

Social Work Education in England: listening, learning, shaping

The 2006 Social Work Education
Quality Assurance Report



General
Social Care
Council

Foreword

I am pleased to present 'listening, learning and shaping', the annual quality assurance report on social work education and training in England for 2006.

The General Social Care Council (GSCC) is the regulator of the social care workforce in England. Our mission is to promote the highest standards of social care, for the benefit and protection of people who use services and the wider public. Our work in relation to the regulation of social work education and training is key to promoting high standards in the social care workforce. This work involves a wide range of national and regional activities with an equally wide range of partners and stakeholders.

Every year we report on the overall health of social work education and examine a range of quality issues affecting both qualifying and post-qualifying education and training. This year's report is presented in the context of the considerable changes which continue to influence social work practice and the importance of social work training in responding to these changes. This is to ensure a skilled workforce who can effectively meet the needs of people who use services and their carers.

The year 2005-2006 has been a challenging but positive year. The continued commitment and enthusiasm of providers is commendable at a time when they are managing and closing existing courses at the same time as developing and embedding new ones. We have seen increased recruitment onto the social work degree and evidence that standards are being maintained and improved. The continued growth of participation of service users and carers in all areas of social work education and development is also notable. Work has continued with a range of partners and stakeholders, including service users and carers, to develop and implement the new post-qualifying (PQ) framework, including the development of five new PQ courses. Providers of current PQ courses have developed creative and supportive strategies to maintain standards and to encourage students to complete awards.

This report also highlights issues for ongoing work and developments for the forthcoming year.

I would like to thank all those who have contributed to this report. We look forward to continuing to work with you to ensure standards in social work education and training are met and to promote high standards of social work practice.



Heather Wing
Director of Regulation

January 2007

List of abbreviations used in this report

AASW	Advanced Award in Social Work	JUC-SWEC	Joint University Council Social Work Education Committee
AQAR	Annual Quality Assurance Return	MHSWA	Mental Health Social Work Award
AMHP	Approved Mental Health Professional	NOLP	National Open Learning Programme
APL/AP(E)L	Accreditation of Prior Learning/ Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning	QA	Quality assurance
ASW	Approved Social Worker	QAA	Quality assurance Agency for Higher Education
CCA	Child Care Award	PQ	Post-qualifying (training)
CCETSW	Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work	PQC	Post-qualifying consortia
CQSW	Certificate of Qualification in Social Work	PQ1	Part one of the Post-qualifying Award in Social Work
CSCI	Commission for Social Care Inspection	PQSW	Post-qualifying Award in Social Work
CWDC	Children's Workforce Development Council	PTA	Practice Teaching Award
DfES	Department for Education and Skills	PTP	Practice Teaching Programme
DH	Department of Health	RCSA	Regulation of Care Services Award
DipSW	Diploma in Social Work	REU	Race Equality Unit
EA	External assessor	RI	Regional inspector
EE	External examiner	SCIE	Social Care Institute for Excellence
ECDL	European Computer Driving Licence	SSD	Social services department
EIT	Education Inspection Team	SWAP	The Social Policy and Social Work subject centre of the Higher Education Academy
ESGT	Education Support Grants Team	SWEG	Social Work Education Group
ESIT	Education Standards and Information Team		
GSCC	General Social Care Council		
HE	Higher education		
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England		
HEI	Higher education institution		
IQF	Integrated Qualifications Framework		

Contents

Section 1	Executive summary	2
Section 2	Introduction	4
Section 3	The context of social work education and training	5
Section 4	The role of the GSCC	7
Section 5	Developing, monitoring and maintaining standards	8
Section 6	Outcomes and issues: qualifying training	11
Section 7	Outcomes and issues: post-qualifying training	21
Section 8	Themes	30
	Equality and diversity	30
	Workforce development and partnerships	31
	Stakeholder involvement (Service users and carers, Employers, Students)	32
	Practice learning	38
	Inter-professional learning	45
	European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL)	45
Section 9	Summary and conclusions	46

Section 1 Executive summary

This report provides an overview of social work qualifying and post-qualifying (PQ) education and training in England during the 2005-2006 financial year.

The report draws on information obtained as a result of quality assurance and other activities undertaken by the GSCC with a range of stakeholders, including universities, students, service users, carers and employers.

The report is presented in the context of considerable changes which are influencing social work practice and the development of the workforce. The many drivers for change in social work are acknowledged, together with the importance of social work training in responding to these changes, to ensure a skilled workforce that can effectively meet the needs of people who use services and their carers.

The report describes outcomes on recruitment, progression and achievement across all awards and summarises key messages from quality assurance.

It confirms that social work qualifying and PQ courses continue to meet standards and requirements. When problems arise, they are quickly identified and strategies are put in place to address them.

Qualifying training

Recruitment to the social work degree has expanded; the number of courses and routes continue to rise.

Arrangements for the delivery of the social work degree continue to be embedded with providers. Minor changes have been made to curriculum content and timetabling following feedback from students and other stakeholders.

The majority of Diploma in Social Work (DipSW) programmes are drawing to a close. There is evidence, with very few exceptions, that the transition is being smoothly managed with excellent support, to enable students to complete their awards where appropriate.

Post-qualifying training

The new employer-led PQ framework continues to be implemented in collaboration with key stakeholders including Skills for Care and the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC). Regional planning networks are developing to take forward PQ training which will meet the needs of employers on both a regional and national level.

Five new PQ courses have been developed working with key stakeholder representatives including service users and carers.

These are:

- working with children, young people, their families and carers;
- practice education;
- working with adults;
- mental health social work; and
- leadership and management.

The current PQ framework has seen promising recruitment particularly for PQ1 and PQ courses. Providers have developed creative activities to encourage and support completion of the existing awards.

Themes

The report focuses on six themes which have been identified from last year's report and this year's work. These are:

- equality and diversity;
- workforce development and partnership;
- stakeholder involvement;
 - service users and carers
 - employers
 - students
- practice learning;
- inter-professional learning; and
- European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL).

It is essential that the workforce reflects the diversity of communities in which it delivers services and is culturally competent. This year's report confirms that apart from a small increase in 18-20 year olds, the profile of recruitment to qualifying programmes remains unchanged; and that most programmes continue to develop strategies to widen access and to support progression and achievement.

The GSCC is leading on two major projects: the progression and retention project and the gateways developments project. These projects will address issues of access, recruitment, progression and achievement in social work education as part of the wider strategy to improve the quantity and quality of the workforce.

The growing impact of regional networks highlights the links between education and training and the workforce alongside the increasingly important role of employers in commissioning and supporting social work training.

The involvement of stakeholders continues to be a key feature of the effective delivery of social work education and there are many good examples of service user and carer participation particularly in the social work degree.

A section on practice learning identifies that whilst some students are concerned about late and inappropriate placements, the majority of higher education institutions (HEIs) are managing the provision of practice learning opportunities effectively.

Work on the development of inter-professional learning in social work education is being done this year by the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) and the GSCC in order to evaluate how effectively this is being taken forward.

Work will be taken forward with stakeholders to explore some of the problems associated with meeting the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) requirements and considering how to address these.

Alongside all other stakeholders, the GSCC will be informed by the Options for Excellence review of social work and social care in driving forward the agenda for social work education and training in the future.

Section 2 Introduction

- 1 This report draws on quality assurance processes and other initiatives taken by the GSCC between April 2005 and March 2006 to report on the state of social work education and training across England and to identify trends, issues and successes. The GSCC is responsible for setting standards, approving, monitoring, reviewing and inspecting qualifying social work training (the Diploma in Social Work (DipSW) and the social work degree) and a number of post-qualifying (PQ) training awards.
- 2 We have undertaken these activities in collaboration with a range of stakeholders, including universities, service users and carers, students, and employers. They, together with the Department of Health (DH), Department for Education and Skills (DfES), and relevant sector skills councils, have an interest in making sure the standards of social work education are maintained and continue to improve in order to produce a knowledgeable and skilled workforce to meet the needs of service users and their carers.

Section 3 The context of social work education and training

The changing context of social work

- 3 This has been a challenging year for all concerned with the education and training of social workers. Challenges have included the continuing development of children's services, implementation of Every Child Matters and a new children's workforce strategy. Mental health services have been reconfigured, and agencies re-organised. In social work education, the DipSW is being phased out; the new social work degree is being embedded. There has been a continuing emphasis on promoting the participation of service users, carers and other stakeholders in social work education; ongoing work on developing and implementing the new PQ framework, and managing the closure of existing programmes.
- 4 Social work education has been responding to significant changes in the way social work is delivered. Social work is increasingly carried out in multi-disciplinary teams in the independent sector and working with specific service users. There has been a separation of policy, structures and systems for the provision of services to children and young people, and those for adults. The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) have become key stakeholders in social work education, ensuring that it meets the needs of the children's workforce.
- 5 Major changes in the delivery of services to adults have been proposed in the White Paper *Our health, our care, our say*, which positions social work within the broader concept of integrated health and social care community services. There has been continuing uncertainty about the implications of any new mental health legislation on the role of social workers working in mental health and particularly the Approved Social Worker role.
- 6 Social work education needs to respond to these key policy and service delivery drivers as well as the changing demography and the increasing diversity of local communities. This is so that social workers are equipped to work in different roles and settings, and with diverse and changing communities. These factors have influenced, for example, the requirements for the new post-qualifying framework of courses.

Section 4 The role of the GSCC

- 7** One of the roles of the GSCC is to make sure that social work education and training is up-to-date and responsive to workforce needs. The GSCC has continued to work with Government and other bodies to contribute to these key drivers and to promote social work education. The GSCC is involved with many projects and working groups across the spectrum of social work. A key example is our representation on the project board and four task groups of the DH and DfES led Options for Excellence review of the social care workforce. The final report from this work was published in the autumn of 2006 and will have implications for social work education and training. The GSCC has worked closely with DfES and the CWDC to ensure that approved social work training continues to meet the needs of the children's workforce and is represented on the project group to create the Integrated Qualifications Framework (IQF) for the children's workforce. This project will also have an impact on the structure and content of qualifications in social work.
- 9** The GSCC are key stakeholders in and contributors to the three-year DH project to evaluate the social work degree. Regular newsletters are issued by the research team.

