Subject benchmark statement

Social work

Draft for consultation September 2007

Contents

Preface

Subject benchmark statements provide a means for the academic community to describe the nature and characteristics of programmes in a specific subject or subject area. They also represent general expectations about standards for the award of qualifications at a given level in terms of the attributes and capabilities that those possessing qualifications should have demonstrated.

This subject benchmark statement, together with others published concurrently, refers to the **bachelor's degree with honours**[1]. In addition, some subject benchmark statements provide guidance on integrated master's awards.

Subject benchmark statements are used for a variety of purposes. Primarily, they are an important external source of reference for higher education institutions (HEIs) when new programmes are being designed and developed in a subject area. They provide general guidance for articulating the learning outcomes associated with the programme but are not a specification of a detailed curriculum in the subject.

Subject benchmark statements also provide support to HEIs in pursuit of internal quality assurance. They enable the learning outcomes specified for a particular programme to be reviewed and evaluated against agreed general expectations about standards. Subject benchmark statements allow for flexibility and innovation in programme design and can stimulate academic discussion and debate upon the content of new and existing programmes within an agreed overall framework. Their use in supporting programme design, delivery and review within HEIs is supportive of moves towards an emphasis on institutional responsibility for standards and quality.

Subject benchmark statements may also be of interest to prospective students and employers, seeking information about the nature and standards of awards in a given subject or subject area.

The relationship between the standards set out in this document and those produced by professional, statutory or regulatory bodies for individual disciplines will be a matter for individual HEIs to consider in detail.

This subject benchmark statement represents a revised version of the original published in 2000[2]. The review process was overseen by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) as part of a periodic review of all subject benchmark statements published in this year. The review and subsequent revision of the subject benchmark statement was undertaken by a group of subject specialists drawn from and acting on behalf of the subject community. The revised subject benchmark statement went through a full consultation with the wider academic community and stakeholder groups.

QAA publishes and distributes this subject benchmark statement and other subject benchmark statements developed by similar subject-specific groups.

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[1] This is equivalent to the honours degree in the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (level 10) and in the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (level 6).
[2] The subject benchmark statement for social work (2000) was published under the same cover as the statement for social policy and administration.

The Disability Equality Duty (DED) came into force on 4 December 2006[3]. The DED requires public authorities, including HEIs, to act proactively on disability equality issues. The Duty complements the individual rights focus of the *Disability Discrimination Act* (DDA) and is aimed at improving public services and outcomes for disabled people as a whole. Responsibility for making sure that such duty is met lies with HEIs.

The Disability Rights Commission (DRC) has published guidance[4] to help HEIs prepare for the implementation of the Duty and provided illustrative examples on how to take the duty forward. HEIs are encouraged to read this guidance when considering their approach to engaging with components of the Academic Infrastructure[5], of which subject benchmark statements are a part.

Additional information that may assist HEIs when engaging with subject benchmark statements can be found in the DRC revised *Code of Practice: Post-16 Education*[6], and also through the Equality Challenge Unit[7] which is established to promote equality and diversity in higher education (HE).

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[3] In England, Scotland and Wales
[4] Copies of the guidance *Further and higher education institutions and the Disability Equality Duty*, guidance for principals, vice-chancellors, governing boards and senior managers working in further education colleges and HEIs in England, Scotland and Wales, may be obtained from the DRC at www.drc-gb.org/employers_and_service_provider/disabilty_equality_duty/sectoral_guidance/ further_and_higher_education.aspx
[5] An explanation of the Academic Infrastructure, and the roles of subject benchmark statements within it, is available at www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure
[6] Copies of the DRC revised *Code of Practice: Post-16 Education* may be obtained from the DRC at www.drc-gb.org/employers_and_service_provider/education/higher_education.aspx
[7] Equality Challenge Unit, www.ecu.ac.uk

Foreword

The review group for the subject benchmark statement for social work (which was originally published under the same cover as the subject benchmark statement for social policy and administration) consisted of members representing social work within HE across the United Kingdom (UK). The review group met initially to discuss procedural and planning issues, with particular focus on the degree of change necessary to the original benchmark statement. Subsequently, the group will meet to consider feedback from consultations with a wide variety of stakeholders, including service users and carers. This form of working was agreed by the whole group and supported by QAA.

It is the unanimous view of the review group that only minor revisions are necessary to the original benchmark statement. These relate specifically to the development of the social work degree as the qualifying award for social work and policy developments associated with devolution, but also reflect other legislative, policy and organisational developments surrounding the structure and delivery of social work education and social work services. To reflect this, the review group introduces the revised statement with explanatory notes on the context of the social work degree and provide separate statements about arrangements in the four UK countries.

