

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

ACCESS TO THE SOCIAL WORK
DEGREE
FOR RELEVANT GRADUATES

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1. INTRODUCTION

This review

- 1.1. This report recommends arrangements for managing access to the new social work degree by relevant graduates in Northern Ireland.
- 1.2. We were commissioned by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. We have worked closely with the joint Project Team (DHSSPS with the Northern Ireland Social Care Council – NISSC) charged with implementing the reforms in social work education.
- 1.3. We have also consulted widely with interested parties in Northern Ireland. We issued a consultation paper at the end of May 2003, and we held a consultation meeting at the Kings Hall Conference Centre on 6 June. This was attended by 32 people representing a wide range of different interests, and there was a lively debate about the issues raised in the consultation paper. We also received a number of written responses. A copy of the consultation paper is attached at Appendix 1. A summary of the main points made in these has been made available to the Project Team.
- 1.4. We are grateful to all those who responded and/or attended the meeting for contributing to the review. The recommendations are our own responsibility, drawing on the evidence and information we have acquired through this consultation process.

Reforms in social work education

- 1.5. This project is of course just one part of a broader set of changes in social work education which are being managed by the Project Team. Most readers will be familiar with the details of this wider context.
- 1.6. The programme of reforms being taken forward in Northern Ireland amounts to a major initiative in change management within a relatively compact geographical area. In some respects, Northern Ireland was better served than other parts of the UK in terms of social work education, but there will nevertheless be some quite significant changes affecting all the key parties involved.
- 1.7. Such changes are bound to cause concerns for some of the parties, but these need to be viewed in the light of the strong support that was expressed during earlier consultation for the concept of retaining an attractive route for graduates to access social work training.

2. GRADUATE ACCESS TO THE DEGREE

Background

- 2.1. The new honours degree in social work will begin in September 2004.
- 2.2. The Rules for the Approval of the Degree in Social Work and Practice Learning Requirements have now been defined by the NISSC and are available on the NISSC website.
- 2.3. Key points about the new arrangements for qualifying education include:
 - The qualifying course will be the new honours degree in social work. It is designed to be generic and to prepare students to work in a variety of social work settings in Northern Ireland, and elsewhere in the UK;
 - All students will be required to register with the Council before they commence their training;
 - The learning outcomes required are set out in the Framework Specification for the degree published in March 2003;
 - Students will have to be assessed as having achieved the learning outcomes including the Practice Learning Requirements before they can be awarded the degree in social work;
 - Students who have attained the degree will be required to do an assessed year in employment before they can be registered as a social worker with NISCC.
- 2.4. There has been a strong graduate entry to social work training in Northern Ireland. In 2002, out of a total entry to training of 280 students, approximately 150 were previous graduates. Graduates bring maturity and prior learning and experience to social work training and the Department wishes to ensure that the new degree continues to be attractive to this important section of the entry population.

The aims of graduate access in the context of the new degree

- 2.5. There is a natural tension in this type of situation between the views of those in a profession who normally wish to “maintain standards” (which can sometimes become a synonym for erecting barriers to entry), and those concerned with work-force planning and service provision who generally wish to have a much more inclusive approach to entry to training in order to ensure a good supply of future service providers.
- 2.6. These are both legitimate concerns, and the most significant policy issue for this review is to find an appropriate balance between them. It is important to recognise that there is no “right answer”, nor any “scientific process” that can determine the outcome. This will involve a judgement on the most appropriate compromise between the two opposing, and equally legitimate, tendencies.
- 2.7. Following from the above, we suggest that two fundamental aims need to be kept in balance in all future discussions about graduate access. These are:
 - a. it is important to make the new degree attractive to a broad range of potential entrants to social work employment – that is after all the main

purpose of the qualifying education;

- b. it is also important to remember the reasons for the introduction of the degree. In our report to the four health departments of March 1999 (our study under the Stage II Review of CCETSW which recommended the new degree), we summarised these as “a significant strengthening of the curriculum... to develop the competences for safe and effective social work, and to develop the critical thinking abilities and professionalism that social workers now require”.
- 2.8. The successful introduction of the reforms will depend on maintaining an appropriate balance between these two aims.

