

Education and Training Committee, 8 March 2012

Responses to the consultation on the threshold level of qualification for entry to the Register as a social worker in England

Executive summary and recommendations

Introduction

We consulted between 18 July 2011 and 18 November 2011 on our proposals in relation to setting a threshold level of qualification for entry to the HPC Register as a social worker in England.

Every time we open a new part of the HPC Register, we need to consult on amending our standards of education and training to set the threshold level of qualification for that group. The existing professional qualifying training in social work in England is a bachelor degree with honours or above. In the consultation, we proposed an amendment to the standards of education and training to set the level for social workers in England as a bachelor degree with honours.

We are proposing to amend the standards of education and training to set the level for social workers in England as a bachelor degree with honours.

Decision

The Committee is invited to:

- discuss and agree the attached consultation responses document; and
- recommend to Council the text of the attached consultation responses document (subject to minor editing amendments and legal scrutiny).

Background information

None.

Resource implications

The resource implications include writing up the outcomes of the consultation and revising the standards of education and training.

Financial implications

The costs of producing and mailing the consultation document and type-setting the new standards of education and training are funded by a grant from the Department of Health.

Appendices

None

Date of paper

27 February 2012

Responses to the consultation on the threshold level of qualification for entry to the Register as a social worker in England

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1. Introduction

About the consultation

- 1.1 We consulted between 18 July 2011 and 18 November 2011 on our proposals in relation to setting a threshold level of qualification for entry to the HPC Register as a social worker in England.
- 1.2 Every time we open a new part of the HPC Register, we need to consult on amending our standards of education and training to set the threshold level of qualification for that group. The existing professional qualifying training in social work in England is a bachelor degree with honours or above. In the consultation, we proposed an amendment to the standards of education and training to set the level for social workers in England as a bachelor degree with honours.
- 1.3 We also consulted at the same time on the standards of proficiency for social workers in England.
- 1.4 The government has announced that the regulation of social workers in England will transfer from the General Social Care Council (GSCC) to the HPC. The regulation of social workers is expected to transfer on 31 July 2012. The government has also indicated that, subject to legislation, our name will change to the Health and Care Professions Council.
- 1.5 Our proposals only relate to social workers in England. Social workers in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales will continue to be regulated by the relevant Care Council and are not directly affected by these proposals.
- 1.6 We sent a copy of the consultation document to around 600 stakeholders including professional bodies and education providers. We advertised the consultation on our website and newsletter and asked other organisations, including the GSCC, to share the consultation document.
- 1.7 We would like to thank all those who took the time to respond to the consultation. You can download the consultation document and a copy of this response analysis document from our website:
www.hpc-uk.org/aboutus/consultations/closed.

About us

- 1.8 We are the Health Professions Council (HPC). We are a regulator and our job is to protect the health and wellbeing of people who use the services of the professionals registered with us.
- 1.9 To protect the public, we set standards professionals must meet. Our standards cover the professionals' education and training, behaviour, professional skills, and their health. We publish a Register of professionals who meet our standards. Professionals on our Register are called 'registrants'. If registrants do not meet our standards, we can take action against them which may include removing them from the Register so they can no longer practise.

About this document

1.10 The consultation had three questions, which were:

1. Do you agree that the threshold level of qualification for social workers in England should be set at bachelor degree with honours?
2. Is this level necessary to deliver safe and effective practice in social work?
3. Do you have any other comments on our proposals?

1.11 This document summarises the responses we received to the consultation. The document is divided into the following sections:

- Section 2 explains how we handled and analysed the responses we received, providing some overall statistics from the responses.
- Section 3 summarises the general comments we received in response to the consultation
- Section 4 outlines the comments we received in relation to specific questions within the consultation.
- Section 5 outlines our response to the comments we received in the consultation and the decisions we are making as a result.
- Section 6 lists the organisations which responded to the consultation.

1.12 In this document, 'you' or 'your' is a reference to respondents to the consultation, 'we', 'us' and 'our' are references to the HPC.

2. Analysing your responses

- 2.1 Now the consultation has ended, we have analysed all the responses we received. While we cannot include all of the responses in this document, you can find a summary of the comments we received in sections 3 and 4.

Method of recording and analysis

- 2.2 We used the following process in recording and analysing your comments.
- We recorded each response to the consultation, noting the date each response was received and whether it was submitted on behalf of an organisation or by an individual.
 - We also recorded whether the person or organisation agreed or disagreed with each question.
 - We read each response and noted the comments received against each of the consultation questions, and recorded any general comments.
 - Finally, we analysed all the responses.
- 2.3 When deciding what information to include in this document, we assessed the frequency of the comments made and identified themes. This document summarises the common themes across all responses, and indicates the frequency of arguments and comments made by respondents.