Social work remains an applied academic subject with an essential practice component and with distinctive subject knowledge and skills; teaching, learning and assessment methods; and subject standards. However, social work degree programmes are now coterminous with professional training and the acquisition of a protected title. This interface entails close links with professional, regulatory and statutory bodies and employers, all of whom have been consulted on the content of the revised benchmark statement.

The review group believes that the revised subject benchmark statement for social work retains the strengths of the original in reflecting the needs and matching the academic practices of the subject area, while ensuring that its content mirrors the changes in social work education, policy and practice in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

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1   Introduction

1.1   This subject benchmark statement fully acknowledges recent changes within the context of social work and its regulation across the UK. These changes include:

- the establishment of General Councils as regulatory bodies in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland
- articulation of new rules and requirements governing social work education across the UK
- formal registration of social workers
- development of occupational standards for social work and social care across the UK
- mapping of social work and social care posts to levels of qualification
- development of care standards, codes of conduct and codes of practice.

1.2   While developments in policy and practice have led, in some countries, to a greater degree of specialisation, this benchmark statement reaffirms the generic knowledge and skills required for the award of a social work degree as the preparatory qualification for practice across settings and 'client' groups. It recognises that the degree of specialisation offered within social work programmes will vary and evolve to reflect organisational and workforce requirements. This benchmark statement reflects the complexity and rapidly changing nature of this context by including specific reference to the legislative, professional and institutional arrangements in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

2   Context for social work education in the UK[8]

England

2.1   Regulation of social work training is now overseen by the General Social Care Council (GSCC) established in 2001 under the *Care Standards Act 2000*. A new integrated professional qualification at honours level was introduced in social work in 2003, incorporating National Occupational Standards (NOS), the original subject benchmark statement for social work, published by QAA in 2000, and the Department of Health (DH) *Requirements for Social Work Training* (2002) specifying certain areas of knowledge that must be covered. All qualifying programmes are approved by the GSCC, validated by universities accredited by the GSCC and may be offered at honours or postgraduate level. From 2003, all new social workers must be qualified to a minimum of graduate level. From April 2003, the title 'social worker' became a protected title. All students of social work programmes and social workers are required to register on the GSCC Social Care Register. Anyone working at any level in social care is governed by the professional *Code of Practice for Social Care Workers* published by the GSCC in 2002[9].

2.2   Social care in England is provided through statutory, private, voluntary and independent organisations, and is coordinated by different government departments, such as DH and the Department for Children, Schools and Families, formerly the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). Criminal justice services, such as

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[8] The context outlined is based on the political situation at the time this benchmark statement was produced and may be subject to change.
[9] *Code of Practice for Social Care Workers* (GSCC, 2002) can be accessed at www.gscc.org.uk/Good+practice+and+conduct/

probation, are coordinated by the Ministry of Justice (formed in May 2007), and probation officers are now separately regulated and trained. Social work programmes are expected to prepare students to work as part of the social care workforce, working increasingly in integrated teams across and within specialist settings in adult health, mental health and children's services; interprofessionally alongside professionals in the National Health Service (NHS), schools, police, criminal justice and housing, and in partnership with service users and carers.

2.3   A review of the social care workforce was undertaken in England reporting in *Options for Excellence - Building the Social Care Workforce of the Future* (DH, 2006) with options and priorities for increasing the supply of all workers within the sector, improving the quality of social care practice, defining the role of social workers and developing a vision for the social care workforce in 2020. The GSCC were commissioned by DH and the former DfES to lead a follow-up project examining the roles and tasks of social workers. This will report in 2007 on the implications for future roles, responsibilities, training and skills required of social workers in the changing context of the forthcoming years.

Scotland

2.4   The integration of an academic and professional qualification led to the Scottish Executive (SE) developing *The framework for Social Work education in Scotland* (2003). This includes the 'Standards in Social Work Education' (SiSWE), which incorporate and replace the original subject benchmark statement for social work and the NOS. The SiSWE were developed under the joint auspices of QAA, the Scottish Executive and the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC). Social work education in Scotland is regulated by the SSSC, and all qualifying programmes in social work must be approved by this Council, as well as validated by their universities. The first new degree programmes were launched in September 2004. These programmes are supported by the Scottish Institute for Excellence in Social Work Education, which was established in July 2003 with the aim of transforming the education and training of the sector. All social work students and graduates must register with the Scottish Social Services Council and are bound by the *Codes of Practice for Social Service Workers*[10]. From 2004 onwards, student social workers must achieve an honours degree in social work (four-year full-time programme), or an equivalent postgraduate award (two-year full-time programme), to become professionally qualified.

2.5   Social work provision in Scotland is divided into three branches: children and families, community care, and criminal justice. The legislation that governs these branches is mainly made by the Scottish Parliament, which can respond relatively quickly to Scotland's needs. Additionally, some key legislation for social work is still made in Westminster.

