



# **Fit for Purpose?**

## **The Social Work Degree in 2008**

Executive summary

**James Blewett**

**Jane Tunstill**

**Synergy Research & Consulting Ltd**

**Commissioned by the General Social Care Council**

# Foreword

It has been five years since the first cohort of students enrolled on the first ever social work degree courses in England. Since then, social work and social care more generally have been the subject of a great deal of debate. This has culminated in the creation of two key policy papers – Putting People First and Building Brighter Futures – both setting a policy framework with the core aim of improving outcomes for all children and for all adults who require support from social care.

Rightly, the government and others have identified the centrality of the workforce in delivering this. As the regulator of social work education and training in England, the General Social Care Council (GSCC) is working closely with both the Department of Health and the Department of Children, Schools and Families to ensure that the degree and the post-qualifying training are able to deliver the goals of both agendas.

This independent report, which we commissioned in 2007, is a timely contribution to the body of evidence informing the current debate on the quality and relevance of social work education. It captures the views of Higher Education Institutions and employers, to provide a snapshot of current policy and practice around the social work degree programme, looking particularly at children's social work.

The report concludes that, in the sample of courses examined, children's social work is being adequately addressed in taught time in the curriculum. This matches our own understanding from the evidence of our annual monitoring of degree programmes. However, the sample in the research is small and it is interesting that there is other evidence coming forward that suggests that the depth of understanding of new social workers is variable. This will need further work. We are also pleased to see support amongst respondents for the post-qualifying framework, which is now embedded in the system.

The report also identifies a number of areas where attention is crucially needed. In particular, it finds that where there appears to be a lack of partnership between the university and employers, the overall quality of the programme is impeded. We will be ensuring that universities are playing their part in forging such partnerships as part of our inspection regime. We are also reviewing the rules and criteria that we use to accredit courses and the regulatory framework we work within to see where we can make the importance of partnership working even more explicit.

A lack of good-quality placements undermines the quality of the degree. Students value their practice placements highly. In our own monitoring of placements we know that most providers find placements on time but quality can be varied. To date, there has been a lack of clear quality criteria for placements. The GSCC, in collaboration with Skills for Care and the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC), has piloted and

produced clear quality standards. We believe this will make a difference but we are assessing whether this needs to be brought into the formal requirements, rather than left as guidance.

Another key issue identified is the lack of support for newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) when starting in their first job. This report highlights the discrepancy that exists between the high expectations that some employers have of new graduates and what they are realistically going to be ready to do. To help address the broader issue, the government is investing significantly in both children's and adults' social work and is piloting a range of new approaches to supporting NQSWs. These programmes will aim to consolidate the knowledge and skills developed during initial training and to identify what a new social worker can reasonably be expected to achieve in their first year.

This report is a helpful contribution to the current debate. Building a skilled and competent workforce is reliant on a range of factors. Strong partnerships between employers and education providers are key to solving many of the issues raised in this report, such as practice placements and support for newly qualified social workers. Good practice certainly exists but it must be adopted by all involved in social work education and training if we are to produce graduates who are fully equipped and ready for the challenge of social work in practice.

The degree has delivered improvement in the short time it has been in existence, but as social work continues to change at such a pace we must make sure the education and training system keeps up. We look forward to working with everyone involved in training and education to ensure that the degree and the post-qualifying training and support system provide secure foundations for the world-class social work workforce we all want to see.

**Mike Wardle**  
Chief Executive, General Social Care Council

# Executive summary

## Study outline

This report provides an “audit” of the new generic social work degree, with regard to its specific relevance to the delivery of children’s services. It should be emphasised that the intention of this piece of work was to provide a snapshot of current policy and practice. In order to do this we selected a purposive sample of social work degree programmes. These six programmes included *old* and *new* universities from across the country, including those in highly urbanised areas such as London, as well as in locations further away from urban centres. All of the institutions ran a combination of bachelor and masters programmes.

The study was undertaken between spring 2007 and spring 2008, and had two consecutive phases. Phase 1 entailed an exploration of the operation of six social work degree programmes, looking at their structures and systems from the perspective of staff in the higher education institutions (HEIs) that deliver the programmes. Phase 2 sought to capture the perspectives of a sample of 22 respondents in 19 agencies in the statutory and voluntary sectors, some of whom were in strategic partnerships with the HEIs in the sample, and others who were selected to ensure a representative spread, both in terms of service identity and geographical location.

The “HEI phase” of the audit had the following aims and objectives:

- What is the content of the degree curriculum?
- How does it relate to the Common Core and National Occupational Standards for post-qualifying childcare social workers?
- How do programmes teach students about their legal mandate when working with children and families?
- What is the pattern of provision of practice learning opportunities with children and families on the programme?

Building on the picture that emerged from this first phase, we interviewed our sample of agency managers. We explored with them, in a series of semi-structured interviews, their experience of the cohort of students who had graduated in 2007, and their opinions of the level of readiness for practice of these newly qualified workers. We used the format of the six elements of the Common Core as a framework for these interviews. Anonymity was guaranteed to all our respondents.

