

**Title:**

**Stay with the 'FLO': Evaluating a mobile texting service to enhance social work student retention while on placement**

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## **Conflict of Interest**

**Phil O'Connell is the creator of FLO and he and Lisa Taylor both work for 'Simple Shared Healthcare'. The remaining academic authors have no conflict of interest.**

**Stay with the 'FLO': Evaluating a mobile texting service to enhance social work student retention while on placement**

**Short title:** Stay with the FLO student retention

## **Abstract**

Practice placements are a trigger point for social work students dropping out of university. This small pilot study, explores the use of 'FLO', an automated text message service, to support social work students on their 70-day placement. Participants were asked to complete a FLO evaluation questionnaire and to attend a focus group to explore their experiences. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis of focus group transcripts. Five key themes emerged: Student retention, sense of belonging and attendance; Importance of the initial text message; Frequency of FLO text messages and reminders; Stopping the FLO and the Future potential of FLO. Student retention was 100% during the placement period. Issues concerning the costs incurred by participants when sending reply text messages were also evident. The authors conclude that FLO, or other similar mobile technologies may be a useful addition to approaches to improve undergraduate social work student retention rates during placement. However, the correct focus and student involvement in designing the content of the text messages is critical.

## **Introduction**

The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) was introduced by the Department for Education in England in 2016. The TEF is a voluntary system that assesses the quality of teaching in English and some Scottish and Welsh Universities. Universities are classified as gold, silver or bronze based on a set of core metrics that includes attrition rates (Hefce, 2017). Recent data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency reveal an increase in the number of students withdrawing from university for the first time in four years (HESA, 2016). There is a significant body of literature surrounding the timing of and reasons for student withdrawal from university (Watts, 2011; Crosling et al., 2008; Dhillon et al., 2008; Yorke & Longden, 2008) and it is widely acknowledged that the decision by students to leave Higher Education (HE) is rarely due to a single causative factor, but rather a complex process which is affected by an array of interacting contributory factors (Watts, 2011; Walsh et al., 2009; Crosling, 2008; Yorke & Longden, 2008; Longden, 2006; Wilcox et al., 2005). Authors highlight a number of possible reasons for undergraduate students leaving their programmes early. These reasons have been categorised into several broad areas: poor decision making regarding choice of course; dissatisfaction with the early student experience, the programme chosen or the institution generally; failure to integrate academically, socially and/or emotionally; failure to cope with the demands of the programme, such as placements or academic work; plus events impacting upon the student's life outside of HE (Watts, 2011; Crosling et al., 2008; Dhillon et al., 2008; Longden, 2006; Thomas, 2002). Thomas (2002) suggests that financial reasons such as hardship and accumulating debt for Higher Education students generally impacts on attrition. Anxiety and stress may also play a role, and whilst 2009-2014 data from Skills for Care highlight that most social work students complete their degree (Skills for Care, 2015), health and social care education has been reported as particularly stressful and anxiety-provoking

(Thomas et al., 2012). In their systematic review of the subject area, Thomas et al. (2012) outline the difficulties that many students have coping with clinical practice and the impact this has on attrition rates. For social work students, additional stressors are related to the nature of the occupation and student exposure to the realities of professional practice when undertaking placements. Worsley et al. (2010) identify a 'double whammy' facing social work students in their second year: academic pressures and professional placement requirements.

While some students excel in a practice setting, others may feel overwhelmed and unprepared for the reality of practice, or isolated and disconnected from university life (Parker, 2010). Placements are therefore often a trigger point for considering dropping out of university (Mulholland et al., 2008). Moriarty et al. (2009), in researching barriers to progression and retention in social work education, found that additional support during placements might benefit students in reducing the risk of withdrawal from programmes. Based on analysis of qualitative interviews with student social workers who failed practice placements, Poletti and Anka (2013) recommend greater support from HEIs, and clarity for students about the type of support available. Pellatt (2006) identifies that clinical practice mentors play a vital role in supporting student nurses in practice and Levett-Jones and Lathlean (2008) suggest that fostering a sense of belonging is a prerequisite for successful learning in clinical practice. However, while Clark et al. (2013) recognise that there is no one single correct approach to enhance the student experience and support retention, an approach to be considered in addition to mentors or face to face support, is the use of wireless communication and technology to maintain staff-student contact.

