



Subject Benchmark Statement

Social Work

April 2026



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About this Statement

This QAA Subject Benchmark Statement for Social Work defines what can be expected of a graduate in terms of what they might know, do and understand at the end of their studies. Subject Benchmark Statements are an established part of the quality assurance arrangements in UK higher education. They are sector-owned reference points, developed and written by academics. Subject Benchmark Statements also describe the nature and characteristics of awards in a particular discipline or area. Subject Benchmark Statements are published in QAA's capacity as an expert quality body on behalf of the higher education sector. A summary of the Statement is also available on the QAA website.

Key changes from the previous Subject Benchmark Statement include:

- streamlining, to enhance clarity, efficiency and focus, thereby assisting course providers in developing new and diverse pathways into social work, giving consideration of the following:
 - equity, equality, diversity and inclusion (EEDI)
 - accessibility and the needs of disabled students
 - education for sustainable development (ESD)
 - employability, entrepreneurship and enterprise education (EEE)
 - generative artificial intelligence (GenAI)
- a comprehensive review updating the context and purposes, including course design and content, in order to inform and underpin the revised benchmark standards.

How can I use this document?

Subject Benchmark Statements are not intended to prescribe any particular approaches to teaching, learning or assessment. Rather, they provide a framework, agreed by the subject community, that forms the basis on which those responsible for curriculum design, approval and update can reflect upon a course, and its component modules. This allows for flexibility and innovation in course design while providing a broadly accepted external reference point for that discipline.

They may also be used as a reference point by external examiners when considering whether the design of a course and the threshold standards of achievement are comparable with those of other higher education providers. Furthermore, Statements can support professional, statutory and regulatory bodies (PSRBs) with their definitions and interpretations of academic standards.

You may want to read this document if you are:

- involved in the design, delivery and review of courses in Social Work
- a prospective student thinking about undertaking a course in Social Work
- an employer, to find out about the knowledge and skills generally expected of Social Work graduates.

Relationship to legislation

The responsibility for academic standards lies with the higher education provider which awards the degree. Higher education providers are responsible for meeting the requirements of legislation and any other regulatory requirements placed upon them by their relevant funding and regulatory bodies. This Statement does not interpret legislation, nor does it incorporate statutory or regulatory requirements.

The status of the Statement will differ depending on the educational jurisdictions of the UK. In England, Subject Benchmark Statements are not [sector-recognised standards](#) as set out under the Office for Students' [regulatory framework](#). However, Subject Benchmark Statements are part of the current quality arrangements in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Because the Statement describes outcomes and attributes expected at the threshold standard of achievement in a UK-wide context, many higher education providers will use them as a tool for course design and approval, and for subsequent monitoring and review, in addition to helping demonstrate the security of academic standards.

Additional sector reference points

Higher education providers are likely to consider other reference points in addition to this Statement when designing, delivering and reviewing courses. These may include requirements set out by PSRBs and industry or employer expectations. In 2024, QAA published an update to the [Quality Code](#), which will be helpful when using this Statement.

Explanations of unfamiliar terms used in this Subject Benchmark Statement can be found in [QAA's Glossary](#). Sources of information about other requirements and examples of guidance and good practice are signposted within the Statement where appropriate.

1 Context and purposes of a Social Work degree

1.1 The study and practice of social work in the UK reflects the key principles of the [Global Definition of the Social Work Profession](#) (International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) 2014):

"Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledges, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing."

1.2 This Subject Benchmark Statement outlines a roadmap for social work education that is underpinned by a commitment to social justice, inclusion, and ethical and reflective practice. It promotes an understanding of challenges facing society and people with lived and/or living experience and how to respond to reduce risk and enhance wellbeing.

1.3 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. Historical convergence of academic and professional awards established a bachelor's degree with honours as the minimum required qualification for social workers in the UK.

1.4 Legislation establishing regulatory bodies in social work and introducing statutory registration of social workers was passed across the UK from 2000 onwards. The title 'social worker' is legally protected, and it is illegal to use it unless a person is registered with these relevant country-specific regulatory bodies:

- Cymru/Wales: Social Care Wales
- England: Social Work England
- Northern Ireland: Northern Ireland Social Care Council
- Scotland: Scottish Social Services Council.

1.5 The regulatory bodies approve Social Work courses and ensure that social work professionals are regulated to maintain high standards and protect the public.

1.6 The standards and expectations set by relevant regulatory bodies significantly influence and inform the structure and content of the curriculum and assessment for Social Work degrees.

Purposes and characteristics of a Social Work degree

1.7 As an academic discipline applied through professional practice, social work is distinguished by its focus on navigating complex social situations to promote and safeguard both individual and collective wellbeing. A key characteristic of Social Work education is to encompass the integrated study of specialised knowledge, skills and values, along with the critical application of research to inform understanding and to guide action, reflection and evaluation. The curriculum and practice continuously evolve and adapt in response to social, political and economic challenges, demands of contemporary social welfare policy, practice, and legislation, and in response to research findings.

1.8 Social work is practised in a diverse range of settings, reflecting the diversity and complexity of contemporary society. The dynamic relationship between society, the state, and the profession remains fundamental to social work's role in supporting individuals affected by trauma and those in need or at risk. Operating in contexts marked by uncertainty,

complexity and ambiguity, social workers must be equipped with the knowledge and skills to navigate these challenges effectively. The administration of social work in some sectors includes the development of social policy and legislation. Social workers are also expected to engage critically with ongoing debates concerning the nature, scope and purpose of the profession, and to demonstrate the capacity to analyse, adapt to, manage, and ultimately lead processes of change.

1.9 Increasingly, social work is conducted within an interagency and/or multi-agency context, requiring social workers to collaborate with others towards interdisciplinary and cross-professional objectives. To be effective in such environments, graduates possess a clear understanding of the distinct roles and responsibilities of professionals and of social welfare organisations operating within the public, voluntary, independent and private sectors and develop skills in effective collaborative practice.

1.10 The nature of Social Work as an academic discipline applied in a professional context means that practice is an essential and core element of learning. The term 'practice' in this Statement is used to encompass learning that not only takes place in professional work-based settings (sometimes referred to as placement), but also in a variety of other experiential learning situations, including classroom-based activity which may also be supported or delivered by people with lived or living experience.

1.11 Course design, content and practice learning requirement are also informed by the stipulations of the relevant regulatory body.

Equity, equality, diversity and inclusion

1.12 Consideration of equity, equality, diversity and inclusion (EEDI) encompasses a wide range of identity characteristics, including, but not limited to, race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion and belief, disability (including neurodivergent people), age, and socio-economic background. It is recognised that there are many forms of difference and that these are, in part, reflected in standards set by the regulatory bodies for social work, and in legal equality duties but go beyond that to recognise intersectionality across the student and staff population. EEDI is central to social work practice and is embedded within the culture and practice of the subject area.

1.13 In creating an inclusive learning community, providers can draw on guiding principles for embedding equality and diversity. Providers can explicitly incorporate anti-discriminatory, anti-oppressive practices and anti-racist values and ethics into their teaching practices, resources and curricula. Key reference points include:

- [The Equality Act 2010](#)
- The Equality and Human Rights Commission [Protected Characteristics](#)
- [Equality Commission for Northern Ireland](#)
- [Social Work and Human Rights](#).