Principles of graduate access

- 2.9. Most of those we have consulted agree with the concept of offering a fast-track route to qualification for relevant graduates. We have based our work around three inter-related principles which are at the heart of this objective.

Principle 1: Fast-tracking: Someone who has successfully studied for a minimum of three years at higher education level, and been awarded a relevant degree, should be offered the opportunity to achieve the required standard for the degree in social work in a reduced timescale (less than three years).

Principle 2: Standards maintained: Graduate applicants who take an accelerated route to qualification as a social worker should still have to demonstrate achievement of the same learning outcomes and other achievements required by the normal three-year degree.

Principle 3: Demonstrating eligibility: Anyone wishing to benefit from a fast-track route will need to be able to demonstrate their eligibility to do so in a way which takes account of the fact that qualification for social work requires a complex mixture of knowledge, skills, and behaviours and values. It is appropriate that demonstrating eligibility for an accelerated route may require more evidence than simply applying for the normal three-year degree programme.

- 2.10. We believe that each of these principles will be supported by most of those we have consulted. They set the framework for our recommendations. We discuss the details of the way they are to be implemented below.

An accelerated route

- 2.11. The first principle means that it is appropriate to offer the opportunity of an accelerated route to relevant graduates in order to enable them to qualify as social workers.

- 2.12. The reasons for providing an accelerated route could be said to be a combination of the following considerations:

- It is necessary to attract graduate entrants as an important source of future social workers;
- It is fair to recognise relevant prior qualifications and commitment by applicants to the profession;
- It is efficient to build on applicants pre-existing qualifications and experience;

- It could be demotivating for individual candidates to require them to repeat prior learning.
- 2.13. These points define a very strong case for supporting the principle of an accelerated route into qualification for social work.

One route or several?

- 2.14. Starting from first principles, one might say that a route could be accelerated by as much or as little as is appropriate in the light of the prior qualifications and experience of the relevant graduates. In the extreme, this could imply a personally-designed programme for every student. Inclusion is an important value of social work (and of higher education) and this might appear an attractive ideal.
- 2.15. However, there are two objections to this, one of principle, and one practical one.
- 2.16. The objection of principle has been expressed by a number of those we have consulted. They would say that, because of the nature of social work, there is a minimum period of study which all students should complete. They would say that it is important that all qualified social workers have broadly completed the same programme of training. They would also say that this exercise should not be about re-creating a different post-graduate route into social work (which ends with the new degree).
- 2.17. The idea of a very flexible or individualised programme also leads to some practical difficulties:
- It would require an expensive process of accrediting prior experience and learning of the candidate, necessarily conducted on an individualised basis;
 - If each student thus selected then had an individualised programme of study there could be severe practical issues about small group sizes, which would be pedagogically undesirable (because students learn from each other), and costly.

A standardised fast-track route

- 2.18. Following from this thinking, many of those consulted probably assume that an accelerated route means a single accelerated route of 2 years rather than 3. They also assume that the two years would be more intensive than two undergraduate years, and would essentially include the full complement of practice learning, normally covered in three years (but clearly with some reductions in course work). This was described by one of those at the consultation meeting as “two calendar years, not two academic years”.
- 2.19. This approach would imply that education providers operating such a route would admit relevant graduates to a more intensive two-year programme, where most of their learning would therefore be separate from undergraduates on the normal three-year route. However, it might be possible to share parts of the programme with the relevant cohorts of three-year degree students.

