

New Degree, New Standards?

A project investigating the Alignment of the Standards
in Social Work Education (SiSWE) to the Scottish Credit
and Qualifications Framework (SCQF)

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This report has been compiled for the Institute of Research and Innovation in Social Services based on desktop research by Roisin McGoldrick (academic) and fieldwork research by Andrina Duncan (practitioner and practice teacher).

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Executive Summary

This project shines a spotlight on the social work qualifying degrees in Scotland with a particular emphasis on the relationship between the SiSWE and the SCQF. It seeks to understand how these two frameworks align to support improved standards of student attainment at a time when the profession has moved from a diploma to degree level qualification.

A previous project set up in 2004 by the then Scottish Institute for Excellence in Social Work Education (now IRISS, the Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services) had the following overall aim: *'To align assessment against the standards in social work education with the levels of the Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework'*. However, it was clear at this time that in order for this work

to make meaningful progress, there was a need to raise awareness of, and promote engagement in, the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework. This work has been ongoing since this time across the social services sector, led predominantly by the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) which aims to raise awareness and integrate the SCQF within the sector. (www.sssc.uk.com)

This current project was initiated in 2006 with key aims of collecting information about stakeholder awareness of the development of learning within social work degree programmes matched against the SCQF, as well as seeking to establish ways of achieving a common agreement amongst stakeholders about accepted levels of knowledge and practice for qualifying social workers.



This report marries together two distinct elements of this research project, presented side by side, which address the above aims. The final recommendations are based on findings from both elements which came to similar conclusions informed from a range of different perspectives.

These two elements were:

- *fieldwork research*, which sought the views of social work degree stakeholder partners including practice teachers, students, service users and carers;
- *desktop research*, which focused on one specific university programme to provide a model of learning matched to the SCQF at different academic levels.

More specifically, the fieldwork research addressed the question of academic levels in **practice settings**. It sought the views of stakeholders about their level of knowledge and understanding of SCQF. Participants were particularly asked about their understanding of the expectations placed on students to perform at different levels during their practice learning experiences. They were asked whether they understood what was expected from a student at the different SCQF levels and to what extent their assessment or contribution to assessment of students reflected this. All participants in the sample had knowledge of the social work degree, either as a student or as a person contributing to the

learning and assessment of social work students.

The desktop research focused on the **academy or university setting**, exploring the expected levels of student learning within the curriculum for different year groups and how these might relate to the practice learning opportunities within a programme. This work particularly focused on the challenges and opportunities that might help to bridge any real or perceived gap between academic and practice interpretations of the standard of work required of students on social work degree programmes. The research also opened up the debate about the tensions and challenges inherent in trying to create a common language and understanding about levels of learning and attainment within professional programmes.

The desktop element of the research uses as examples two subjects from the social work curriculum, to help focus attention on specific issues, rather than having to consider the curriculum as a whole, these were – *risk management and research*. These were chosen as they are taught subjects which have been strengthened in the new degree and it was felt participants in the project, both from the academy and practice, would be able to identify whether or not this stronger focus, which had been identified as desirable, was in fact evident.



Project Findings

Overall, the project findings identified a range of pertinent questions about levels of practice which we strongly argue should be debated across the whole social work education community in order to gain clearer common understandings. For example, how does one judge the research and enquiry skills of a student against the SCQ framework? Is this actually what practice teachers are required to do? If so, how do we quantify these skills – indeed, is it possible to quantify them? Does quantifying such activities reduce their intrinsic worth? How do we judge, fairly and equitably, the respective skills of two students who, at different stages in their degree, are required to demonstrate skills in research and enquiry which can be differentiated according to the level of study they are at? Can we set meaningful assessment criteria to test these different levels, and how do we engage all those involved in this activity – would doing so simply mechanise practice and lead us back to the practice requirements of the previous Diploma in Social Work programmes (DipSW) and the ‘tick box’ approach which was so questioned because of its quantitative rather than qualitative outcomes?

Project findings identified the need for better understanding and integration of SCQF across the whole field of social work

education; it must not continue to be solely the domain of academia if the concept of partnership working is to survive and thrive.

The findings also identified a recognised need for universities, with their stakeholder partners, to articulate and develop more materials identifying expectations of student learning and guidance about assessment at different academic levels and to make these widely available to all stakeholders.

The aim of the SiSWE and SCQF is to drive up standards in social work education, but they can only do so if they are jointly owned and their purpose understood by the academy (university) and the field (practice). The challenge in the document entitled *Changing Lives. Report of the 21st Century Social Work Review (2006)* for social workers to become more autonomous in terms of their practice is likely to be aided by the production of confident, competent practitioners who are able to articulate the arguments which inform their practice decisions. This driving up of standards is the challenge with which academic institutions and all of those involved in practice learning must now engage as a joint activity. Using SCQF as a model to support this aim is one step forward.