1.14 Course providers have a duty to make reasonable adjustments for their students to provide an accessible learning environment open to all, including those with protected characteristics. This approach aligns with the [International Federation of Social Workers \(IFSW\) definition of social work](#), and specifically 'principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work' as well as relevant professional standards.

1.15 Social Work courses educate, equip and empower students and educators to consider their own self-identity in terms of intersectionality, the interconnected nature of social categories such as race/ethnicity, class and gender, and how this influences their outlook

and understanding of individuals and of different social groups. Course providers are committed to widening access and participation to progress towards a safe and inclusive learning environment for all, one which seeks to bridge the gaps and enhance opportunities to thrive and realise potential. To achieve this, course providers can develop a culture and curriculum that promote critical thinking and holistic evaluation of social issues, and which address any awarding gaps. This approach includes critically evaluating and applying concepts and language relevant to EEDI. The following are examples of cross-cutting themes that shape Social Work curricula, learning, teaching and assessment and which will be useful to include when aligning Social Work courses:

- anti-ableism
- anti-discrimination
- anti-oppression
- anti-racism
- belonging
- climate justice
- cultural humility
- decolonising the curriculum
- gender inequalities
- identity and power
- intersectionality
- modern slavery
- neurodiversity
- poverty.

1.16 Recognising the role social work plays in oppression, an inclusive and representative workforce at local, regional and national levels is at the heart of effective Social Work education. Making the profession more diverse and promoting wider participation enhances representativeness. A broad range of stakeholders and educators is needed to work inclusively and effectively with all students. Diversity of staff in academic and practice settings is integral to upholding ethical responsibilities, particularly in safeguarding students and people with lived or living experiences. Drawing on a sense of self, self-awareness and self-identity can be used to support students in recognising and reflecting on their own lived privileges and barriers.

1.17 Course providers and practice placements have a legal duty to make reasonable adjustments for students to provide an accessible learning environment open to all, including those with protected characteristics. Further guidance is available in QAA's [Creating Inclusive Subject Learning Communities](#).

1.18 Examples of ways in which courses and providers consider equity, equality, diversity and inclusion in their learning community include:

- celebrating the richness of, and value added by, cultural and individual differences
- working legally and ethically, giving due regard to protected characteristics
- understanding different perspectives
- mitigating for disadvantage by incorporating reasonable adjustments, for example alternative assessments
- developing individual and personalised learning plans
- involving students as co-creators of the curriculum
- permitting the recording of synchronous content
- creating safe spaces for students to share experiences without fear or judgement
- having systems and processes in place for students to raise issues or share experiences of discrimination or oppression.

Further examples are provided in the section on Accessibility below.

1.19 To foster robust professional practice, course providers make explicit and embed anti-discriminatory, anti-oppressive practices and anti-racist values and ethics in:

- curriculum design
- course content
- delivery of learning and teaching
- assessment and feedback.

1.20 It is beneficial for courses to actively and intentionally recognise, challenge and dismantle oppression, discrimination and racism in all its forms, including structural, institutional, interpersonal and internalised racism. This includes a specific and unambiguous commitment to addressing anti-Black racism and the unique forms of oppression that impact those from other global majority and minoritised ethnic backgrounds.

1.21 Examples of how courses might do this include:

- developing a curriculum which critically engages with the history and contemporary realities of oppression, discrimination and of racism, colonialism and empire and their enduring legacies within social work and wider UK society, for example by integrating knowledge and perspectives from Black and global majority scholars, activists, practitioners and people with lived experience
- ensuring that teaching and assessment methods are inclusive, culturally responsive, anti-oppressive and inclusive of diverse forms of knowledge, identity and lived experience – this includes actively working to decolonise pedagogical practices
- ensuring that students from Black and global majority backgrounds are not viewed solely through a deficit or victim lens, but as holders of rich, diverse knowledge systems and experiences, thereby enabling their perspectives to be heard, respected and used to shape programme content, delivery and policy
- actively monitoring and addressing differential attainments
- providing safe, accessible and accountable mechanisms to report and address issues, with clear action plans and follow-through, for example by using [Shades of Bias](#), a case study template designed to enable critical reflection on how discrimination, oppression and racism manifests in social work and beyond
- fostering a learning environment where anti-oppressive, anti-discriminatory and anti-racist values are modelled and embedded
- having a commitment to an inclusive team, for example by recognising the pivotal role of Black and global majority staff in shaping and delivering an inclusive pedagogy.

Accessibility and the needs of disabled students

1.22 The Equality Act 2010 places a legal duty on education providers in England, Scotland and Wales. For courses in Wales, The Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011 sets standards for the promotion and use of Welsh language in education and social care. The Special Educational Needs and Disability (Northern Ireland) Order 2005 places a legal duty on education providers in Northern Ireland. Course providers can adopt a proactive rather than reactive approach, where issues of accessibility of teaching, learning, assessment and the wider student experience are anticipated for students with disabilities, including those with neurodiversity.

1.23 Ensuring accessible learning and practice environments is not only a legal obligation, but also a reflection of the core values of the social work profession. It is a responsibility actively upheld and supported by all stakeholders involved in the education and training of social workers.

1.24 Courses can be designed to accommodate students with individual requirements, ensuring accessibility is embedded in both curriculum design and the broader student experience. Course providers are expected to make anticipatory reasonable adjustments to teaching, learning and assessment, whether on campus, online or in practice settings, to enable all students to achieve and demonstrate the intended learning outcomes.

1.25 Courses strive to ensure equitable access while maintaining rigorous academic and practice standards and evaluating readiness for professional practice by:

- having policies and procedures in place to support reasonable adjustments for applicants during the admissions process
- having policies and procedures to cover both institutional learning and that undertaken in practice, to assess specific needs, document plans and make reasonable adjustments
- having clear ways to communicate issues and areas of concern, including complaints and appeals procedures
- screening practice learning for health and safety standards and accessibility and making reasonable adjustments as needed
- being accessible for all students both in person, in practice settings and digitally, making reasonable adjustments as needed to ensure that students can use and benefit from the support offered
- ensuring students have access to learning resources and technology that support their individual learning and, if the student has a learning need, that adjustments are documented and made accordingly
- explicitly incorporating anti-discriminatory, anti-oppressive practices and anti-racist values and ethics into their teaching practices, resources and curricula
- ensuring accessibility in respect of curriculum and content by making reasonable adjustments where required so that students have clear plans documenting individual support needs
- including a wide range of assessment strategies
- being alert to and supporting students to navigate obstacles and barriers, for example, poverty including digital poverty and signposting students to support services
- finding possible solutions for accessibility problems which may be experienced by marginalised groups, such as offering bursaries and lending laptops
- adopting a flexible approach and discussing the specific nature of reasonable adjustments with individual students to ensure they are appropriate to them as an individual while still meeting professional and/or regulatory body requirements – this could involve alternative forms of assessment that allow students to demonstrate achievement of learning outcomes.

Education for sustainable development

1.26 Social workers can contribute to any area of sustainable development, such as reconnecting people with the natural environment and reducing inequalities on an individual

and global level. They also play a critical role on the frontline supporting people impacted by the climate crisis, including, but not limited to, disaster management, working with people unequally impacted by climate change, and supporting those experiencing eco-anxiety. Social work's promotion of social justice finds itself at the heart of challenging inequality, poverty and displacement, some of which may be attributed to environmental destruction. Social work contributes to addressing challenges experienced individually, locally, nationally and globally through analysing and explaining experiences and behaviour in the context of people's environments.

