provides an important context for interpreting the findings presented in the following section, particularly in relation to how students experience assessment, learning, and professional identity formation within placement-based settings.

Participants across both stakeholder groups demonstrated a strong shared commitment to meaningful, values-informed assessment and expressed a desire for assessment practices that more accurately reflect the pedagogical foundations of youth work. While the existing framework was broadly valued, particularly for its reflective orientation and use of dialogical review processes, participants identified several tensions relating to authenticity, progression, equity, and the recognition of practice-based expertise. The analysis is organised into four interrelated themes: assessment design and authenticity; developmental progression and scaffolding; equity, inclusion, and flexibility; and the role of placement supervisors as educators. These themes capture both areas of alignment between stakeholders and points of friction where assessment practices were experienced as misaligned with the realities of placement learning.

Theme 1: Assessment design and authenticity

Both students and placement supervisors expressed broad support for the current assessment framework, particularly the use of critical questions as a reflective structure. Participants described these questions as helpful in prompting students to articulate learning, connect theory to practice, and engage in structured dialogue during placement reviews. However, this support was consistently accompanied by calls for stronger alignment between assessment tasks and the lived realities of youth work practice. Supervisors questioned the extent to which some assessment tasks captured what they regarded as core youth work competencies. One supervisor commented: "Some of the tasks feel too theoretical — we need to see how students actually work in practice. I'd rather assess how they build relationships, manage conflict, or evaluate a piece of work they've led". Students echoed this view, suggesting that artefacts such as session plans, safeguarding documentation, evaluation tools, and reflective portfolios more accurately represented their day-to-day responsibilities than simulated or hypothetical tasks. While reflective writing was recognised as valuable, participants expressed concern that an over-reliance on written reflection risked privileging articulation over action.

Across both groups, there was a strong emphasis on dialogical assessment as a defining strength of the current model. The tripartite review process was widely viewed as a meaningful space for reflective conversation and shared sense-making. However, supervisors frequently reported feeling marginalised in final grading decisions, despite their sustained engagement with student practice. This created a perceived disconnect between those who observed practice most closely and those responsible for summative judgement. Students also noted that dialogical formats could unintentionally favour confident speakers, potentially disadvantaging quieter or neurodivergent learners. As a result, participants advocated for more inclusive, co-produced assessment models that retained dialogue while incorporating varied forms of evidence, including structured observation, oral assessment, and creative or practice-based outputs.

Theme 2: Developmental progression and scaffolding across levels

A second, strongly articulated theme concerned the developmental coherence of placement assessment across academic levels. While participants valued the consistency provided by critical questions, both students and supervisors described them as largely static across levels, limiting their capacity to reflect increasing professional complexity. Supervisors emphasised that expectations of student capability changed markedly as students progressed through the programme, yet assessment structures did not always make this progression explicit: “The critical questions are good, but they need to change across levels. What we expect at Level 4 should be about building confidence — by Level 6, we should be seeing leadership, partnerships, policy engagement.”

Students described their own development in similar terms, characterising progression as a movement from self-awareness and supported practice toward greater autonomy, integration of theory, and leadership. Several participants expressed frustration that assessment criteria did not sufficiently acknowledge this shift, making it difficult to demonstrate growth beyond improved articulation of reflection. This lack of explicit scaffolding was perceived as limiting the developmental function of assessment. Participants suggested that clearer differentiation of expectations, tasks, and criteria across levels would support more meaningful learning and provide greater clarity about what constituted progression within professional practice.

Theme 3: Equity, inclusion and flexibility in assessment

Concerns about equity and inclusivity were raised consistently, particularly in relation to assessment formats and placement structures. Students highlighted that assessment practices relying heavily on written or verbal fluency could disadvantage those whose strengths lay in relational, practical, or embodied aspects of youth work practice. One student noted: “Good talkers can get through the course easier. There needs to be an observed element so we can actually assess youth work skills — not just their ability to reflect on them.”