Final Recommendations drawn from both elements of the Project

- Universities that deliver social work education and all their stakeholder partners, including students, should engage in a national conversation and debate about expected student levels of learning and about assessment.
- Based on the recommendation above, universities that deliver social work education and their stakeholder partners, including students, should work towards adopting common understandings of and agreement about expectations of student learning at different SCQF levels.
- This understanding should be clearly written, articulated and widely available to all stakeholder partners.
- Ongoing developments in the social work honours degree and equivalent postgraduate routes to social work qualifications would benefit from greater collaboration with stakeholder partners.
- Work should be undertaken to align generic SCQF level descriptors more closely with the social work context.



Introduction

This project shines a spotlight on the social work qualifying degrees in Scotland with a particular emphasis on the relationship between the SiSWE and the SCQF. It seeks to understand how these two frameworks align to support improved standards of student attainment at a time when the profession has moved from a diploma to degree level qualification.

A previous project set up in 2004 by the then Scottish Institute for Excellence in Social Work Education (now IRISS, the Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services) had the following overall aim: *'To align assessment against the standards in social work education with the levels of the Scottish Credit and Qualification Framework'*. However, it was clear at this time that in order for this work to make meaningful progress, there was a need to raise awareness of, and promote engagement in, the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework. This work has been ongoing since this time across the social services sector, led predominantly by the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) which aims to raise awareness and integrate the SCQF within the sector. (www.sssc.uk.com)

Findings from an audit prior to the start of this project found a range of different approaches to practice learning between universities, including:

- Different SCQF levels at which practice learning occurred, ie first practice learning experiences for some students are set at SCQF level 8, while others are set at levels 9 or 10. Final practice learning is currently set at both SCQF levels 10 (for all undergraduate and some post graduate programmes) and 11 (for some post graduate programmes).
- Some programmes increase their practice learning expectations as the students progress through the programme whilst others set their practice learning expectations at one SCQF level irrespective of which year the student is in, for example, all practice learning being set at level 10.
- Differences in how the SiSWE are articulated eg numbered and described differently by different universities.

How these individual programme patterns and overall differences in approach between universities had been articulated to and understood by students, employers and the service users and carers involved in assessing students was a clear focus for this project.

This project was initiated in 2006 with key aims of collecting information about stakeholder awareness of the development of learning within social work degree



programmes matched against the SCQF, as well as seeking to establish ways of achieving a common agreement amongst stakeholders about accepted levels of knowledge and practice for qualifying social workers.

Setting the Context

In 2002, the Scottish Minister for Education and Young People launched *the Framework for Social Work Education in Scotland*, which announced the introduction of a degree-level qualification by 2004 for social work.

Previously there had been a certificate (1971) and a diploma (1992), although increasingly these were embedded within graduate and postgraduate qualifications. The above document clearly lays down a general set of standards (SiSWE) to which all programme providers must adhere and against which the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) quality assure.

At each point of significant change there has been a need for negotiation between the practice field (practice) and the academy (universities) in the overall venture of producing confident and competent professionals to take their place alongside contemporaries within their own and other disciplines – many of whom have experienced similar changes (e.g nurses, teachers, and occupational therapists). Additionally, the evolution of practice teaching has moved from informal

agreements between universities and employers to a more formal credit rated qualification (Practice Learning Qualifications (Social Services) and Practice Learning Qualifications) These qualifications contribute towards the formation of self-motivated, accountable practitioners fit to meet the demands of the profession within an inter-disciplinary context as emphasised through *Changing Lives - the Report of the 21st Century Social Work Review. (Scottish Executive 2006)*.

The introduction of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) in 2001 provided an opportunity for programmes to make more explicit the learning expected from students at different academic levels. Sharing this knowledge and understanding with colleagues in practice settings is a crucial aspect of the partnership arrangements that are integral to the degrees.

'The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework provides a national vocabulary for describing learning opportunities, so making the relationship between qualifications clearer. It will clarify entry and exit points, help map routes to progression within and across education and training sectors, and increase the opportunity for credit transfer.'
(SCQF/SFEU Level Descriptors 2007)

This current project has sought to examine the relationship between student learning



within social work programmes in Scotland and the notion of learning at different academic levels. It has attempted to determine who might be aware of this potential alignment both in practice and the academy and what the implications might be for a shared understanding – specifically, in relation to student assessment levels.

To achieve this, the project had two distinct elements. The first element addressed the question of academic levels in **practice settings**. It set out to establish the views of employers (particularly practice teachers, link workers and training staff), students, service users and carers about their level of knowledge and understanding of SCQF. In particular, participants were asked about their understanding of the expectations placed on students to perform at different SCQF levels during their practice learning experiences. They were asked whether they understood what was expected from a student at these different levels and to what extent their assessment of students reflected this. All participants (stakeholders) in the sample had knowledge of the social work degrees, either as a student or as a person contributing to the learning and assessment of social work students.

