



Assessment of Social Work Students Guidance

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Introduction

Purpose

This guidance supplements the social work qualifying education and training standards 2020. This guidance is particularly relevant to standard 5, which is about curriculum and assessment.

We recommend that you read the following documents alongside this guidance:

1. **Education and training standards guidance**
This provides general guidance on our qualifying education and training standards.
2. **Guidance on practice placements for social work students**
This provides guidance against the requirements relating to practice education, as set out under standard 2, and additional guidance against standards 3.2, 3.3, 3.5, 4.3 and 4.6 and 5.4.

This guidance provides more detail on how social work students should be assessed and makes suggestions for what good assessment might look like. It aims to help education providers see how they can comply with our standards. We recognise that providers have different curricula and structures and this guidance respects these differences and is not prescriptive.

This guidance is primarily for providers of social work courses and organisations that provide practice learning placements for social work courses. Social work students may also want to familiarise themselves with this guidance as it provides information about their assessments.

Format of this guidance

Most of our requirements about assessment are included under standard 4, which is about curriculum and assessment:

‘Courses must be designed to allow students to develop the required behaviours, skills, knowledge and understanding to meet the professional standards.’

For providers to meet standard 4 with respect to assessment, we set requirements that say in more detail what providers must do. This guidance is structured against each of these requirements.

We set requirements which are relevant to assessment in other parts of the standards that are about evaluating data (3.9) and supporting students (5.4, and 5.5 and 5.8). This guidance also includes those requirements.

Assessment strategy and design

4.8 Ensure that the assessment strategy and design demonstrate that the assessments are robust, fair, reliable and valid, and that those who successfully complete the course meet the professional standards.

It is important that your assessment strategy and design ensures that students can meet all the professional standards before completing the course. You must also ensure that students who do **not** meet the professional standards are not allowed to complete the course. However, you may wish to consider providing opportunities for such students to receive a different award which does not qualify them to be a social worker.

Producing your assessment strategy

An assessment strategy is a document that sets out your approach to assessment, both formative and summative, across the entire course. Formative assessment is informal, frequent, does not result in a judgement about a student's performance or progression and is primarily for the benefit of the student's learning. Summative assessment is a formalised assessment that is scheduled and results in decisions about a student's performance and progression. It is best practice for students to have experienced all your assessments in a formative context before they are required to undertake them in a summative context, so they know what to expect from their summative assessments and can prepare appropriately.

Your assessment strategy should show how individual assessments and examinations contribute to overall judgements about students' performance and progression.

When producing and developing your assessment strategy you should consider including the following information:

- The rationale for your approach to assessments, ideally referencing academic literature and best practice in assessment.
- When and in what format assessments take place during the course.
- How assessments can be co-produced with people with lived experience¹.
- Pass marks required for individual modules and assessments.
- The assessment requirements for progression in the course, for example which assessments must be passed before a student may progress.
- Compensation regulations.

¹ For more information about the effective involvement of people with lived experience in social work education, please see education and training standards guidance section 4.2.

- The resit policy, which should include the number of re-sits students are allowed (and within what period).
- The maximum time a student can take to complete the course.
- Information about options available for students who are at risk of not progressing or not completing the course, including alternative qualification options.
- Mitigating circumstances, reasonable adjustments, academic appeals and complaints policies.
- Who is responsible for managing and delivering assessments.

Demonstrating reliable and valid assessments

Your strategy needs to show that your assessments are reliable, which means that they are consistent and thorough enough to produce replicable results. You should be able to show that your assessments produce the same, consistent results across a cohort of students regardless of when the assessment takes place or who marks it.

Psychometric analysis of assessment elements, such as written exam questions, examiners, or sites where examinations are delivered, can be useful to evidence whether your assessments are reliable. You may also wish to consider using methods of assessment that are proven to be reliable, such as multiple-choice answer questions. However, it is important to balance the reliability of the assessment method against the validity. For example, a multiple-choice answer examination may be a valid way of testing theoretical knowledge, but it would not be as valid a way of assessing a student's ability to reflect on their experiences or demonstrating behaviours required for professional practice.