Wireless communication is fast growing and this has driven forward a mobile phone culture (Castells et al., 2007). Mobile phones are among the most rapidly growing technologies in the world (Rebello, 2010). Indeed, there are more mobile phones in the UK than people (Chambers,

2014). We are moving towards a culture where people use mobile phones to organise every aspect of their lives (Chambers, 2014). Technology enabled education has now become part of our everyday academic life (Castells et al., 2007) and this has spawned an array of research into the almost ubiquitous use of mobile phones in university students (Bomhold, 2013; Hong et al., 2012; Head & Ziolkowski, 2012; Toda et al., 2012; Baghianimoghadam et al., 2013).

Waldman and Rafferty (2008), in their review of technology supported learning in social work, found that engagement with technology was generally limited in the field, but that one of the ways of developing use was through enhancement, 'adding value through digital resources and collaborative tools' (p.583). They go on to identify that 'm-technologies' have been a 'powerful ally in supporting fieldwork activities' in disciplines such as geography, and that for social work education, mobile technology offers a range of possibilities 'for managing student contact and supporting recording of learning in a range of formats, thus facilitating inclusion' (p.589).

One such mobile technology is FLO. Originally designed as a mobile phone 'Telehealth' service, FLO is used to send automated texts giving guidance and information to patients about their medical condition (Cottrell et al., 2012). Within the UK National Health Service (NHS), FLO has been used to help patients manage their own conditions (Cottrell et al., 2012a; Cottrell et al., 2014; Cottrell et al., 2015a; Cottrell, 2015b) and has been found to be acceptable to patients (Cottrell et al., 2012b). In collaboration with the NHS, FLO was adapted for use within an educational setting; specifically, to support undergraduate student retention. FLO has also been successfully used with nursing, sports and exercise, and social welfare law students, to facilitate retention in their first year (Boath et al., 2016a; Boath et al., 2016b).

Anecdotal and written feedback from social work students in previous cohorts suggested that the first block placement of 70 days is a source of anxiety as they enter the 'real world' of social



work' for the first time. Until this point the students spend four days a week in University. Although there are a range of support mechanisms currently in place for students including, weekly supervision, monthly placement visits with the work based supervisor and practice educator, monthly tutorials, three placement learning support meetings, three teaching recall days used to invite students back into University and ad hoc support via telephone, email or face-to-face as required, there was no contact via text messaging. This pilot study therefore explored the use of FLO for the first time in supporting a cohort of second year BA (Hons) Social Work students on their first 70-day block practice placement.

### Methodology

All full-time second year BA (Hons) social work students going on their first 70-day placement were invited to participate in the project. Students were informed about the project during an interactive question and answer session with a member of the FLO Team who was not their lecturer, nor involved in their placements. It was made clear to students that FLO was not part of their core curriculum, that they could choose whether to participate in FLO, or not, and that their choice would have no impact either on their placements, or results, teaching either then, or in the future. Those willing to participate completed a FLO consent form, provided their mobile phone number and were 'signed up' for FLO. A questionnaire was designed specifically for the evaluation to be completed in class to assess students' use of FLO. The questionnaire explored students' views of FLO and whether or not they found FLO texts helpful, supportive and relevant; and if FLO texts encouraged them to attend placements, seek support and made them feel linked to the University while on placement. Their reasons for stopping FLO and the timing and frequency of text messages were also explored. Open response boxes were used to allow students the opportunity to identify further uses of FLO and make any other addition comments.

### *FLO Licence*

A 'FLO' licence was purchased to support this project and the development of the Student Mobile Texting Service (N.B. Medical issues were not dealt with by this text service). The Licence cost £10,500 per annum and offers 37,500 texts.