The second element focused on the **academy or university setting**, exploring the expected levels of student learning within the curriculum across different years and how this might relate to the practice learning

opportunities within a programme. This work focused particularly on the challenges and opportunities that might help to bridge any real or perceived gap between academic and practice interpretations of the standard of work required of students on social work degree courses. The research also opened up the debate about the tensions and challenges inherent in trying to create a common language and understanding about levels of learning and attainment within professional programmes.

The desktop research element of the project uses two examples drawn from the social work curriculum to help focus attention on specific issues, rather than having to consider the curriculum as a whole, these are – *risk management and research*. These were chosen as they are taught subjects which have been strengthened in the new degree and it was felt participants in the project, both from the academy and practice, would be able to identify whether or not this stronger focus, which had been identified as desirable, was in fact evident.

This report marries together the two distinct elements of this project, presented side by side, which address the overall aims. The final recommendations are based on findings from both elements which came to similar conclusions informed from a range of different perspectives.



Fieldwork Research

The initiation of the project

This overall project, of which the fieldwork research is one of two elements, was initiated in 2006 with key aims of collecting information about stakeholder awareness of the development of learning within social work degree programmes matched against the SCQF, as well as seeking to establish ways of achieving a common agreement amongst stakeholders about accepted levels of knowledge and practice for qualifying social workers.

In meetings with stakeholders it was stated that the findings from this project would be based on what was arguably still an early stage in the implementation of the degree, with some students only embarking on their first experience of practice learning in 2007. However, it was felt an appropriate time to consider the specific expectations that were being placed on students and the information stakeholders might be given in relation to the practice learning component of the various social work programmes. A key area of investigation was whether SiSWE was clearly aligned to SCQF and if so, the impact of this on any additional assessment requirements at degree level and how this might be being articulated across programme partnerships.

In the early stages of corresponding with agencies it became apparent that there were likely to be difficulties due to lack of awareness of SCQF and issues about levelling.

Here are some examples of the comments received:

'I have no knowledge of the SCQF, or how the SiSWE are aligned to it. As a practice teacher, I assess students against the standards, taking into account their stage of learning. This works well to ensure students' readiness for social work practice. My understanding is that universities have the quality assurance mechanisms in place to ensure that the qualification they award is aligned to the SCQF.'

Training manager

'We work with the SCQF framework on the basis that the level of understanding and theoretical basis would be deeper where the SCQF level is higher, but this does not impact on our assessment of students.'

Practice teacher

A challenge for the project at this early stage was to recognise that, while SCQF was becoming more well-known within the academic field, this was not the case for employers or students and certainly not for service users or carers.



It became apparent during discussions with stakeholders that the choice of terminology was important, as the key question was not so much whether people had heard of SCQF but whether they had had an opportunity to gain an understanding of some of the concepts, for example, **different levels of learning require different levels of assessment.**

Therefore, in meetings with stakeholders, discussions often concentrated on establishing what was being used, other than the SCQF, as an indicator for assessment of practice at different levels. For example, when several students from different universities, during the course of their programme, are placed within the same practice learning setting, could they be learning at different SCQF levels, while potentially being assessed, using the same indicators, at the same level?

Methods employed

During the fieldwork research element of this project, the range of stakeholders interviewed included representatives from employing agencies, students, service users and carers. They were selected from a range of geographical areas to allow representation from partner employers working with all the universities across Scotland that deliver social work education. Both voluntary and statutory employers were represented. Five of the eight universities that offer social work

programmes were represented, and both postgraduate and undergraduate students were interviewed.

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews which took place between August 2006 and April 2007. Some stakeholders were seen individually and others in group settings, depending on their preference and availability.

Some difficulty was experienced accessing the original target of 20 employing agencies, due to lack of response or responses suggesting the topic of investigation was not relevant to them. A total of 11 employing agencies were engaged in the project.

A total of 67 people were interviewed during this phase of the project, as follows:

- 27 employers (a mix of practice teachers, practitioners, learning development workers and link workers who had provided practice learning for 106 students);
- 23 students from 5 universities, from both undergraduate and postgraduate routes, who were interviewed in four groups;
- 17 service users and carers. This stakeholder group had had contact with students in a range of situations: talking to class groups, small groups, being interviewed for video or live scenarios,



shadowed in their day-to-day role, visited by students in practice learning and having students based in a setting with them. All had contributed in some way to the formative or summative assessment of the students.

Each stakeholder group was asked a series of questions, based around the four headings below, designed to address the project aims. The aim was to find out their level of understanding about SCQF as a national framework, but more importantly to establish what they understood about its applicability within social work degrees.