The social work education stakeholders' group

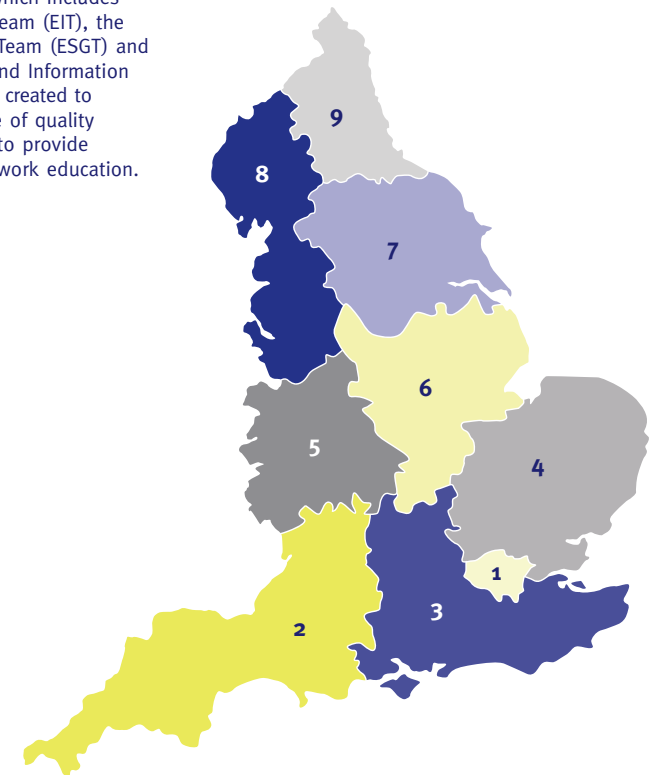
- 8** The social work education stakeholders' group meets twice a year to allow representatives of national stakeholders in social work education and training to meet with one another and to provide a forum for discussion and debate. It has the particular remit to identify issues that may need to be taken forward, either to the GSCC or to any other suitable forum. It is important that the views of students contribute to this debate and the national social work students' stakeholder forum has been developed to enable students' views to be heard.

How the GSCC regulates and quality assures social work education

- 10** The GSCC regulates social work education and training under statutory duties and powers outlined in the Care Standards Act 2000. This includes the remit to regulate and promote high quality standards in all qualifying and post-qualifying social work courses.
- 11** The key activities relating to social work education and training are carried out on behalf of the GSCC by the Social Work Education Group (SWEG) which includes the Education Inspection Team (EIT), the Education Support Grants Team (ESGT) and the Education Standards and Information Team (ESIT). ESIT has been created to improve the evidence base of quality assurance processes, and to provide reliable data about social work education.

- 12** Inspectors work with social work education providers and other stakeholders across nine regions in England. These regions have recently been aligned with workforce development regions and have enabled closer working with sector skills councils (see below). Further information about the work of SWEG and maps indicating the changed regions and relevant inspectors who now work in these can be found on the GSCC website. The Education and Training Committee of the Council advise on key policy and strategy for social work education.

- 1 London
- 2 South West
- 3 South East
- 4 East of England
- 5 West Midlands
- 6 East Midlands
- 7 Yorkshire and the Humber
- 8 North West
- 9 North East



Section 5

Developing, monitoring and maintaining standards

13 The regulation of social work education is concerned with developing, monitoring and maintaining professional standards. A range of activities are carried out to make sure GSCC standards and requirements are met before courses start and then continue to be met. The requirements are detailed in the *Assuring Quality* publications for each award: the *Accreditation of universities to grant degrees in social work*; the *Approval of courses for the social work degree rules, 2003*; and *Approval of post-qualifying courses rules, 2005*. These documents are all available on the GSCC website.

Becoming better regulators

14 Since the DipSW and PQ courses were established there have been significant changes recommended by Government in how regulatory activities should be undertaken. Guidelines have been issued by the Better Regulation Commission and we have begun to develop new procedures which streamline our processes and reduce the burden on universities. At the same time we are making sure that standards are maintained and improved. We are working towards the five principles of better regulation which stress:

- proportionality;
- accountability;
- consistency;
- transparency; and
- targeting and focusing.

15 During this period we have continued to regulate under our national award requirements for the DipSW and PQ awards and have developed new procedures which apply to the social work degree and the new PQ framework.

Regulatory activities

16 The GSCC's regulatory activities are outlined below.

- We develop standards for new awards, with other stakeholders. During this period we have developed standards and requirements for five new PQ awards as detailed in Section 63.
- We approve universities and courses. Three universities have been accredited to grant degrees in social work making a total of 68. Thirteen universities have been approved to offer early start PQ courses. Eighteen more social work degree courses have been approved making a total of 218.
- Approved courses are monitored on a yearly basis to make sure they are continuing to meet the GSCC's published requirements. This is done by regional inspectors (RIs) considering reports submitted to the GSCC by providers and external assessors and/or examiners, monitoring recruitment, progression and achievement, and taking into account any concerns raised by stakeholders. For the social work degree the university is also asked to tell the GSCC about the results of monitoring and evaluation of the course by students, service users, carers and employers. All DipSW, degree and PQ courses have been monitored this year.

- Reviews of courses are conducted at least every five years after approval and enable an in depth consideration of the strengths of the courses, areas for development and whether requirements continue to be met. There have been no reviews of DipSW programmes and the first reviews of the social work degree will not start until the autumn of 2006, with the vast majority beginning in 2007-2008. We have reviewed nine Practice Teaching Awards (PTA), four Mental Health Social Work awards (MHSWA), four Child Care awards (CCA) and three Post-qualifying consortia (PQCs).

- Inspections are done where serious concerns arise that requirements and standards of education and training are not being met. There have been no inspections during this reporting period.

- Concerns expressed to us by students or other stakeholders about social work education and training are investigated. We have formally investigated 14 concerns.

- We have set up student forums to enable more direct communication with student representatives to gather a balanced view of their experiences. More details about this can be found in paragraph 104.

Informal queries and concerns

17 The Social Work Education Group (SWEG) answer numerous phone and email queries about social work education and training and provides guidance to universities and other stakeholders about requirements and rules governing courses. The most frequent queries and concerns have been about ECDL, student placements, criteria for entry to the social work degree and the changes to the PQ framework.

Monitoring enrolment, progression and achievement

18 Our student records office collects data about students enrolling onto all approved courses. This provides valuable information about the numbers and profile of students and emerging trends in recruitment, progression and achievement. This information is reported on in the next section.

Monitoring the use of funding for practice learning and other initiatives

19 The Education Support Grants Team, based in Rugby, manages and monitors the expenditure of DH funding provided for the new social work degree, DipSW, Practice Teaching Award (PTA) and POCs. DipSW programmes and universities offering approved social work degree courses receive funding to support practice learning opportunities. Universities that have applied for accreditation to offer the new social work degree also receive funding towards involving service users and carers in the design and delivery of the new degree.

20 The monitoring of expenditure is linked to the quality assurance (QA) system through management requirements and conditions of grant. Information and analysis of practice learning opportunities is reported on in Section 7.

Section 6

Outcomes and issues: qualifying training

External assessment and external examining

21 External scrutiny of courses is done by external assessors for the DipSW and all PQ awards, and by external examiners for the social work degree. External assessors continue to be appointed to programmes from a UK approved list and have been pivotal so far, in ensuring a positive transition from the DipSW to the new degree and continuity for PQ awards.

External assessors met as a group to look at emerging issues in the face of transition and the impact on standards. In their role they see the full range of assessed material on courses and in this way can impact on standards at an early stage in the process. They have proved to be effective change agents and a resource to programme teams in ensuring best practices are maintained and developed.

These activities are supported by the Education Standards and Information Manager at the GSCC who also links with the JUC-SWEC and SWAP in an enhancement agenda for external examining, including an annual study day where external examiners in active appointment to degree programmes across the UK meet to exchange ideas and best practices.

22 At the 2006 standardisation activity, external examiners talked about improving the evidence base in external examining reports, making judgements on professional competence (professional and academic standards) and ensuring consistency in practice learning and assessment within and across programmes. Four-country alignment issues were also addressed. Reports on UK standardisation activities are available from the GSCC's Education Standards and Information Team.

23 External examiners are appointed directly by universities and complete an annual report on a university proforma each year. This is submitted to the GSCC as part of annual monitoring of social work degrees.

24 Quality assurance and regulation is therefore dependent on feedback from a whole range of stakeholders, including:

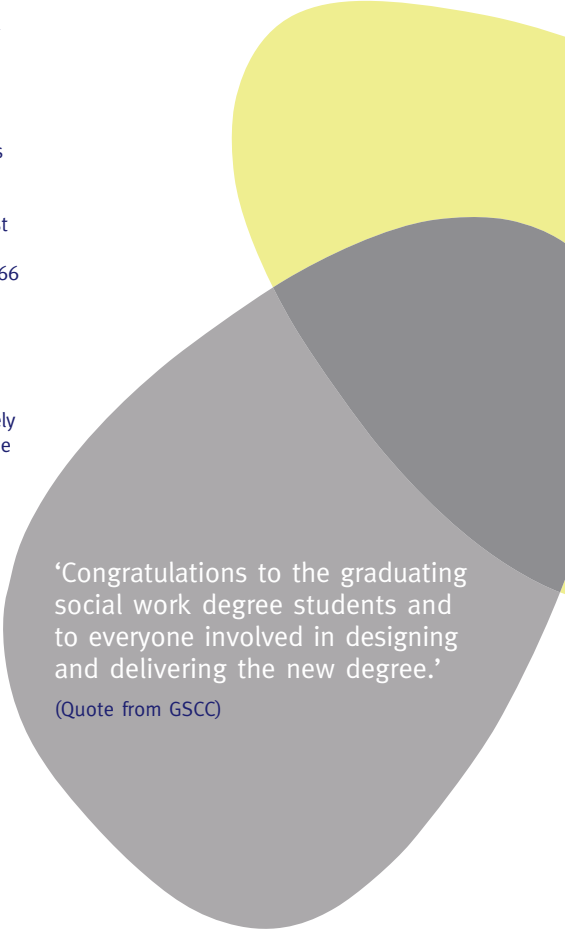
- universities;
- external assessor and examiners;
- regional inspectors;
- service users and carers;
- employers; and
- students.