Your strategy needs to show that your assessments are valid, which means that they assess what they are intended to assess; for example that a student has met a learning outcome or outcomes, or they have demonstrated that they have met a professional standard or standards. When designing assessments, you should consider methods that draw on contexts and scenarios that are relevant to the practice of social work. An example would be an observed practical assessment of a student interacting with a person with lived experience of social work, which could be done through role play.

Reliable and valid assessment methods and processes will contribute to your assessments being robust and allowing students to clearly demonstrate how they are progressing through their course and achieving the learning outcomes.

Your strategy needs to show that your assessments are fair and provide all students with an equal opportunity to demonstrate their progression and achievement, and that they take into consideration a specific student's needs, for example the needs of disabled students or those facing difficult circumstances.

Responsibility for your assessment strategy

Ideally, overall responsibility for your assessment strategy should be led by a person or group of people who oversee assessment across the course, rather than delegated to people or groups of people with responsibility for elements of the course. Responsibility for delivering your assessment strategy should be managed within your governance framework with clear lines of reporting and accountability. You may wish to consider including the following elements in the governance and management framework for your assessment strategy:

- A board with overall and final responsibility for assessment that is accountable through published processes and criteria. The board should coordinate the assessments within and between years to ensure that assessments have a logical sequence and are set at an appropriate level.
- External examiner(s) (see 4.11 below for further information).
- A senior member of staff with overall responsibility for assessment.
- A dedicated administration system for assessment.
- A member of staff with responsibility for all assessment data and data management processes.
- A member of staff, or access to a member of staff, with skills in psychometric analysis of assessment data to contribute to the identification and development of assessment methods, produce analytical reports after assessments and produce overarching reports periodically that identify trends and areas for improvement.
- Working in collaboration with people with lived experience of social work.
- Procedures for the development and control of any bank of written assessment items.

Your assessment strategy and associated policies should be shared with students and educators and ideally be readily available, on internal websites or as part of student and educator handbooks or briefing materials.

Assessing against learning outcomes and the professional standards

It is important that you have documentation to identify when and how students are summatively assessed against the learning outcomes for your course and can meet all the professional standards before completing the course. This is sometimes called an assessment blueprint. It is not necessary for each of the professional standards to have its own individual assessment or be allocated to a specific assessment. It may be that several assessments considered altogether make sure that students are able to meet one or more of the professional standards.

Different assessment methods will be appropriate to assess different learning outcomes and your documentation should specify which method or methods are used to assess students against each learning outcome. Assessment methods could include:

- Presentations.
- Essays.
- Coursework.
- Case study analysis.
- Examinations.
- Practice portfolios.

Scheduling assessments

4.9 Ensure that assessments are mapped to the curriculum and are appropriately sequenced to match students' progression through the course.

It is important that assessments are carried out at appropriate stages during the course to match students' expected progression. For example, end of module and end of year assessments should be scheduled close to the end of that phase of learning, with appropriate time allowed for revision.

You should consider the assessment burden on students when scheduling your assessments. For example, scheduling several assessments in a short period of time may cause undue stress for students. Scheduling assessments so there are reasonable gaps between them could reduce pressure on students.

Providing feedback

4.10 Provide timely and meaningful feedback to students on their progression and performance in assessments.

It is important that students receive useful feedback as soon as is practical after their assessment about their progression and how they have performed. Feedback is an important part of encouraging students to reflect on their performance

When considering the way in which you provide feedback to students you may wish to consider the following:

- The policy and process for providing feedback should be available to students.
- The form of feedback you give should align with the purpose of the assessment. For example, if the purpose of the assessment is to check whether students have met specific learning outcomes and/or professional standards, the feedback provided should specifically cover that student's performance in meeting the outcome and/or standard or their progression towards meeting it.
- That sometimes it may be appropriate to provide no feedback other than the test result. The reasons for this should be stated in the policy document.