Demonstrating eligibility

- 2.20. Applicants to this standardised fast-track programme would need to demonstrate their eligibility for social work training (as for all applicants) and additionally that they are capable of completing the academic programme in a shorter timescale. Some might wish also to demonstrate that they could also complete the practice learning requirements in a shorter timescale.
- 2.21. Like all applicants for social work training, relevant graduates would therefore need to complete a process of statements and interviews to establish their suitability.
- 2.22. Going beyond this, we considered whether there might be some prior qualifications which could provide an “automatic” right to a fast-track route in the sense of saying that (for example) “anyone with this degree is suitable for fast-tracking”.
- 2.23. There is general agreement that certain degrees are likely to be helpful, and those most commonly mentioned include sociology, psychology and social policy. However, it is also agreed that possession of a certain degree is not enough. Degrees with the same name differ between institutions and change over time. Eligibility for exemption will also depend at least partly on the student’s ability to apply their prior qualification, and on other factors such as their motivation, and their ability to take on the culture and values of social work.
- 2.24. We believe therefore that no “automatic” exemptions should be given but that assessment of suitability should be via a relatively “light-touch” APEL process which might require the applicant to prepare a statement and be interviewed about their formal qualifications; the relevance and currency of these qualifications; other relevant experience and prior learning; their motivation and ability to apply this knowledge; their ownership of the values and aims of social work.
- 2.25. This could be accommodated as part of the overall selection process for social work, and would result in admission to either the standardised fast-track course or to the normal three-year course (for those suitable but not eligible for fast-tracking).

Possibility of further variations and APEL arrangements

- 2.26. We believe that this standardised 2-year fast-track route should be an effective way of making the degree more attractive to graduates; that it should meet the needs of most potential applicants; and that it should not be too difficult to design and deliver.
- 2.27. However, this does not mean that there would be only one fixed and identical route for all relevant graduates. With the likelihood that there will be more than one relevant degree, there will be applicants with a range of slightly different relevant prior learning. There will need to be some modest flexibility in their programmes of study (e.g. a small number of options in the early part of the course or the possibility of “top-ups” or tailoring of some students’ courses). Of course anyone who is significantly short of the required relevant learning should be rejected (but encouraged to enter the three-year degree programme).
- 2.28. The need for such minor variations could be identified through the normal application process outlined above.

Practice Learning

- 2.29. The Practice Learning Requirements set out the extent to which exemptions may potentially be possible for students with appropriate prior learning. In principle, appropriate candidates may qualify for exemption from part or all of the 25 days required at Level 1 (Foundation), and the 85 days required at Level 2 (Application), but none of the 100 days required at Level 3 (Integrated Application). Nor should they be exempt from the 30 days required for individual practice development.
- 2.30. These Requirements clarify an issue which was debated intensively during the consultation process. Some of those consulted considered that no further exemptions or variations (beyond the two year fast track with a full PL element) should be granted, and certainly none in practice learning. They would argue that it takes students a significant period to absorb the social work culture and values and that too much “fast-tracking” threatens this. These commentators stressed that previous practice is not adequate, that the degree assesses practice learning (not practice), and it is much more difficult to justify exemptions from this.
- 2.31. However, others acknowledged that some candidates (e.g. those in social care employment) might be able to justify further exemption, but noted that this would not be a simple judgement to make and it would therefore require a more demanding process of APEL (certainly more than what we have described above).
- 2.32. We agree that it will be more difficult to assess and accredit prior practice learning experiences, and it would therefore need a relatively more costly and infrequent APEL mechanism to establish eligibility. However, we believe that in principle that this should be offered, so that the new framework is not perceived as about erecting barriers to, or pre-judging the suitability of, applicants who happen to have rather more prior experience than normal. We are therefore pleased with the way the Practice Learning Requirements have been drafted.
- 2.33. However, we would agree with the argument that exemptions from practice learning should be limited in terms of the amount of PL that can be APELed, and carefully justified. The students will of course still have to demonstrate achievement of the same standards and to pass all the same assessments.
- 2.34. It should remain the responsibility of education providers to decide how to operate these arrangements. There is some interest in the idea of a single regional assessment centre for such cases, as is we understand being implemented in Scotland.