2.6   The 21st Century Social Work Review published recommendations and an implementation plan in *Changing Lives* (SE, 2006). Some key findings that have significance for social work education are: social work is 'a single generic profession'; social workers make a valuable contribution to the social fabric; 'doing more of the same won't work'; and that social workers need to work more closely with the providers of universal services. All social work programmes must ensure that students achieve both the standards set out in *Key Capabilities in Child Care and*

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[10] *Codes of Practice for Social Service Workers* (SSSC, 2005) can be accessed at www.sssc.uk.com/NR/rdonlyres/761AD208-BF96-4C71-8EFF-CD61092FB626/0/ CodesofPractice21405.pdf

Protection (SE, 2006), which contains requirements for all qualifying social workers and those in *The framework for Social Work education in Scotland*.

Wales

2.7   In Wales, social work schemes of study and professional registration are regulated by the Care Council for Wales (CCW). The *Qualification Framework for the Social Care Sector in Wales*[11] includes the NOS, the original subject benchmark statement for social work, CCW rules for programme approval and National Assembly for Wales requirements. The integrated undergraduate social work degree, approved under this Framework, commenced in Wales in 2004. Social work degree programmes in Welsh universities should take into account the specific legislation, policy and cultural environment of Wales, and the relationship of these areas to the UK-wide context. The *Welsh Language Act 1993* applies to all areas of social work delivery and to social work education.

2.8   The Welsh Assembly Government has responsibilities for social services in Wales, as well as other relevant areas such as health, education, housing and the Welsh language. Under the *Government of Wales Act 2006*, the National Assembly for Wales will be able to pass its own legislation in devolved areas. Relevant areas that are still governed directly from Westminster are criminal justice, including youth justice, and areas covered by the Department for Work and Pensions.

2.9   Social policy for devolved areas of social work in Wales from 2008-18 will be set within the broad framework for public services provided by the Welsh Assembly Government in Making the Connections: Delivering Beyond Boundaries (2006) and more specifically within the strategic aims contained in *Fulfilled Lives, Supportive Communities* (2007).

Northern Ireland

2.10   Northern Ireland is governed by a devolved Assembly set up following the *Northern Ireland Act 1998* and re-established in May 2007. Northern Ireland has its own court structure, replicating that of England and Wales. The devolved Northern Ireland Assembly is the prime source of authority for all devolved responsibilities and has legislative and executive authority in the areas of finance and personnel, agriculture, education, health and social services, economic development, and environment.

2.11   The Northern Ireland Assembly is responsible for overseeing the delivery of education and integrated health and social services in Northern Ireland. Social work is regulated by the Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC). The NISCC and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety jointly produced the *Northern Ireland Framework Specification for the Degree in Social Work* (2003), which sets out a single comprehensive set of learning requirements and outcomes for the degree in social work. It incorporates the relevant NOS and the original subject benchmark statement for social work. From September 2004, a degree in social work is the recognised professional qualification for all social workers, probation officers and education welfare officers in Northern Ireland. The degree replaces the Diploma in Social Work and previous social work qualifications awarded in the UK by the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work. Following

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[11] *Qualification Framework for the Social Care Sector in Wales* can be accessed at www.ccwales.org.uk/DesktopDefault.aspx?tabid=420

the introduction of the protection of title on 1 June 2005, all qualified social workers are required to register with the NISCC.

2.12   Uniquely in the UK context, social work graduates are required to undertake an assessed year in employment before becoming eligible to register as a social worker with the NISCC. In addition, there are a number of distinctive learning requirements and outcomes that are specific to Northern Ireland. Thus students are required to understand the impact of Northern Ireland's political violence on their practice and consider their role in integrated health and social care organisations.

3   Nature and extent of social work

3.1   This subject benchmark statement covers social work as an applied academic subject at honours level. It sets out expectations concerning:

- the subject knowledge, understanding and skills of an honours graduate in social work
- the teaching, learning and assessment methods employed in their education
- the standards expected of them at the point of graduation.

3.2   Legislation establishing regulatory bodies in social work and introducing statutory registration of social workers was passed across the UK from 2000 onwards. These Acts also recognise the terms 'social work' and/or 'social worker' as protected titles. Anyone using the title 'social worker' is required to be registered with the relevant care council.

3.3   Professional social work qualifications in the UK are linked to a specific level of academic achievement and may be attained through undergraduate or postgraduate study. Convergence of academic and professional awards established an undergraduate honours degree as the minimum required qualification for social workers. The curriculum design and assessment of academic work and practice within the respective social work degrees is determined by the specific requirements in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The NOS and the subject benchmark statement for social work inform these requirements. This statement covers only honours degrees that constitute a professional qualification in social work.