Social work embraces first, second and third generation rights. First generation rights refer to civil and political rights such as free speech and conscience and freedom from torture and arbitrary detention; second generation to socio-economic and cultural rights that include the rights to reasonable levels of education, healthcare, and housing and minority language rights; and third generation rights focus on the natural world and the right to species biodiversity and inter-generational equity. These rights are mutually reinforcing and interdependent and accommodate both individual and collective rights. [\(IFSW\)](#)

1.27 Social Work courses develop graduates as global citizens who understand the impact of climate and environmental issues, including, but not limited to, displacement, poverty, economic prosperity, social justice and the factors that affect their interrelationships.

1.28 Social work is a value-based profession, focusing on social justice, critical thinking, collaboration, empowerment, and relationship-based practice, among other principles. Consequently, students are encouraged to critically reflect on their actions to acknowledge their current and future social, cultural, economic and environmental impacts, and gain a deep understanding of these factors. They are encouraged to navigate complex situations sustainably, exploring and engaging in sociopolitical processes to support sustainable development.

1.29 Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is a key instrument to achieve the United Nation's [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs). SDGs are the blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future. They address the global challenges we face, including those related to poverty, inequality, the climate crisis, environmental degradation, peace and justice. Many of the United Nation's SDGs are social work goals:

 **SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS**



[UNESCO and the Sustainable Development Goals | UNESCO](#)

1.30 UNESCO identifies key competencies essential for addressing the SDGs, as well as pedagogies to achieve these. The key competencies cover ways of thinking (systems, future, critical); ways of practising (strategically, collaboratively, integrated); and ways of being (self-awareness, normative, reflective). They are at the heart of social work practice and can be embedded in qualifying education, evident in course and module design, and included in assessments.

1.31 ESD integrates content such as climate change, poverty and sustainable consumption into the curriculum. It promotes interactive student-centred teaching in appropriate settings. ESD encourages a shift from teaching to learning. It requires an action-oriented, transformative pedagogy, which supports self-directed learning, participation and collaboration, problem-orientation, inter and trans-disciplinarity and the linking of formal and informal learning. These pedagogical approaches, central to Social Work education, make possible the development of key competencies to promote sustainable development.

1.32 The International Federation of Social Work (IFSW) affirms and supports the United Nation's SDGs, recognising their momentum and the opportunities they create to foster social, economic and ecological transformational global change. Educators can ensure programmes are structured to develop graduates who are ready for both local and global environmental, economic and social challenges. As the QAA/Advance HE [Guidance on ESD](#) (2021) states, '[ESD] can be understood as a lens that permits us to look critically at how the world is and to envision how it might be and equips us to deliver that vision' (page 8). ESD can be an integral part of curriculum design, course management and delivery. Educators preparing students for the future, can embrace ESD and ensure that every graduate has not only the knowledge and skills but the attributes to cope, and ideally thrive, in the face of multiple challenges in the 21st century.

1.33 Central to the UN's Agenda of Sustainable Development is the core commitment to inclusion while ensuring that 'no-one is left behind'. This commitment is reflected in the emphasis on ethical considerations within the discipline, course and module design, the student experience, and curriculum content. The contributions of social work are critical to addressing the challenges of sustainable development, including urgent climate action, and represent an opportunity for students and graduates to apply their social work skills, knowledge and behaviours in response to the problems experienced in local communities, nationally and globally.

Employability, entrepreneurship and enterprise education

1.34 Employability, enterprise and entrepreneurship education supports behaviours, attributes and competencies that are likely to have a significant impact on the individual student in terms of their choice of employment destination and future career success. It prepares students for changing environments and provides enhanced impact through practice-based learning opportunities and activities that build links between course providers and external organisations.

1.35 Social Work courses prepare graduates for changing environments and provide enhanced impact through practice-based learning in employment settings and activities that build links between academic institutions and external organisations.

1.36 Beyond employment, entrepreneurship education provides competencies to help graduates lead a rewarding, self-determined professional life, well placed to add social, cultural and economic value to society through their careers.

1.37 Developing an entrepreneurial mindset in social work means becoming:

- aware of ongoing personal and professional development and how this shapes a social work professional identity
- motivated to achieve personal and professional ambitions and goals during social work education and understanding how to take this into professional practice
- self-organised, flexible and responsive in the face of challenges, changes and with competing demands
- curious about new possibilities for creating value and making positive impact
- responsive to problems and opportunities by making new connections in the social work community, and more widely
- skilled at being creative to achieve results
- tolerant of characteristics that resonate with social work, including uncertainty, ambiguity, risk and failure
- environmentally and sustainably aware
- sensitive to social justice values, ethics, social representation, inclusion and environmental issues.

1.38 Course experiences:

- offer students and graduates the opportunity to explore a range of professional career pathways in social work, service development, education (including practice education) and research
- provide practical ways to develop and apply enterprise behaviours, attributes and skills, individually and collaboratively
- ensure students have a wide range of opportunities to develop new knowledge, skills, behaviours and attributes in relation to enterprise and entrepreneurship
- enhance employability and prepare graduates to undertake social work practice in a range of settings, including those that do not have statutory duties
- prepare graduates for the changing environments and uncertainty often experienced in social work.

1.39 Behaviours can include demonstrating agency and taking responsibility for one's own effectiveness; communicating at different levels with organisations, individuals and groups; showing ability to adapt to changing contexts and opportunities; thinking strategically; making defensible decisions informed by a robust evidence base; balancing and managing risk; seeking advice and support when required; working collaboratively and independently where required.

1.40 Attributes can include being reflective, reflexive, flexible and adaptable: being professionally curious and open-minded to emerging contexts and opportunities; being imaginative and innovative; being proactive and having the confidence to take the initiative; being determined, persistent and adaptable to work with challenges; being interested in networking and making things happen and having a mindset for professional practice.

1.41 Skills for professional practice can include career planning; strategic thinking; advanced interpersonal communication skills; creative problem-solving and decision-making skills; project management skills; finance and budgeting skills; report writing skills; negotiation and influencing skills; understanding systems and processes; a confident understanding and application of legal and ethical frameworks; demonstrable ability to practice professionally and ethically; and embedding digital literacy.

1.42 Developing digital competency and transferable skills includes using digital technology to communicate ideas creatively, innovatively and accessibly to enhance academic success and employability.

1.43 Learning about and experiencing enterprise and entrepreneurship can have several benefits. It fosters a 'can do' confidence, building on strengths, values and motivation, gives students alternative perspectives on their career options and pathways into social work, and helps students understand that social work is undertaken in a range of settings, including statutory and non-statutory organisations, local, national or international.

1.44 Enterprise skills, such as leading others, teamwork and the ability to demonstrate initiative and original thought, alongside self-discipline in starting tasks and completing them to deadline, are essential attributes that have been identified by employers as priorities in social work practice. Ultimately, the aim is for graduates to become professional social workers who have the required professional knowledge and skills; that is, graduates who are critical thinkers, open minded, responsive, adaptable, able to communicate on a range of levels, negotiate and influence decision making and who can enter the social work profession with competence and confidence.

