

Education and training in the first year of regulation – annual monitoring

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Introduction

The annual monitoring process operates alongside our approval and course change processes as outlined in the [education and training rules 2019](#) (rule 8). Each provider of social work education and training is required to confirm each year that approved courses continue to meet our education and training and professional standards. This provides a snapshot of current progress rather than an in-depth look at each course, but this activity informs future inspections and supports our education quality assurance work.

In this first year of applying the monitoring process, we also took the opportunity to check that all 75 of the current course providers were preparing for the introduction of our revised [education and training standards 2020](#), to be implemented in September 2021, to find out more about response to the COVID-19 pandemic and to better understand equality, diversity and inclusion issues.

This brief report summarises the key findings from the full set of annual monitoring responses, which in this instance comprised a form completed for each approved course during the autumn of 2020. Responses were initially analysed by a small team of our education quality assurance inspectors, each of whom is a qualified social worker themselves.

We are grateful to course providers for taking the time to provide progress updates during what transpired to be a very challenging year. We hope that course providers and students will find this summary helpful. We expect it to complement larger reports on inspection activity which we hope to begin publishing over time.

Preparing for new standards

The new education and training standards, which will be implemented from September 2021, develop the existing standards and enhance duties and responsibilities around admissions, use of digital technology, practice placements and student support.

All respondents to this annual monitoring exercise indicated confidence that their approved course was on track to meet the new standards. Local and regional teaching partnerships and training networks were often cited as a reason for this optimism, as they can open a wider range of practice placement options and apprenticeship opportunities and are seen as a durable means of sharing emergent good teaching practice.

Reports varied on the subject of technology. Some course providers believe the digital proficiency of applicants is adequate if they can navigate the online admissions process, while other admissions managers actively assess computer skills as part of the interview experience and offer further developmental support during the course.

A small number of respondents raised concerns about whether internal validation by the course's awarding university could be completed before the deadline expected for meeting the revised standards. We will continue to offer as much flexibility as possible around this for course providers who contact us early in their planning.

Some course providers, and especially their practice learning co-ordinators, asked for further clarification around what sort of placement settings would count as 'statutory' for the purposes of meeting the new standards. We are currently reviewing the scope for updated guidance.

Our inspectors noted universal commitment to involving people with lived experience as part of the courses, but also identified wide variation in the means of doing so. Some course teams endeavour to engage people with lived experience and carers in thinking about the overall shape of the course, while other curricula make space for experts by experience to be directly involved in specific teaching inputs. We are interested in developing a fuller understanding of the most effective methods of involving people with lived experience in social work education and training and will continue to discuss what works with course providers and educators in the year ahead.

Coping with coronavirus

All course providers had to adjust quickly during 2020 as the impact of the pandemic on every aspect of life, including social work education and practice, became clearer. Most told us that they had initially found it challenging to secure practice placements for some students, but that this had eased somewhat as virtual means of contact with people with lived experience and carers developed. At the start of the first lockdown period we decided to defer the introduction of new standards to offer a window of flexibility to course providers, and some made use of this to temporarily reduce the minimum duration of practice placements, in varying proportions though taking 100 days down to 80 is typical.

Some creative approaches to meeting learning needs have also come to light, such as accessing practice experience opportunities via students' existing employers, particularly for apprentices, and online simulation of real-world practice contexts. We will be working to understand more about this over the coming year to understand how that altered learning experience affects the confidence of students as they continue their course, and as newly qualified social workers when they graduate.

We asked all course providers to put policies in place to ensure that no social work student suffered undue disruption to their professional education and resulting qualification as a result of the issues generated by the pandemic. Most providers told us that it was possible to quickly make appropriate arrangements by adapting existing general contingency plans, although they had often not proved necessary in the event. There may be scope to build 'no detriment' provision into providers' ongoing business continuity plans. We will continue to be ready to discuss this with course providers when helpful, although it is appreciated that such measures are often applied to a whole education institution rather than just to one course or training programme.

We have been impressed by the creativity of course providers in making the fullest use of the wide range of digital learning and team-working platforms now available, with evolved methods of online assignments and examinations now widespread. Definitions of 'blended learning' are inevitably varied at this stage, for example there is not yet a standard combination of online and face-to-face delivery across providers or established best practice around the balance of live and recorded online content. It is also evident from course providers' feedback that amending assessment processes without compromising on quality and rigour is a complex task. We are keen to engage with course providers, social work students and apprentices in gaining a fuller understanding of which methods prove most sustainable and effective.

Developing diversity

As part of this annual monitoring exercise, we invited course providers to add information about the make-up of student cohorts and staff teams, as part of our overarching commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion.

Because intergenerational opportunity is a key metric in understanding inclusion, on this occasion we experimented with a specific question about what proportion, by protected characteristic, of students were the first in their families to attend university. Many course providers pointed out that the sample size this related to was too small for genuine anonymity to be possible, for instance because of just one trans student in a class of under 30 participants. We will consider whether and how to explore this topic in future monitoring activities.

Some course teams did not feel able to share diversity data at this time, often because permission to forward anonymised data had not yet been secured within their university or higher education institution. Where data was provided, the lack of a standard format obstructs a combined quantitative analysis at this moment, but in the view of our inspectors there were signs of an appropriately representative mix of students' maturity and ethnicity specifically. We understand that there is always more that can be achieved in reflecting the demography of the communities that social workers serve and will bear these technical issues in mind when designing future monitoring exercises.

An emerging cause for concern, shared by some course providers and our inspectors, was the low number of male students recruited by those courses for which data is available. This echoes a long-standing trend in the field, as we reported in [Social Work in England: First Reflections report](#) – only 17.7% of serving social workers are male. Incomplete data again obscures the picture to an extent, but with admissions of men who wish to train as social workers reportedly as low as 10% on some courses, there is a legitimate concern about whether this imbalance accords with social work values. We will continue to engage with course providers to understand how widespread an area for development this is, potentially through including a more specific question in next year's monitoring form. We will be open to exploring how and whether we may provide further assistance or co-ordination in responding positively.

What we will do to support sustained education quality

This snapshot of current training shows social work education responding fast to challenging circumstances. As outlined above, several course providers nevertheless took the opportunity to raise concerns about issues yet to be fully resolved, or indeed relay suggestions for improvements to the monitoring process.

There are some key areas that we can work to support as a regulator of social work.

- We will communicate with course providers to offer as much flexibility as possible around deadlines for meeting the revised education and training standards.
- We will explore the scope for updated guidance about what sort of placement settings count as ‘statutory’ for the purposes of meeting the new standards, and plan to consult educators and practitioners about this.
- We will continue to seek knowledge about what works well to involve people with lived experience in social work education with course providers and educators.
- We will continue to discuss any emerging support requirements for students nearing the end of their courses, including additional issues arising from the COVID-19 pandemic.
- We will continue to be ready to discuss the scope to build ‘no detriment’ provision into ongoing business continuity plans with course providers.
- We will engage with course providers, social work students and apprentices in gaining a fuller understanding of what forms of blended learning prove most sustainable and effective.
- We will review the design of the annual monitoring form to provide assurance of data protection and anonymity, and to seek a full data set around student gender balance.

This work will be evident throughout our interactions with course providers during the year ahead. If you would like to discuss any aspects of this report in the meantime, please contact our education quality assurance team by emailing

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