### *Focus groups*

A focus group topic guide was devised. All students who participated in FLO were invited to take part in a focus group to explore their views of FLO and its relevance and usefulness to placements. Lunch and refreshments were provided. Students were also given FLO merchandise (pen, lanyard and coaster) as a 'thank you' for participating. They were not told about this in advance. The focus groups were audio recorded with the permission of the participants and transcribed to facilitate analysis.

### *Analysis*

Quantitative data was analysed in SPSS using descriptive statistics. Qualitative data was analysed using thematic framework analysis as described by Miles and Huberman (1994) to identify emergent patterns and themes. All transcripts were read independently by two of the FLO research team, who devised an index of key concepts and themes drawing on *a priori* issues linked to the study objectives as well as issues raised by the participants. The researchers agreed on a final framework and subsequently data from the transcripts were applied systematically to the framework followed by mapping and interpretation.

### *Ethical Approval*

Ethical Approval was obtained from Staffordshire University Research Ethics Committee. Informed consent was sought from all students participating in FLO and also for participation in the pilot study. Placement providers were not involved in FLO, devising or sending text messages and so ethical approval was not required for providers.

### *Placement Protocol*

A placement protocol was developed using two themes for the text messages:

1. Messages of support to the student during their placement time. These were designed to be encouraging and offer appropriate guidance if the student was experiencing problems in the placement, for example, who to approach for support.
2. Messages containing questions regarding their own experience in the placement. These were designed to be self-evaluative or to ascertain how the student felt they were progressing in their placement or identify that key placement quality indicators were effective, for example, quality of student support in the placement.

The protocol was set up on the FLO system with identified days numbered for the release of each message to take place; for example, the first question was released on day seven, after commencement of the student accepting the first FLO message. The system was programmed to provide an alert when a student responded with a concern, for example, in situations where students respond that their placement is not going well.

All responses to questions prompted an automated response either congratulatory in nature or offering guidance on where to gain support and advice. The messages were timed to commence on placement day one and continue across the placement period. The seven messages of support

and six questions were timed to be released after 4.00pm on each due date. This was to avoid the main business hours in practice placements.

The protocol commenced with a welcoming text for the students who had volunteered to accept FLO messages and examples of FLO protocols are shown in Box 1. Although texts and responses were automated, the responses were monitored on a fortnightly basis. Any responses of concern would trigger contact from the Practice Learning Facilitator.

**Box 1: Examples of FLO protocols**

FOCUS	EXAMPLE OF TEXT MESSAGES
<p>Providing reassurance</p>	<p>The first welcoming text message was sent on Day One and read:            “Hi, it’s FLO. A new experience lies ahead and we hope you will enjoy your placement”</p> <p>A response required text was sent on Day Seven and read:            “Hi it’s FLO, how’s your placement going? Let us know by replying with #1 if great, #2 if fine or #3 if not so good”            If the student replied ‘Great’, FLO replies with:            “Fantastic – a really good start”            If the student replied ‘Fine’, FLO replies with:            “That’s good, if you think it could be improved talk to your WBS in the first instance”            IF the student replied ‘Not so good’, FLO replies with:            “Sorry to hear this, chat to your WBS/PE or Tutor for support. Your experience is very important; don’t struggle on, discuss it with someone”</p> <p>On Day Twenty-One an informative, no response required text was sent and read:            “Hi, hope your placement is going well. Remember to chat with your WBS/PE/Tutor if you have any concerns to support you. Take care, FLO”</p>
<p>Improving awareness of support available</p>	<p>An informative, no response required text message was sent on Day Four and read:            “Hi it’s FLO. It’s early days yet, remember to speak with your WBS or Personal Tutor if you have any concerns about your placement. Take care.”</p> <p>On Day Twenty-Five a response required text was sent as follows:</p>