Generative artificial intelligence

1.45 Contemporary and emerging forms of artificial intelligence, including Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI), have become integral components of modern society. These technologies not only underpin but actively shape social relationships, individual lived experiences, sociopolitical discourse, and numerous other facets of community and cultural life. Social Work students and social workers critically engage with technologies in their learning and practice to ensure effective support for people, congruent with social work values. Course providers can support students to use technologies competently and critically, legally and ethically, and for the benefit of individuals and communities. It is expected that procedures will be in place to ensure authenticity and academic integrity.

1.46 There are many ways to engage with technologies, in various places and spaces: higher education (or other) settings, online and virtual spaces, practice learning contexts, and others. Students and educators engage with technologies at both an individual level, within whole groups, and across communities and societies, and with differing levels of access and accessibility. Students and educators need to be able to navigate these from a variety of perspectives, keeping abreast of evolving technologies and their uses, and harnessing their far-reaching impacts for enhancing learning and teaching, research, practice learning, and social work practice. Educators and placement providers engage with ways technologies can empower and improve the lives of people and communities, and recognise, respond to and challenge the risks and discrimination they can create and reinforce for individuals and groups. Further guidance and support is provided in [QAA advice and resources on Generative AI](#).

1.47 To ensure social work values are always upheld across both learning and practice, engagement with GenAI technologies include the following:

- robust critical thinking and critical use, including with respect to legal obligations
- ethical practice grounded in equity and inclusion
- promotion of social justice and working to address oppression and discrimination
- an applied appreciation of social and environmental impacts.

1.48 It is expected that social work values guide student and educator engagements with technology throughout the learning journey and that technologies and digital options do not replace human relationships or interactions.

2 Distinctive features of a Social Work course

Design

2.1 The study and practice of social work in the UK reflects the key principles of the Global Definition of the Social Work Profession ([IFSW, 2014](#)). As an academic subject applied through professional practice, Social Work is characterised by a distinctive focus on practice in complex social situations to promote and protect individual and collective wellbeing. This includes the importance of partnerships between higher education (course) providers and service providers to ensure the full involvement of employers, practitioners, academics and researchers, people with lived or living experiences, and with students in both academic and practice learning settings and in assessment processes.

2.2 Courses in Social Work involve the integrated study of subject-specific knowledge, skills and values and the critical application of research knowledge to inform understanding and to underpin action, critical reflection and evaluation. Courses are designed to help foster analytic and critical, theoretical, explanatory and practical understanding in a wide range of contexts.

2.3 Social Work courses are designed to offer students knowledge to equip them to work in professional contexts with a wide range of individuals, groups and communities. Courses are also inclusive of students with lived experience of support, including, for example, care experienced students. Diversity of experience is a key strength of all programmes, providing a more authentic and richer learning environment.

2.4 Social Work education is rooted in values and ethics that require social work practitioners to recognise the dignity of the individual, but also to make and implement difficult decisions (including the restriction of liberty) in human situations that involve the potential for benefit or harm. Courses therefore involve the study and application of, and critical reflection upon, ethical principles and professional dilemmas as a core requirement. Reflected by the four nations' regulators, this involves showing respect for persons, honouring the diverse and distinctive organisations and communities that make up society, promoting social justice and combating processes that lead to discrimination, racism, marginalisation, inequality and social exclusion, which impact upon the individual, family or society.

2.5 Contemporary definitions of Social Work as a degree subject reflect its heritage in a range of academic subjects and practice traditions. The precise nature and scope of the subject is itself a matter for legitimate study and critical debate. The summary points below are relevant to this.

2.6 Social work is located within different and changing social welfare contexts. Within the UK there are different traditions of social welfare (influenced by legislation, historical development, devolution and social attitudes) and these have shaped both social work education and practice in a diverse range of settings. The international context involves critically examining how Social Work educators are responding to and learning from the continuing challenges faced by global citizens. This includes an exploration of how Social Work courses are preparing students to act as critical thinkers, innovators and leaders, upholding the principles of social justice, human rights and inclusivity in an increasingly polarised and fragmented landscape.

2.7 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.

2.8 Social work, both as an 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. Social work is responsive to change in supporting people and communities. While social work is undertaken in a wide range of settings, the relationship between society, state and social work remains central to the role of social work. Qualified social workers therefore need to be equipped both to understand and to work within this context of contested debate about the nature, scope and purpose of social work, and be enabled to analyse, adapt to, manage and eventually lead processes of change.

Regulatory bodies

2.9 As noted in section 1, the standards and expectations set by relevant national regulatory bodies significantly influence and inform the design of the curriculum and assessment for Social Work degrees.

Cymru/Wales

2.10 The [Care Standards Act 2000](#) established the Care Council for Wales as the regulator for social workers in Wales, and this was changed to [Social Care Wales](#) in the [Regulation and Inspection of Social Care \(Wales\) Act 2016](#). The title 'social worker' is legally protected in the [Regulation and Inspection of Social Care \(Wales\) Act 2016](#) (section 111).

2.11 Social Work courses must be approved by Social Care Wales. The professional requirements for the Social Work degree are contained in the framework for [Social Work Qualifications](#). The award in Wales is based on the [National Occupational Standards](#), the [Code of Professional Practice for Social Care](#), and this Subject Benchmark Statement. Social Work degrees may be offered as a bachelor's degree or a postgraduate qualification. Courses are delivered through partnerships between degree-awarding bodies and local authority employers and comprise both academic and practical learning. Social Work degrees in Wales must be informed by contemporary legislation and social policy, as well as regulatory developments relevant to Wales and their relationship to the UK-wide context(s).

2.12 Social Work students must register with Social Care Wales and demonstrate both an understanding of, and ability to adhere to, the Code of Professional Practice for Social Care throughout their studies and into practice.

England

2.13 The [Children and Social Work Act 2017](#) established [Social Work England](#) as the regulator for social workers in England. The title 'social worker' is legally protected by [the Social Workers Regulations 2018](#) (regulations 28 and 29).

2.14 Social Work courses must be approved by Social Work England with courses needing to meet the [Education and Training Standards](#) and produce graduates who can demonstrate that they meet the [Professional Standards](#). [Social Work England-approved courses](#) also reflect the wider curriculum guidance available for the profession, including Social Work England's [knowledge, skills and behaviours](#) and this Subject Benchmark Statement. The [Professional Standards Authority](#) oversees Social Work England as well as eight other health and care professional regulatory bodies operating in England.

2.15 Following completion of an approved Social Work course, graduates are eligible to apply to [register with Social Work England](#). As registered social workers there is a range of post-qualifying Knowledge and Skills Statements that are used to guide and assess practice, for example during the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment, and these statements continue to evolve to reflect changing demands on the profession.

Northern Ireland

2.16 The [Health and Personal Social Services Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2001](#) established the Northern Ireland Social Care Council as the regulator for social workers in Northern Ireland. The title 'social worker' is legally protected by Section 3 of the Act.

2.17 The Northern Ireland Assembly is responsible for overseeing the delivery of education and integrated health and social services in Northern Ireland. The Social Care Council and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (now the [Department of Health](#)) jointly produced the [Northern Ireland Framework Specification for the Degree](#) in Social Work (2003), which was reviewed and updated in 2014, then further amended in 2015. This sets out a single comprehensive set of learning requirements and outcomes for degrees in Social Work. It is framed by the relevant national occupational standards and the QAA Subject Benchmark Statement for Social Work. In addition, there are several distinctive learning requirements and outcomes that are specific to Northern Ireland. 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 in a post-conflict society.