25 This report summarises the results of all the activities in previous sections and identifies the key themes emerging with relation to qualifying and post-qualifying courses. Quotes have been used from these sources to provide examples including direct feedback from student representatives attending the student forum.

The courses

26 Entry to professional social work training is by achievement of the honours degree in social work introduced by the DH in 2002, or approved postgraduate degrees. The first intake of students started the degree in September 2003. Since then a total of 12,666 students have enrolled.

27 Last year the first 66 students qualified as social workers through a small number of postgraduate courses awarding the social work degree. It is expected that approximately 2,520 students will have graduated with the social work degree in the summer of 2006.



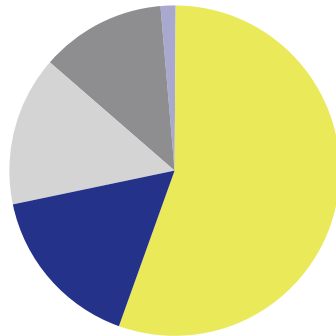
'Congratulations to the graduating social work degree students and to everyone involved in designing and delivering the new degree.'

(Quote from GSCC)

28 A total of 218 degree courses have now been approved to be offered at 67 accredited universities and 11 colleges. These colleges do not themselves have degree awarding powers, but are validated by an accredited university to deliver the degree. Full details of all approved courses are listed on the GSCC website. Courses are offered at undergraduate and postgraduate level and in a variety of ways as described in the chart opposite.

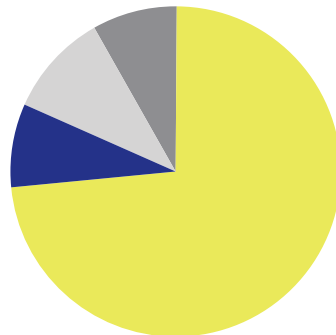
29 The number of new courses for which approval is being sought has reduced significantly during this reporting period. However the number of places available for social work students continues to increase and this year shows another rise of 19 per cent in enrolment. We have accredited three universities which have not previously offered social work qualifying courses to do so and two more have expressed an interest in accreditation for a 2007 start.

Undergraduate courses offered



- Full-time/college based
- Part-time/college based
- Part-time/employment based
- Full-time/employment based
- Distance learning

Postgraduate courses offered



- Full-time/college based
- Part-time/college based
- Part-time/employment based
- Full-time/employment based

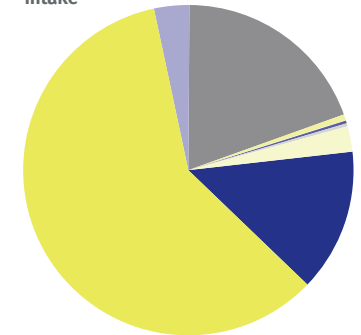
30 The degree replaces previous qualifying courses, including the Diploma in Social Work (DipSW), which had its last intake of students in September 2003. The DipSW and other previous awards remain equally recognised as appropriate qualifications for registration as a social worker on the GSCC Social Care Register. Eleven DipSW programmes have now closed. The majority of the remaining 67 programmes have continued to support small numbers of part-time students and some deferred or referred students who are expected to complete by the summer of 2006. The National Open Learning Programme continues to support a large number of students due to the flexible timescales for completion and may not close until 2008-2009.

Recruitment

31 Enrolment for the social work degree for the academic year 2005-2006 is 5,567, reflecting a 19 per cent increase over 2004-2005 intake and a rise of 33 per cent in qualifying training since 2000. Of those enrolled for the degree there has been a 5 per cent increase in postgraduate students over the last year to 20 per cent. This brings the proportion of students taking the social work degree on postgraduate courses to the same level as that for the DipSW.

32 The chart opposite shows the number of students enrolling on different types of programme for 2004-2005.

Composition of 2005 social work degree intake



- Undergraduate, full-time, college-based: 3,309 students (60%)
- Undergraduate, part-time, employment-based: 784 students (14%)
- Undergraduate, part-time, college-based: 132 students (2%)
- Undergraduate, distance learning: 22 students (0%)
- Postgraduate, part-time, employment-based: 6 students (0%)
- Postgraduate, part-time, college-based: 1 student (0%)
- Postgraduate, full-time, employment-based: 39 students (1%)
- Postgraduate, full-time, college-based: 1,092 students (20%)
- Undergraduate, full-time, employment-based: 182 students (3%)

33 As can be seen, 80 per cent of students are enrolled on full-time courses. There has been a small increase in the proportion of students on employment based-routes, although increasingly employers are sponsoring or seconding staff onto full-time college-based courses. We are aware that recruitment and retention remains an issue for employers, and there are increasing examples of 'grow your own' initiatives being developed to meet local employer demand for trainee and apprenticeship provision. This is an area which the gateways development project, led by the GSCC, will be researching and will consider the need for more diverse and flexible routes to training.

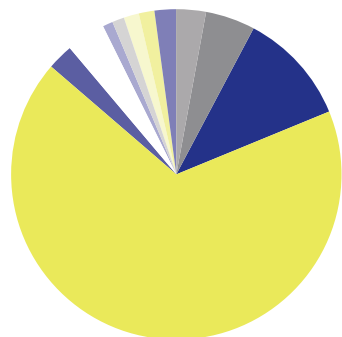
34 There has been no recruitment onto the DipSW in keeping with the policy of last intakes in September 2003.

Who studies on social work degree courses?

35 It is important that social workers are representative of the diverse communities in which they work. Students on social work qualifying courses are rather different to those on other degree courses. There is a higher proportion of mature students, a higher proportion of students from black and minority ethnic groups, and a much higher proportion of women than men.

36 The chart opposite shows the percentage of students from different groups enrolling on the social work degree in September 2005. Apart from a rise in 18-20 year olds from 3 per cent to 11 per cent there has been no major change in the profile of students enrolling for the last three years.

Composition of 2005 social work degree intake by ethnicity

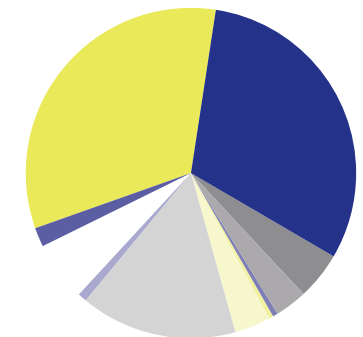


- British 67.9%
- African 10.7%
- Caribbean 4.9%
- Any other white background 2.9%
- Indian 2.0%
- Pakistani 1.7%
- Irish 1.5%
- White and black African 1.1%
- White and black Caribbean 1.1%
- Other, including:
 - Any other mixed background 1.0%
 - Any other black background 0.5%
 - Any other Asian background 0.3%
 - Bangladeshi 0.7%
 - White and Asian 0.5%
 - Chinese 0.2%
 - Other 0.7%
 - Not stated 2.4%

37 Universities continue to take equality and diversity issues into account in seeking to widen participation in the social work degree. The proportion of black and minority ethnic students varies considerably across the country, generally reflecting local populations. Universities in London and Birmingham in particular have very high proportions of black and minority ethnic students, well over the national average of 16 per cent. However, overall there has been no change in the proportion of different ethnic groups enrolling on the social work degree (GSCC data packs 2000 onwards).

38 This year a number of HEIs reported a high percentage of students who are entering training without traditional educational qualifications. However overall figures indicate the breakdown of enrolments by education qualifications is as shown in the graph opposite and that the majority of candidates have A level or degree qualifications.

Social work degree registration by education level for 2005 cohort



- 'A' levels or equivalent
- Degree
- Higher Diploma
- No information supplied
- Non-certificated learning
- None
- 'O' levels or equivalent
- Other Diploma/Certificate
- S/NVQ Level 2
- S/NVQ Level 3
- S/NVQ Level 4

Progression and achievement

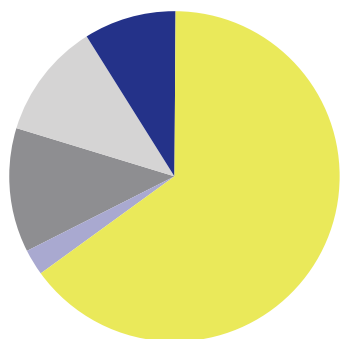
Social work degree

39 There is ad hoc reporting of a high rate of withdrawal in some degree programmes – for example, 20 reported significant numbers of withdrawals. One, albeit small, programme had 50 per cent of a cohort who withdrew, and several advised that many younger applicants did not take up places which had been offered. We are not able to confirm this as a statistic across the country due to different start times and years in which withdrawal takes place. However it has alerted us to the need to monitor this for reporting purposes once the results of the 2003 start programmes are all confirmed.

Diploma in Social Work (DipSW)

40 The results for DipSW during this period are as follows:

DipSW results 2005-2006



- Passed: 3,440 students (66%)
- Deferred: 468 students (9%)
- Referred: 599 students (11%)
- Withdrawn: 654 students (12%)
- Failed: 126 students (2%)

Results status	Numbers
Passed	3,440 (66%)
Failed	126 (2%)
Withdrew	654 (12%)
Referred	599 (11%)
Deferred	468 (9%)
Total	5,287

Results of quality assurance activities

41 This has been an important time for providers in embedding the degree and ensuring that key new requirements are met. Whilst universities have always been evaluated on the quality of their teaching, learning and assessment, the new degree brought with it new requirements and arrangements to be taken on board. These include the involvement of service users and carers and other stakeholders in all aspects of the social work degree, increased provision and new requirements about practice learning, a focus on inter-professional learning, whistleblowing procedures and the ECDL. Analysis of these key themes is of particular interest and they are explored in more depth in Section 5.