	<p>“Hi it’s FLO. You’ve had a few weeks to settle in. Please rate the quality of student support in your placement. Reply with #1 Great, #2 Fine or #3 Not so good</p> <p>If the student replied ‘Great’, FLO replies with:  “Excellent: really pleased to hear that”</p> <p>If the student replied ‘Fine’, FLO replies with:  “Glad to hear that but you can always chat with your WBS/PE and suggest some ideas to help improve it”</p> <p>If the student replied ‘Not so good’, FLO replies with:  “Sorry to hear this, chat to your WBS/PE/Tutor immediately for support. Your experience is very important; don’t struggle on, discuss it with someone”</p>
<p>Learning prompts</p>	<p>An informative, no response required text was sent on Day Fourteen in advance of the first university recall day (Learning Consolidation Day), as follows:  “Hope you’re enjoying your placement. Remember to check your LCD dates on BB and come with any queries and placement experiences for sharing. FLO”  (BB = Blackboard)</p> <p>A further informative, no response required text was sent on Day Thirty-Five and read:  “Make sure you take up your opportunities for supervision and make the most it. F0LO”</p> <p>On Day Forty-Two, a response required text was sent that read:  “Hi again. You’re now further into your placement, how’s it going? Please reply with #1 if great, #2 if fine or #3 if not so good”</p> <p>If the student replied ‘Great’, FLO replies with:  “That’s good to hear – well done”</p> <p>If the student replied ‘Fine’, FLO replies with:  “That’s good, if you think it could be improved talk to your WBS/PE”</p> <p>If the student replied ‘Not so good’, FLO replies with:  “Very sorry to hear that discuss your concerns with your WBS/PE or contact your Tutor immediately – they are there to help you”</p> <p>On Day Forty-Nine an informative, no response required text was sent as follows:  “Hi, you will have an opportunity to evaluate your placement experience so please start thinking about the strengths and weaknesses so far”</p>

## Results

There were a total of 64 second year BA (Hons) social work students, and of those 45 (71%) signed up to FLO. Ages ranged from 19 – 49 years old. The socio-demographic characteristics of these students and their placement setting is shown in Table 1. Overall, this is representative of a typical student cohort at this University.

Table 1: Participant Characteristics

	Male	Female
<b>Gender</b>	4 (9%)	41 (91%)
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
White British	4 (9%)	29 (64%)
Black African	0 (0%)	7 (16%)
Black Caribbean	0 (0%)	2 (4%)
Dual Heritage (White/ Black Caribbean)	0 (0%)	2 (4%)
Information not provided	0 (0%)	1 (2%)
<b>Placement Setting</b>		

Private, Voluntary, or Independent Sector Agency	3 (7%)	41 (91%)
Local Authority	1 (2%)	0 (0%)

Thirty of the 45 students who signed up for FLO (67%) completed the FLO evaluation questionnaire. Nine (20%) students participated in a focus group; these were all White British, two were male and seven were female. No (0%) students left University during or immediately after the placement period and this compares well with the previous year's data when three students left during this time.

The results of the evaluation were summarised and highlighted within the text. Direct quotations are used to highlight emergent themes below. No areas of concern were identified in the fortnightly monitoring and no alerts were received throughout. The following five key themes emerged from the data: Student retention, sense of belonging and attendance; Importance of the initial text message; Frequency of FLO text messages and reminders; Stopping the FLO and the Future potential of FLO

*Student retention, sense of belonging and attendance*

The Higher Education Academy What Works? Student Success and Change Programme (Thomas et al.,2017), identified a strong link between student retention, sense of belonging and engagement within the academic sphere that enables students to survive and thrive. In line with previous research demonstrating that fostering a sense of belonging encourages student retention (Levett-Jones and Lathlean, 2008), 22 (73%)

students completing the questionnaire and five students in the focus group reported that that FLO made them feel linked to the University while on placement and liked the concept of a text messaging service and the opportunity it afforded for them to still feel linked to the University. Quotes such as the following were typical:

*Yes, when you are out on a placement – it was good to have the connection, it was a good support. (SW3)*

*FLO helped me to feel connected to the University when on placement (SW26)*

Good pastoral support and good clinical practice mentors have been shown to have a key role in student retention (Thomas et al., 2017; Banks et al., 2012; Pellatt, 2006). Five students in the focus group reported that FLO had encouraged them continue their placement.

