



**Studying for your**  
**Social Work**  
**Degree**

**CRITICAL  
STUDY SKILLS**

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# Chapter 1

## Studying social work in higher education

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### Learning outcomes



#### After reading this chapter you will:

- have gained knowledge of higher education and its place in the UK education system;
- understand some of the terminology and 'jargon' used in higher education;
- have gained knowledge of institutions which set standards for social work education;
- have gained knowledge of levels and qualifications in social work;
- understand the relevance and importance of lifelong learning and continuing professional development;
- understand the importance of student autonomy and independent learning in universities;
- have gained knowledge of how courses are structured and delivered.

This chapter will develop your knowledge and understanding of the study of social work in UK universities. It will outline the 'qualification frameworks' that are relevant to becoming, and developing as, a social worker, and discuss the role of important educational and professional bodies. In addition, you will be introduced to the types of teaching and learning that you will encounter as a student social worker.

Before you read the chapter, test your knowledge with the **Quick quiz** below. You can revisit the quiz as you read, or come back to it after reading the whole chapter to see if your answers have changed. Key words in this chapter are highlighted in **bold** and can be found in the glossary in the **Appendix**.

CROSS  
REFERENCE

Appendix,  
The language  
of higher  
education

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### Quick quiz

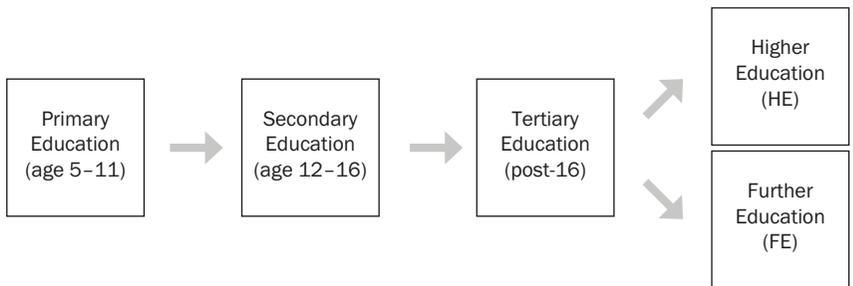


- 1) What does HE stand for?
  - 2) How is HE different from FE?
  - 3) What are the main qualifications offered by universities?
  - 4) Which is the higher level qualification, a *degree* or a *diploma*?
- ↓

- 5) What is the minimum academic qualification you need to become a qualified social worker?
- 6) What mark (percentage) do you usually need to obtain a *first-class* degree?
- 7) What are 'credits' and how can you get them?
- 8) What do you think 'Accreditation of Prior Learning' might be?
- 9) What is 'lifelong learning'?
- 10) What are the most common types of assessment in universities?

## What is HE?

**HE** stands for '**higher education**', one of two options in UK **tertiary education**, ie education available to people of 16 years or above.



**Figure 1.1: The UK education system**

HE is mainly provided by universities, and principally awards **degrees** and **diplomas**. In contrast, **further education (FE)** is provided by colleges, which deliver courses and award qualifications which are **vocational** in nature (NVQs; City & Guilds; BTEC), preparing people directly for the workplace. However, in recent years, there has been a blurring of the line between the two types of institution, with many FE colleges, sometimes in association with partner universities, also offering degrees. This is one way of making degrees accessible to a wider range of people, some of whom may find it convenient to attend classes in a local FE college or to study in the evenings. Recently introduced 'higher and degree apprenticeships', which offer the potential to obtain a degree while learning on the job, also blur the boundaries between vocational and academic learning.

## Your social work degree

Social work education in the UK is fully integrated into the HE sector. Although there is a large vocational skills-based component to learning how to practise, to be a social worker also requires highly developed intellectual skills. Universities are considered to be the best place for students to acquire and develop these. Social work is thus an

academic subject, equivalent to any other, such as medicine, engineering or English literature, and therefore measured against the same standards.

## Qualification frameworks

HE qualifications, sometimes called ‘academic awards’, are regulated across the UK via two frameworks: the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (QAA, 2008), and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in Scotland (QAA, 2014). These frameworks help institutions and employers judge the value of an individual’s education and help ensure equity between academic subjects. Table 1.1 shows the academic levels assigned by the QAA to each stage of HE, and provides information on how they relate to a study pathway in social work.

**Table 1.1: An overview of academic levels in relation to social work study in HE**

<b>UNDERGRADUATE STUDY</b>			
<b>England, Wales, Northern Ireland</b>	<b>Scotland</b>	<b>Award</b>	<b>Notes</b>
Level 4	Level 7	Certificate of Higher Education (CertHE)	
Level 5	Level 8	Diploma of Higher Education (DipHE) Foundation Degree (FdD)	
Level 6	Level 9	Ordinary Bachelor’s Degree eg BA/BSc Social Work	
	Level 10	Bachelor’s Degree with Honours eg BA/BSc (Hons) Social Work	One of two usual academic qualifications for social workers in England
<b>POSTGRADUATE STUDY</b>			
Level 7	Level 11	Master’s Degree eg MSc, MA, MPhil Postgraduate Certificate or Diploma (PGCert; PGDip)	One of two usual academic qualifications for social workers in England
Level 8	Level 12	Research Doctorate (PhD) Professional Doctorate	

An undergraduate degree has four classifications. These are shown in Table 1.2, along with the marks usually required at each level.