3.4   This benchmark statement informs descriptions of professional competence for registration by identifying the required academic level and the range of subject matter necessary for an undergraduate degree. The process of establishing undergraduate degree programmes in social work should only be undertaken in partnership with other stakeholders including regulatory bodies, employers, professional bodies, providers of practice-learning, service users and those who work within social work and social care.

3.5   Honours degree programmes in social work may be studied in full-time, part-time, open and distance-learning, work-based, and post-experience modes. Irrespective of learning mode, however, all honours degree programmes covered by this statement must include structured opportunities for supervised or directed practice in relevant and appropriate practice-learning settings.

3.6   In addressing the content and standards of honours degrees, this statement takes account of European and international contexts of social work, including the Bologna process and the desirability of the mutual recognition of social work

qualifications within the European sector of the International Federation of Social Workers.

3.7   Contemporary social work increasingly takes place in an inter-agency context, and social workers work collaboratively with others towards interdisciplinary and cross-professional objectives. Honours degree programmes as qualifying awards are required to help equip students with accurate knowledge about the respective responsibilities of social welfare agencies, including those in the public, voluntary/ independent and private sectors, and acquire skills in effective collaborative practice.

3.8   To facilitate broad access to honours degree programmes in social work, holders of sub-degree and vocational qualifications (normally in social care) may be offered entry with advanced standing by means of approved procedures for the recognition of prior (experiential) learning. Honours degree programmes must, however, ensure that all such arrangements enable students to achieve fully the standards required by the relevant care council.

3.9   The term 'service user' is used in this statement to cover the wide and diverse set of individuals, groups and organisations who are involved in, or who benefit from, the contribution of social work to the well being of society. This group will include some that are involuntary or unwilling recipients of social work services. The term 'carer' is used in this statement to cover people who provide informal, unpaid care to a member of their family or to another person, and who work in partnership with social workers to deliver a service. In providing services, social workers should engage with service users and carers in ways that are characterised by openness, reciprocity, mutual accountability and explicit recognition of the powers of the social worker and the legal context of intervention. Service users and carers are required by the four care councils to be involved in all aspects of the design, delivery and assessment of qualifying honours degree programmes.

4   Defining principles

4.1   As an applied academic subject, social work is characterised by a distinctive focus on practice in complex social situations to promote and protect individual and collective well-being. At honours level the study of social work involves the integrated study of subject-specific knowledge, skills and values and the critical application of research knowledge from the social and human sciences (and closely related domains) to inform understanding and to underpin action, reflection and evaluation. Honours degree programmes should be designed to help foster this integration of contextual, analytic, critical, explanatory and practical understanding.

4.2   Contemporary definitions of social work as a degree subject reflect its origins in a range of different academic and practice traditions. The precise nature and scope of the subject is itself a matter for legitimate study and critical debate. The following three main issues are relevant to this.

•   Social work is located within different social welfare contexts. Within the UK there are different traditions of social welfare (influenced by legislation, historical development and social attitudes) and these have shaped both social work education and practice in community-based settings including residential, day care and substitute care. In an international context, distinctive national approaches to social welfare policy, provision and practice have greatly influenced the focus and content of social work degree programmes.

- There are competing views in society at large on the nature of social work and on its place and purpose. Social work practice and education inevitably reflect these differing perspectives on the role of social work in relation to social justice, social care and social order.

- Social work, both as occupational practice and as an academic subject, evolves, adapts and changes in response to the social, political and economic challenges and demands of contemporary social welfare policy, practice and legislation.

4.3   Honours graduates in social work should therefore be equipped both to understand, and to work within, this context of contested debate about nature, scope and purpose, and be enabled to analyse, adapt to, manage and eventually to lead the processes of change.

4.4   The applied nature of social work as an academic subject means that practice is an essential and core element of learning. The following points clarify the use of the term 'practice' in the statement.

- The term 'practice' in this statement is used to encompass learning that not only takes place in professional practice placements, but also in a variety of other experiential learning situations. All learning opportunities that bear academic credit must be subject to methods of assessment appropriate to their academic level and be assessed by competent assessors. Where they form part of the curriculum leading to integrated academic and professional awards, practice learning opportunities will also be subject to regulations that further define learning requirements, standards and modes of assessment.

- In honours degree programmes covered by this statement, practice as an activity refers to experiential, action based learning. In this sense, practice provides opportunities for students to improve and demonstrate their understanding and competence through the application and testing of knowledge and skills.

- Practice activity is also a source of transferable learning in its own right. Such learning can transfer both from a practice setting to the 'classroom' and vice versa. Thus practice can be as much a source of intellectual and cognitive learning as other modes of study. For this reason, learning through practice attracts full academic credit.

- Learning in practice can include activities such as observation, shadowing, analysis and research as well as intervention within social work and related organisations. Practice-learning on honours degrees involves active engagement with service users and others in practice settings outside the university, and may involve for example virtual/simulated practice, observational and research activities.