*Just having contact in some way from Uni helped me keep going (SW19)*

*It was beneficial to have that university contact and knowing that the university was behind you. (SW5)*

However, not all students felt that FLO was personalised enough:

*No – I didn't feel it was personalised, for example, having a bad day and you open the text message and it says 'Hi its FLO', you don't want to engage because you were not having a good day. There was no engagement and too impersonal. (SW14).*



*I felt it was great having the contact with the University, but I do think the questions need to be specific. (SW19)*

#### *Importance of the initial text message*

There were initial problems with students interacting with FLO and three students initially mistook the initial text sent by FLO as spam and subsequently, ignored or deleted the message:

*Also, from the start, the initial message to sign up came late evening and ...I was not sure if this was from the University or a hoax chat message as it said 'Hi, this is Florence, fancy a Chat?' That initially put me off'*

*Concerned regarding the first text message, it was a while from signing up, and the initial message I thought was from junk texting i.e. a dating message (SW19)*

Students suggested solutions to this, such as:

*Some sort of passcode sent to you in the original e-mail so you knew it was legit*

*(SW24)*

*It would have helped if 'Staffs University' had been in the text (SW 20)*

#### *Frequency of FLO text messages and reminders*

The timing and frequency of texts and reminders was highlighted as a problem by some social work students who could not use or access their mobile phones while on placement:

*They text too quickly, would send a text if not responded would text again when I haven't replied because I was on placement (SW2)*

*It was un-useful for FLO to continue to text during office hours asking for a response. When I responded, I got a thank you – this was not useful to me at all, or prompts to respond – very irritating (SW25)*

### *Stopping the FLO*

Seven (23%) students texted STOP to FLO. The reason for this was that despite FLO being a free text service, students reported that they had received texts saying that they would be charged for responding.

*We were under the impression that we were being charged for using this service.*

*This was a deterrent for me (SW 22)*

*... was sent a notification saying I'd be charged for sending a reply (SW 27)*

*I stopped replying to them as it told me I was getting charged (SW18)*

### *Future potential of FLO*

Despite the apparently negative evaluation of FLO by social work students completing the questionnaire, the focus group revealed that students felt that a text messaging service had the potential to be very useful. The major suggestion was for an interactive text messaging service that enabled responses to be texted directly to students. There were also calls for FLO to be more personalised and individually tailored to each student. Quotations such as those following were typical:

*You should be able to text back, that could be picked up by someone working on FLO who can support. (SW1)*

*Maybe something like 'it's coming up to your midpoint review, how many direct observations have you had? If you answered with a 1, they text back with you should have two you need to go down this route. Or how did your midpoint review go? More interactive would have been better. (SW3)*

*It would be good if it said that the AOPS [analysis of practice academic assignments] are in soon, or this is what you have to do for your AOPs, or start looking at it instead (SW5)*

While students recognised that sending a block text to a cohort at the same time would work for a University based course, this was a barrier to using FLO to support placements, as students went on placement at different times and different placements would have particular needs:

*You would have to start FLO when you were ready when you start your placement, so they work in line with you, rather than a standard time as different people start at different times. (SW8)*

*It's very difficult to give advice on a placement, as everybody is different/individual and have different needs. The advice therefore has to be general. (SW4)*

Future uses of FLO were suggested and overall students felt that something more overtly supportive, personalised and specific to the student and interactive would be more helpful and facilitate communication:

*Needs to be more personal to the specific student (SW14)*

*Was only good / not good answers didn't provide any contact to properly communicate (SW4)*

*It would be good if there were some interaction, more human instead of automated messages (SW10)*