- Knowledge of the role of SCQF within undergraduate and postgraduate social work programmes.
- Experience of assessing student practice measured against SCQF.
- Knowledge of levels of expected student practice learning matched against SCQF.
- Access to information to support the understanding of expected student learning at appropriate SCQF levels at the different stages of practice learning.

In addition, the stakeholder groups were asked if they could envisage any benefits that would result from increasing the understanding and use of SCQF in the practice learning component of the degree.

Principal findings

The principal findings from the fieldwork research element of this project were as follows:

- Stakeholder groups lack knowledge about SCQF.
- The majority of current student assessment in practice is based on models adopted prior to the introduction of SCQF.
- Stakeholders would welcome greater clarification of expectation of student learning at different SCQF levels.
- There is a lack of clear documentation to support a consistent approach to student learning and assessment across both the academy and practice settings.

Detailed findings

1 Knowledge of the role of SCQF within undergraduate and postgraduate social work programmes

Employers

- The bulk of agency personnel had little or no knowledge of SCQF as a framework or as a concept, although there was some evidence, particularly as other related developments (eg. Practice Learning Qualifications and Key Capabilities) were unfolding, that this knowledge could increase.



- All agencies reported that they had felt informed about the bulk of the changes in social work education and particularly SiSWE. However, they were uniformly unclear about information on how practice learning was to be aligned to SCQF. For example, one participant noted that at a workshop when a question was posed about SCQF the reply from an academic had been that *'...this was not relevant to the practice learning component of the new degree'*.
- Most agencies felt that those most likely to have knowledge of SCQF would be the training personnel and candidates undertaking SVQ/HNC qualifications within organisations, rather than people involved specifically with the social work honours degree.

Summary of findings

Findings suggest that participants from employing agencies feel ill-prepared in terms of their knowledge and understanding of the SCQF and how it relates to practice.

There appears to be limited information available to employing agencies, as well as uncertainty about where to access this information; also, participants were not sure about how to meet the new challenges associated with SCQF and the social work degree.

Students

- A small percentage of the students had knowledge of the SCQF as a framework or a concept. Students from one HEI noted that this information had come from the university, while others reported gaining some information from the SSSC and other social work related websites.
- Only two of the 23 students knew at what SCQF level academic input and practice learning were aligned on their social work programme.
- Students were not clear about if or how practice learning was aligned at different levels across HEI's, in spite of several of the them having been in practice learning settings, working closely with students from other HEIs who were working at different SCQF levels.

Summary of findings

Students seemed unaware of the criteria by which they were being assessed during their practice, apart from what they were told by their training team. Although they were aware of the standards in social work education they needed to meet at the different stages of their programme, they appeared not to be aware of assessment levels and methods. They reported that, as far as they were aware, their assessment was based on the practice teacher's previous experience and not related to universally agreed levels of learning or transparent criteria.



While they were aware of different expectations, they attributed these to variations in setting and practice teacher, rather than seeing them as derived from different academic levels.

Service users and carers

- Only two of the seventeen service users and carers interviewed had knowledge of SCQF. For one this was due to their involvement with a module within the FE sector. Another noted that SCQF had been mentioned in relation to Practice Learning Qualification development with the possibility that service users and/or carers may be able to complete this programme at SCQF Level 7.

Summary of findings

Service users and carers do not appear to adequately be informed about expectations of student learning at different SCQF levels.

2 Experience of assessing student practice measured against the SCQF

Employers

- Participants from employing agencies reported that SCQF had not formed part of their discussions with students or university staff prior to or during students' practice learning opportunities.
- The measure employer participants described using to decide on whether practice was 'good enough' was their own prior experience of assessing students undertaking previous DipSW programmes.

- A minority of practice teachers reported that one HEI had included information on SCQF in their handbook.
- No agency staff had discussed SCQF with any of the students they were working with.

Summary of findings

The majority of employer participants interviewed are not utilising SCQF to inform their assessment of students on the degree in social work.

Assessment of social work students in practice is being based on previous models aligned to former programmes.

Students

- Students reported being aware of assessment models and grading scales being used in assessment although they gave no evidence of understanding if and how this process was linked to SCQF.
- Evidence from students indicated that they understood practice teachers were using their own judgement and experience as indicators for assessment rather than any other criteria.

Summary of Findings

All students interviewed reported and expressed surprise that there was no transparent, agreed national system by which practice learning is measured and assessed.



Service users and carers

- Service users and carers reported they normally received information on the year of study but not the level of expected ability of students, nor on the SCQF level of their previous practice learning experience.
- Findings suggest that although service users and carers frequently receive helpful information about their expected role, there is little detail in writing or verbally about student levels and expectations.

Summary of findings

Service users and carers felt that because they have little knowledge of expected levels of ability of students they are insufficiently prepared to employ different techniques in their work with differing levels of students.