4.5   Social work is a moral activity that requires practitioners to make and implement difficult decisions about human situations that involve the potential for benefit or harm. Honours degree programmes in social work therefore involve the study, application of and critical reflection upon ethical principles and dilemmas. As reflected by the four care councils' codes of practice, this involves showing

respect for persons, honouring the diverse and distinctive organisations and communities that make up contemporary society, promoting social justice and combating processes that lead to discrimination, marginalisation and social exclusion. This means that honours undergraduates must learn to:

- recognise and work with the powerful links between intrapersonal and interpersonal factors and the wider social, legal, economic, political and cultural context of people's lives
- understand the impact of injustice, social inequalities and oppressive social relations
- challenge constructively individual, institutional and structural discrimination
- practise in ways that maximise safety and effectiveness in situations of uncertainty and incomplete information
- help people to gain, regain or maintain control of their own affairs, insofar as this is compatible with their own or others' safety, well-being and rights
- work in partnership with service users and carers and other professionals to effect change.

4.6 The expectation that social workers will be able to act effectively in such complex circumstances requires that honours degree programmes in social work should be designed to help students learn to become accountable, reflective, critical and evaluative. This involves learning to:

- think critically about the complex social, economic, political and cultural contexts in which social work practice is located
- work in a transparent and responsible way, balancing autonomy with complex, multiple and sometimes contradictory accountabilities (for example, to different service users, employing agencies, professional bodies and the wider society)
- exercise authority within complex frameworks of accountability and ethical and legal boundaries
- acquire and apply the habits of critical reflection, self-evaluation and consultation, and make appropriate use of research in the evaluation of practice outcomes.

5 Subject knowledge, understanding and skills

Subject knowledge and understanding

5.1 During their degree studies in social work, honours graduates should acquire, critically evaluate, apply and integrate knowledge and understanding in the following five core areas of study.

5.2 **Social work services, service users and carers**, which includes:

- the social processes (associated with, for example, poverty, migration, unemployment, poor health, disablement, lack of education and other sources of disadvantage) that lead to marginalisation, isolation and exclusion and their impact on the demand for social work services
- explanations of the links between definitional processes contributing to social differences (for example, social class, gender, ethnic differences and religious belief) to the problems of inequality and differential need faced by service users

- the nature of social work services in a diverse society (with particular reference to concepts such as prejudice, interpersonal, institutional and structural discrimination, empowerment and anti-discriminatory practices)
- the nature and validity of different definitions of, and explanations for, the characteristics and circumstances of service users and the services required by them
- the relationship between agency policies, legal requirements and professional boundaries in shaping the nature of services provided in interdisciplinary contexts and the issues associated with working across professional boundaries and within different disciplinary groups.

5.3 **The service delivery context**, which includes:

- the location of contemporary social work within historical, comparative and global perspectives, including European and international contexts
- the complex relationships between public, social and political philosophies, policies and priorities and the organisation and practice of social work, including the contested nature of these
- the issues and trends in modern public and social policy and their relationship to contemporary practice and service delivery in social work
- the significance of legislative and legal frameworks and service delivery standards (including the nature of legal authority, the application of legislation in practice, statutory accountability and tensions between statute, policy and practice)
- the current range and appropriateness of statutory, voluntary and private agencies providing community-based, day-care, residential and other services and the organisational systems inherent within these
- the significance of interrelationships with other related services, including housing, health, income maintenance and criminal justice (where not an integral social service)
- the contribution of different approaches to management, leadership and quality in public and independent human services
- the implications of modern information and communications technology (ICT) for both the provision and receipt of services.

5.4 **Values and ethics**, which includes:

- the nature, historical evolution and application of social work values
- the moral concepts of rights, responsibility, freedom, authority and power inherent in the practice of social workers as moral and statutory agents
- the complex relationships between justice, care and control in social welfare and the practical and ethical implications of these, including roles as statutory agents and in upholding the law in respect of discrimination
- aspects of philosophical ethics relevant to the understanding and resolution of value dilemmas and conflicts in both interpersonal and professional contexts
- the conceptual links between codes defining ethical practice, the regulation of professional conduct and the management of potential conflicts generated by the codes held by different professional groups.

5.5 **Social work theory**, which includes:

- research-based concepts and critical explanations from social work theory and other disciplines that contribute to the knowledge base of social work, including their distinctive epistemological status and application to practice

- the relevance of sociological perspectives to understanding societal and structural influences on human behaviour at individual, group and community levels
- the relevance of psychological and physiological perspectives to understanding personal and social development and functioning
- social science theories explaining group and organisational behaviour, adaptation and change
- models and methods of assessment, including factors underpinning the selection and testing of relevant information, the nature of professional judgement and the processes of risk assessment and decision-making
- approaches and methods of intervention in a range of settings, including factors guiding the choice and evaluation of these
- knowledge and critical appraisal of relevant social research and evaluation methodologies, and the evidence base for social work.

