



## 2. Key principles in selecting



## 2.1 Transparency

In line with SWRB recommendations and Supporting Professionals in Admissions (SPA) good practice guides<sup>14</sup> as well as regulatory body requirements it is expected that course providers will ensure that they provide clear information regarding the nature of the course and professional expectations and a transparent approach to selection processes for potential applicants. In addition to required academic qualifications, publicity should ensure that the need for appropriate personal skills, qualities and abilities is apparent. This should be clear in materials used to promote social work programmes.

Information to potential applicants regarding what is assessed/required, the modes of assessment, and the rigorous nature of the selection process should be explicit. Programmes should ensure that information about the criteria they select against is available to applicants prior to interviews taking place.

Information regarding programme content, including placements, and full information regarding fees, student bursaries, where available<sup>15</sup>, any hidden costs (such as travel to placements), and any financial support provided from within the HEI is essential and will usually be an expectation from within the HEI too. It is desirable for HEIs to develop information/resource packs for applicants which can be widely disseminated and/or provided within an online environment designed for this purpose.

Publicity materials should be regularly reviewed and updated as necessary. Clear information and transparency will enable informed decision making by prospective candidates.

## 2.2 Consistency and

### minimum standards

Entry to social work programmes usually requires that applicants hold a specified level of academic qualifications and the additional assessment of suitability for professional education.

Importantly, the selection of social work students involves the assessment and identification of those who have the potential to complete the challenges of professional social work training and once qualified, be effective and safe practitioners who are able to recognize for themselves when their own fitness to practice or suitability is temporarily or permanently reduced for whatever reason.

In conjunction with their partners (employers and service users and carers), HEIs are ultimately responsible for making decisions about the suitability of students to enroll on social work programmes in line with SWE, requirements and the WMTP recognizes that entry standards and decisions may vary between member HEIs.

All programmes should specify the professional nature of the programme to prospective students, highlighting the ways in which this may impact upon them. Prospective students should be made aware that some behaviours or actions in the home, socially, in other paid employment or in their use of social media might adversely impact on their standing as prospective social workers. These professional responsibilities can, for example, form part of information provided at open days or when communicating with offer-holders prior to entry.

Programmes may sometimes accept students quite close to the start of the programme, during the Clearing period. For this reason, HEIs will need to complete suitability checks in the short space of time. Where it is not possible to complete prior to offer being made, applicants must be reminded that such checks are a condition of any offer of a place on the course and it is important that documentation given to applicants confirms that non-completion or

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.ucas.com/providers/good-practice>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.nhsbsa.nhs.uk/social-work-students>

unsuccessful completion of such disclosure processes may result in their place being withdrawn. This relates to any suitability/fitness to practice self-declaration form HEIs use and also to DBS processes.

As there are no single reliable and valid explicit/direct indicators of who will become a good social worker following initial education and who will remain in the profession, there is an element of

risk taking and 'prediction' in the process. This is especially so given the potentially fluid nature of professional suitability which results in students and social workers being more or less suitable for safe and effective practice as a result of different life experiences<sup>16</sup> This highlights the need for carefully designed selection processes that consider the qualities and abilities of individual applicants within a more holistic context, whilst also ensuring that the suitability is a whole course and whole career focus.

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<sup>16</sup> Holmstrom, C. (2016). Suitability, gatekeeping and social work education. In I. Taylor, M. Bogo, M. Lefevre, & B. Teater (Eds.), *Routledge International handbook of social work*

*education* (pp. 298-309). Routledge. Taylor & Francis.

All applicants for social work programmes should be assessed against SWE requirements and also the relevant elements of the Professional Capability Framework (PCF)<sup>17</sup> for social workers, using the entry point set of standards (Appendix 1). By the point of entry to social work programmes, prospective students should therefore demonstrate that they:

- have the potential to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to meet the professional standards;
- demonstrate a good command of English
- can demonstrate that they have a good command of English;
- have the capability to meet academic standards; and
- have the capability to use information and communication technology (ICT) methods and techniques to achieve course outcomes.