42 This section of the report briefly summarises what we have learnt about other aspects of the social work degree.

The role of stakeholders in monitoring and evaluating courses

43 A key change in the quality assurance (QA) of the social work degree is the heightened role played by service users and carers, employers and students in evaluating courses.

44 All HEIs reported a variety of mechanisms enabling students to give their views and evaluate the different aspects of the courses. These included written evaluation of modules and practice learning, meetings with tutors, representation on various HEI committees and stakeholder groups. Typically this feedback resulted in changes being made to module contents, timetables and the assessment burden. One HEI in the North West reviewed its programmes based on the comments coming out of the student forum. Despite this seemingly comprehensive picture the national students' forum and recent forum held in the North West indicated that it was important for students to have direct voice through to the GSCC. Student representation on courses is seen as variable, with some students reporting good experiences and others seeing student involvement as 'lip service'.

46 Higher education institutions (HEIs) also reported involving service users in evaluating the courses, primarily through membership of stakeholder forums and representation on management committees. The level of this varied; in some cases it was very clear how universities had taken these views into account in their action planning, but in others there was a clear need for them to enable more active engagement. Examples of the impact of this participation were changes made to module content, reviews of handbooks and policies, proposals for more involvement of service users and carers; and in one case, improvements in signage for those with disability.

45 'Service users are represented on every committee of the programme and play an integral part in review, monitoring and evaluation, e.g. they review existing course material and provide feedback on content and method of delivery.'

(Quote from EA report)

47 All HEIs reported the involvement of employers in monitoring and evaluating through membership of programme boards, and/or stakeholders groups. Particular examples of changes made include the setting up of a new employment-based route; a new site for delivery of the degree and joint appointments of lecturers between the university and an employer.

Maintaining standards

48 Monitoring confirmed that the vast majority of programmes were continuing to meet GSCC requirements. External examiners (EEs) generally reported very favourably on the social work degree programmes, particularly with respect to the robustness and fairness of assessment systems. There was evidence of generally high standards of teaching and assessment and some exceptional work produced by students.

49 Some EEs continue to comment on the need for improved systems of support for students enrolling from non-traditional backgrounds and others who have poor writing and literacy skills. External examiners' concerns about literacy and scholarship of a small proportion of students on many courses does not appear to have been completely addressed by the more rigorous selection criteria for the degree. However, there is evidence that HEIs are responding. For example, by the provision of assessed study skills courses, early identification systems and revisiting the selection process, without compromising a commitment to the widening participation agenda.

50 In three cases particular concerns were voiced about the standards of the course and this was taken up by inspectors and addressed by the programmes. Two courses being delivered at related teaching institutions, which do not have their own degree awarding powers, were experiencing difficulties with staff being able to deliver degree-level study, staffing resources and administration. Work was done with the colleges and with the accredited universities with the help of EEs to ensure that the universities took responsibility for putting improvements in place. These courses continue to be carefully monitored.

51 In a further case there were concerns that the HEI was not meeting comparable required standards with respect to marking and support for a significant number of students with writing and literacy difficulties. This was taken up with the HEI who put systems and strategies in place to revise selection requirements by introducing a written test, to provide study support for students through essay writing seminars, and early identification of difficulties. Revised criteria for marking, which had been perceived as too lenient, were introduced.

Changes to the curriculum

52 Twenty HEIs had evaluated the first two years of social work degree provision and made some minor changes to courses. These were usually as a result of feedback from EEs or students about areas of the curriculum, e.g. adding electives or introducing a European perspective, or adjusting the assessment strategy to reduce the burden and ensure coherence. It is important that providers are responsive to feedback and are reviewing and updating the degree. None of the changes were significant enough to require a GSCC new approval.

Resources

53 There is no evidence of major problems with resources to support the social work degree and things appear to have 'settled down' following the transitional period last year. Problems arising from staffing or other resource issues were noted by six EEs and eight programmes. However where problems had arisen due to staff illness or turnover, efforts were made to rectify this through speedy appointment of staff. This was also the case where student numbers had increased. Particular needs with relation to administrative staff and practice learning organisers were also highlighted and addressed. Some concerns were raised in two cases about the professional development needs of staff in higher education (HE) and further education (FE) colleges offering the degree under the guidance of an accredited university.

Whistleblowing

54 Approved universities are required to have whistleblowing policies and procedures to support students who wish to report concerns about poor practice, e.g. in their placements. There were no reports of any students accessing such whistleblowing procedure during this period.

Ending a student's training on the grounds of suitability

55 Higher education institutions see themselves as gatekeepers to the profession through their selection procedures and once on the course, to end training if a student is found to be unsuitable. Fourteen students had their training ended on the grounds of suitability. However it is not clear how many students either withdrew voluntarily or were counselled out when suitability was questioned. These matters and the need for clarity about the interface between the GSCC and universities in making decisions about suitability are being considered by a joint working group of GSCC and Joint University Council Social Work Education Committee (JUC-SWEC) representatives. This group is intending to issue some jointly agreed protocols in the new year.

Section 7

Outcomes and issues: post-qualifying training

Diploma in Social Work (DipSW)

56 The focus of monitoring on DipSW programmes has been to ensure that systems and structures are in place to enable students to successfully complete their course. We found that the pattern from previous years has been maintained and all programmes continue to meet requirements with continuing supportive partnerships, good standards of teaching, learning and assessment and robust QA systems. Problems that were picked up last year resulting in a preliminary investigation have been monitored and improvements have been maintained.

57 All programmes have confirmed in their annual quality assurance returns that systems have remained in place to assist students to complete their academic and practice work. They have stated a commitment to maintaining standards and systems, and to ensuring a satisfactory ending to programmes. A number of strategies have been put in place to achieve this including named personnel to oversee closure and individual learning plans for students. Some programmes are prioritising placements for DipSW students and ensuring a pool of experienced practice teachers. External assessors are playing an important role ensuring that assessment processes are maintained and that there is appropriate monitoring of students.

58 Several DipSW programmes are taking active steps to ensure that the lessons and good practice learned from the DipSW are used to inform the development of the social work degree. Some programmes are doing final DipSW surveys and three programmes in one region have joined forces to conduct a longitudinal study.

59 A total of 41 programmes had no complaints from students; 18 had one or two complaints; and one had over five.

Concerns

60 The GSCC has a formal concerns procedure to investigate situations where it is being alleged that GSCC rules and requirements are not being met. However, we do not have any power to overturn assessment decisions and always encourage students to go through the appeals or complaints procedures of the university first, as this is the most appropriate avenue to get their concerns addressed.

61 The majority of concerns are therefore dealt with at an informal level. Fourteen formal concerns were handled from students about their training. Eleven of these were from DipSW students and two were from students on social work degree courses. Concerns were mainly about placement experiences or the circumstances surrounding assessment decisions. Specific concerns ranged from allegations of unfair discrimination on racial or disability grounds to lack of tutor support.

62 Once qualified, social workers become eligible to study for one or more awards in the post-qualifying (PQ) framework. During 2005-2006 a new framework of awards has been in the process of development, while at the same time candidates have continued to register for and achieve awards within the existing framework.

63 The existing framework introduced in 1991 ultimately leads either to the Post-qualifying Award in Social Work (PQSW) or the Advanced Award in Social Work (AASW). The PQSW is in two parts. Part one (PQ1) is intended for newly-qualified workers to consolidate their learning from the DipSW, and part two demonstrates the complex work expected of more experienced workers. The AASW is set at an advanced level, enabling practitioners such as managers and trainers to demonstrate leadership and expertise in their area of work.

64 Four specialist PQ GSCC-approved awards are currently offered across the country as follows:

- 28 Mental Health Social Work Award (MHSWA) programmes;
- 36 Practice Teaching Award (PTA) programmes;
- 18 Child Care Award (CCA) programmes; and
- the Regulation of Care Services Award (RCSA). This award was approved in 2003 to be the primary qualification for inspectors in the regulation of care services in England and Wales and is delivered solely by Anglia Ruskin University.

Post-qualifying consortia

65 PQ awards are co-ordinated and administered by 17 PQ consortia (PQCs) across the country. In addition to the national awards described above, PQCs approve a range of locally designed courses that meet all or some of the PQSW requirements. Candidates may also present individual portfolios for the PQCs to assess against the requirements.

A new framework for post-qualifying training

66 In February 2005 a new post-qualifying framework, which builds on the social work degree and brings post-qualifying training up-to-date with the changing social work environment, was launched. This acknowledges that social workers are in specialist roles, and promotes inter-disciplinary working. There are three levels of award with a modular structure to support career development and workforce planning needs.

67 During the last year standards and requirements for four specialist awards have been approved. These are:

- working with children, young people, their families and carers;
- practice education;
- working with adults; and
- leadership and management.

68 The standards and requirements for mental health are expected to be published by winter 2006.

69 Regional planning networks established by Skills for Care, now joined by the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC), and comprised of local employers, service users and carers and HEIs, will commission these awards according to local workforce needs. The new awards will be fully in place from September 2007. A small number of universities have applied for approval to start in the 2006-2007 academic year and further details are on the GSCC website.

70 Candidates can continue to register for courses in the old framework until 31 March 2007. The last date for a PQ award to be awarded is 27 September 2008. Arrangements are in place to ensure the current awards retain their value, and consortia are working hard to support existing candidates during the period of transition from one framework to another. Full details of the new framework and transitional arrangements are on the GSCC website.