The accelerated course

- 2.35. This report is primarily concerned with access to the course, rather than with the content of the fast-track itself, which is in our view clearly the responsibility of the course providers. However, we would expect the accelerated course to have the following features.
- It is recognisably the same course as the normal three-year degree, just delivered in a different way. It leads to the same competences and assessments and those who graduate should be recognised as equally well prepared for social work (albeit a

part of their preparation will have taken place before they enroll for the social work degree);

- It is a shorter and accelerated route, i.e. it would not just compress three years of course work into two. It would make some exemptions from course work (or deliver this in an accelerated manner) in recognition of the fact that these students will be more mature; will have achieved the attributes of “graduateness”; and will have a degree in at least one subject which relates to a part of the social work curriculum. As noted above, some tailoring of individual learning programmes will be required;
- It will need to include all the assessments of practice learning included in the three-year degree, but the possibility of exemptions from practice learning as defined in the Requirements.

2.36. It will be for education providers to propose appropriate arrangements.

Conclusions

2.37. We conclude therefore

1. It is important for social work in Northern Ireland to be accessible to a range of potential students with differing prior experience and qualifications, and in this initial period of the new degree it is appropriate to make particular arrangements to attract graduates with a relevant degree.
2. An assessment capability will be required at a regional level, and this could be developed by course providers working in partnership and perhaps attached to the Regional Body set up to plan social work training arrangements. This should define what constitutes a relevant degree for purposes of students’ making a case for fast-tracking.
3. A standardised 2-year fast-track route with some exemptions from course work but a full complement of practice learning assessment should be offered to all graduates with a relevant degree. This should be accessed by a relatively light-touch statement and interview process in which applicants would justify their eligibility in terms of their motivation and their ability to apply their prior learning, not just by paper qualifications.
4. Course providers should be flexible in allowing reasonable variations around this standardised fast track programme for candidates who can justify this. These could include admitting candidates who need a modest further “top-up” to their learning, or a slight variation from the standardised course.
5. In more exceptional cases, candidates who can demonstrate that they are ready to pass straight to the first practice learning assessment point should be able to make a case to do this, via a process of APEL which would be managed by the regional assessment facility;
6. Course providers should be responsible for developing these arrangements, in collaboration with the regional body. They should be approved by the NISCC. It would be appropriate to review these arrangements after the first 2-3 years of operation of the new degree.

Appendix 1

CONSULTATION ON ARRANGEMENTS FOR ACCESS TO THE NEW SOCIAL WORK DEGREE FOR RELEVANT GRADUATES

Background

The new honours degree in social work will begin in September 2004.

The rules for the approval of the degree in social work are currently being drafted by the NISCC ("The Council") and will be forwarded to the Department in May for its consent. They should be available soon. In the meanwhile, most recipients will be aware that the key points about the new arrangements for qualifying education are:

- The qualifying course will be the new honours degree in social work. It is designed to be generic and to prepare students to work in a variety of care settings in Northern Ireland, and elsewhere in the UK;
- All students will be required to register with the Council before they commence their training;
- The learning outcomes required are set out in the Framework Specification for the degree published in March 2003
- Students will have to be assessed as having achieved the learning outcomes including the practice learning requirements before they can be awarded the degree in social work
- Students who have attained the degree will be required to do an assessed year in employment before they can be registered as a social worker with NISCC.

Graduate access

There has been a broad entry to social work training in Northern Ireland, with a strong graduate entry. In 2002, out of a total entry to training of 280 students, approximately 150 were previous graduates. Graduates bring maturity and prior learning experience to social work training and the department wishes to ensure that the new degree continues to be attractive to this important section of the entry population.

We have been commissioned by the department to advise on the characteristics of an accelerated route to be offered to relevant graduates from the start of the new degree in September 2004.