(Social Work England, 2021, Education and Training Standards, Section 1.1)

And applicants should be able to meet the PCF expectations for this pre-entry stage:

- demonstrate an initial understanding of the role of the social worker;
- demonstrate motivation and commitment to become a social worker
- identify my own potential strengths and challenges in relation to the role of social worker
- demonstrate an initial understanding of the importance of personal self-care, resilience and adaptability in social work
- demonstrate the ability to take responsibility for my own learning and development. (PCF 1)
- recognise the impact my own values and attitudes can have on relationships with others
- understand the importance of seeking the perspectives and views of service users and carers
- recognise that social workers will need to deal with dilemmas, conflict and use the authority invested in their role. (pcf2)

- demonstrate an initial understanding of difference and diversity within society, the importance of equal opportunities and the implications of this for social work practice.
- receptive to the views of others. (Pcf 3)
- recognise the contribution of social work to promoting human rights, social justice, inclusion and equality
- receptive to the idea that there may be ethical dilemmas and conflicts in the social work role between promoting rights and enforcing responsibilities. (Pcf 4)
- Identify how own learning (formal, informal and experiential) contributes to understanding and developing the social work role. (PCF5)
- demonstrate an ability to reflect on and analyse my own experiences (educational, personal, formal and informal)
- demonstrates curiosity and critical thinking about social issues. (PCF6)
- can communicate clearly, accurately and appropriately to the level of training applied for, in verbal and written forms
- demonstrate an ability to engage with people with empathy
- motivated to develop skills to help people find solutions to social needs (PCF7)
- demonstrate understanding of the importance of working as a member of a team and collaborating with other colleagues in an organisation. (PCF8)
- recognise how my own learning, behaviour and ideas can influence and benefit others. (PCF9)

It is recognised that HEIs should be able to adapt general requirements to suit local needs and the specific nature of the course applied for. For example, many postgraduate courses will require a level of 'readiness' for social work education and training that is beyond that applied to undergraduate applicants given the longer nature of the undergraduate route and the greater opportunities for significant growth to occur prior to first placement. The selection processes devised and implemented by programme providers must be compliant with internal institutions policies and procedures as well as meeting SPA and SWE

<sup>17</sup><https://www.basw.co.uk/system/files/resources/pcf-entry.pdf>

requirements. This is important given the need for transparency and maybe relevant in relation to appeal and complaints processes, and in order to model and mirror social work values and principles.

Concerns were raised in the Social Work Task Force report and subsequent national guidance<sup>18,19</sup> regarding programmes that may have admitted students who may not be fully suitable, to boost numbers at a time when applications were very buoyant, and bursaries were uncapped. Deviation from minimum standards should not have increasing student numbers as a primary motive. In addition, any changes to entry standards should be subject to an assessment of potential impact upon under-represented groups within HEI and those on social work courses.

SWE (2021) standards also require that programme providers ensure that the processes used to select students:

- Are multidimensional in nature (1.1);
- Take account of relevant prior experience (1.2);
- Assesses the character, conduct and health of prospective students (1.4)
- Are based upon equality and diversity policies with appropriate monitoring (1.5);

SWE guidance can be found here: <https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/standards/qualifying-education-and-training-standards-guidance-2021/#admissions> in which some of the pre-entry qualifications (e.g English Language) are clarified.

## 2.3 Stakeholder involvement

Social work programme providers should ensure that employers, service users and carers are fully involved in selection processes, including their design and review<sup>20</sup>. Programme providers should therefore ensure that participation is prioritised, and social work organisations should seek to honour agreements to allow staff to be involved in this process wherever possible.

During the admissions workshops there was clear support for the involvement of those with lived experience and employers in admission processes. This is due to the added value they bring to selection processes. The involvement of those with lived experience requires that sufficient resourcing is in place to sustainably support service users and carers. This also includes payments to those with lived experience to enable them to play a key role in social work admissions and learning. Involving practitioners also requires robust processes between HEIs and employers. Payments should of course be reviewed on a regular basis and details of payments should be transparent, although we recognise that central funding for this important work has not increased in many years.

While shared decision making between HEIs, those with lived experience and practitioners is important, the responsibility for the final decision to offer a place will rest with the HEI. This is because the HEI is accountable for contracting with the student.

## 2.4 Equality and diversity

The Equality Act 2010 has important implications for HEIs and selection and recruitment processes to qualifying social work programmes. The Act reinforces previous legislation in respect of

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<sup>18</sup> <https://www.basw.co.uk/system/files/resources/pcf-student-asye.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130403221302/https://www.edu>

<https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/01114-2009DOM-EN.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> Social Work England, standard 1.3: <https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/standards/education-and-training-standards/>

reasonable adjustments to disabled applicants



and students. Programme providers are required to ensure that their practices are compliant with the Equality Act 2010 Technical Guidance on Further and Higher Education<sup>21</sup>. Programmes will need to ensure that whilst entry thresholds are not adjusted, for example minimum standards must be met in respect of written work, this can be assessed via adjusted processes, such as allowing more time where appropriate and/or the use of technology rather than relying upon handwritten work.