2.18 Since September 2004, an honours-level degree in Social Work is the recognised professional qualification for all social workers, probation officers and education welfare officers in Northern Ireland. Following the introduction of the protection of title on 1 June 2005, all Social Work students and qualified social workers are required to register with the Social Care Council. Social Work graduates in Northern Ireland are registered by the Social Care Council with a condition that they undertake an Assessed Year in Employment.

2.19 The Standards of Conduct and Practice for Social Workers were revised in 2015. There are separate [Standards of Conduct for social work students](#). These describe the behaviours, attitudes and values expected of registrants and are the benchmark of good practice. The relevant practice standards for social work students are found in the [Framework Specification for the Degree in Social Work \(2015\)](#).

Scotland

2.20 The [Regulation of Care \(Scotland\) Act 2001](#) established the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) as the regulator for social workers in Scotland. The title 'social worker' is legally protected by section 52 of the Act.

2.21 All qualifying courses in Social Work are approved by the SSSC which was established in October 2001 under the Regulation of Care (Scotland) Act 2001. It aims to strengthen professionalism, raise standards of practice, and ensure the social services workforce is trained, trusted and skilled. It maintains registers of the workforce, sets [codes of practice](#), regulates training and education, and investigates cases where workforce standards are not met. As the social worker title is protected in law, to practice as a social worker in Scotland requires a recognised social work qualification and registration with the SSSC. The [Standards in Social Work Education and Ethical Principles](#) and the [Scottish Requirements for Social Work Education](#) have both been revised since the Framework for Social Work Education was published in 2003. Social Work students must achieve a generic honours degree in Social Work, or an equivalent postgraduate award, to become professionally qualified.

2.22 Following completion of an approved Social Work programme, graduates are eligible to register with the SSSC.

Progression

2.23 Over the course of a standard undergraduate degree with honours (FHEQ Level 6; FQHEIS/SCQF Level 10) or, if available, an integrated master's degree (FHEQ Level 7; FQHEIS/SCQF Level 11) a Social Work student will progress from one level of study to the next, in line with the regulations and processes for each institution. However, it is expected that each level would see the attainment of knowledge, expertise and experience that builds towards the final achievement of meeting the threshold subject-specific and generic skills listed in this Statement. This will usually include successful completion and the award of credit for the full range of learning and assessment, including practice components.

2.24 Social Work can be studied as a Bachelor of Science (BSc) or Arts (BA) degree, or an equivalent postgraduate conversion course, as well as at a more advanced level – for example, as a postgraduate diploma (PgDip) or as a Master of Science (MSc or MSci) or Arts (MA). The range of programme pathways is diverse, including through a degree apprenticeship. All these options will include practice learning integrated into the programme, to provide students with an opportunity to apply and develop their skills in real-life situations.

2.25 There is flexibility for courses to be designed to draw upon providers' areas of expertise, culture and ways of working while retaining the broad base of the discipline. There is also design flexibility in terms of how Social Work interfaces with research and practice in other disciplines.

2.26 Courses are designed to provide an understanding of a range of seminal and contemporary theories, methods and research, and to prepare students for the application of social work knowledge and skills to future practice. Historical and contemporary viewpoints are integrated throughout the design of a course and represent culturally diverse perspectives.

2.27 Ethical understanding, ethical behaviour, social justice and professional values are at the core of social work and therefore central to course design. For example, there will be a range of activities that will facilitate the comprehensive application of social work values and ethics in research, professional practice and everyday conduct. Students will be able to apply this to their own value base and ethical behaviour as well as critically evaluating the ethical behaviour of others.

Flexibility

2.28 In England, Wales and Northern Ireland, the duration of a full-time course leading to a bachelor's degree is typically three years and is set at Level 6 of the FHEQ. Degrees involving a year abroad or a placement year can take up to four years.

2.29 In Scotland, a bachelor's/ordinary degree is set at three years at Level 9 on the SCQF/FQHEIS. A bachelor's degree with honours, which is the most typical route for students, is designed to include four years of study, and is set at Level 10 of the SCQF/FQHEIS. In addition, a number of Scottish universities have a long tradition of labelling certain undergraduate academic degrees as a Master of Arts (MA). This title reflects historic Scottish custom and practice with an MA/ordinary degree at Level 9 and MA with Honours at Level 10 on the SCQF/FQHEIS.

2.30 Integrated master's degree courses typically include study equivalent to at least four full-time academic years in England, Wales and Northern Ireland; and five in Scotland, of which study equivalent to at least one full-time academic year is at Level 7 of the FHEQ and Level 11 on the SCQF/FQHEIS. The courses are designed to meet the qualification

descriptors in full (FHEQ Level 6 and SCQF/FQHEIS Level 10, and FHEQ Level 7 and SCQF/FQHEIS Level 11).

2.31 Students following part-time routes accumulate academic credit in proportion to the intensity of their study, and their total study time and credit value would be the equivalent to those achieved on full-time routes.

2.32 Courses can be delivered flexibly and may be:

- offered as full-time or part-time modes of study, in accordance with the provider's validation or approval procedures
- designed to use technology-enhanced learning to ensure that students develop skills for online learning, interaction and collaboration, which will be important during future employment in a world that increasingly requires digital skills
- co-designed and reviewed in partnership with students, employers and people with lived experience, adopting active and participatory approaches, enhanced choice, and personalisation of education, providing an opportunity for enhanced student learning – approaches vary across the sector according to local institutional strategy, ranging from module feedback processes and staff-student committees to extensive consultation on course content
- offered with recognition of prior learning (RPL) entry points, where appropriate, allowing students to convert relevant degree-level knowledge, skills and experience into credits to enable them to start the programme of study at the appropriate level; this can be accompanied by clear information for students on cost, timescales and what happens if module assessments are failed
- delivered using blended or hybrid models of teaching and learning which take adequate account of digital inclusion and sustainability, particularly to improve accessibility for students to learn at a preferred time, pace and place.

Partnership

2.33 Degree-awarding bodies may deliver courses in partnership with other providers through validation and franchising arrangements. Others may work with partners who deliver specific elements of the course through practice-based learning or as part of an apprenticeship. Subject Benchmark Statements, such as this one, play an important role in helping partners design provision that contributes to threshold standards being met in a specific subject area.

2.34 Social Work courses are expected to work in partnership with people with lived or living experience to promote understanding, empathy and effective practice. This allows students to hear a diverse range of perspectives and challenge their perceptions, as well as encouraging broader reflection.

2.35 Courses work in partnership with practice learning providers and relevant external stakeholders. Practice-based learning will be subject to a collaborative written agreement between practice educators, supervisors, course providers, placement providers, and students. Social Work courses are expected to ensure that the views of employers, practitioners and people with lived or living experience of social work are incorporated into the design, ongoing development and review of the curriculum.

2.36 Courses should be written in alignment with the regulatory body standards relevant to the country in which they are being delivered.