Consultation

We wish to ensure that the advice we provide is informed by the experience and views of those who know the current system, and those who will be affected by the new arrangements. We invite you to contribute to this debate by:

- a. discussing the issues raised in the following paper with your colleagues and contacts who can contribute to this debate;
- b. attending a consultation workshop we will be holding on Friday 6 June at Kings Hall Conference Centre in Belfast;
- c. replying to the questions at the end of this paper with the views of your organisation (or your personal views if you do not have a corporate view).

You can write, fax or Email to us and details of how to do so are at the end of the paper. We need to receive such written responses by Friday 20th June if they are to influence our advice to the department.

1. What does an accelerated route mean?

In principle an accelerated route implies that someone who has already studied for a minimum of three years at higher education level, and been awarded a relevant degree, may be offered the opportunity to achieve the required standard for the degree on social work in a reduced timescale (less than three years).

However, it does not imply any reduction in standards for qualification. They will still have to demonstrate achievement of the same learning outcomes.

2.38. Do you agree with our understanding of this? YES/NO

2. What is a relevant degree?

Any graduate will have acquired some of the skills and experience which are assessed as part of the social work degree, but not all of them, and not necessarily any of the knowledge. While any degree is helpful, some degrees are “cognate” to the social work knowledge base in terms of the content of their curriculum. Examples would be Sociology, Social Policy, Psychology, and perhaps also Law, and some of the health professions.

Would it be possible to draw up a list of “relevant” degrees which could automatically grant some exemption from the full social work degree course? YES/NO

If so, what degrees should be on such a list:

2.39. certainly

2.40. possibly?

3. How could exemptions be decided?

Specific exemptions from parts of the degree course would be granted in respect of an entrant’s previous relevant qualifications and experience. In principle, these could be specified by one or more of the following mechanisms:

a. standard exemptions from course work

It could be possible to define specific standard exemptions from parts of the social work degree which could be granted in normal circumstances to graduates with appropriate relevant degrees as defined above. (Some relevant degrees might justify different exemptions from others.)

Is this appropriate? YES/NO

b. accreditation of prior learning and experience (APEL)

An alternative to standard exemptions would be to consider the prior learning and experience of each applicant and to make specific changes to the course to take account of these (or to design an individual tailored programme) for each individual or for each group with similar needs. This is a more expensive process, but might be more effective for the individuals, and for outcomes.

How could APEL work for graduate entrants? Is it practical? Should it be done by each course provider, or centrally? What would the resource implications of this be?

(Please comment)

c. practice learning

In principle, we suggest that the same arguments could apply to practice learning. Standards must be maintained (i.e. all who graduate must be able to pass the same assessments), but if applicants can demonstrate equivalent practice-based experience and pass the assessments, they should be eligible for exemptions.

Do you agree with the principle?

YES/NO

If so, would this require an APEL process, or could applicants who can demonstrate significant prior experience of assessed or supervised practice be allowed to go straight to an assessment point?

(Please comment)

4. How could the timescale be accelerated?

The simplest and most cost-effective approach to manage exemptions could be to permit all applicants who came within a certain defined band of prior learning and experience to enter the second year of the course, possibly with some individual "top-up" modules where needed to ensure adequate coverage of material that would normally be covered in year one.

Could this be effective?

YES/NO

- *Would the second-year programme need to be adjusted for this group? Should this be done on a standard or an individualised basis?*
- *Alternatively, would it be better to devise curricula and course structures which permitted multiple entry points?*
- *Would the course providers be able to manage multiple entry points?*
- *Are there any other approaches which should be considered?*

(Please comment)

5. Costs and benefits

The standard exemptions approach would be the simplest to administer. The APEL approach would be more flexible and therefore could be more effective in attracting graduates, but it would require a greater effort by course providers.

Do you have views about the relative desirability of these two approaches, and their practicality?

6. Any other points?

Are there any other points you would like to bring to our attention?

Thank-you for your attention. Please reply to

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