5.6 **The nature of social work practice**, which includes:

- the characteristics of practice in a range of community-based and organisational settings within statutory, voluntary and private sectors, and the factors influencing changes and developments in practice within these contexts
- the nature and characteristics of skills associated with effective practice, both direct and indirect, with a range of service users and in a variety of settings
- the factors and processes that facilitate effective interdisciplinary, interprofessional and inter-agency collaboration and partnership
- the place of theoretical perspectives and evidence from international research in assessment and decision-making processes in social work practice
- the integration of theoretical perspectives and evidence from international research into the design and implementation of effective social work intervention with a wide range of service users, carers and others
- the processes of reflection and evaluation, including familiarity with the range of approaches for evaluating welfare outcomes, and their significance for the development of practice and the practitioner.

Subject-specific skills and other skills

5.7 As an applied subject at honours degree level, social work necessarily involves the development of skills that may be of value in many situations (for example analytical thinking, building relationships, working as a member of an organisation, intervention, evaluation and reflection). Some of these skills are specific to social work but many are also widely transferable. What helps to define the specific nature of these skills in a social work context are:

- the context in which they are applied and assessed (eg communication skills in practice with people with sensory impairments or assessment skills in an interprofessional setting)
- the relative weighting given to such skills within social work practice (eg the central importance of problem solving skills within complex human situations)
- the specific purpose of skill development (eg the acquisition of research skills in order to build a repertoire of research-based practice)
- a requirement to integrate a range of skills (ie not simply to demonstrate these in an isolated and incremental manner).

5.8 All social work honours graduates should show the ability to reflect on and learn from the exercise of their skills. They should understand the significance of the

concepts of continuing professional development and lifelong learning and accept responsibility for their own continuing development.

5.9   Social work honours graduates should acquire and integrate skills in the following five core areas.

ICT and numerical skills

5.10   Honours graduates in social work should be able to use ICT methods and techniques to support their learning and their practice. In particular, they should demonstrate the ability to:

- use ICT effectively for professional communication, data storage and retrieval and information searching
- demonstrate sufficient familiarity with statistical techniques to enable effective use of research in practice
- integrate appropriate use of technology to enhance skills in problem-solving in the four areas set out below
- have a critical understanding of the social impact of ICT, including an awareness of the impact of the 'digital divide'.

Problem-solving skills

5.11   These are sub-divided into four areas.

Managing problem-solving activities

5.12   Honours graduates in social work should be able to plan problem-solving activities, ie to:

- think logically, systematically, critically and reflectively
- apply ethical principles and practices critically in planning problem-solving activities
- plan a sequence of actions to achieve specified objectives making use of research, theory and other forms of evidence
- manage processes of change drawing on research, theory and other forms of evidence.

Gathering information

5.13   Honours graduates in social work should be able to:

- gather information from a wide range of sources and by a variety of methods, for a range of purposes. These methods should include electronic searches, reviews of relevant literature, policy and procedures, face-to-face interviews, written and telephone contact with individuals and groups
- take into account differences of viewpoint in gathering information and critically assess the reliability and relevance of the information gathered
- assimilate and disseminate relevant information in reports and case records.

Analysis and synthesis

5.14   Honours graduates in social work should be able to analyse and synthesise knowledge gathered for problem-solving purposes, ie to:

- assess human situations, taking into account a variety of factors (including the views of participants, theoretical concepts, research evidence, legislation and organisational policies and procedures)
- analyse information gathered, weighing competing evidence and modifying their viewpoint in light of new information, then relate this information to a particular task, situation or problem
- consider specific factors relevant to social work practice (such as risk, rights, cultural differences and linguistic sensitivities, responsibilities to protect vulnerable individuals and legal obligations)
- assess the merits of contrasting theories, explanations, research, policies and procedures
- synthesise knowledge and sustain reasoned argument
- employ a critical understanding of human agency at the macro (societal), mezzo (organisational and community) and micro (inter and intrapersonal) levels
- critically analyse and take account of the impact of inequality and discrimination in work with people in particular contexts and problem situations.

Intervention and evaluation

5.15   Honours graduates in social work should be able to use their knowledge of a range of interventions and evaluation processes selectively to:

- build and sustain purposeful relationships with people and organisations in community-based, and interprofessional contexts
- make decisions, set goals and construct specific plans to achieve these, taking into account relevant factors including ethical guidelines
- negotiate goals and plans with others, analysing and addressing in a creative manner human, organisational and structural impediments to change
- implement plans through a variety of systematic processes that include working in partnership
- undertake practice in a manner that promotes the well-being and protects the safety of all parties
- manage the complex dynamics of dependency and, in some settings, provide direct care and personal support in every day living situations
- meet deadlines and comply with external definitions of task
- plan, implement and critically review processes and outcomes
- bring work to an effective conclusion, taking into account the implications for all involved
- monitor situations, review processes and evaluate outcomes
- use and evaluate methods of intervention critically and reflectively.