2.37 Partnerships encourage the development of professional relationships. They also provide students with a strong foundation for future multi-agency or interdisciplinary working. There is also a strong focus on working in partnership with students in relation to the curriculum and overall learning and practice experience. The student voice is embedded at all levels, with staff and support services valuing and listening to students' feedback to enhance provision.

Monitoring and review

2.38 Degree-awarding bodies, and their collaborative partnerships, routinely collect and analyse information and undertake periodic course review according to their own needs. Considering the student voice will form part of this. They draw on a range of external reference points, including this Statement, to ensure that their provision aligns with sector norms. Monitoring and evaluation are a periodic assessment of a course, conducted internally or by external independent evaluators. Evaluation uses information from both current and historic monitoring to develop an understanding of student achievement or inform future course planning.

2.39 Externality is an essential component of the quality assurance system in the UK. Providers will use external reviewers as part of periodic review to gain an independent perspective on any proposed changes and ensure threshold standards are achieved, and content is appropriate for the subject.

2.40 The external examining system currently in use across the UK higher education sector also helps to ensure consistency in the way academic standards are secured by degree-awarding bodies. Typically, external examiners will be asked to comment on the types, principles and purposes of assessments being offered to students. They will consider the types of modules on offer to students, the outcomes of a cohort and how these compare to similar provision offered within other UK higher education providers. External examiners are asked to produce a report each year and make recommendations for changes to modules and assessments (where appropriate). Subject Benchmark Statements, such as this one, can play an important role in supporting external examiners in advising on whether threshold standards are being met in a specific subject area.

2.41 Social Work courses are distinctive in that they also involve a range of stakeholders in course monitoring and review, including people with lived experience of social work support and practicing social workers. This ensures courses are current and relevant to the needs of the profession.

2.42 Social Work courses will require approval and ongoing monitoring from regulatory bodies. These are usually done through a combination of site visits and desk-based reviews.

3 Content, structure and delivery

Content

3.1 Providers use the relevant national qualifications frameworks pertaining in the specific jurisdiction in designing courses at specific levels. It is expected that Social Work course content is based on principles of being relevant, contemporary, evidence informed, current and coherent. It is beneficial if courses are co-produced with stakeholders, as well as responsive to emerging need and insights, locally, nationally and globally. Course content that is inclusive and decolonised supports social work values. Social Work students learn to work with and to support individuals, families, groups and communities in a variety of settings and across the life span.

3.2 Social Work courses encompass knowledge, skills, values and behaviours to prepare students to be competent and reflective practitioners. Key features include, but are not limited to, theoretical knowledge, factual knowledge, including research, and practice knowledge.

3.3 Typically, content includes research to inform practice, theories from social work and related disciplines, skills, methods, professional values and ethics. Content incorporates the voices of those with lived or living experience and practitioners. It explores practice in both UK and global contexts. Key areas include service leadership and delivery, involving key roles and responsibilities, social policy, legislation, and the development of subject-specific, reflective, and research-informed knowledge and skills. Students are supported in building professional identity and lifelong learning habits, while developing core knowledge, skills and behaviours in information gathering, problem-solving, analysis, synthesis, intervention, evaluation, communication, and collaborative practice.

3.4 The necessity to engage in practical learning is a fundamental part of the Social Work curriculum. Conducted in work-based settings, practice-based learning involves active participation and direct interaction with individuals who have lived or living experience, including parents, carers, wider community and other professionals. It can also encompass observing other professionals and individuals with lived experience, developing and analysing skills, shadowing, supervision, reflective analysis, research, and interdisciplinary or multi-agency interventions within social work and related organisations. There is an expectation for the clear integration and application of social work knowledge into practice.

3.5 Course content, practice-based learning opportunities and assessment of learning is sequenced to enable incremental learning and development as relevant to the level of study.

Teaching and learning

3.6 Teaching and learning is scaffolded in such a way that Social Work students receive a comprehensive induction to higher education and orientation to each level of progression. As students' progress through the course, they assume increasing responsibility for their own learning, preparing them for their future careers. The aim is to design teaching and learning strategies that are inclusive, accessible, engaging, effective and enjoyable for students. It is expected that learning is facilitated by a range of people, including academic staff, researchers, social work practitioners and people with lived or living experience.

3.7 The learning processes in Social Work courses can be categorised into five inter-related themes: awareness raising, skills and knowledge acquisition, conceptual understanding, practice skills and experience, and reflection on performance (these are reflected in the benchmark standards set out in section 4). The themes are operationalised in various learning and teaching methods, including lectures, reading, independent study,

workshops, problem-based learning, simulations, peer activities, technologies, role play, and practice-based learning. Teaching sessions may occur synchronously, asynchronously, or in a blended format, depending on the specific context.

Assessment

3.8 Assessment of Social Work students is grounded in principles of inclusivity, accessibility and integrity, and will incorporate feedback and feed forward. The core purpose of assessment is to measure learning and ability, ensure professional standards are met and to provide a means for students to reflect on their performance and receive regular feedback on their achievements and development needs. Courses set tasks that promote learning, develop and test relevant knowledge and skills, drawing on various sources, including practice contexts. Assessments can be authentic and reflect the requirements of the profession. Some assessments across courses may include co-production and co-delivery with stakeholders. Assessment criteria are clearly articulated and linked to module and course learning outcomes. Assessment enables judgments to be made regarding readiness for practice, progress, and the final award, ensuring fitness for practice in line with professional standards.

3.9 A diverse range of assessment methods is encouraged to promote equity, equality, diversity and inclusion, including assessments of practice-based learning. The choice of assessment methods is closely related to the learning outcomes they aim to develop and measure. These methods may include practical skills sessions, dialogical assessments, self-assessments, digital products, written work, presentations, portfolio creation and examinations. Formative and summative assessments can involve a range of stakeholders, including self-assessment, peers, practice educators and people with lived or living experience. Assessments can take place in various environments, including online and in practice-based settings.

4 Benchmark standards

Introduction

4.1 Social Work is a professional social work qualification which can be delivered in an undergraduate honours degree or postgraduate award. It is an academic subject applied through professional practice. Students must demonstrate that they have met both the academic and practice requirements of their course. Graduates are also expected to meet any specific standards set by the relevant regulatory body in the country in which the course is delivered.

4.2 Please note that minimum threshold standards described here are not intended to specify universal competence standards for a discipline. If a provider chooses to develop competence standards (as defined by the Equality Act 2010 and relevant equality legislation in Northern Ireland) as part of a programme specification, these can be informed by the relevant Subject Benchmark Statement along with any PSRB requirements. In these circumstances, providers should follow the most recent guidance from the [Equality and Human Rights Commission](#).

4.3 This Subject Benchmark Statement sets out the minimum threshold standards that a Social Work student will have demonstrated when they are awarded:

- a bachelor's degree with honours
- an integrated master's degree
- a postgraduate taught master's degree.

4.4 Demonstrating these standards over time will show that a student has achieved the range of knowledge, understanding and skills expected of graduates in Social Work.

4.5 While the requirements for practice are standard across undergraduate and postgraduate Social Work courses, the academic course and modules will be designed and assessed at the appropriate level, Level 6 (SCQF Level 10 in Scotland) or Level 7 (SCQF Level 11 in Scotland). As such, their application to an individual course is necessarily contextual. All Social Work degrees are accredited by regulatory bodies (see section 2 for more details). Learning outcomes defined by the regulator to support development of knowledge, skills, values and behaviours required for professional registration will also apply.