Quantitative analysis

- 2.4 We received 56 responses to the consultation document. (We have included and taken into account late responses to the consultation if we received them on or before 1 December 2011 but were unable to consider comments made in responses received after this date.) Twenty-three responses were made by individuals and thirty three were made on behalf of organisations.
- 2.5 The table below provides some indicative statistics for the answers to the consultation questions. Please note: some respondents did not clearly indicate the question to which they were responding, or responded more generally. In these cases, we have classified their responses under general comments unless it was possible to classify their responses elsewhere.
- 2.6 Question 3 'Do you have any other comments about our proposals' did not lend itself to quantitative analysis. As a result, we have not included it in the table below. However, we have recorded the comments made in response to this question within the document.
- 2.7 Percentages in the table have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

Quantitative results

Question	Yes	No	Don't know	No answer
Do you agree that the threshold level of qualification for social workers in England should be set at bachelor degree with honours?	46 (82%)	6 (11%)	2 (4%)	2 (4%)
Is this level necessary to deliver safe and effective practice in social work?	43 (77%)	5 (9%)	2 (4%)	6 (11%)

3. General comments

- 3.1 This section outlines general comments made in response to the consultation. This includes responses to question three of the consultation document. We have grouped the general comments made by respondents under specific headings.

Level of qualification and competence

- 3.2 Most respondents to the consultation agreed that the threshold level should be set at bachelor degree with honours because this level ensured safe and effective social work practice. They argued that completing a bachelor degree equipped social workers with the necessary skills for practice, including the ability to make evidence based decisions and reflect on their practice.
- 3.3 However, several other respondents argued that deciding the level of academic qualification does not necessarily create competent practitioners. It was important therefore, that the education programmes provided sufficient practical experience to ensure that social workers were able to practise effectively.

The threshold level and individual social workers

- 3.4 There was a varying degree of understanding about our proposals and their impact on individual social workers amongst respondents to the consultation. The threshold level of qualification does not apply to individual practitioners, only education providers.
- 3.5 However, several respondents were concerned that setting the threshold at bachelor's degree would mean that social workers with other qualifications (for example Masters) would not be able to register with HPC or would need to complete additional qualifications. Other respondents raised concerns that we would abolish existing social work qualifications if they were not delivered at bachelor degree level.

Setting the threshold at other levels

- 3.6 A small number of respondents argued that the threshold level of qualification should be set at a different level and not at bachelor degree with honours. This included proposals for it to be set at diploma or Masters level.
- 3.7 However, other respondents argued that setting the threshold at Masters level would discourage applicants to the profession.

Changes within the social work profession

- 3.8 A number of respondents commented on changes currently taking place within social work in England. This included the work of the Social Work Reform Board, creation of the College of Social Work, external reviews and

the proposals to introduce the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment.

- 3.9 Respondents highlighted the importance of HPC responding to these changes flexibly and appropriately.

The HPC's role as the regulator of social workers in England

- 3.10 A small number of respondents raised concerns about the government's decision to transfer the regulation of social workers in England to the HPC, as they felt that the HPC did not represent the social work profession.

Concerns about the quality of existing education programmes

- 3.11 Several respondents responded to the consultation raising concerns about the quality of some social work education. This included concerns that education providers did not run robust admissions processes, that practice placements were not always appropriate and that existing training did not adequately equip social workers for autonomous practice.

Recognition and reciprocity of training in the UK

- 3.12 A number of respondents working with social workers in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland commented on the importance of recognising qualifications from those countries.

The process for approving education programmes

- 3.13 Several respondents commented that it was important that social workers were involved in making the decision about whether the HPC approved a social work programme. This would help to ensure that, in addition to the programme being set at the right academic level, the programme taught safe and effective practice.

Maintaining diversity in education provision

- 3.14 A number of respondents commented that, whilst setting the threshold level was important, it was equally important that education providers continued to offer programmes at Masters and Post-Graduate Diploma level so that individuals with a first degree could join the profession.

Criteria for entry onto an education programme

- 3.15 A small number of respondents suggested that, in addition to setting the threshold level, we should also set some entry criteria for entry onto the bachelor's degree with honours programme. This included criteria based on age and level of English language proficiency.

4. Comments in response to specific questions

4.1 This section contains comments made in response to questions one and two within the consultation document. We have grouped them together below.

1. Do you agree that the threshold level of qualification for social workers in England should be set at bachelor degree with honours?

2. Is this level necessary to deliver safe and effective practice in social work?

4.2 Most respondents agreed that the threshold level of qualification should be set at bachelor degree with honours. Respondents gave the following reasons for setting the threshold level at bachelor degree:

- The degree equips social workers with the necessary skills for practice. This includes the ability to analyse information and draw on relevant research to make decisions.
- It will ensure that social workers in England meet the standards of proficiency.
- It ensures appropriate levels of literacy and communication (both oral and written).
- It will ensure equality with other professions and support professionalism within social work.
- Setting it at bachelor degree will ensure consistency with the levels of qualification required in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.
- Setting the level at bachelor degree will support the diversity of the workforce as employment-based students and those coming to social work as a second career could qualify without unnecessary barriers.

4.3 In addition to setting the threshold level at bachelor degree with honours, a small number of respondents suggested that we should specify that the degree must be in social work or that individuals must hold at least second-class honours in order to gain registration.