*I do think the questions need to be specific. Also there may be things that come up on placement that you may not need to speak to your practise educator about or your tutor, but if there was a helpline number that would be useful. I think it needs re-thinking (SW19)*

*Something much more focused on University work rather than on the placement work (SW4)*

*Yes, example you could set it to key dates, for hand in dates, reminder system. Or your learning curriculum is this date, have you been on blackboard (SW12)*

*It's a good idea for dates, reminder texts rather than how you feel. (SW14)*

*The info was good, but the guidance wasn't overly supportive (SW20)*

*Suggestions and where to find help other than just tutor or, practice educator*

*(SW21)*

*It would be better to send links to relevant literature/websites in relation to social work/placements (SW25)*

*For us, at level 4 we had to see a tutor to get signatures and prompts for this would be good as some failed the course for this (SW10)*

*Motivation texts were good; I would like them to carry on, but more University course specific (SW18)*

*For us a blog would be better where you can write and read what others are going through (SW10)*

Taylor et al (2015) highlighted the importance of a partnership approach in facilitating the adoption of telehealth. FLO was initiated over the summer period and students were not involved in devising placement messages. The need for staff-student co-production, or even student led text messages was reflected in student comments and all students in the focus group were keen to be involved in designing a text message system that worked for them:

*Yes – if we were included we would be more enthused to use it (SW3)*

*The concept is good, it's the messages behind it is not right at the moment*

(SW10)

## **Discussion**

Over the last decade there has been an increase in the use of technologies in higher education (Saade & Kira, 2009); this includes increased use in social work education (Waldman & Rafferty, 2008), reflecting technological advances, the preferences of contemporary students (Haythornthwaite & Andrews, 2011) and the reality that most social work graduates will work in organisations using computer technology (Zeman & Swanke, 2008). Brett (2008) observed that students valued a mobile technology text-based administrative system, used to text information such as changes of venue/teaching room, reporting of cancelled lecturers and so on. Such mobile technologies have potential in social work education (Waldman & Rafferty, 2008) and, as practice placements are often a trigger point for increased attrition (Mulholland et al., 2008), exploration of the use of such technologies at this point in the social work student journey is apt.

Overall, the social work students participating in this study liked the concept of a text messaging service. The opportunity it afforded for them to feel linked to the University was valued and some students reported that FLO was supportive in relation to their placement. However, while FLO was perceived very positively in the NHS in helping patients manage medical conditions (Cottrell et al., 2012a; Cottrell et al., b); and with nursing, sports and exercise, and social welfare law students to facilitate retention in their first year (Boath et al., 2016a; Boath et al., 2016b), it was less positively received by the social work students on placement who participated in this study. The differences between cohorts of students suggests that FLO, or an alternative text messaging service, would need to be tailored to each student

cohort. In addition, the fact that many students wanted FLO to be more interactive and individually tailored to them, suggests that a more personal, interactive SMS approach that offers pastoral support (Banks et al, 2012) and clinical practice mentorship (Pellatt, 2006) might be more acceptable to students while on placement.

As FLO is designed as an NHS telehealth system, it is highly secure and although highlighted as a limitation, the inability to text back other than pre-coded responses ensured that no client data could be shared by students, or confidentiality breached while out on placement.

The decision to monitor FLO responses on a fortnightly basis was based on practical, workload reasons. No areas of concern were identified in the fortnightly monitoring. However, students did highlight concerns via their tutor, mentor and Practice Learning Facilitator, suggesting that they recognised that FLO was not an appropriate tool for sharing concerns.

