



## 4. Modes of assessment

## 4.1 Selection tools

It is important that a holistic approach is taken to assessing the suitability and readiness of an applicant to undertake professional social work training. Academic ability only forms one element of the process, while an assessment of their personal readiness and suitability forms another. To enable a holistic approach a range of selection mechanisms is required. This also allows for 'triangulation' and decision making based upon different forms of information. Programmes may wish to use a proforma (Appendix 7) to demonstrate how each criterion is assessed and by which test or activity.

It is important that selection tools and tests are fair and valid. To comply with guidance from Supporting Professionalism in Admissions Programmes (SPA)<sup>31</sup> admissions test should: have rigorous validation and reliability testing; ensure the minimum of bias; be readily accessible to those with specific requirement; be fair and professionally administered; be able to demonstrate they are fit for purpose and add value as part of holistic decision-making; and be approved for use through the institution's relevant structures and processes. However, research indicates significant lack of 'evidence' about the longer-term efficacy of any one selection tool<sup>32</sup>.

Good practice includes an element of cross reference from one element of the selection process to another – such as asking an applicant in their interview to reflect on their performance in other elements of the selection day and/or to expand upon elements of their written application or other written work which can also serve to ensure authorship.

To increase inter-assessor consistency, descriptively anchored rating scales are

recommended. Recommendations To offer a place on a course should not be made, for example, following the interview without consideration of marks achieved during the written and group tasks stages.

Assessors should be a mix of academics, current practitioners, service users and carers. Assessors should have a shared understanding of their role and receive preparatory briefings, debriefings, support mechanisms and have feedback opportunities (Appendix 9).

All selectors, academics, practitioners and those with lived experience, involved in any element of selection days should receive appropriate training for their role.

Programme providers when planning selection days should consider several factors. Correspondence providing details of the day, what is being assessed and how it is being assessed should be sent to all shortlisted applicants. Applicants should be provided with a welcome greeting and refreshments are desirable.

The environment should be accessible, comfortable and consideration should be given to the layout of the assessment rooms. Consideration should be given to travelling times, and an activity, such as an ice breaker question, is recommended to put applicants at ease. The WMTP encourages all involved in selection processes to model the values and principles which underpin social work practice.

Standardised interview questions, written tests and a standardised format for group interviews across the partnership was not deemed appropriate in consideration of candidates who make applications to several HEIs in the area and the importance of each HEI having sovereignty in this arena.

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<sup>31</sup><https://www.ucas.com/file/233201/download?token=WyNEuW1d>

<sup>32</sup> [https://www.anzswwer.org/wp-content/uploads/Advances\\_Vol18\\_No2\\_2016\\_Chapt7.pdf](https://www.anzswwer.org/wp-content/uploads/Advances_Vol18_No2_2016_Chapt7.pdf) in Lafrance, J., Gray, E., & Herbert, M. (2004). Gate-keeping for professional social work practice. *Social Work Education, 23*

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Manktelow, R., & Lewis, C. A. (2006). A study of the personality attributes of applicants for postgraduate social work training to a Northern Ireland university. *Social Work Education, 24*(3), 297–309.



## 4.2 Written assessment

While academic writing can be taught on social work programmes, written tests (Appendix 6) are often deemed important to evidence applicants' ability to write clearly and logically at the application stage. Personal statements should not usually be used as the written element of the selection process as authorship cannot be guaranteed, although it is possible to adapt interviews to ensure there is a link between written content and discussion. Written tests should be completed and assessed prior to offers being made where used.



Written tasks can test applicants' comprehension, spelling, grammar, punctuation and sentencing structure. Timing the exercise can assess whether applicants can write under pressure.

The written test can be used to assess other skills, for example analysis, reflective capacity, values, particular knowledge or other elements of the entry level PCFs. If used to assess additional skills and capabilities, applicants should be informed of this.

Written tests can be sent out to applicants prior to the selection day to enable applicants to prepare, or they can be set on the day. If given on the day, responses can be considered more authentic.

Written tasks can take several forms. The provision of social work articles which discuss topical social work issues and asking candidates to illicit the main themes are considered favorable. Equally, case scenarios

are considered a useful tool for the written task.

Verbal reasoning is the ability to understand and logically work through concepts and problems expressed in words. Verbal reasoning tests assess how well a candidate can extract and work with meaning, information and implications from text. Programme providers should ensure that written assessments capture this skill.

Marking criteria for written tests should be mapped to the PCFs. Here it is applicant potential that is being assessed, rather than students already having the skills to write highly reflective pieces of work.