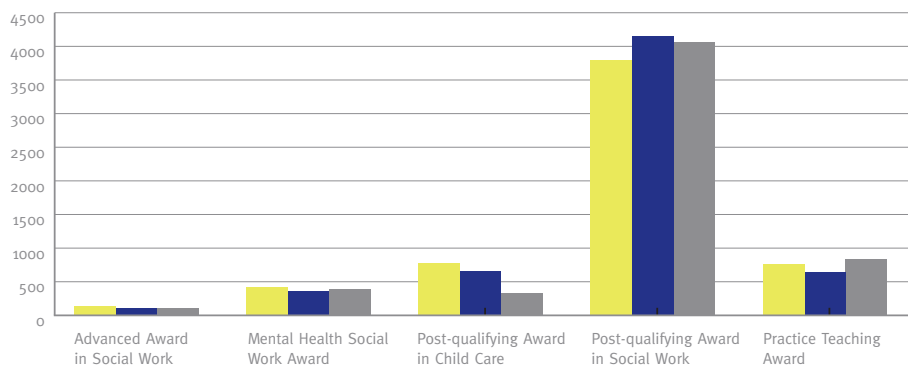
Recruitment

71 The graph below shows a very small decrease of registration onto PQ courses during the last year. There has been increased enrolment onto practice teaching programmes and mental health social work courses. This represents considerable work by PQC's to encourage and enable students to complete full PQSW awards, particularly where they already hold part awards before the new framework starts.

By contrast there has been a fall of 50 per cent in enrolments to the child care award. This appears to be due to a range of issues, including waiting for the early start programmes, the majority of which are child care, difficulties in meeting backfill requirements to release candidates and changes in local authority funding arrangements. There will be no further enrolment to the RSCA. The course will remain open until the end of the current PQ timetable to enable any out of cohort candidates to complete.

Number of PQ registrations, 2003-2005

2003 2004 2005



Achievement

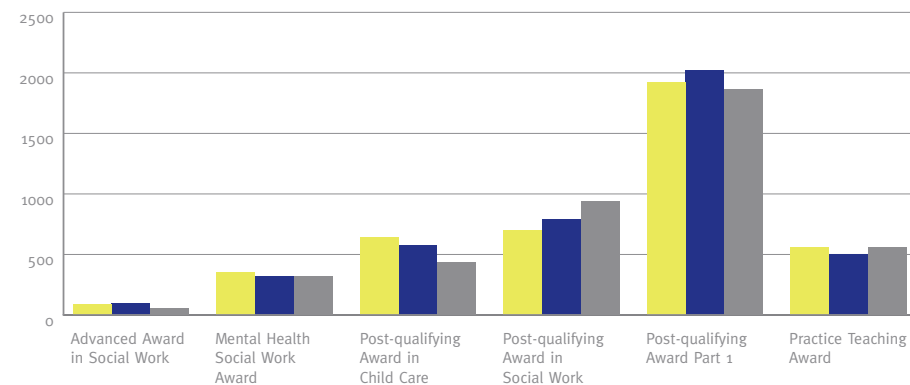
72 There has been a steady increase in the achievement of PQSW awards since 2000 leading to a total of 940 this year, and 3,723 over the five years. Achievements for PQ1 are slightly down. The achievement of advanced awards has continued to decline, with 57 this year. Achievements for the four specialist awards have remained constant for MHSWA and PTA with a significant decline in CCA reflecting the decline in registration.

Results of quality assurance activities

73 Outlined below is a summary of what we have found out about post-qualifying courses during this reporting period from all our sources. This includes results from 20 reviews held with respect to PQ courses as described in Section 5. The annual monitoring process for 2004-2005 confirmed that the GSCC quality assurance requirements for post-qualifying (PQ) social work education and training are being met across the country.

Number of PQ awards achieved, 2003-2005

2003 2004 2005



74 Common themes have emerged from the quality assurance of all PQ awards.

• **Impact on the workforce**

Post-qualifying courses continue to make a significant contribution to the professional development of workers in their specialist fields, producing reflective and analytical practitioners. Both employers and candidates alike comment on improved confidence and competence to practice. Candidates are enthusiastic about developing specialist knowledge and skills which they can concurrently put into practice.

Another strength of PQ courses and one that is essential to their effective delivery and outcomes is the presence of strong, facilitative, cohesive and collaborative partnerships between the providers and employers. This enables strategic workforce and operational planning across a wide geographical area to meet employers' needs for specialist workers.

• **Quality of teaching and learning**

The high quality of teaching and learning and opportunities for candidates to benefit from stimulating and challenging courses which change their practice, is a common feature. Many participants in reviews have commented on the accessibility and helpfulness of the course teaching team.

Strength of partnerships

'The collaboration between partners shows a high level of commitment, trust, value and professionalism.'

(Quote from review report)

• **Studying and learning**

Whilst there are benefits from studying and working at the same time, there are continuing concerns expressed by students about the variable and often insufficient support from employers as well as the conflicting demands of workload commitment and pressure of study. This issue will be monitored through the new PQ framework and is being explored in depth in a current Skills for Care project: *What works in work-based learning. Candidates' experience of PQ study*, SfC, – to be published December 2006.

• **Involving service users and carers**

Requirements to involve service users and carers in current PQ courses are less specific than in the social work degree and new framework. Although this varies across programmes some PQ courses have responded to the evident benefits of this approach and have begun to develop participation of service user and carers in their course.

Mental Health Social Work Award (MHSWA) programmes

75 Social workers must have successfully completed the MHSWA to be eligible for appointment as an ASW by their local authority. All sources provide evidence that MHSWA programmes continue to meet requirements and to equip candidates to take on the Approved Social Worker (ASW) role, functions and duties with competence and confidence. Recruitment to these programmes is clearly linked to local needs and to ensuring that there are sufficient ASWs to meet the local authority's statutory obligations. The reorganisation of mental health services across the region together with delays and subsequent abandonment of the Mental Health Bill may have caused some potential candidates to consider delaying further professional development and training until they were more certain of the future. However, overall recruitment is still slightly up.

76 In addition to the common features described above, MHSWA programmes generally benefit from the contributions of a range of different professionals which enhance the multi-disciplinary perspective and value of their learning. There is a long tradition of involving mental health service users and carers actively and effectively in course delivery and assessment. It is notable for example that all MHSWA courses involved service users in annual monitoring of their programmes and in reviews. This is not as apparent in other PQ courses.

77 Areas noted for improvement include procedures to end a candidate's training due to suitability, candidate support and clarity of information about course processes and requirements. For some programmes the need for an increased emphasis on anti-discriminatory practice has been highlighted, while in others more emphasis is needed on the impact of mental health issues on children and families.

79 Despite a significant decrease in enrolment onto child care programmes, feedback from all sources provides evidence that programmes continue to prepare candidates well for complex work in child care. Programmes have been a valuable resource for agencies to support the national strategy for improvement in quality of social work in children and families provision. Programmes continue to 'grow their own' practice assessors and mentors from successful Child Care Award holders. Like many other PQ courses, the programmes are flexible and responsive to contemporary social work issues and the needs of each group.

80 The involvement of service users and carers is developing but is an area for increased focus in the new PQ specialist courses. Other areas for improvement are consistency in feedback to candidates and in assessment.

The Regulation of Care Services Award (RCSA)

81 Candidates initially enrolled on the RCSA programme when they were employed as inspectors by the then National Care Standards Commission. With the introduction of the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) and a subsequent change in the learning and development policy, the RCSA was no longer the preferred qualification for inspectors. To date, of the 167 registered candidates 101 have gained the full award. Some have decided to transfer to the Anglia Ruskin University part-time online distance learning MSc programme for regulators and inspectors. The RCSA England programme carried out a comprehensive post-programme evaluation of the first cohort in 2005. RCSA candidates, practice assessors and line managers considered that those who had completed the programme became demonstrably more effective and efficient in their regulatory roles. The course made a significant contribution to driving service improvement by modernising the regulation of social care services and promoting better outcomes for people through inspections, reviews and performance assessment. The RCSA will finish at the same time as all other PQ courses within the current framework and there are currently no plans for it to be included in the new framework.

Practice teaching awards

'The review found that well-established high standards, that have sustained this valued and adaptable programme in providing for high quality qualified practice teaching in the region for several years, continue to be evident in its closing stages.'

(Quote from review report)

82 Although overall enrolment on Practice Teaching Programme (PTP) courses is slightly up, this varies considerably across the country. Where local degree programmes have needed a qualified practice assessor to be involved with the development and assessment of student social workers, the linked practice teaching programmes have continued to recruit healthily. For others, especially where universities have developed their own programmes to train social work assessors, recruitment has fallen and the last cohorts were enrolled in May 2004.

Child care awards

78 'Much has been achieved through the effort of individual candidates, teachers, practice assessors, service users, managers and partners who have demonstrated their enthusiasm, creativity, endeavour and above all their commitment to raising the standards of child care social work.'

(Quote from Inspector's review report)

83 The majority of PTP programmes continue to be valued as providing courses which are responsive and adaptive to workforce needs and producing high quality practice teachers. Some appeared to be struggling to maintain collaborative partnerships and there was a lack of attendance by key stakeholders in three out of nine PTP reviews reflecting this.

84 Several of the programmes were highly dependent on one key member of staff and lacked a systems-based approach and contingency planning in the event of this person's absence or departure. This highlights the benefits of PQ courses being embedded in university structures and drawing on support and resources from across the institution.

85 The most common area for further developments for PTPs was the involvement of service users and carers in all aspects of the course.

Post-qualifying consortia (PQC)

'This continues to be a progressive, dynamic and committed consortium with active partner contribution and high quality management and administration. The consortium is innovative and developmental in its approach, whilst also maintaining a firm commitment to standards and a focus on practice competence. The support for all stakeholders, the assessment systems, and the mentoring scheme are all areas of strength.' (Quote from review report)

86 This has been a difficult period for the 17 post-qualifying consortia across England, managing transitional and closure arrangements and dealing with uncertainty about their role during the next two years. However, PQC's have continued to do their activities in a committed, creative and professional way building on well-established and collaborative partnerships. The majority reported increased registration particularly for PQ1. There were also reports of increased registrations from candidates in adult services and independent providers.

Managing transition

'The PQ consortia have performed a very important role in promoting and publicising the new post-qualifying framework and helping stakeholders understand the transitional arrangements.'

(Quote from RI regional report)

87 All PQ courses were asked to complete transitional action plans (TAPs) in October to ensure current and new candidates were encouraged to complete whole PQSW awards; to ensure all requirements were maintained through the transitional period; and to successfully manage outcomes and the closure timetable. The plans demonstrated that PQC's and PQ programmes were making considerable efforts to ensure a satisfactory ending to the existing PQ framework. Subsequent annual monitoring identified that programmes and PQC's had set up good communication systems to track, contact and advise registered candidates, providing individuals with opportunities and resources to assist them in completing courses.