Participants across both groups advocated for assessment approaches that recognised diverse ways of demonstrating competence, including video reflection, supervisor feedback, creative artefacts, and live observation. These approaches were seen as more aligned with the relational and situated nature of youth work practice. Structural issues relating to placement organisation were also identified as equity concerns. Part-time and postgraduate students, many of whom were already embedded in professional contexts, described different learning experiences to full-time students. Issues relating to placement timing, intensity, and flexibility were seen to shape both learning opportunities and assessment outcomes, with some participants arguing that current structures implicitly privileged traditional full-time study patterns.

Theme 4: The role of the placement supervisors as educator

A final, cross-cutting theme concerned the central role of placement supervisors as educators. Students consistently identified supervisors as their most significant source of learning during placement, often contrasting the immediacy and relevance of practice-based guidance with classroom-based learning. Supervisors, however, frequently described their role in assessment as constrained. While responsible for mentoring, supervising, and observing students over extended periods, their formal contribution to summative assessment was often limited. This disjunction was experienced as both frustrating and demotivating, raising questions about how professional expertise is recognised within academic assessment systems. Participants across both groups suggested that more formal recognition of supervisors as

co-educators — and potentially as co-assessors — would enhance assessment credibility and better reflect the distributed nature of learning in professional practice settings.

Summary

The findings reveal a shared desire for placement assessment that is authentic, developmental, inclusive, and dialogical, and that reflects the pedagogical values underpinning youth work education. While the existing framework provides a valued structure for reflection and dialogue, participants identified clear tensions where assessment practices were experienced as insufficiently aligned with real-world practice, professional progression, and diverse learner needs. These findings provide an empirical foundation for considering how placement assessment might be refined to better support learning, equity, and professional formation.

Discussion

This study set out to explore how placement assessment within community youth work education is experienced by students and placement supervisors, with particular attention to suitability, relevance, and fairness. The findings reveal broad support for reflective, dialogical assessment approaches, while also surfacing persistent tensions relating to authenticity, developmental progression, equity, and the recognition of practice-based expertise. Taken together, these tensions point to a need for assessment frameworks that are not only pedagogically sound, but more closely aligned with the relational and situated nature of youth work practice.

A central issue emerging from the findings concerns the authenticity of assessment. While reflective writing and structured questioning were widely valued, participants consistently emphasised the importance of assessment practices that capture learning as it unfolds in practice. This echoes wider debates in work-based learning literature regarding the limitations of decontextualised assessment and the need to recognise socially situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1998). Within youth work education, where learning is enacted through relationships, participation, and ethical judgement, assessment that privileges articulation over action risks misrepresenting professional competence. Furthermore, while youth work education values inclusivity, empowerment and participation, the institutional structures that support placement-based learning can unintentionally disadvantage diverse learners from non-traditional backgrounds. This is argued by Cooper and Brooker (2019) who state that *incongruencies* exist between university values and the values of the youth work field.

The findings also highlight tensions surrounding developmental progression. Although critical questioning provides a consistent reflective structure, their largely static application across academic levels was perceived as limiting opportunities to evidence increasing complexity, autonomy, and leadership. This aligns with concerns raised in assessment literature about the importance of developmental scaffolding and constructive alignment across levels (Biggs & Tang, 2015). In professional programmes, assessment frameworks that do not clearly signal progression may inadvertently constrain students' capacity to demonstrate growth beyond improved academic performance.

Issues of equity and inclusion were evident across all themes. Participants' accounts suggest that assessment approaches heavily reliant on written or verbal reflection may privilege certain learners while marginalising others, including neurodiverse students and those whose strengths lie in relational or practical domains. These findings resonate with inclusive assessment frameworks that advocate for multiple modes of evidencing learning and competence (Hockings et al., 2012; CAST, 2024). Within youth

work education, such considerations are not merely pedagogical, but ethical, given the profession's commitment to participation, social justice, and anti-oppressive practice.