## 4.3 Group task

Group tasks (Appendix 6) provide an additional opportunity for applicants to demonstrate relevant skills and abilities – communication, active listening, diplomacy, respect for others, positive body language, emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, confidence, and the ability to challenge constructively.

Group activities are used to assess interpersonal skills and personal characteristics, and this should be made clear to applicants prior to the selection day.



Case scenarios/role play provide good topics for discussion in group tasks and were considered the preferred vehicle for discussion in workshop sessions.

Those evaluating performance are required to control factors, for example the mix of those in the group in relation to gender and demographics.



## 4.4 Individual interview

Programmes should ensure that all applicants shortlisted to attend a selection day receive an individual interview. No applicant should be offered a place without performing well at individual interview.

Programme providers should clarify with applicants what is being assessed at interview in the interests of transparency.

The interview panel should comprise an academic, a practitioner and a service user/ carer.

It is beneficial, where possible, for panel members to have sight of each candidate's personal statement form prior to the interview session, whilst being mindful of confidentiality legislation/policies.

The interview can be used to assess communication skills, motivation, level of understanding about the nature of social work and an element of self-reflection in relation to life/work experience and readiness/suitability for social work.



Interview questions (Appendix 6) should be linked to the entry level PCFs and should avoid using social work jargon. Questions should cover broad aspects of the PCFs: professionals; values and ethics; critical reflection and analysis; and skills and intervention.

Questions should be designed with fairness in mind as it is important that no applicant is disadvantaged by specific questions, for example, younger applicants may feel disadvantaged when compared to other applicants in relation to experience.

If supplementary questions are utilised, there is a requirement to ensure this is considered when answers are compared.

It is recommended that candidates are provided with a copy of the questions during the interview.

### Online/remote interviews and assessments

During the COVID-19 pandemic due to restrictions upon travel and meeting in groups, most HEI student selection work moved to online platforms. Since restrictions have lifted, WMTP is aware that some HEIs have reinstated in situ selection processes whilst others have continued with online processes. Whilst it is of course for each HEI to adopt a mechanism that works well for them and their applicants, there are important considerations for the Partnership in relation to best practice but also in relation to comparability of experience for all involved.

Advantages of retaining remote assessment processes have been reported to include the following:

- Equity of approach for local and international students
- Reduced travel costs for all involved
- Ability to assess IT competence by default
- Ability to 'hide' selectors from view during any group task
- Reduced no-shows have been reported by some HEIs
- Reflects the changed realities of some areas of social work practice where increased use of remote contact has been introduced

However, those favouring in situ assessments highlight factors including the following as advantages of this approach:

- A more familiar approach to all involved with some feeling more confident about in person assessments of readiness/suitability

- Assesses commitment and motivation when people need to travel/commit to an in situ event
- Group exercises may be more reflective of student experiences during the course

In promoting best practice within the Partnership region, HEIs will need to satisfy themselves that whichever mode is used is aligned to good practice guidance and is research informed and that equalities issues and impacts of the selected approaches have been fully considered. In particular, where in situ interviews are held, the way in which international students are interviewed, if not attending in situ, needs careful consideration to promote equivalence of processes. Where processes are held remotely, consideration about how to manage and assess the impact of technological failure will also need careful consideration.

Whichever approach is used, HEIs will want to satisfy themselves that the best practice points below are embedded in their selection processes:

- Applicants are informed about how they will be assessed in advance
- Applicants are treated fairly and consistently throughout the process
- The process overall is holistic and not dependent upon one element only
- That the potentially flawed nature of interviews is recognised and that the use of standardised marking/scoring based upon descriptive weighting scales is used to promote standardised approaches.
- Interviewers are trained in their role and responsibilities and have completed equalities and unconscious bias training and this is refreshed as required.

## 4.5 Postgraduate programmes

Whilst sharing many features of undergraduate programmes, postgraduate and masters level programmes have different requirements in relation to the level of academic study and the speed at which

students must demonstrate their readiness to enter practice learning.

Programme providers may want to differ in respect of the nature of personal and pre-professional attributes and characteristics that are required for practice learning at different entry (undergraduate/ postgraduate) levels.

## 4.6 Evaluation of selection processes

Programmes should develop a sampling model to analyse decisions and ensure consistency and quality.

Programmes should seek feedback from all parties – academics, practitioners, service user/ carers and students – on admissions processes (Appendix 9).

Programmes should evaluate their selection processes on a regular basis and should seek and respond to applicant feedback.