An implication of this could be that the contributions of service users and carers to the degree programmes are not being used to maximum effectiveness.

3 Knowledge of levels of expected student practice learning matched against SCQF

Employers

- All but one employer participant had no knowledge of the SCQF level set by the HEIs for whom they had provided practice learning opportunities.
- Employer participants reported little knowledge and understanding either of

the levels at which different HEIs set practice learning opportunities or the different patterns that had been adopted across the country, ie: two practice learning opportunities both set at level 10; two practice learning opportunities set at levels 8 and 10; two practice learning opportunities set at levels 9 and 10; three practice learning opportunities set at levels 8,9, and 10.

- Employer participants reported little or no knowledge of what these different levels might mean in terms of their expectations of student performance in practice.
- There was strong evidence to suggest that employer participants agreed that, other than in respect of some key new areas of emphasis within the degree, assessment of students remained largely unchanged from previous models.

One practice teacher noted:

'I would be offended if someone thought I didn't know what first or second placement practice looked like.'

When trying to allay the fears of some link workers who had voiced anxieties about contributing to the assessment of degree students, some practice teachers were reported as giving the following general advice.

'You know what first placement students look like.' (Link worker)



Summary of findings.

The majority of employer participants have little or no knowledge of SCQF either as a framework or as a concept.

Notions of levelling of student practice appears to be largely based on the previous system of two 'placements' as required by the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW), with staff relying on their previous experience of assessing students, irrespective of SCQF level. Whereas within the new social work honours degree, patterns of practice learning can be set as deemed appropriate by each HEI within the requirements set out in the Framework for Social Work Education in Scotland (2003).

Students

- A small minority of students (12%) reported knowing, in the context of their own institution, what SCQF level their practice learning was set at, although they were unaware of differences across other higher education institutions.
- All the students, even those from the same university, reported that they had experienced very different expectations being placed on them by their training teams and they had no sense that there was any agreed measurement of practice matched to their specific level of learning.

- No students had any knowledge about possible information exchange between their HEI and practice setting in relation to expected levels of student performance.

Summary of findings

Students were unaware of any uniform measure of performance in practice, although they reported perceived inconsistencies of approach.

Students were unaware of information flow between universities and practice settings regarding expected levels of learning and assessment during a practice learning experience.

Service users and carers

- All but one of this group reported that they did not know the different levels at which students were assessed on different practice learning experiences.
- 29% expressed concern that being provided with too much detailed information might detract from the spontaneity of their approach.
- Although not specifically aligned to SCQF, one group of seven service users and carers reported on one HEI that was providing helpful materials, illustrating expectations of student learning within practice settings.



Summary of findings

Although some service users and carers had been provided with specific information about expectations of student performance in practice settings, it was felt that too much detail might militate against effective involvement.

4 Access to information to support the understanding of expected student learning at appropriate SCQF levels at different stages of practice learning.

Employers

- 30% of employer participants linked to one HEI reported receiving informative materials regarding expectations of student performance in practice – this material was not aligned to SCQF.
- Some employer participants provided evidence of verbal and written information from HEIs which provided clarity about how the SiSWE targets were to be met in practice. However, no participants reported receiving any information relating to levels of practice or student expectations that was aligned to SCQF.

Summary of findings

Evidence suggests that some HEIs have prepared useful materials to support employers providing experience for students in practice learning settings, particularly in relation to meeting the SiSWE targets.

However, no specific written information seems to be available in relation to SCQF levels of expected student performance.

Students

- All the students said they were aware of what 'standards' they needed to meet at the different stages of their programme and that this was clearly articulated in the HEI materials. Students reported that HEIs encouraged them to progress beyond minimum expectations should a practice learning setting be able to provide these opportunities.
- Students reported no knowledge of any materials which set out at what specific SCQF level the standards were to be met.
- Most students spoke of being '*totally dependent on*' or '*at the mercy*' of assessment by link workers and practice teachers.
- All students commented that there seemed to be disparity in what was expected, but were not sure whether this was about SCQF levels or whether it resulted from the diverse opportunities afforded by different practice settings and the skill and knowledge of different practice teachers.

Summary of findings

Students are well informed about the SiSWE targets they are required to meet although less clear about the levels at



which they are to meet them, particularly in relation to practice and the SCQF.

Service users and carers

- All service users and carers reported that although they had various forms for providing feedback from HEIs, they were unaware that any of them made reference to SCQF either as a framework or a concept of levelling.
- The majority of this group (71%) reported having no information, either with or without mention of SCQF, that informed them of what a student should know or be able to do at any given stage in their programme.

Summary of findings

Service users and carers have little or no knowledge or understanding of SCQF or its applicability to student learning at different levels of their programme.

5 All stakeholder groups were asked if they could envisage any benefits to the added understanding and use of SCQF in the practice learning component of the degree.