Finally, the findings highlight the under-recognised role of placement supervisors as educators. While supervisors were consistently identified as central to student learning, their limited involvement in formal assessment decision-making reflects a broader tension between institutional accountability and distributed professional expertise. This disjunction mirrors critiques within youth work literature regarding the marginalisation of practice knowledge within academic systems (Ord, 2016; de St Croix, 2017).

Repositioning supervisors as legitimate contributors to assessment may therefore be critical to enhancing both credibility and coherence in placement learning. Collectively, these discussions suggest that placement assessment in youth work education functions as a key pedagogical site where professional values, power relations, and institutional priorities intersect. The findings do not call for the abandonment of reflective assessment frameworks, but rather for their thoughtful evolution to better capture practice-based learning, support developmental progression, and uphold principles of equity and participation. The following section considers the implications of these insights for academic practice within higher education.

Implications for academic practice

The findings and discussion of this study point to several implications for academic practice in the design, delivery, and governance of placement assessment within youth work education. While grounded in a specific programme context, these implications are relevant to professional education more broadly, particularly where learning occurs across academic and practice settings and where assessment must negotiate multiple forms of knowledge, authority, and accountability.

Designing for authenticity in practice-based assessment

First, the study highlights the need for academic practitioners to re-examine how authenticity is operationalised within placement assessment. While reflective writing and structured questioning remain important tools for professional learning, the findings suggest that assessment frameworks should place greater emphasis on *evidenced practice* rather than retrospective accounts alone. Academic teams may therefore wish to expand the range of acceptable assessment evidence to include structured observations, artefacts of practice (such as session plans or evaluations), and supervisor commentary that captures learning as it occurs in situ. This has implications for assessment design at programme level. Rather than adding discrete tasks, authenticity may be strengthened by embedding practice-based evidence within existing assessment structures, ensuring alignment with learning outcomes and professional standards. Such approaches support the credibility of academic judgement while better reflecting the relational and contextual nature of youth work practice.

Strengthening developmental progression across academic levels

A second implication concerns the need for clearer developmental progression within placement assessment frameworks. The discussion identified limitations in assessment structures that remain static across academic levels, potentially obscuring expectations for increased autonomy, complexity, and leadership. For academic practitioners, this suggests the importance of reviewing placement assessment criteria and guiding questions to ensure they are explicitly differentiated across levels. Developmentally

responsive assessment may involve level-specific prompts, staged assessment criteria, or progressive expectations regarding the nature of practice evidence submitted. Such approaches can help students to recognise their professional growth, support academic skills development, and reinforce the coherence of placement learning across a programme. This also aligns with constructive alignment principles (Biggs & Tang, 2015), ensuring that assessment signals not only *what* students should demonstrate, but *how* professional competence evolves over time.

Advancing equity and inclusion through assessment design

The findings further underscore the responsibility of academic practitioners to address equity and inclusion within placement assessment proactively. Participants' experiences suggest that assessment practices privileging written or verbal fluency may inadvertently disadvantage some learners, particularly in a discipline where competence is enacted through relationships, judgement, and ethical action. From an academic practice perspective, this reinforces the value of inclusive assessment design that enables students to demonstrate learning through multiple modes, without compromising academic standards. Offering choice in formats—such as oral, visual, or creative evidence—at the point of assessment design, rather than through individual adjustments, can support fairness and transparency across cohorts. This approach positions inclusivity as a core pedagogical principle rather than a remedial accommodation.

Repositioning placement supervisors as educational partners

Finally, the study has important implications for how academic practitioners engage with placement supervisors within assessment processes. While supervisors are central to student learning and well positioned to observe practice over time, their contribution to formal assessment is often constrained by institutional structures. The findings suggest a need to move beyond viewing supervisors solely as providers of placement opportunities or informal feedback. Academic teams may wish to explore ways of strengthening supervisors' roles as educational partners through clearer guidance, structured feedback mechanisms, and more dialogic assessment conversations. While responsibility for final academic judgement remains with the institution, recognising supervisors' practice-based expertise can enhance the validity and credibility of assessment, as well as strengthen partnerships between higher education and practice settings.