Unlike the experience in the NHS (Cottrell et al., 2012a,b) where patients started to view FLO as a real person (the name FLO is short for Florence, after Florence Nightingale), the social work students were acutely aware that FLO was an automated system. The link to the nursing profession and the choice of name may have therefore appealed more to nursing students (Boath et al, 2016a). However, the licence agreement did not allow a change from the name FLO. Bates and Poole (2003; cited in Traxler & Kukulska-Hulme 2005) argue that consideration of whether the right technology has been selected is an important aspect of a comprehensive evaluation of mobile learning. Thus, the pros and cons, limitations and advantages of other text messaging systems should be reviewed prior to any final decision regarding the future of FLO. Indeed, if mobile technology support is to continue, the choice of name and technology adopted may need to be considered by student co-producers, alongside academic, administrative and practice learning staff. Indeed, in light of student feedback from

this and previous research (Boath et al., 2016a; Boath et al., 2016b), a new version of FLO, called EDITH is currently being designed specifically for use in education.

In their comprehensive study of mobilising student engagement in a variety of contexts, including field-work and placements, Linsey et al. (2010) found that students were reluctant to make use of the technology unless it had a clear, perceived benefit to them, particularly with text-based messaging services. The timing of the texts and content sent to the social work students were not what they felt they wanted while on placement. Although this may have led to dissatisfaction with FLO, it was not a reason given for stopping the 'FLO' of texts.

The system was programmed to provide an alert when a student responded with a concern and alerts were monitored every two weeks. No alerts were made during the pilot period. However, that may be because students had other support and supervision mechanisms available to them. However, without other mechanisms, more frequent monitoring may have been required.

Although FLO is a free text service, students reported that they had received texts saying that they would be charged if they texted FLO, and this had prompted some students to stop receiving texts from FLO. Some students believed that they had actually been charged for using FLO. Exploration within the focus groups and discussion with the FLO team revealed that this was not limited to one mobile phone service provider. This anomaly has been reported to the FLO designers and is being investigated with the mobile phone companies involved. The FLO team are currently looking at solutions to this problem. This would need to be corrected if FLO is to continue in future.

Placements are a key trigger point for students leaving University (Mulholland et al 2008). No students left the University during the period that FLO was used. Although attrition rates were improved from the previous year, when three students had left, we are not able to say that this was directly due to FLO, as there may have been other external factors. However, the positive



comments by some students suggest that FLO may have had a part to play in this reduced attrition rate.

Although staff attitudes to FLO were not assessed within this pilot evaluation, anecdotally, individual staff attitudes ranged from enthusiasm to resistance. While academic and administrative staff were overall happy with the training provided, they raised concerns regarding the lack of dedicated time required to set up FLO, to write protocols and to monitor FLO. As Taylor et al. (2015) highlighted, appropriate staff training, a partnership approach to implementation and early success are all critical to acceptance and increased adoption and this should be addressed in future research

## **Conclusion and Implications for Practice**

As a mobile technology, FLO has the potential to provide some additional support social work students as they commence their first placement. However, liaison with the FLO or other mobile text developers would be essential to resolve practical problems, such as students being charged for texting back. Resources would also be required to fund not only the FLO licence, but also the staff time involved in devising protocols, signing students up to FLO and to monitoring responses and intervening where required.

Social work students suggested that more personalised texts and a more interactive version of FLO would be welcome and following on from this research, EDITH is currently being developed. Revision of the text messages and having messages designed by students who have previously been on placement may result in students feeling more supported by FLO, as the texts may be '*more real*' to them. Students were not involved in the design of FLO at this pilot

stage. However, all the students who participated in the focus groups said that they would like to be involved in developing the content for a text messaging system in future. While this pilot was structured to assess the automated texts as described above, there is potential for greater bespoke individualised interaction by responding personally to the student via email or through the FLO text messaging system. However, any future developments of FLO and its protocols would need to involve not just relevant administrative and academic staff, but also students as co-producers. To this end, meetings are currently underway with the Students' Union regarding future potential uses of FLO. Any future delivery plan will need to be carefully managed and take into consideration the views of students, and the workload implications for academic, placement, administrative and technical support staff. Therefore, the challenge, and opportunity for social work educators, is to design and arrange the delivery of messages in the most efficient and cost-effective manner, that is acceptable to staff and students alike. If these challenges can be overcome, further studies should be conducted to establish the extent to which text based placement support systems have the potential to improve student retention in social work.

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