**Table 1.2: Bachelor's degree classifications and typical required marks**

CLASSIFICATION	MARKS REQUIRED
1st	Above 70%
2:1	60–69%
2:2	50–59%
3rd	40–49%
Fail	Below 40%

## Courses and credits

You can see from [Table 1.1](#) that, in order to enter the social work profession, you must obtain a degree from an HE institution, usually a university. If you study full time, it will take three years to obtain an honours degree (or four years in Scotland). However, universities recognise that this timescale is not possible or ideal for many people, so they have flexible learning systems which allow students to fit study into their lives in a practical way. This can involve:

- **distance learning**, where the student mainly studies from home via correspondence, using web-based resources – perhaps occasionally attending university workshops etc;
- **blended learning**, which combines traditional classroom study and web-based learning;
- **part-time study** (including the new higher degree apprenticeships mentioned earlier).

Flexible learning is facilitated by the **credit** points system which underpins HE education. Each course **module** that you study has a number of credit points attached to it. Each credit is equal to 10 hours of study, either in class, or through self-study (QAA, 2008, 2014). These credit points build up to eventually form your degree, whether over three years' full-time study, or over a longer period if you study part time. [Table 1.3](#) shows that a student has to earn 360 credit points in order to be awarded an honours degree.

**Table 1.3: HE qualifications in relation to credit points**

ACADEMIC QUALIFICATION	CREDIT POINTS REQUIRED
CertHE	120 at Level 4 (Scotland Level 7)
DipHE	120 at Level 4 (Scotland Level 7) + 120 at Level 5 (Scotland Level 8)
Degree with Honours (Ordinary Degree in Scotland)	120 at Level 4 (Scotland Level 7) + 120 at Level 5 (Scotland Level 8) + 120 at Level 6 (Scotland Level 9)

Look at the QAA frameworks (2008, 2014) online to see descriptors detailing exactly what is expected of a student at each level. Note that not all universities offer the CertHE. Some universities in England, Wales and Northern Ireland may offer an ordinary degree without honours to students who have obtained a certain number of credits at Level 6. A four-year Scottish Honours Degree requires an additional 120 credits at Level 9/10.

Universities provide students with information on each module with regard to its academic level and the number of credit points it carries. Many modules, often called 'core modules', will be obligatory; some modules will be optional. All modules are organised around the following:

- a set of **learning outcomes** which identify what you will be able to do or understand by the end of the course;
- a process of **teaching and learning** which will help you achieve the learning outcomes;
- **assessment** which will measure your achievement and provide evidence of it while advancing your learning.

## Top tips



### Thinking about 'the big picture'

Learning outcomes, teaching and learning, and assessment will be aligned, so you should think about 'the big picture' and consider them together. When preparing for assessments, for example, look again at the learning outcomes to check what you will be expected to demonstrate. In class, think about how the classroom activities are partly preparing you for assessment, and ask if you are not sure.

## Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL)

Credit points can sometimes be assigned for prior learning or experience, through a process known as Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL). There are two branches of APL:

- 1) Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning (APCL) allows you to transfer any credit points you already hold from one institution to another. One example of this is when English social workers holding only a diploma (having qualified before 2004) decided to 'top up' to an honours degree by completing 120 credit points at Level 6. Some returned to their original place of study but some chose to transfer their credits to a different institution and study for additional credit there.
- 2) Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) allows you to acquire credit points for your practical or professional experience, provided that it meets the academic standards demanded by the university involved. To support an application for APEL, a university will often require a **portfolio** of evidence, ie a reflective account (usually written) of your learning experiences.

### CROSS REFERENCE

Chapter 3,  
Becoming a  
member of your  
academic and  
professional  
community,  
Reflective  
practice

Not all universities run an APEL scheme for social workers although this option is available in some. While this transfer system allows for flexibility in HE, please do note that it can often be a very complicated process, with institutions sometimes disagreeing on the transfer values of particular modules.

## Reflection



- List examples of your own practical or professional experience which you think would be valid in terms of APEL, along with examples of evidence you could provide as support. (An example is provided.)

EXPERIENCE	SUPPORT
worked as a social care assistant supporting older people in their communities	written reflection outlining the knowledge, values and skills demonstrated in this role; showing an understanding about working to build on people's strengths and draw upon community supports; feedback from colleagues; direct feedback from service users and their carers and families about the impact of your work; feedback from your supervisor or line manager about your work; identification of your own strengths and areas for development in your future practice

## Lifelong learning and continuous professional development

The flexible approach to study outlined above is underpinned by the much-valued educational principle of **lifelong learning**. Lifelong learning, by definition, extends beyond your degree, and may involve postgraduate study or general professional development. If you are a registered social worker, lifelong learning may involve taking post-qualifying modules, sometimes called 'standalone modules', which are offered by many universities. These could help in maintaining your **continuing professional development (CPD)**.

CPD in social work is regulated by the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC). HCPC specifies the CPD standards for all professionals, including social workers, who are registered with them. Social workers are required to maintain a continuous and up-to-date record of their CPD activities, which must be relevant to their current or future practice. CPD activities must contribute to the quality of the social worker's practice and service delivery, and ultimately benefit service users.