Employers

- When introduced to the SCQF documentation, employer participants agreed that there were benefits to greater understanding and use of SCQF, although they also commented that the framework in its present format was too generalised and required to be made more specific to the social services sector.

According to employer participants the benefits of greater use of SCQF would be:

- a form of standardisation – a basic minimum benchmark;
- greater clarity of expectations across all practice settings, including multi-agency settings;
- consistency of student experience between settings;
- the provision of an audit tool to ensure that agencies knew what learning opportunities were available in their organisation and what specific opportunities could be provided for students in each setting at different levels;
- maximisation of opportunities for inter-agency and multi-agency settings to engage in practice learning; ie, more transparent expectations of student learning at different levels might encourage other professionals to become more involved with student social workers;
- promotion of the idea of continuous professional development, moving from pre- to post qualifying learning;
- provision of a mechanism for assessing the qualifications of overseas workers.

Students

When introduced to SCQF documentation, all the students agreed that there could be benefits in promoting the knowledge and



use of SCQF within the social work/care sector. However, they felt it needed to be integrated into current learning and assessment processes rather than instituted as an additional requirement.

According to the students, the benefits of greater use of SCQF across the sector would be:

- as a quality assurance tool in respect of the practice learning settings and the assessment given within these;
- standardisation of good quality practice, which would benefit students and ultimately improve service delivery;
- as newly qualified workers, the embedding of SCQF at the pre-qualifying stage will provide them with a clearer sense of their own continuous professional development;
- a couple of groups felt that the implementation of clearer expectations of student performance matched against SCQF would make feedback in practice learning more meaningful and effective. Currently they reported having knowledge of the marking criteria for their academic work but not of the practice learning criteria.

Service users and carers

The service user and carer groups reported that they could envisage potential benefits from the knowledge and use of SCQF if this provided a clearer expectation of

student performance at different levels.

They emphasised that this would need to be clearly articulated and 'jargon free' and that it should not cut across the contribution they could make from their unique perspective.

According to service users and carers the benefits of greater understanding and use of SCQF across the sector would be:

- service users and carers could become more effective in their involvement with students by selecting information that was more aligned to different levels of student learning;
- the contributions of service users and carers would be more meaningful.



Desktop Research

To recap: This overall project, for which the desktop research is one of two elements, was initiated in 2006 with key aims of collecting information about stakeholder awareness of the development of learning within social work degree programmes matched against the SCQF, as well as seeking to establish ways of achieving a common agreement amongst stakeholders about accepted levels of knowledge and practice for qualifying social workers.

This second element of the research, and the subject of this next section of the report, examines how one university undergraduate social work degree programme provides students with specific learning (in research and risk management) matched against both the SCQ and SiSWE frameworks. It explores the responsibilities of programme partnerships to make information about student levels of learning explicit, transparent and a shared activity.

The University selected for this research

At the point of beginning this part of the project the new undergraduate degree at the Glasgow School of Social Work (GSSW) was in its third year and the postgraduate programme was about to release its first qualified workers into the workplace. These students undertook a course of study which was explicitly and carefully matched to the Standards in Social Work Education (SiSWE).

Each programme is also linked to the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF), which means that qualifying students are being assessed in different ways. Part of the purpose of this project is to explore that differentiation and to determine how this is dealt with, especially in assessed practice learning modules.

This section of the report outlines some of the challenges involved in the alignment of the SiSWE with the SCQF. Its purpose is to stimulate a dialogue in relation to these challenges which will help to bridge the gap between academic and practice interpretations of the standards of work required for the new Honours degree in Social Work. In order to address these issues it is important to set the context and the parameters of that dialogue.

Social work education has developed in parallel with other similar professional qualifications since the earliest qualifications of medical social worker or hospital almoner were introduced in the years immediately following World War II.

In 1971 the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW) was



set up in order to regulate the first unified generic social work qualification which was offered at the level of Diploma (both undergraduate and postgraduate). The CQSW was the nationally agreed qualification for the occupation of social worker.

This was superseded in 1989 by the Diploma in Social Work, which was revised in 1995 and then replaced in 2004 by the Honours degree which raised the requirements for qualifications in social work to all-graduate level for the first time.

At each point of significant change there has been a need for negotiation between the field and the academy in the overall aim of producing confident and competent professionals to take their place alongside contemporaries in other disciplines – many of which have experienced similar changes (e.g. nursing, teaching and occupational therapy). In social work the relationship between the universities, employing agencies and services users is perhaps more visible than in some other professions. The partnership approach adopted by CCETSW brought employers and educators to the same table with some degree of coercion. While there were acknowledged difficulties in this approach, it did have some clear strengths in creating joint agendas and objectives. It allowed for an exchange between the field and the academy which is now less clear or evident. Whereas in the DipSW qualification the professional body (CCETSW) awarded

the professional qualification – effectively, the licence to practice – the university awarded the academic part of the qualification. In the new degree qualification both the academic and the professional awards are made by the universities. This involves a new set of relationships being constructed – or perhaps reconstructed. These relationships are now characterised much more by negotiation than by obligation. This brings challenges in terms of the nature and degree of the relationships and involves both constituent groups in clarifying and acceding to new arrangements.