Communication skills

5.16   Honours graduates in social work should be able to communicate clearly, accurately and precisely (both orally and in writing) with individuals and groups in a range of formal and informal situations, ie to:

- make effective contact with individuals and organisations for a range of objectives, by verbal, paper-based and electronic means
- clarify and negotiate the purpose of such contacts and the boundaries of their involvement

- listen actively to others, engage appropriately with the life experiences of service users, understand accurately their viewpoint and overcome personal prejudices to respond appropriately to a range of complex personal and interpersonal situations
- use both verbal and non-verbal cues to guide interpretation
- identify and use opportunities for purposeful and supportive communication with service users within their everyday living situations
- follow and develop an argument and evaluate the viewpoints of, and evidence presented by, others
- write accurately and clearly in styles adapted to the audience, purpose and context of the communication
- use advocacy skills to promote others rights, interests and needs
- present conclusions verbally and on paper, in a structured form, appropriate to the audience for which these have been prepared
- make effective preparation for, and lead meetings in a productive way
- communicate effectively across potential barriers resulting from differences (for example, in culture, language and age).

Skills in working with others
5.17   Honours graduates in social work should be able to work effectively with others, ie to:

- involve users of social work services in ways that increase their resources, capacity and power to influence factors affecting their lives
- consult actively with others, including service users and carers, who hold relevant information or expertise
- act cooperatively with others, liaising and negotiating across differences such as organisational and professional boundaries and differences of identity or language
- develop effective helping relationships and partnerships with other individuals, groups and organisations that facilitate change
- act with others to increase social justice by identifying and responding to prejudice, institutional discrimination and structural inequality
- act within a framework of multiple accountability (for example, to agencies, the public, service users, carers and others)
- challenge others when necessary, in ways that are most likely to produce positive outcomes.

Skills in personal and professional development
5.18   Honours graduates in social work should be able to:

- advance their own learning and understanding with a degree of independence
- reflect on and modify their behaviour in the light of experience
- identify and keep under review their own personal and professional boundaries
- manage uncertainty, change and stress in work situations
- handle inter and intrapersonal conflict constructively
- understand and manage changing situations and respond in a flexible manner
- challenge unacceptable practices in a responsible manner
- take responsibility for their own further and continuing acquisition of knowledge and skills
- use research critically and effectively to sustain and develop their practice.

6 Teaching, learning and assessment

6.1   At honours degree level, social work programmes explicitly recognise and maximise the use of students' prior learning and experience. Acquisition and development of the required knowledge and skills, capable of transfer to new situations and of further enhancement, mark important staging posts in the process of lifelong learning. Social work models of learning are characteristically developmental and additive (ie students are expected to assume increasing responsibility for identifying their own learning needs and making use of available resources for learning). The context of learning should take account of the impact of the Bologna process and transnational learning. The overall aims and expected final outcomes of the honours degree, together with the specific requirements of particular topics, modules or practice experiences, should inform the choice of both learning and teaching strategies and aligned formative and summative assessment methods.

6.2   The learning processes in social work at honours degree level can be expressed in terms of four inter-related themes:

i   **awareness raising, skills and knowledge acquisition** - a process in which the learner becomes more aware of aspects of knowledge and expertise, learns how to systematically engage with and acquire new areas of knowledge, recognises their potential and becomes motivated to engage in new ways of thinking and acting

ii   **conceptual understanding** - a process in which a learner acquires, examines critically and deepens understanding (measured and tested against existing knowledge and adjustments made in attitudes and goals)

iii   **practice skills and experience** - processes in which a student learns practice skills and applies theoretical models and research evidence, together with new understanding, to relevant activities and receives feedback from various sources on performance, enhancing openness to critical self-evaluation

iv   **reflection on performance** - a process in which a student reflects critically and evaluatively on past experience, recent performance, and feedback, and applies this information to the process of integrating awareness (including awareness of the impact of self on others) and new understanding, leading to improved performance.

6.3   Honours degree programmes in social work acknowledge that learners learn at different rates and in diverse ways and learn best when there is consistent and timely guidance and a variety of learning opportunities. Thus programmes should provide clear and accessible information about learning approaches, methods and outcomes, which enable students to engage with diverse learning and teaching methods in learning settings across academic and practice environments.

6.4   Approaches to support-blended learning should include the use of ICT to access data, literature and resources as well as engagement with technologies to support communication and reflection and sharing of learning across academic and practice learning settings.