The purpose of a well-designed holistic selection processes should be to select fairly from a diverse pool of applicants, to choose students who will broadly represent the diverse communities they will work within once qualified. In addition, programme providers are required to consider their own strategies to widen access to, and participation in, higher education more generally. Whilst some research literature implies that there is an 'either/or' decision to be made when selecting students such that either intellectual

ability/academic qualifications OR their personal qualities are privileged<sup>22</sup>, both are clearly important as recognized in the Reform Board and subsequent reviews of social work education.

Discriminatory practice can be significantly avoided in selection processes by adhering to good practice outlined in this document. Modes of assessment should be reasonably adjusted where the applicant has disclosed a disability, to ensure that the applicant is not unfairly disadvantaged by the mode of assessment. In addition, HEIs are required to ensure that their own selection processes comply with good practice set out in the Quality Assurance Authority (QAA) guidance in relation to disability and disabled students<sup>23</sup>.

The Data Protection Act 2018<sup>24</sup> and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)<sup>25</sup> place requirements and restrictions on HEIs in relation to the personal and sensitive data they collect and process. As well as records of what personal data exist within the organisation, the GDPR requires the provision of a documented understanding of why information is held, how it is collected, when it will be deleted or anonymised, and who may gain access to it. Institutions are required to apply appropriate organisational and technical measures to keep information secure. There are duties to report security breaches to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) and, in some cases, to the individuals affected. Where institutions rely on consent to process individuals' personal data, they must be able to demonstrate that this consent was "freely given, specific, informed and unambiguous". Under the GDPR, individuals' rights have been enhanced. See [www.ico.gov.uk](http://www.ico.gov.uk)<sup>26</sup> for further guidance.

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/publication-download/equality-act-2010-technical-guidance-further-and-higher-education>

<sup>22</sup> Dillon, J. (2007) The Conundrum of Balancing Widening Participation with the Selection of Suitable Students for Social Work Education, *Social Work Education*, 26:8, 827-841, DOI: [10.1080/02615470601140609](https://doi.org/10.1080/02615470601140609)

<sup>23</sup> <https://nadp-uk.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/2010-Code-of-practice-for-academic-qual-standards.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2018/12/contents/enacted>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation>

<sup>26</sup> [www.ico.gov.uk](http://www.ico.gov.uk)



The process of selection should also be carried out in a way which reflects the values that underpin the social work profession, being mindful that selection works both ways and that an important part of the process is applicants being

able to self-assess their readiness, commitment and interest in proceeding with their applications, as well as HEIs choosing the applicants they judge to be best placed to succeed on their courses.

## 2.5 Recommended personal skills and attributes and holistic assessment

The Social Work Task Force report raised issues regarding the mix of skills and attributes needed for social work. This is due to the very nature of social work and the relationship-based nature of social work practice. These skills and attributes include analytical skills, empathy, resilience, ability to use authority and a sound value base. Recognising potential is important, given that applicants can and do change during professional training and that applicants are therefore unlikely to be 'fully formed' professionals at this early stage in their journeys.

Given that more than just good academic qualifications are required and that distinct characteristics, abilities and experiences are needed, the challenge is being able to design ways of identifying/specifying these and then observing, assessing and evaluating these characteristics in a reliable and valid way which is free from discrimination.

To enable a holistic approach (SWE, 2021, 1.1), a range of selection mechanisms is required. This also allows for 'triangulation' and decision making based upon different forms of information. This approach also recognises that no single method of assessment would allow for a fair and reliable approach to selecting from a diverse applicant pool. It also recognises that applicants who demonstrate less aptitude in one area may show significant strength in another. Programme providers are required to adhere to a Proficiency Commitment for all applicants. An applicant may be borderline in one category, for example those applicants who do not achieve a minimum of 120 Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) points or a minimum 2.1 undergraduate degree. However, at selection this may be compensated for by other elements which demonstrate the applicant's suitability and readiness to undertake social

work training.

Programme providers can demonstrate that they have triangulated the modes of assessment by the use of an aggregated feedback form (Appendix 8).