Our interviews explored both their perception and their experience of the level of knowledge, skills and practice brought into the workplace by NQSWs, as well as their experience of working in partnership with universities in helping to prepare students for their post-qualifying careers. We were also keen to identify examples of both good and poor practice.

## Overview of findings

Phase 1 concluded that the interests of HEIs, students and agency partners were inextricably interlinked. The HEI staff we interviewed in the project were committed to, and enthusiastic about, the task of producing a high-quality social work workforce, who could deliver high-quality services for children and their families. Central to their aspirations were two convictions.

First, they believed that the generic degree offered the best opportunity to prepare high-quality children's *and* adult services social work staff, whose skills and abilities would be complementary.

Second, they were convinced that achieving these ends depended on a set of robust college/employer collaborations. They also believed that qualifying training was but the first, though crucial, step in a social worker's career, which needed to incorporate opportunities for lifelong professional development. Inseparably linked to this, as perhaps both cause and effect, was the need to maintain the currency of policy and legal input on qualifying and post-qualifying courses. The fast pace of policy and organisational change made this, in the view of our respondents, a crucial requirement across the professional life-course of every worker.

Phase 2 picked up the storyline, not least by acknowledging the challenging policy and organisational backdrop for these aspirations, in which support and respect for the task of developing and deploying social work skills cannot be taken as a given. Our respondents from both phases of the project were in no doubt that there are very real difficulties and challenges in getting appropriately trained social workers into the roles and sets of responsibilities within which to best apply their values, knowledge and skills.

The following key points emerged from data collected in both phases of the study:

- Social work degree programmes are enthusiastically engaging with the current change agenda in children's services and are incorporating the necessary teaching of all aspects of the curriculum.
- HEIs *and* employers interviewed were united in their concern at the challenges that currently face the social work profession, in the form of overly rigid and bureaucratic organisational and managerial requirements, which can undermine the delivery of high-quality, face-to-face social work services for children and their families.
- Professional training that prioritises an emphasis on "procedural activity" is seen by managers as being at variance with the "high-quality training" that they want delivered and that should put a central emphasis on topics such as theoretical models; human development; and the development of a capacity for analysis and critical thinking.

- There was general support from those we interviewed for the concept of a generic degree linked to continuing professional development.
- HEIs value the contribution that the practice placement element of the degree makes to the academic and professional development of their students. However, there is continuing concern about both the quantity and quality of placement availability.
- The partnership between employers and HEIs in respect of a range of dimensions of the programmes is central to the delivery of high-quality professional training for social workers. The study found many examples of good practice but also examples where HEIs have so far made insufficient effort to build the necessary robust partnerships.
- Many managers are keen to go into colleges and provide teaching sessions, but are disappointed to be only rarely asked to do so. They see this as part of their professional role and one that complements their input into student learning in the agency.
- As managers they reject a mechanistic model that “theory is something you get in a university” and believe that central to their role as a manager, is a responsibility for the creation in their teams of a *culture of learning*.

## Implications for future policy

1. All our respondents believed in the central importance of agency/HEI collaboration in the process of delivering qualifying training. It may be that this dimension of qualifying programmes merits further attention in the context of course inspection. The GSCC might consider more explicit criteria on which to base inspection judgments in respect of partnerships between HEIs and their local agencies. These criteria should seek to ensure that the inspection of social work programmes can interrogate the extent of partnership working, beyond the formal representation of agencies on programme boards.
2. There is a high level of desire and commitment on the part of managers to play their part in the professional development of NQSWs. The GSCC may therefore consider issuing relevant guidance from a regulatory perspective. This would clarify the responsibilities of an employer for the consolidation of an individual’s practice across their first year of employment as an NQSW and potentially complement the current CWDC initiative on NQSWs.

## Fit for the future!

Many of our agency respondents felt that expectations of NQSWs were far too high in respect of size of caseloads and complexity of work. In particular, they strongly disapproved of NQSWs being given large numbers of “child protection cases”. At an individual level they saw this as militating against the holistic professional development of the new social worker. At an aggregate workforce level they linked this issue of overloading workers at the beginning of a promising career to the early burnout of social workers and, ultimately, to the inability of agencies to retain staff. Professional development is a complex process and requires a multi-faceted approach in the context of the increasingly multi-agency and inter-professional configuration of children’s services. What is clear is that the only solid foundation for sustained professional development is high-quality professional supervision combined with a managed workload and appropriate training opportunities. There is clearly a reservoir of goodwill on the part of employers to make a central contribution to the success of the new degree and to optimise their contribution to the process of producing the social work workforce of tomorrow.

General Social Care Council  
Goldings House  
2 Hay's Lane  
London SE1 2HB

Tel: 020 7397 5100

[www.gsc.org.uk](http://www.gsc.org.uk)

Published October 2008