Consortia have worked with employers to develop creative processes to enable completion of PQSW and AASW awards, for example to allow those without PQ 6 to gain and develop training and assessment skills. Other activities included auditing training needs, running information days and workshops, targeting bursaries to particular awards or groups of staff, and extra tutorials and individual personal plans for out of cohort students. In their reports, external assessors express confidence in the TAPs and stressed the vital importance of maintaining high standards and strong management. The EAS also paid tribute to the energy and vision of existing PQ staff and drew attention to the fact that changes may cause anxiety.

Section 8 Themes

88 This section considers particular themes that were identified in last year's report or have emerged during this reporting period.

Equality and diversity

89 It is essential that the social work workforce reflects the diversity of the communities in which it delivers services and is culturally competent. While social work programmes within universities and colleges have a good record of widening access and participation, there is still considerable work to be done before this objective is achieved. In paragraphs 35-38, we noted that profiles of recruitment to qualifying social work courses have remained unchanged for several years. There is still an under-representation of men, young people and some black and minority ethnic groups entering the social work profession. The gateways to the professions project aims to explore this further.

90 The benefits of recruiting a diverse student group is highlighted by one external examiner as follows:

'The professional programmes recruit across a wide age and educational range, many students bringing significant experience of working within social care and related settings...this leads to considerable richness in understanding other cultures and approaches to social welfare and education.'

91 However, recent research commissioned by the GSCC and completed by the Social Care Workforce Research Unit at King's College London confirmed concerns that there are differential progression rates amongst certain students including those from black and minority ethnic groups. This is outlined in the report *Diversity and progression in social work education in England* (King's College London and the GSCC, 2006). The research provides a baseline from which to identify what enables progression and achievement for particular groups of students and what hinders it, in order to improve progression rates and support the objective that the social care workforce reflects the diversity of the communities in which it delivers services. This work is being taken forward by a steering group composed of representatives from SCIE, the Race Equality Unit (REU), the Social Care Workforce Research Unit (SCWRU), JUC-SWEC and the GSCC.

92 Annual monitoring suggests that HEIs have a good record of widening access and participation and that many are rising to the challenge of providing appropriate support for students across the age range and in relation to particular needs. Universities are adapting the curriculum and practice learning to meet the needs of younger people with less experience. One university reported in their annual monitoring report:

'Younger recruits have provided every indication that they are coping as well as the traditionally more mature students in both academic and professional practice components.'

93 Universities are also seeking to meet the needs of students with dyslexia both academic and in practice placements, although one EE identified a university with no formal systems to identify dyslexia. Several highlighted the need for better learning support for those with unconventional academic backgrounds and those for whom English is a second language.

Workforce development and partnerships

94 An emerging feature in the regulation and quality assurance of social work education is the increasingly important link between social work education, workforce development needs and changes in service delivery outlined in Section 2. This highlights the importance of shared working between education providers, sector skills councils and employers; an important feature of the social work degree which is reflected in the structures and processes for the implementation of the new PQ framework. The GSCC is also developing its partnership activities with stakeholders in the regions. Regional inspectors meet regularly with Skills for Care and Learning Resource Network (LRN) colleagues to extend partnership working in order to contribute to effective regional workforce partnerships.

95 Many regions are building on already well-developed regional networks in the social care field and a history of collaborative working means that changes are readily embraced. The LRN and subcommittees of the Skills for Care regional committees have a large and ever-increasing stakeholder membership including CSCI, the Association of Directors of Social Services (ADSS), the PQ consortia, the Workforce Development Directorate, statutory and voluntary agency representatives, higher and further education representatives, and the all important service user and carer voice. These regional groups are beginning to take a significant role in the future commissioning of post-qualifying education and training to be sure that workforce development and training is tailored to the local needs of agencies. Employers have a key role in the commissioning of courses and accurate and up-to-date workforce data is essential to inform this process.

96 Another important regional feature is the networks originally set up to support DipSW implementation. These have now evolved to cover the degree and PQ courses. The networks provide a forum for more specialist regional discussion and collaborative planning for issues such as the development and co-ordination of practice learning opportunities, inter-professional learning, registration and conduct issues, and service user and carer participation in social work education and funding.

Stakeholder involvement

97 The involvement of stakeholders in all aspects of the course is a key requirement of the social work degree and is central to the planning and delivery of new PQ courses.

Service users and carers

‘It is a constant battle to provide the complex, high quality learning experience demanded by professional requirements against the backdrop of a centralised structure which is slow to respond to the learning needs of students, staff and outside contributors. Nevertheless, the over-riding impression from students was that service user experience was an extremely powerful learning tool.’

(Quote from external examiner report)

98 Evidence from annual monitoring suggests that considerable progress has been achieved by universities in involving service users and carers in the design and delivery of the social work degree during the last three years. This includes involvement in selection and recruitment of students, designing modules, direct teaching, marking and assessment, service user-led placements, and review and evaluation. External examiners found evidence of service user involvement in curriculum development, development of new teaching materials, direct delivery of modules and some assessment. A common area of involvement is the preparation of students to do practice learning. However, our monitoring identifies that while there is excellent and comprehensive participation in some areas this needs to continue to be promoted, developed and monitored. Higher education institutions are at different stages of development; involvement in recruitment and teaching is generally more developed than in design, assessment, monitoring and evaluation. Further work is needed to build capacity and support user-controlled organisations and groups, and engage with diverse groups of service users and carers. A weak area in particular continues to be the representation of black and minority interests.

99 Students at the regional forum identified the further development of service user and carer involvement as a priority and stressed the value of involvement for both service users and students.

Funding to support service user and carer participation

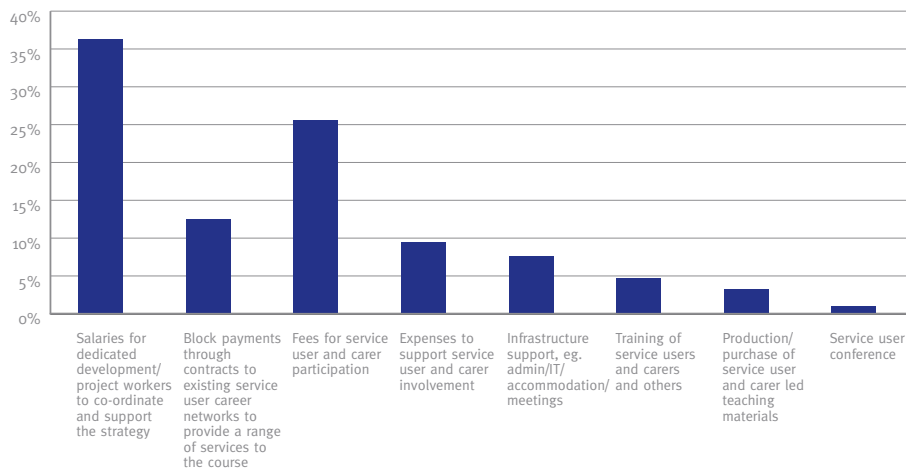
100 Providers of the social work degree have continued to be given financial assistance from the Department of Health to support service user and carer participation through an annual grant of £8,500. Monitoring of this expenditure by the Education Support Grant Team indicates the range of exciting ways in which universities are engaging with users and carers in collaboration across recruitment, teaching, assessment and quality assurance. In the North East region, the degree courses are collaborating on a number of strategies and have pooled resources to enable the development of service user and carer networks, holding a range of events and developing teaching materials.

101 As can be seen by the chart below the most money has been spent on salaries for service user and carer co-ordinator posts.

PQ courses

102 Involving service users and carers is more developed in degree courses than in the current PQ framework. Although some PQ mental health programmes are at the forefront of this important work by having service users and carers involved at every stage of the course, from recruitment through to teaching and assessment to management.

Service user and carer expenditure as percentage of total



The GSCC and service user and carer involvement in social work education

103 The GSCC has consistently played a key role in promoting and supporting the participation of service users and carers in social work education and training programmes through approval and monitoring processes and through key initiatives. This year, service users and carers have been involved in reference and steering groups to jointly produce the standards and requirements for new PQ awards in child care, mental health and social work with adults. In April 2006, service users and carers and regional inspectors jointly planned and presented a conference for HEI and employer stakeholders in Birmingham to discuss the latter two awards. Evaluation by all service users and carers, and other stakeholders confirmed that service users' and carers' input has been invaluable and has lent credibility to the outcomes.

104 Work is now being completed to consider how service users and carers, as experts by experience, can make a significant contribution to the regulation of social work education with the aim of improving both the quality of social work education and our practice as a regulator. We are intending to pilot the involvement of service users and carers in two reviews of the social work degree. This will be evaluated and lessons will be learnt for the future.

Employers

105 Employers are key stakeholders and encouraged to take part in selection, contributing to course design and represented on the management of the course. During this reporting year, despite the small number of employment-based courses there has been an increase in employers supporting employees with the social work degree through traineeships and secondments.

Annual monitoring information suggests that social work employers are generally positive about their involvement in social work education and training. A GSCC survey into agency engagement with the degree concluded that the overall picture is positive with high levels of engagement by agencies in respect of all of the GSCC accreditation criteria, covering degree planning and development, recruitment and selection, teaching and marking and quality assurance. This degree of engagement is broadly correlated with levels of placement numbers, size and resourcing of agencies.

It is noteworthy that even very small independent sector agencies make a significant contribution to a wide range of collaborative activities, not just placement provision. The Thames Valley sub-region has made considerable progress with inter-university initiatives. The Ruskin College based voluntary sector practice learning consortium serving the Thames Valley sub-region is an example of very sophisticated collaboration with the voluntary sector.

Joint appointments

106 Another key example of employer involvement is the growth of joint appointments for social work degree courses.

‘The senior management team has strategically developed joint appointment posts with most of the key local authority partners. This has proved particularly beneficial for ensuring high standards of practice learning and developing a comprehensive curriculum that enables students to make real connections between theory and practice.’