6.5   Learning methods may include:

- learner-focused approaches that encourage active participation and staged, progressive learning throughout the degree
- the establishment of initial learning needs and the formulation of learning plans
- the development of learning networks, enabling students to learn from each other
- the involvement of practitioners and service user and carer educators.

6.6   Learners should engage in a broad range of activities to facilitate critical reflection, including reading; self-directed study; research; a variety of forms of writing; lectures; discussion; seminars/tutorials; individual and group work; role plays; presentations; projects; simulations; and practice experience.

6.7   Assessment strategies should show alignment between, and relevance to, social work practice, theory and assessment tasks. They should also be matched with learning outcomes and learning and teaching methods. The purpose of assessment is to:

- provide a means whereby learners receive feedback regularly on their achievement and development needs
- provide tasks which promote learning, and develop and test cognitive skills, drawing on a range of sources including the contexts of practice
- promote self evaluation, and appraisal of their progress and learning strategies
- enable judgements to be made in relation to progress and to ensure fitness for practice, and the award, in line with professional standards.

6.8   Assessment strategies should be chosen to enhance learners' abilities to conceptualise, compare and analyse issues, in order to be able to apply this in making professional judgements.

6.9   Assessment methods normally include case based assessments; presentations and analyses; practice-focused assignments; essays; project reports; role plays/simulations; e-assessment; and examinations. The requirements of honours degree programmes in social work frequently include an extended piece of written work, which may be practice-based and is typically undertaken in the final year. This may involve independent study for either a dissertation or a project, based on systematic enquiry and investigation. Where practice competences have to be assessed, as identified through occupational standards or equivalent, opportunities should be provided for demonstration of these, together with systematic means of development, support and assessment.

6.10   Honours degree programmes in social work assess practice not as a series of discrete practical tasks, but as an integration of skills and knowledge with relevant conceptual understanding. This assessment should, therefore, contain elements that test students' critical and analytical reflective analysis. As the honours degree is an integrated academic and professional award, the failure of any core element including assessed practice will mean failure of the programme.

7 Benchmark standards

7.1 Given the essentially applied nature of social work and the co-terminosity of the degree and the professional award, students must demonstrate that they have met the standards specified in relation to **both** academic and practice capabilities. These standards relate to subject specific knowledge, understanding and skills (including key skills inherent in the concept of 'graduateness'). Qualifying students will be expected to meet each of these standards in accordance with the specific standards set by the relevant country (see section 2).

Typical graduate

7.2 Levels of attainment will vary along a continuum from the threshold to excellence. This level represents that of typical students graduating with an honours degree in social work.

Knowledge and understanding

7.3 On graduating with an honours degree in social work, students should be able to demonstrate:

- a sound understanding of the five core areas of knowledge and understanding relevant to social work as detailed in paragraph 5.1, including their application to practice and service delivery
- an ability to use this knowledge and understanding in an integrated way in specific practice contexts
- appraisal of previous learning and experience and ability to incorporate this into their future learning and practice
- acknowledgement and understanding of the potential and limitations of social work as a practice based discipline
- an ability to use research and enquiry techniques with reflective awareness to collect, analyse and interpret relevant information
- a developed capacity for the critical evaluation of knowledge and evidence from a range of sources.

Subject-specific and other skills

7.4 On graduating with an honours degree in social work, students should be able to demonstrate a developed capacity to:

- apply creatively a repertoire of core skills as detailed in paragraph 5.2
- integrate clear understanding of ethical issues and codes of values and practice with their interventions in specific situations
- consistently exercise an appropriate level of autonomy and initiative in individual decision making within the context of supervisory, collaborative, ethical and organisational requirements
- demonstrate habits of critical reflection on their performance and take responsibility for modifying action in light of this.

Appendix A: Membership of the review group for the subject benchmark statement for social work

Janet Fabb	University of Paisley
Dr Sally Holland	Cardiff University
Professor Joan Orme (Joint chair)	Glasgow School of Social Work (a joint School of the Universities of Glasgow and Strathclyde)
Professor Jackie Powell	University of Southampton
Professor Michael Preston-Shoot (Joint chair)	University of Bedfordshire
Jackie Rafferty	Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Social Policy and Social Work
Dr Caroline Skehill	The Queen's University Belfast
Hilary Tompsett	Kingston University

Appendix B: Membership of the original benchmarking group for social work

Details appear below as published in the original subject benchmark statement for social policy and administration and social work (2000).

Mr P Bywaters	Coventry University
Ms A Cleverly	University of Wales Institute, Cardiff
Mr S Collins	University of Wales, Bangor
Dr R G Colman	University of Leicester
Dr P Higham	The Nottingham Trent University
Mr J Lewis	University of Plymouth
Professor J Lishman	The Robert Gordon University
Ms J Powell	University of Southampton
Dr S Trevillion	Brunel University
Professor B Williams (Chair)	University of Dundee