These implications suggest that effective placement assessment in youth work education depends on assessment being understood as a pedagogical practice, not simply a mechanism of measurement. For academic practitioners, this involves designing assessment frameworks that are authentic, developmental, inclusive, and collaborative—capable of capturing the complexity of practice learning while remaining aligned with institutional and professional expectations. In doing so, assessment can function as a formative space where professional identity, ethical reasoning, and readiness for practice are actively shaped.

Recommendations

The findings of this study indicate a need to reconceptualise assessment content and structure in ways that more accurately reflect the developmental, situated, and relational nature of youth work practice. In particular, the use of uniform critical questions across levels risks flattening distinctions in learner

progression. Revising these questions to be level-specific would enable assessment to more clearly evidence the transition from emerging competence at Level 4 towards autonomy, professional judgement, and leadership at Level 6. Such differentiation would support clearer expectations for students and more robust judgements of progression for assessors.

Participants' accounts also highlight limitations in assessment practices that rely predominantly on retrospective written reflection. To more fully capture learning as it occurs in practice, there is a strong case for formally integrating observed practice and artefact-based tasks into assessment design. The inclusion of supervisor observations, practice documentation, and workplace-produced artefacts would allow assessment to attend to the real-time enactment of skills, ethical decision-making, and relational competence that are central to youth work pedagogy. Ensuring coherence between assessment content and sector expectations is also essential. Alignment with the QAA Subject Benchmark Statement (QAA, 2019), National Occupational Standards (NYA, 2020), and wider youth work literature would strengthen the credibility and transparency of assessment processes. Assessment tasks should more explicitly address areas such as governance, safeguarding, budgeting, partnership working, and evaluation, which participants identified as central to professional practice yet inconsistently assessed. Broadening the scope of assessment in this way would better prepare students for the complexities of contemporary youth work roles. In line with dialogical and inclusive pedagogical principles, offering a wider range of evidence formats represents a further enhancement to assessment practice. Allowing students to submit video recordings, podcasts, or creative artefacts alongside written work can improve accessibility and more accurately reflect the diverse ways in which youth work knowledge is generated, demonstrated, and communicated in practice. Such flexibility also recognises the multimodal nature of professional competence within informal education settings.

The study also points to the need for greater flexibility and clarity within placement processes and support structures. Rigid placement timelines were experienced as misaligned with the realities of work-based, part-time, and non-traditional learners. Introducing more flexible models—such as summer starts or extended placement blocks—would better accommodate diverse learner circumstances while maintaining placement quality and integrity. Central to strengthening placement-based assessment is the role of the practice educator. The findings suggest that practice educators are often positioned ambiguously within assessment processes, despite their close engagement with students' learning in practice. Clarifying and elevating this role through formal training, moderation opportunities, and explicit inclusion in marking protocols would enhance consistency, confidence, and parity of judgement across placement settings. There is also a clear rationale for improving placement preparation and recall activities, particularly for postgraduate students or those returning to practice after extended periods. Tailoring these activities to reflect learners' prior experience and professional trajectories would better support re-entry into practice learning and reduce unnecessary duplication of undergraduate-level content.

Finally, the findings call for a more integrated approach to theory–practice learning within assessment design. Rather than confining critical reflection to discrete components, assessment tasks should embed theory–practice integration throughout placement activity. This is particularly important in postgraduate contexts, where learners are expected to demonstrate advanced criticality, professional reasoning, and reflective depth. Distinguishing postgraduate assessment frameworks from undergraduate expectations would acknowledge prior experience while ensuring alignment with advanced learning outcomes and professional standards. By implementing these recommendations, youth work programmes can strengthen their alignment with professional standards, enhance the inclusivity and authenticity of assessment, and

better prepare students for ethical, relational, and contextually grounded practice. In doing so, institutions can uphold the transformative promise of youth work education — not only for students, but for the communities they will serve thus, “Holistic pracademic youth work education in this context requires formal youth work education to continually strengthen connections with practice” (Cooper, 2024, online).