## 2.6 Experience

The Social Work Task Force report did not recommend a requirement for prior experience to access social work training given concerns about what the requirement would represent and whether it is experience itself or commitment to entering social work that was being highlighted. In general, WMSWTP HEI postgraduate courses specify the need for relevant pre-course experience and detail the nature and the amount of this. For undergraduate programmes, the majority but not all of HEI partners state that experience is required or preferred. However, there is a need to recognise the complexity and need for fairness of any requirement for 'experience', for example, the requirement for experience could potentially discriminate against younger applicants. Indeed, SWE require that we take account of experiences that applicants have had and this can include personal experiences, voluntary experiences as well as paid work experience.



A lack of clarity (or transparency) regarding what is required, together with the recognition that previous experience has not conclusively been shown to be correlated with positive outcomes or course completion<sup>27</sup> is concerning.

<sup>27</sup> Holmström, C. and Taylor, I.

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social work: A critical analysis of  
policy, theory and research.  
Social Work Education, 27(5),

pp.519-535



Therefore, this guidance suggests that no formal pre-requisite of length of time or nature of life/work experience should be stated. Rather, applicants should be asked to demonstrate how their learning from life and any work experience has helped to prepare them for social work training.

## 2.7 Criminal convictions

Criminal conviction checks should be completed in a timely way in respect of all applicants being considered for a place on a programme. Applicants are required to be informed of the need to complete Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks and any cost associated with these. Applicants should also be advised that the existence of prior convictions is not necessarily a barrier to entry to the profession.

Programme providers should ensure that they have mechanisms in place to deal with declared convictions (Appendix 4). Mechanisms are required to include consideration of the sector guidance in respect of Fitness to Practice/Suitability<sup>28</sup>, in consultation with placement providers to provide independent review, and an element of reflection and learning by the applicant on their convictions.

Criminal conviction checks should be completed, and programme providers satisfied prior to applicants starting on courses, for example by making this a condition of any offer made for a place on the course and where this is not completed satisfactorily, the HEI has mechanisms for removing unsuitable students.

In addition, course providers will need to ensure that there are no discrepancies between the information provided on a DBS certificate and that previously disclosed by the prospective student. Where any discrepancies emerge, the HEI will need to ensure fair and appropriate processes are followed to establish whether the student's suitability for social work is adversely affected and what the appropriate response is. This may require consultation with placement providers,

anonymously, to establish whether the information may present challenges when seeking placements for the student.

## 2.8 Health requirements

Information to applicants should be clear and include the requirement for a health declaration. Applicants should be advised that the existence of health condition or disability is not necessarily a barrier to entry to the profession. Any health requirements should be appropriate and proportionate and the emphasis at entry to programme point is that students are able to effectively manage any health or disability related needs and seek medical guidance if their condition worsens during their studies, and that they are offered appropriate supports and/or reasonable adjustments.

Any assessment of suitability based upon health or other factors needs to be based upon knowledge of the programme and how it is delivered, including placements. It is the programme provider's responsibility to make sure that they have made reasonable adjustments in line with equality legislation, if appropriate, during selection processes and during learning and assessment activities, but is the responsibility of placement providers once a student commences placement with them. Admissions processes must comply with regulatory standards outlined in SWE guidance s1.4 and decisions by HEIs and placement providers should be made with reference to this guidance.

Applicants invited to attend interviews and other tests should be encouraged to disclose any disabilities in a supportive manner and will be informed that disclosure then means that appropriate adjustments can be made to the assessment process (Appendix 4). We understand, however, that significant stigma remains within the wider societal context and this will sometimes impact upon willingness to disclose such issues.

## 2.9 Communication

Programme providers are expected to keep

<sup>28</sup> [https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-](https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/assessing-suitability-students-enter-and-remain-qualifying-social-work-programmes)

[hub/assessing-suitability-students-enter-and-remain-qualifying-social-work-programmes](https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/assessing-suitability-students-enter-and-remain-qualifying-social-work-programmes)

applicants informed throughout the application process. Key updates should be provided throughout the admissions cycle and may be communicated either directly by the institution, or through UCAS.

Communications include but are not limited to: acknowledgement of application receipt; confirmation that

a decision has been made; confirmation of any conditions required for admission if an offer has been made; confirmation of reasons for rejection if an application has been unsuccessful (although we recognize that currently some HEIs have used to an end of application cycle approach to providing feedback to unsuccessful applicants); and confirmation of admission where all conditions have been satisfied.