(Quote from university annual report)

‘We are in the process of recruiting to another joint appointment with one of our local authority partners; we will then have five joint appointments which have acted to cement and progress productive relationships with our partners.’

(Quote from university annual report)

Students

107 Following the successful national student forum held by the GSCC last year, a pilot forum for social work students from the North West region was held in Salford on 7 February 2006. This regional forum was attended by 21 student representatives and provided an opportunity to share their views with the GSCC and contribute to the national agenda for the development of social work education. The report of this, *The Northwest Regional Social Work Students’ Forum (February 2006)*, was presented to the social work education stakeholders group and disseminated to local providers. During this year we will be holding two more student forums, one in the north and one in the south. Comments from the student forums and from reviews are included throughout the report.

Practice learning

108 The following context covers both the Diploma in Social Work (DipSW) and the social work degree.

Context

109 Provision of high quality practice learning opportunities to ensure that all students spend at least 130 days (DipSW) or 200 days (degree) gaining experience and learning in practice settings lies at the heart of qualifying training. For the DipSW, students must have two contrasting placements. The GSCC DipSW rules and requirements lay down the quality assurance and resourcing expectations that programmes must meet. For the degree, students must spend time in at least two practice settings, involving services to at least two user groups and complete statutory tasks involving legal interventions (DH requirement). Higher education institutions must secure, allocate, approve and audit appropriate practice learning opportunities for these purposes and make sure that there are enough practice assessors with appropriate values, professional qualifications and experience to resource provision. Final assessment must include an assessment by a qualified and experienced social worker.

110 Managing the tensions between supply and demand is one of the key challenges of all social work qualifying courses. The larger the pool of practice learning opportunities, the greater the choice and capacity to mix and match to individual student learning needs.

111 Different regions have their own particular features which impact directly on practice learning provision, ranging from rural issues of geography, travel and accessibility to urban ones of HEI concentration, and the clustering and competition for scarce resources locked up in agencies already under pressure. Higher education institutions rely almost exclusively on the goodwill and capability of local and regional employers to provide a constant supply of suitable practice learning opportunities. These arrangements are normally managed through collaborative stakeholder structures, typically through service level agreements based on multiple partnerships across the independent and statutory sectors, although it is unusual for 100 per cent of all need to be guaranteed in this way.

112 The creation and development of additional sites and personnel is a necessary capacity building exercise for most HEIs, especially given that demand is about to peak as the third cohort of degree students has now been recruited. For the degree, placement patterns over the three years for undergraduates vary between HEIs; some students only go out on placement in the second year although for longer periods. Therefore the overall supply and demand picture is complicated. Late start, inappropriate or inadequate practice learning experiences constitute the biggest single source of concern for students. In these situations, as one student commented, 'Practice learning is viewed by some students as a lottery'. While some students see themselves as losers, many are winners. It should be noted that a very high proportion of practice learning opportunities are fit for purpose and provide excellent experience.

113 The GSCC administers dedicated funding through our Education Support Grants Team (ESGT) to contribute to the support of practice learning allocated on the basis of the number of placement days provided. Research by the GSCC suggests that the current arrangements based on a daily placement fee facilitate the maintenance and development of supply. The total amount paid for placements for the period 1 October 2004 to 30 September 2005 was almost £9 million. This was used for paying agencies or in some cases third parties for the planning and/or assessment elements of placements. Our research also indicates that the DH performance indicator star rating methodology, which requires statutory agencies to provide a quantity of placement days in proportion to their social workforce establishment, has also focused the need of local and unitary authorities to mainstream placement provision. The GSCC bursary scheme has an element for placement travel. This has supported the provision of placements, especially in more remote sites.

Practice learning data

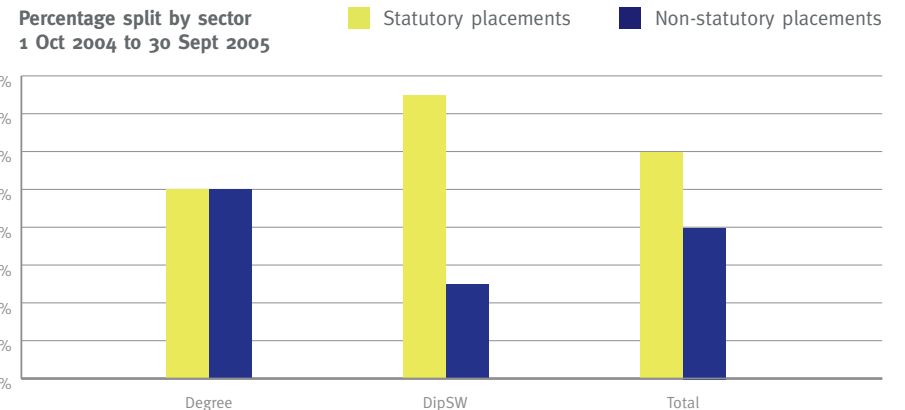
114 As an awarding body for the DipSW and a regulatory body for the degree, the GSCC has responsibility to ensure HEIs are complying with our rules and requirements (DipSW), the DH requirements and our own approval criteria in respect of practice learning. We rely on the annual reports from HEIs; financial monitoring returns; regional inspectors' local knowledge and interventions; any formal concerns raised with us; and, for this period in question, the work of the Practice Learning Taskforce (PLTF), a Skills for Care project tasked with promoting practice learning. The GSCC also completed a national snapshot survey of employer engagement during this period, some of which related to practice learning provision.

Quantitative information

115 A statistical quantitative summary of national practice learning opportunity (PLO) provision is shown below. It is based on data received by the Education Support Grants Team covering both DipSW and degree placement provision. Placements for the period covering both have run concurrently.

116 In the chart below, it can be seen that overall there is a 60:40 balance between 'statutory' and 'non statutory' placements. These roughly equate to local authority or unitary authority sites and private, independent, not for profit, for profit, or voluntary sector sites. Figures are based on all placements but mostly first level, or second. Most undergraduate courses have not yet reached the point of a year three placement. The figures suggest that in over 200 days, students will have experienced the breadth of social work across the social care sector.

117 There is some variation within individual regions which are likely to reflect start up dates, cohort profiles, placement patterns, structure of courses, availability of practice learning opportunities, as well as pedagogical principles. Some courses have a distinct preference for using non-statutory placements for the first level placement, with no qualified personnel on site and reserving the statutory experience to later, particularly when this also enables a qualified experienced social worker to be working off site. This may be the reason why there is nearer to a 50:50 split for degree placements. It is expected over time, as the degree courses mature and student numbers level out, that the sector split will move nearer to the 60:40 balance. Qualified social workers, often with a practice teaching award, are usually reluctant to directly assess students in their final placement at the point of qualification.



118 In this respect, the data, although incomplete, provides an insight into the use of on site and off site practice assessment provision. There is an approximately 65:35 split across all the placements, where it has been reported. The GSCC has not routinely collected data on assessor status other than their situation. However, off site assessors, often freelance or employed directly by the HEI, are likely to be social work qualified, experienced and trained assessors. Some on site assessors might be as well. There is some regional variation, perhaps reflecting different practice learning models of delivery. However, if the limited data is reliable and general (note that most HEIs did not report assessor status) and the same pattern exists, then it is possible to determine that students are at some point being assessed by an experienced and qualified social worker who is also likely to be a trained assessor.

119 Where recorded, it can be seen from the chart below that over 45 per cent of all placements took place in a fieldwork setting and a further 18 per cent involved community work settings, also a form of fieldwork. Residential and day care settings provided 12 per cent of the total. Of the specified returns, service user focus suggests that working with children and families (35 per cent), people with mental ill-health (11 per cent), older people (10 per cent) and people with physical disabilities (4 per cent) tend to predominate, although more generic placements (19 per cent) covered more than one service user group. The response rate was not high but, based on the returned data, distribution of service user focus is consistent across the country, with children and family services by far the most popular.

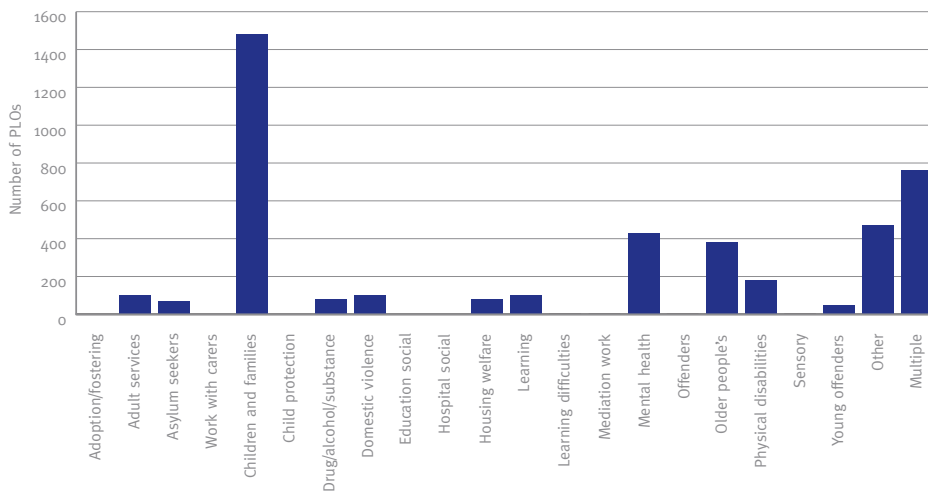
120 Over 9,000 placements were offered in the period in question. The number of formal concerns expressly about placement experience received by the GSCC was very small although regional inspectors would have dealt with more on an informal advisory basis, sometimes involving direct liaison with the HEI in question. We have encountered some examples of late starts in the case of specific individuals but, on occasion, some institutions have found it difficult to place students due to placement shortages. There has been no major failure and overall the GSCC rules, requirements and criteria, and the DH requirements regarding practice learning opportunity variation and sufficiency, have been broadly met for the period in question. Our research suggests that where any of these have been jeopardised it is because of unpredictable contingencies affecting local employers, or more disconcertingly, where employer stakeholder partnerships are either very restricted in range or proving not to be as tight or strong as they set out to be. Anonymised comments by external examiners and assessors can be seen on the right.