Limitations

As with all qualitative, context-specific research, the findings of this study should be interpreted with an awareness of its scope and limitations. This research was conducted within a single youth work programme, and while the issues identified may be transferable to similar professional contexts, they are not intended to be generalisable across all placement settings or disciplines. Timing also presented practical challenges. Data collection occurred late in the academic year, when student availability was constrained by competing deadlines, placement pressures, and staff transitions. Consequently, while the student data gathered was rich and detailed, it may have benefited from a larger or more varied sample had the study been conducted earlier. More broadly, qualitative research inherently captures participants’ perceptions at a specific moment in time. Students’ and supervisors’ views are inevitably shaped by recent experiences and institutional dynamics, and these perceptions are not fixed—they may shift over months, particularly in practice-based education where contexts change rapidly. This temporal and situational specificity calls for cautious interpretation and highlights the value of iterative cycles of inquiry.

The researcher’s insider position—as both a placement and module coordinator—represents a further consideration. While this position provided valuable contextual insight and facilitated access and trust, it also introduced the potential for bias in interpreting the data. These limitations were mitigated through multiple strategies. Ongoing reflexive practice, transparent acknowledgement of positionality, and structured dialogue with colleagues, external examiners, and the research supervisor allowed emerging interpretations to be tested and challenged. Furthermore, the use of multiple data sources—including student and supervisor perspectives and assessment documentation—strengthened analytic rigour through triangulation. Engaging in collaborative sense-making ensured that interpretations remained grounded in evidence rather than shaped by personal assumptions or institutional pressures.

Finally, it is important to note that this study focused on perceptions of assessment rather than direct measurement of learning outcomes or professional performance. While these perceptions provide valuable insight into the assessment experience, they do not provide definitive evidence of learning impact. Future research might build on this work by examining how revised assessment approaches influence student progression, competence, and professional readiness over time.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore the perceptions of students and placement agencies regarding the assessment of community youth work placements. The findings reveal that while the current framework is fundamentally sound, structured, reflective, and rooted in the professional ethos of youth work, it requires some enhancement to ensure it is equitable, authentic, and progressive. Students and supervisors alike value the opportunity to reflect, plan, and discuss learning. The five critical questions and associated practice tasks provide a strong foundation. However, issues around the relevance of some tasks, the limited role of the practice teacher, the lack of observed practice, and the uneven developmental progression across levels point to potential weaknesses that risk undermining the model’s effectiveness.

There is also evidence that the current structure may not adequately support all learners. Part-time, postgraduate, and neurodiverse students experience the assessment process differently and may require greater flexibility, alternative formats, and more nuanced support. Ensuring that assessments are both academically rigorous and practically grounded is essential not only for individual student development, but also for maintaining the credibility of youth work education in the eyes of placement agencies and the wider sector. Indeed, as Cooper (2024, online) contends, “All youth work education systems should facilitate learning that enable students to embody youth work values and ethics”. Ultimately, this research highlights that effective assessment in youth work placements is not simply a matter of measuring competence, but it is also about cultivating reflective, ethical, and capable practitioners who are ready to meet the complex needs of young people and communities. To do this, assessment must be co-constructed, professionally relevant, and deeply attuned to the lived experiences of both students and educators.

Biography

Mark McFeeters has been involved in the youth sector for twenty years and now is a Lecturer in Community Youth Work at Ulster University (UU) in the School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences. In addition to teaching and working with students he is the Placement Coordinator for youth work at UU and has recently completed his MEd in Higher Education Practice and is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.

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