Classification

4.6 The majority of students will perform significantly better than the minimum threshold standards. Each higher education provider has its own method of determining what appropriate evidence of this achievement will be required.

4.7 For bachelor's degrees with honours, providers can refer to [Annex D in The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies](#) which sets out common descriptions of the four main degree outcome classifications for bachelor's degrees with honours – 1st, 2.1, 2.2 and 3rd – and of postgraduate awards at Level 6 (SCQF Level 10 in Scotland). In this Statement, 'threshold level' attainment typically maps onto that associated with a 3rd class honours degree. 'Typical' maps to a 2.2 or 2.1, and 'excellent' to a 1st class degree.

4.8 Similar classification practices are in place for integrated master's courses, with 2:2, 2:1 and 1st class awards. For master's courses, achievement above the threshold results in

awards of merit and distinction. For all awards, criteria for achievement above the threshold will be in line with the higher education provider's common or generic marking schemes.

Bachelor's degree with honours

Minimum standards

4.9 Students graduating with a bachelor's degree with honours in Social Work must demonstrate at least a threshold-level of attainment across all categories outlined in four main areas: **knowledge and understanding, demonstrable skills, values and ethics**, and **PSRB requirements**.

4.10 Criteria for achievement at threshold level will be in line with the higher education provider's common or generic marking schemes for undergraduate courses and the sector-recognised standards that are in use in each of the nations of the UK. The threshold, including the required number of mandatory days in practice will also be determined by the relevant professional regulator.

4.11 On graduating with an honours degree in Social Work, graduates will have demonstrated the following:

Knowledge and understanding: a coherent knowledge and understanding of the context of professional social work, the knowledge base of social work and its practical application, including:

- a) awareness of the role of social work across the globe and in the UK and its constituent nations
- b) understanding of social work across statutory, independent, voluntary and third sectors
- c) the ability to identify, assess and critically apply research to support a strong evidence base to inform and guide professional practice
- d) a critical understanding of theory, policy, legislative context, methods and skills, and awareness of how they apply to practice
- e) evidence and demonstration of knowledge, skills and wider behaviours or professional competencies required by regulatory bodies
- f) engagement with contemporary cultural and societal debates, such as those concerning inequality, power and oppression
- g) understanding of the relevance of climate change, social, ecological and environmental justice, conflict and diminishing democracy, and the role of social work in addressing the impact on individuals, families and communities, environmental hazards in terms of their impacts on fulfilling individuals' and communities' human rights and the disproportionate burden on those already facing hardship or inequality such as poverty, racism or ableism
- h) the ability to understand, identify and appropriately respond to need and risk
- i) recognition of intersectional issues that might impact on need and risk, and to respond and challenge where required
- j) understanding of the knowledge base and values of social work, and their integrated application and use when working across disciplines
- k) critical awareness of contested political and societal contexts and commitment to anti-discriminatory, anti-oppressive and anti-racist practice

- l) an ability to use knowledge and understanding to effectively relate to people with lived experience and other professionals to improve outcomes
- m) continuous learning, reflection on experience and use of feedback, with the ability to incorporate this in future learning and practice.

Demonstrable skills: a consistent application of social work skills. Reflective application of a range of social work methods, underpinned by critical thinking, evidence-informed decision-making, and understanding of diverse practice context, including the capacity to:

- n) use knowledge, understanding and critical thinking to inform practice, drawing on theory, policy, legislative context, methods and skills
- o) use and evaluate research and wider evidence to inform practice and decisions
- p) build relationships and work in partnership with individuals with lived or living experience, and other professionals across agencies
- q) practice in environmentally sustainable ways
- r) communicate effectively verbally, non-verbally and in writing with individuals with lived or living experience, and other professionals across contexts and levels
- s) work within teams, systems and processes, gathering, processing and analysing information to enable understanding and interventions
- t) work across and with other agencies and disciplines
- u) demonstrate the application of social work values and ethics, including cultural humility and anti-discriminatory, anti-oppressive and anti-racist practice
- v) maintain appropriate standards of personal and professional conduct, drawing on relevant codes of practice and/or standards
- w) critically engage with digital technology to collate, analyse, select, record and present information
- x) exercise an appropriate level of autonomy and decision-making within the context of organisations to ensure safe and effective practice
- y) support people to improve outcomes, and manage and reduce risk
- z) recognise the dignity of the individual, working in a strengths-based and empowering way
- aa) make and implement difficult decisions (including the restriction of liberty) in human situations that involve the potential for benefit while understanding harm
- bb) confidently defend decisions made, drawing on a wide evidence base
- cc) demonstrate professional leadership and advocacy skills
- dd) maintain professional boundaries, working within the limits of the role, identifying sources of support where needed
- ee) critically reflect on their performance, using feedback and evidence
- ff) engage in continuous professional development, identifying gaps in knowledge and ways to resolve them
- gg) use support and supervision effectively, to maintain safe, effective, accountable and sustainable practice in a demanding working environment
- hh) take responsibility for their own wellbeing, including by taking appropriate action and seeking support.

Values and ethics: a commitment to professional social work practice, guided by the core values of the profession, ethical principles and a sense of global social responsibility.

PSRB requirements: Demonstration of the minimum requirements set by the professional regulator, including the required number of days in practice.

Integrated master's degree

Threshold level (3rd class degree)

4.12 Integrated master's degrees in Social Work typically add an extra year of full-time equivalent study to an honours degree in Social Work and include the equivalent of a year's worth of study at master's level, often including research and are required to meet the benchmarks of both an undergraduate and a master's Social Work degrees.

4.13 With regard to undergraduate courses, students graduating with an integrated master's degree in Social Work must demonstrate at least a threshold-level of attainment across all categories outlined in **knowledge and understanding, demonstrable skills, values and ethics**, and **PSRB requirements** as detailed in paragraph 4.11 above. Threshold-level attainment often maps onto that associated with a 3rd class honours degree. The threshold, including the required number of mandatory days in practice, will also be determined by the requirements of the relevant professional regulator.

4.14 On graduating with an integrated master's degree in Social Work, graduates will have demonstrated the following:

Knowledge and understanding: a broad and critical knowledge and understanding of the context of professional social work, the knowledge base of social work and its practical application (paragraph 4.11 a-m). Evidence of achievement in completion of an element of self-directed study, involving personal inquiry, for example a research project or synoptic project.

Demonstrable skills: a consistent application of social work skills (paragraph 4.11 n-hh). The consistent and reflective application of a range of social work methods, underpinned by critical thinking, evidence-informed decision-making, and a nuanced understanding of diverse practice context.

Values and ethics: a commitment to and critical understanding of professional social work practice, guided by the core values of the profession, ethical principles, and a sense of global social responsibility.

PSRB requirements: Demonstration of the minimum requirements set by the professional regulator, including the required number of days in practice.

Postgraduate master's degree benchmark standards

4.15 The standards for master's degree programmes in Social Work below can also apply to postgraduate certificates and diplomas. These qualifications are located at the same academic level as master's degrees in the Qualifications Frameworks but involve a lower overall volume of learning (and credit where credit is used).