4.4 Several respondents supported our proposed threshold level but emphasised that this level was the minimum for safe and effective practice on entering the profession. Social workers should be encouraged to continue to learn and develop once in practice, to build on their pre-registration education.

4.5 However, a small number of respondents disagreed with our proposals and argued that we should not set the threshold level at bachelor degree. They gave the following reasons not to set it at that level:

- it will mean that individuals who don't have a bachelor degree will need to retrain and education providers will no longer be able to offer qualifications delivered at other levels (this was based on a misunderstanding about the nature of our proposals); or

- the level should be set at Masters level as social workers work with vulnerable people in very challenging situations.

4.6 A number of respondents commented that the level of the qualification itself would not ensure safe and effective practice in the profession. Instead, it was important that education providers and employers offered social work students appropriate placements and support whilst in training so that they developed the skills to be able to practise safely and effectively. A small number of respondents also highlighted the role of employers in providing support and supervision to social workers in their practice.

5. Our comments

- 5.1 The following section sets out our response to the comments we received in the consultation and identifies decisions we have made in response.

The threshold level of qualification and individual social workers

- 5.2 The threshold level of qualification only applies to education programmes and does not apply to individuals. Individuals currently registered with the GSCC will transfer to the HPC without needing to complete additional qualifications, irrespective of the level of their qualification. In addition, social workers who are not currently working (and not currently registered) but have a qualification recognised by the GSCC will be able to register with the HPC even if the qualification was not a bachelor degree.
- 5.3 In setting the threshold level of qualification for entry, we are setting the contemporary threshold level of qualification which we would normally accept for the purposes of an approved programme which leads to registration. As the threshold is the 'minimum', we may approve programmes above the threshold level. When the HPC Register opens to social workers in England, we will approve both degree level and Masters level programmes approved by the GSCC as leading to registration with them. This means that education providers will still be able to offer programmes at Masters level if they choose to.

The threshold level and competence in practice

- 5.4 The Health Professions Order 2001 does not give us a power to set the qualifications required for entry, but enables us to approve qualifications which meet the standards we have set for entry to the Register.
- 5.5 Our obligation is to set threshold standards of entry to the Register, the standards of proficiency, which a newly qualified applicant needs to meet in order to be able to practise safely and effectively. These standards therefore ensure that social workers are competent on starting practice. We may then approve a qualification which delivers those standards, but cannot insist that only a specified form of academic award will do so.
- 5.6 We consulted separately on the standards of proficiency for social workers in England. The consultation document is available on our website here: www.hpc-uk.org/aboutus/consultations/closed/index.asp?id=124

Recognition and reciprocity of training in the UK

- 5.7 We will take over the regulation of social workers in England. Social workers in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales will continue to be regulated by the relevant Care Council and are not directly affected by setting the threshold level.
- 5.8 There are currently recognition arrangements in place between the GSCC and the other three UK Care Councils. This means, for example, that

someone qualified in Scotland is eligible to register in England, and vice versa.

- 5.9 We have agreed arrangements for recognition and reciprocity of training delivered in the other three countries at the point that the HPC Register for social workers opens. This will ensure that social workers qualified or registered elsewhere in the UK are eligible to apply for registration with ourselves without facing unnecessary barriers.

Our decisions

- 5.10 We have carefully considered the comments we received. When we consider setting the threshold level of qualification we can have regard to the existing level of qualification delivered. However, our primary consideration must be that the level of qualification must be that necessary to achieve the standards of proficiency and the level cannot be aspirational.
- 5.11 We believe that bachelor degree with honours is the appropriate threshold level for social workers as this reflects existing levels of provision and is the level necessary to achieve the standards of proficiency.
- 5.12 We have decided that the threshold level of qualification for entry to the Register as a social worker in England should be set at bachelor degree with honours.

6. List of respondents

Association of Directors of Adult Social Services
Association for Improvements in the Maternity Services
British Association of Social Workers
Bradford College University Centre
Care Council for Wales
Children's Workforce Development Council
Devon Partnership NHS Trust
Durham County Council
Hampshire Adult Services
Help the Hospices, Association of Palliative Care Social Workers and National
Association of Palliative Care Educators
The Hesley Group
Joint University Council Social Work Education Committee, Social Work Policy and
Social Work and Association of Professors of Social Work
Leeds University
Leicester City Council, Workforce Development Unit Social Care
Newcastle City Council, Adult and Culture Services
North Essex Partnership NHS Foundation Trust
Northern Health and Social Care Trust
Northern Ireland Social Care Council
Nursing and Midwifery Council
Oxford Brookes University
Rotherham, Doncaster and South Humber NHS Foundation Trust
Scottish Social Services Council
Social Care and Social Work Improvement Scotland
Somerset County Council Community Directorate
Somerset Partnership NHS Foundation Trust
Southern Eastern Health and Social Care Trust
University of Bedfordshire
University of Bournemouth
University of Cumbria
University of Plymouth, Service User and Carer Consultative Group, BA (Hons)
Social Work,
University of Portsmouth
University of Sunderland
Worcestershire Council, Mental Health Trust