'[This programme] offers a variety of excellent practice placements with strong support from partner agencies in the statutory and voluntary sector.'

'The programme manages despite resource constraints to provide students with a range of placement experiences which enable core competencies to be met.'

'Difficulties in obtaining practice learning opportunities which match the student requirements of each of the levels of academic study are issues identified by the team and currently under scrutiny.'

Practice learning opportunities (PLOs) in England – service user focus, Oct 2004 to Sept 2005



121 For the social work degree, the DH requires that students must undergo assessed preparation for practice that involves shadowing an experienced social worker and learning more about service users before they can engage with full practice learning opportunities. It is for HEIs to determine how this is organised but the requirement serves as an extra safeguard. A small number of students did not demonstrate their suitability to proceed. Ultimately, robust preparation, availability of and good placement provision are intended for one purpose: to ensure that students can learn and are assessed as competent practitioners. These last two factors are heavily influenced by placement quality.

Qualitative data

122 Quality, in relation to placements, means many things; the range of learning opportunities; the skills and commitment of the practice assessor and host team; the relationship between key players; the recognition and nurturing of specific needs; and an open assessment process. For the DipSW, programmes are required to have in place monitoring systems to oversee all aspects of provision. For the social work degree, HEIs are required to monitor their own placement provision in line with the Quality Assurance Agency's code of practice on placement learning and DH requirements. Most HEIs have developed their own distinctive placement monitoring procedures. The GSCC does not specify how it is carried out and to date we have not expressly required to see the detailed outcomes of any audit, only any significant outcomes involving adverse trends, improvements or celebrated achievements. However there is sufficient commentary.

123 In general, external assessors have routinely commented on the high quality of DipSW placement reports and practice learning. External examiners for the degree do not always take the opportunity to comment directly on placement provision since they report directly to their HEI using individual institutional formats. The GSCC has encouraged HEIs to ask their external examiners to expressly comment on practice learning. Where they have made observations, they are very similar to those of DipSW external assessors, a range of which are shown below.

'The course is to be commended on the high quality of its practice learning and practice assessment handbooks and the associated module guides.'

'The case studies and reports from students on practice demonstrated to me how far the students have developed in their practice and in their understanding of the role of social work.'

124 Practice assessment panels are often praised for the robustness of their work. Evidence presented by students and endorsed by practice assessors for practice competence, has usually been noted as strong. External assessors and external examiners often refer to the sheer pressure of locating whole cohorts of students and the intense resources required to match them, the last few taking up disproportionate time. We are aware that there have been several instances where a particular placement will not be used again because it proved unsuitable. Late starts, and use of previously untried sites, are the most frequently cited reasons for poor quality learning experiences. Most of the concerns are situation-specific; some are expressly mentioned by external examiners, for example:

'The criteria for the presentation of portfolios could helpfully be simplified and modified. Portfolios this year were unwieldy, overlong, and repetitive.'

'There are concerns over the assessment of first placements.'

125 Regional inspectors consider EA and EE reports in making their own overall annual assessment of placement quality. This is based on close local knowledge and historical understanding of the circumstances, issues and challenges facing each programme. All programmes were seen to be adequate, meeting practice learning quality standard requirements, and in many cases demonstrating exemplary arrangements and a desire to enhance and improve. Others were advised by inspectors on areas for improvement. Some inspectors' comments are shown below:

'Your audit of practice learning was thorough and helpful and included the involvement of service users and carers.'

'Thank you for your copy of your practice learning action plan, which includes action to address difficulties experienced with late start placements.'

126 In summary, this reporting year's data indicates that most programmes are providing, maintaining and developing a good supply of appropriate high quality placements, a resource intensive activity in which some struggle more than others. Most HEIs are to be commended. Given the number of placements only a very small percentage proved to be unsatisfactory. However, we are conscious that the amount of evidenced audit detail which HEIs share with us in their annual report varies: moreover, each HEI has its own unique system of monitoring which makes comparing like for like difficult. The GSCC is currently working together with other stakeholders to develop a more systematic practice learning quality assurance data collection tool in line with the Practice Learning Taskforce's objective number 7: to improve the quality of practice learning opportunities, ensuring the student perspective is incorporated.

Inter-professional learning

127 Social work education and training provision is designed to promote inter-professional education, learning about, learning with and learning from other professionals. This includes both common learning with other professions and acquiring the knowledge and skills associated with inter-agency working. The evidence suggests that inter-professional learning is variously addressed in practice with some excellent examples but also many gaps. Some universities have well-established links with their health faculties and seven are already providing joint inter-professional degrees. Where social work is located within an inter-professional faculty this assists initiatives to develop inter-professional learning within the social work degree and in respect of post-qualifying learning development. The demand from health staff for certain modules also helps to ensure the financial viability of provision. However there is little evidence of shared learning with disciplines other than health and it appears to have a low profile in many universities.

128 Ad hoc responses from degree students are generally negative with many finding shared learning in academic settings an alienating rather than helpful experience. During 2006-2007, the GSCC is intending to focus on this topic in annual monitoring in order to gain a clearer picture of the prevalence and nature of inter-professional learning. SCIE is also undertaking a knowledge review about inter-professional working in social work education which will report on the knowledge and evidence of practice in this area.

European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL)

'ECDL is a swear word among students who cannot see the relevance. It needs integrating to be relevant.'

(Quote from regional student forum)

129 To be awarded the degree, students must have 'been assessed as competent to the level of the European Computer Driving Licence or its equivalent'. There have been continuing concerns and confusions about this requirement, from both providers and students. Some HEIs appear to have forgotten about it and there is ad hoc evidence of varying and unequal practice with a hugely diverse approach. We are therefore collecting information about its implementation as part of annual monitoring for this year to see whether improvements can be made.

Section 9

Summary and conclusions

130 Many of the patterns of the previous year's report are continuing, but there are some key emerging issues particularly around dealing with transition and responding to changes in workforce development. The continued commitment and enthusiasm of providers is commendable at a time when they are managing and closing existing courses at the same time as developing and embedding new ones.

- Regulatory work and quality assurance activities during this reporting period provide evidence that the social work education and training programmes continue to meet standards and requirements. Monitoring processes and opportunities for feedback from stakeholders including external assessors, external examiners and students are effective in identifying situations where a provider may be struggling to meet threshold standards. These situations are immediately investigated by the inspector and where necessary action plans are devised and subsequently monitored to ensure problems are resolved. Examples this year have concerned consistency of assessment processes, lack of provision for students to achieve ECDL, incorrect reporting of results, and late or inappropriate practice learning provision.
- Providers of the social work degree have on the whole responded to key requirements positively. Where there are problems the framework is robust in identifying and addressing issues with providers.

- PQ courses within the current framework continue to equip candidates well, to do complex work with confidence and competence, and have responded positively to changing needs and service delivery.

131 Recruitment, progression and achievement

- Recruitment to the social work degree is buoyant, but it is too early to identify particular trends in progression and achievement. It will be important to carefully monitor the profile of students enrolling and whether the aim of recruiting a younger workforce is being achieved. The recruitment, progression and achievement rates of particular groups of students will also need to be carefully monitored and efforts to address this will be led by the progression and retention project and the gateways development project. Rates of withdrawal, deferral and referrals will also require careful monitoring.

132 Managing transition and responding to change

- Social work education continues to operate in a fast changing environment and needs to continue to respond to workforce and service delivery needs.
- The requirements for the social work degree were developed in the period 2000-2003, but in recent years there has been a great deal of policy change and activity in the area of social work and social care. As a result, the policy and organisational landscape now looks very different than it did three years ago. The GSCC will therefore be taking forward an audit of the social work degree, following the outcomes of *Options for Excellence*, to reassure all stakeholders that the social work degree remains broadly fit for purpose and the regulatory framework is flexible enough to respond appropriately to changing workforce and service delivery needs.
- PQ programmes have responded well to the closure of the current framework and there has been positive recruitment and creative activities to encourage and support completion of awards.
- A key challenge for the forthcoming year will be to ensure a smooth transition to the new framework through clear and timely processes for approval of new PQ courses and a good communications framework to ensure that all stakeholders are kept clearly informed.

- The majority of DipSW courses are drawing to a close and it is expected that there will only be a few still open next year. This transition appears to have been managed quite smoothly and lessons can be learnt for any transitions in the future.

133 Practice learning

- While HEIs appear to be managing the provision of practice learning opportunities well, there remains particular concerns from students about late and inappropriate placements and the impact of this on their overall learning experience, caring commitments and in some cases delays in qualification and subsequent employment. The need for a national quality improvement framework for practice learning is recognised by the GSCC and other stakeholders. A national working group is being set up to develop a model for levering up the quality of practice learning infrastructure.

134 Promoting the involvement of stakeholders in social work education

- There is evidence that HEIs are engaging actively with employers and students and seeking to gain feedback from all stakeholders to continually monitor and improve courses.
- Work should continue to promote and support the involvement of service users and carers in all social work education courses and to support engagement with diverse groups.
- The continuing involvement of employers in working together with HEIs to meet regional workforce needs should be encouraged.
- The GSCC will continue to work with students to seek their views directly about social work education.

135 Inter-professional learning

- There are examples of some good practice, but also considerable gaps in opportunities for students to learn about, with and from other professionals. The GSCC will monitor this through annual monitoring and regional intelligence. Outcomes will be shared to enable issues to be considered as necessary.

136 European Computer Driving Licence

- The GSCC will work with all stakeholders to gain a clear picture of issues and problems associated with meeting the ECDL requirements in the social work degree and consider how these can be addressed.

Notes

General Social Care Council

Goldings House
2 Hay's Lane
London SE1 2HB

For additional copies please visit

www.gscc.org.uk or call **020 7397 5800**

© Copyright General Social Care Council 2006

G_SWEQAR_Jan 07_v1