Threshold level (pass degree)

4.16 With regard to postgraduate courses, students graduating with a master's degree in Social Work must demonstrate at least a threshold-level of attainment across all relevant

outcome categories. Threshold-level attainment typically maps onto that associated with a pass degree. The threshold, including the required number of mandatory days in practice, will also be determined by the relevant professional regulator's requirements.

4.17 On graduating with a master's degree in Social Work, graduates will have demonstrated the following.

Knowledge and understanding: A critically informed understanding of the contexts shaping professional social work, alongside a sophisticated grasp of its knowledge base (paragraph 4.11 a-m). This also includes the capacity to interrogate and apply complex concepts to practice with intellectual rigour and reflexivity. Evidence of achievement in completion of an element of self-directed study, involving personal inquiry, for example a research project or synoptic project and the ability to generate original insights.

Demonstrable skills: a consistent application of social work skills and methods (paragraph 4.11 n-hh). Practice is underpinned by critical thinking, evidence-informed decision-making, and understanding of the complexities inherent in diverse practice environments. Exercise professional judgement in ethically challenging situations.

Values and ethics: a commitment to and critical understanding and application of professional social work practice, guided by the core values of the profession, ethical principles, and a critical understanding of global social responsibility.

PSRB requirements: Demonstration of the minimum requirements set by the professional regulator, including the required number of days in practice.

5 List of references and further resources

Useful resources for course providers

British Association of Social Workers (2025) Generative AI & Social Work Practice Guidance, available at: <https://basw.co.uk/policy-and-practice/resources/generative-ai-social-work-practice-guidance>

British Association of Social Workers (2025) Shades of Bias, available at: <https://basw.co.uk/shades-bias-sob>

British Association of Social Workers (2024) The Synergy Sessions: BASW England mini-series, available at: <https://basw.co.uk/policy-and-practice/resources/synergy-sessions-basw-england-mini-series>

Decolonising Social Work Field Education (2025) Decolonise and Rehumanise Social Work Field Education, available at: www.dialogueswfe.org/episode-2

Diverse Educators (2025) 'When they try to deny us, resist with Shades of Bias!' available at: www.diverseeducators.co.uk/when-they-try-to-deny-us-resist-with-shades-of-bias/

Harms-Smith, L and Martinez-Herrero, MI, Arnell, P, Bolger, J, Butler-Warke, A, Cook, W, Downie, M, Farmer, N, Nicholls, J and MacDermott, D (2019) *Social Work and Human Rights: A Practice Guide* BASW: Birmingham, available at <https://new.basw.co.uk/policy-and-practice/resources/social-work-and-human-rights-practice-guide>

Trevithick, P (2016) A lexicon of 80 skills + interventions, available at www.researchgate.net/publication/307631866_A_lexicon_of_80_skills_interventions

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Cernega A, Nicolescu DN, Meleşcanu Imre M, Ripszky Totan A, Arsene AL, Şerban RS, Perpelea AC, Nedea MI, Pişuru SM (2024) Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity (VUCA) in Healthcare, *Healthcare* (Basel). Apr 2;12(7):773 [doi: 10.3390/healthcare12070773](https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare12070773). PMID: 38610195; PMCID: PMC11011466

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Jones, R (2020) 1970-2020: A fifty-year history the personal social services and social work in England and across the United Kingdom, *Social Work and Social Sciences Review*, 21(3), pp 8–44 <https://doi.org/10.1921/swssr.v21i3.1495>

Lekas HM, Pahl K, Fuller Lewis C (2020) Rethinking Cultural Competence: Shifting to Cultural Humility, *Health Services Insights* Dec 20;13:1178632920970580 [doi: 10.1177/1178632920970580](https://doi.org/10.1177/1178632920970580). PMID: 33424230; PMCID: PMC7756036

Livingston, W, Redcliffe, J, and Aziz, AQ (eds) (2023) *Social Work in Wales*, Bristol, UK Policy Press, available from: <https://doi.org/10.51952/9781447367215>

MacDermott, D (2024) A chronology of the history and development of social work education in Northern Ireland, *Social Work Education*, 43(9), pp 2588–2610
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2023.2275650>

Trevithick, P (2009) Revisiting the Knowledge Base of Social Work: A Framework for Practice, *British Journal of Social Work* 38(6) [doi: 10.1093/bjsw/bcm026](https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcm026)

Useful resources from professional, statutory and regulatory bodies

Cymru/Wales

Yn Gymraeg:

Gofynion Gofal Cymdeithasol Cymru ar gyfer cyrsiau gwaith cymdeithasol

Cymwysterau gwaith cymdeithasol

<https://gofalcymdeithasol.cymru/cymwysterau-ac-ariannu/cymwysterau-gwaith-cymdeithsol>

Safonau Galwedigaethol Cenedlaethol ar gyfer Gwaith Cymdeithasol

<https://gofalcymdeithasol.cymru/adnoddau-a-chanllawiau/blynyddoedd-cynnar-a-gofal-plant/safonau-galwedigaethol-cenedlaethol-nos/gwaith-cymdeithasol>

Codau Ymarfer Proffesiynol

<https://gofalcymdeithasol.cymru/delio-a-phryderon/codau-ymarfer-a-chanllawiau>

In English:

Social Care Wales requirements for social work courses

Social work qualifications

<https://socialcare.wales/qualifications-funding/social-work-qualifications>

National Occupational Standards (NOS) for social work

<https://socialcare.wales/resources-guidance/early-years-and-childcare/national-occupational-standards-nos/social-work>

Code of Professional Practice for Social Care Workers

<https://socialcare.wales/dealing-with-concerns/codes-of-practice-and-guidance>

England

Social Work England

Professional standards (2019)

www.socialworkengland.org.uk/standards/professional-standards

Education and training standards

www.socialworkengland.org.uk/standards/education-and-training-standards

Knowledge, skills and behaviours

www.socialworkengland.org.uk/education-training/knowledge-skills-and-behaviours

Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland Social Care Council

Framework Specification for the degree in social work (2015)
<https://the-northern-ireland-framework-specification-for-the-degree-2015.pdf>

Standards of conduct for social work students (2019)
<https://niscc.info/standards-and-guidance>

Scotland

Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC)

Standards for Social Work and Ethical principles
www.sssc.uk.com/about-us/publications/standards-in-social-work-education-and-ethical-principles

Scottish Requirements for Social Work Education
www.sssc.uk.com/about-us/publications/scottish-requirements-for-social-work-education

Codes of Practice for Social Service Workers and Employers 2024
www.sssc.uk.com/standards/codes-of-practice

6 Membership of the Advisory Group

Membership of the Advisory Group for the Subject Benchmark Statement for Social Work 2026

Name	Institution / Organisation
Andrea Collins (Chair)	Manchester Metropolitan University
Yvalia Febrer (Deputy Chair)	Kingston University
Dr Denise MacDermott (Deputy Chair)	Ulster University
Nadira Begum	QAA Coordinator
Zoe Burke	Social Work England
Dr Neil Casey	QAA Officer
Tricia Devlin	Northern Ireland Social Care Council
Sara Driscoll	University of Strathclyde
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Dr Kim Heanue	University of Huddersfield
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The fourth edition, published in 2019, was revised by QAA to align the content with the revised UK Quality Code for Higher Education, published in 2018. Proposed revisions were checked and verified by a member of the Subject Benchmark Statement for Social Work group from 2016.

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