What remains unchanged however is the inter-dependence between the academy and the field; universities require practice learning opportunities not only to allow students to fulfil the requirements of the degrees, but also to ensure that students are able to *apply* their knowledge, skills and understanding appropriately. Agencies need to ensure a flow of new staff and new learning in order to be dynamic and responsive to the needs of users and carers. Many agencies recruit students who have had good practice learning experiences with them. There are clearly mutual interests to be served here, and thus exploration is necessary about how this might be best achieved.

There is an ongoing dilemma in this process which relates in part to how existing qualifications are rated and valued



against new *improved* models. At each stage in the development the qualification level has gone up, and the expectation that practitioners with earlier qualifications will be able and willing to train and supervise students being assessed under new rules and standards is perhaps a contentious one. If, however, it is accepted that there is a continual need in any profession to strive toward raising standards of practice, then this may provide legitimacy and acceptance for the processes involved in doing so.

Variations in training provision

All the universities in Scotland which host qualifying level social work training have developed the new degrees in particular ways, but all must be clearly aligned to SiSWE and SCQF in order to obtain and maintain validation. This means that there is variation in the programmes currently offered and this could be seen as a strength in the system, although it does mean that practice teachers will need to be attuned to the different programmes, particularly differences in practice learning patterns, from which they supervise students. The new degrees have been designed to involve service users and carers to a much greater extent than ever before, but this is still an area under construction, and each

programme across the country is at a different stage of development.

The actual programme content and organisation varies considerably within the given parameters. SiSWE and SCQF are designed to ensure that, despite this variation, social work education is robust, fit for purpose and fit for the demands of the 21st century. The eight university departments in Scotland which provide qualifying social work programmes do so under clear regulatory frameworks. It will be important that the quality assurance mechanisms to assess the 'readiness to practise' of the graduates of these programmes are credible to both the HEIs and the employing agencies, if public confidence in the profession is to grow and develop.

One such programme will now be explored in some detail. It is important to bear in mind that this is just one example from the range of programmes provided, but it should suffice to give a general outline of what is offered and how in terms of two core curriculum areas (research and risk assessment¹) attempts are being made to ensure that the knowledge base of social work and the practice arena into which it is aligned are coherent and fit for purpose.

¹The choice of these two areas seems appropriate, given the emphasis on them in recent times, particularly in Changing Lives Report of the 21st Century Social Work Review Scottish Executive 2006 and their increased emphasis within the social work honours degree, but the same process could apply to any other area of the curriculum.



The approach taken at the Glasgow School of Social Work (GSSW)

Programme design

The programme has been carefully designed and mapped against the SiSWE and comprises a number of discrete, credit rated, academic and practice learning modules all oriented to providing the necessary learning opportunities to enable students to meet the required professional standards.

Overall the programme at GSSW, as at other centres, balances and fuses academic and practice learning according to the national requirements and ensures that all students acquire a broad general knowledge and understanding of social work and social care while having the opportunity to study and practise in different settings in order to develop greater knowledge and expertise. Attention is paid not only to knowledge and research but also to practice skills and the development of competent and critically analytical practitioners. A programme module on approaches to learning (*Learning to Learn*) is fundamental to Year 1, and in all years the development of such skills is promoted throughout the learning process.

By the end of this programme, students are expected (among other requirements) to be able to:

- accept and exercise a degree of professional autonomy;
- manage complex work and practise effectively in complex situations;
- establish effective and constructive relationships with service users and other professionals;
- work according to professional codes of conduct for good practice;
- contribute to the ongoing development of effective practice through engaging with research in all its forms and applications.

GSSW Course Handbook

Students who graduate from this and other programmes across the country will be aware of the complex social, economic, familial and individual factors impacting on the lives of service users. They will be knowledgeable about and able to reflect critically on social problems and the structural, familial, and individual contexts within which they occur. They will become self-aware practitioners who are able to reflect critically upon and evaluate their practice and their own contribution to service delivery.



Approaches to learning and teaching

The overall approach adopted in this particular programme is based primarily on:

- An adult learning approach to programme-based learning, practice learning, and the promotion of change. This approach is centred on the development in students of a strong capacity for self-directed learning, which enhances their capacity to develop into reflective and creative practitioners. Such an approach, with its emphasis on the development of skills in learning as well as skills in practice, lays a strong basis for further learning and development beyond undergraduate/qualifying education, thereby fostering a capacity for engagement in life-long learning.
- An active recognition and exploration of the transferability of knowledge, skills and processes.
- A consistent application of a value base which has at its core respect for individuals, and an actively anti-oppressive approach to practice.