When considering the content of the feedback you provide to students, you may wish to consider the following elements of best practice in giving feedback. Good feedback:

- Is specific, non-judgemental and descriptive, reflecting on observed behaviours and tasks.
- Is provided within a supportive educational environment in which feedback is embedded in practice.
- Is delivered in a timely fashion (as soon as practical after the assessment), while recognising the need for quality control arrangements after assessments and that delaying feedback can help to improve the information provided. Expectations about the timescale for feedback should be made clear to students.
- Is planned and considered and provides high-quality information to students about their learning.
- Is ongoing and frequent, part of a sequence rather than a series of isolated episodes.
- Is built into the assessment strategy and the curriculum.
- Supports the student to share their thoughts and feelings as part of the feedback process.
- Facilitates the development of the student's self-assessment and reflection.
- Promotes student motivation and self-esteem to avoid the creation of anxiety.
- Delivers difficult messages about progress in a way which is constructive.
- Acknowledges that some students may need more detailed feedback, particularly in relation to communication and interpersonal skills and self-presentation where they appear less confident or skilled. Consideration should be given to the possibility that cultural or social background and norms may influence both their actions and how they are perceived by others.
- Relates to the student's personal goals, establishes mutually agreed goals and provides opportunities to close the gap between current and required performance.

Assessors

4.11 Ensure assessments are carried out by people with appropriate expertise, and that external examiners for the course are appropriately qualified and experienced and on the register.

It is important that staff who carry out assessments for your course are suitably experienced and skilled and are appropriately trained and supported. Your assessors should have relevant qualifications and experience and you should have confidence in their ability to course's assessment methods and marking schemes fairly and consistently. Training for assessors could include:

- Providing information about the course's assessment strategy.
- Providing information about how and when the course's learning outcomes are assessed.
- Providing information about how assessments contribute to deciding whether a student has met the professional standards.
- Equality, diversity and inclusion training.

External examiners

It is important that there is appropriate professional input in the external review of your assessment process.

You should recruit external examiners through a transparent process using role specifications that include requirements in relation to expertise and experience in the design and delivery of assessments. You should have processes for briefing external examiners and providing training for their role as appropriate.

You should ensure that your external examiners have professional experience and qualifications relevant to the course and are registered social workers. Your external examiners should contribute to the review and development of assessment strategies, providing advice from an overarching perspective. Their role should be strategic and at the level of reviewing processes and systems, rather than the examination of individual students.

You should use published guidance on external examiners to inform your processes, for example, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Code of Practice for external examining.

You should be able to show that you review comments from external examiners and give due consideration to any recommendations they make to improve your assessments and be able to justify why you have not acted on any recommendations, if this is the case.

Governance processes

4.12 Ensure that there are systems to manage students' progression, with input from a range of people, to inform decisions about their progression – including via direct observation of practice.

You should have clear governance mechanisms to oversee progression and make decisions about the assessment and graduation of individual students. Your processes should support the following:

- Reaching consistent, evidence-based and defensible decisions about individual students, using expert judgement in an accountable and consistent manner when necessary.
- Identifying borderline candidates, for example by using standard error of measurement (SEM) criteria and applying this to candidates on both sides of the pass mark.
- Exercising discretion in a fair and consistent manner that would withstand challenge on the grounds of due process.
- Defining any use of compensation, consistent with ensuring that all students that graduate have met the professional standards.
- Taking appropriate consideration of mitigating circumstances without compromising the need for graduates to meet the learning outcomes and the professional standards. You should not award additional marks in these circumstances or change pass/fail decisions. You may consider whether the student should be given a further chance to take the assessment in addition to your usual retake rules or whether a previous attempt is to be discarded and the next attempt counted as the first attempt. You may think it appropriate to require students to submit mitigating circumstances before assessments rather than when they find they have failed. External examiners should be able to review these decisions.
- Decisions about when students are allowed to retake assessments. **For further guidance about students re-taking placements, please see 5.3 under education and training standards guidance.**
- Decisions about student remediation.

The relationship between your assessment processes and policies and those of your parent higher education institution (HEI) should be clear and explicit. You should work with your HEI with the aim of ensuring that decisions relating to professional competence of students and how this affects their progression do not conflict with the regulations of your HEI. **For further guidance about student fitness to practise procedures, please see 5.3 under education and training standards guidance**

Your rules on how many times a student can retake an assessment should strike a suitable balance between the need to support students to succeed and progress and the need to make sure that students who complete the course achieve the professional standards. It is important that retake assessments are held to the same standard as the initial assessment.

Evaluation

3.9 Evaluate information about students' performance, progression and outcomes, such as the results of exams and assessments, by collecting, analysing and using student data, including data on equality and diversity.

You should evaluate information about students' performance, progression and outcomes by collecting and analysing data and using it to make changes or improvements where appropriate. This includes equality and diversity data in relation to learning outcomes. For example, you might make a change to your teaching or assessment if your data analysis showed that groups of students with a particular protected characteristic tended to perform less well in that specific part of the course and you then identified that this was related to the approach taken to the teaching or assessment.

Your data collection should incorporate verification systems to check the data is accurate and take appropriate data security and data protection measures.

Reasonable adjustments

5.4 Make supportive and reasonable adjustments for students with health conditions or impairments to enable them to progress through their course and meet the professional standards, in accordance with relevant legislation.

We expect you to make supportive and pragmatic adjustments to the way you deliver your assessments, including for those students who have long term health conditions and disabilities, while also abiding by the Equality Act 2010. You should take account of any adjustments you have made when considering how a student can meet the professional standards at the end of their course.

Examples of reasonable adjustments that could be made to assessments include:

- Additional time for an assessment or specific components of an assessment.
- Allowing a student to take the assessment in a quiet environment.
- Allowing a student to take breaks during the assessment period.
- Allowing students to use a pen and paper.
- Providing assessment materials printed on coloured paper.

Providing information to students

5.5 Provide information to students about their curriculum, practice placements, assessments and transition to registered social worker, including information on requirements for continuing professional development (CPD).

It is important that students have all the information they need about their assessments. Much of this information could be included in your assessment strategy and associated policies and you could consider providing this to students at the point of induction. You should consider providing information to students about the following areas:

- The assessment course.
- The roles, responsibilities and lines of accountability of staff involved in assessment.
- Assessment format, length, the range of content and the contribution of an individual assessment to the overall course.
- The marking process, including the marking schedule and methodology, the moderation and verification of marks and who is involved in marking (including the role of external examiners).
- The process for considering borderline cases (where a student is on the borderline between passing and failing an assessment).
- The decision-making processes for determining the progression and graduation of students.
- When marks will be made available to students.
- The feedback students should expect to receive after they receive their marks and the pastoral care and support they can access.
- Mitigating circumstances, reasonable adjustments, academic appeals and complaints policies.
- The steps taken to deter cheating and/or plagiarism in assessments and the consequences if they are detected.
- Arrangements for students to raise concerns and questions and how these are considered and acted upon when appropriate.
- Student involvement in the evaluation of assessment.

Academic appeals

5.8 Ensure there is an effective process in place for students to make academic appeals

Assessment processes must be applied fairly, and students must be able to make an academic appeal where they feel that this has not been the case.

It is therefore important that you have a clear, robust and effective process in place for students to make academic appeals and that students have access to information about this process.

An academic appeal means a request by a student for a review of a decision made by you or another academic body about their progression, assessment or award. You must have a process in place which allows learners to make an appeal if they feel that the process which led to the decision has been followed incorrectly or unfairly, or when new information has come to light which affects the assessment outcome.

By effective, we mean that the process must allow you to deal with an appeal in a fair and timely way, and that it must include you taking appropriate action if necessary.

You should make sure that students are not disadvantaged in any way because they have made an academic appeal. Also, your process should enhance or improve the assessment process or other parts of the course in response to the issues raised through appeals.

Students should have clear information about the appeals process, including how to make an appeal, who will decide their appeal, how their appeal will be decided, and where they can go for advice.

Further information

We have provided a range of guidance materials supporting the standards for education and training:

- Education and training standards guidance.
- Guidance on the assessment of social work students.
- Guidance on practice placements for social work students.

All our standards and guidance are available on our [website](#).