A Problem Based Learning (PBL) approach is used in some modules. This approach complements other approaches adopted;

importantly, it offers opportunities for students to develop their learning by working in small groups to research a typical social work 'scenario' and present findings to the larger group.

Research and Risk Assessment

The two key curriculum areas to be explored in this project are *research and risk assessment*². The following grid gives an indication of how and at what levels these areas are addressed in the academic modules and also in the practice domain.

It should be possible to use a similar mechanism or mapping exercise to check out the integration of policy initiatives – for example, Key Capabilities – or to ensure adequate coverage of new and evolving knowledge of other key curricular areas.

Overall, it provides a model from which expectations of student learning in specific curricular areas can be based.

²Note: This kind of approach could apply to any other area of skills or knowledge development across a curriculum. The intention is to provide some examples of how key areas can be charted in order that practice teachers, tutors and importantly, students can see clearly what expectations are fair and reasonable at what stage in the course overall. It is not intended to be definitive, due to the variations in the programmes across the country.



Examples of curriculum areas where core issues of research and risk assessment may be found.

Year 1

	Risk assessment	Research
<p>Year 1 SCQF Level 7</p> <p>All modules are university based, incorporating practice learning sessions within the core teaching.</p>	<p>Knowledge</p> <p>Development of knowledge base in social sciences and social policy to set out the context for practice.</p> <p>Introduction to the reality that social workers are engaged in the process of risk assessment throughout their practice.</p> <p>Use of enquiry reports e.g. Caleb Ness, Borders Enquiry to aid this process – risk involved in different services user domains compared and contrasted to include ideas of self determination.</p>	<p>Knowledge</p> <p>Introduction to enquiry/research Library usage Referencing</p> <p>Research skills are developed in problem-based learning groups.</p> <p>Substantial proportion of learning is self-directed and students hold one another accountable for knowledge development.</p>
<p>Extract from SCQF level descriptor</p> <p>Students should be able to: use their knowledge, understanding and skills to critically evaluate and formulate evidence-based arguments and identify solutions to clearly defined problems of a generally routine nature.</p>	<p>Application</p> <p>Knowledge of attachment theory should inform initial and tentative understanding of risk assessment.</p> <p>Sound grasp of social policy in relation to poverty and disadvantage should help students set a context for any assessment.</p> <p>Service users and carers involved in grounding the theoretical ideas in practice using own experiences to help students develop understanding of real world issues in safe learning environment.</p> <p>Introduction to codes of practice in social work and other professions.</p>	<p>Application</p> <p>Research into outcomes in residential child care could offer some explanation for the behaviour exhibited in one of the scenarios used in the Families and Carers module. (See Appendix 1)</p> <p>Module on Ethics Values and Justice introduces students to concepts of reasoning and deduction. (See Appendix 1)</p>



Year 2 – includes first period of assessed practice

	Risk assessment	Research
<p>Year 2 SCQF Level 8 3 university-based modules 1st assessed practice module</p>	<p>Knowledge</p> <p>Building on Year 1 modules, concepts of social justice and resilience are highlighted.</p> <p>Ecological factors in risk assessment are explored.</p> <p>Legal consequences of risk are outlined. (See Appendix 1)</p>	<p>Knowledge</p> <p>Students should be able to move beyond introductory explanations of human behaviour.</p> <p>Contemporary ideas in relation to human development should be explored.</p> <p>It would be reasonable to expect that students could begin to identify some critical reviews of agency policy and procedures.</p>
<p>Extract from SCQF level descriptor</p> <p>Students should be able to: apply their subject-related and transferable skills in contexts where the scope of the task and the criteria for decisions are generally well defined but where some personal responsibility and initiative is required.</p>	<p>Application</p> <p>In each contact with service users and carers an assessment is begun. Where knowledge or understanding is incomplete, this should be discussed with the practice teacher, who will check the course handbook.</p> <p>Application of all modules in practice situations is required. (See Appendix 1)</p> <p>Clarity in relation to models and methods of assessment should be evident by the end of the first period of assessed practice.</p>	<p>Application</p> <p>Using the definition of research from Abbott and Sapsford (1997) 'finding out about things and trying to make sense of them in the light of evidence' may help students to understand, for example, parental reaction to mainstreaming of education for children on the autistic spectrum or help to inform a decision about moving a frail older person from one residential unit to another.</p>



Year 3

	Risk assessment	Research
<p>Year 3 SCQF Level 9 All modules are university based.</p>	<p>Knowledge</p> <p>Consolidation of knowledge gained from practice experience and development of understanding of risk assessment and risk management. Modules include Risk and Protection and Social Work in Diverse Settings, thus helping to develop comprehensive understanding of the principles of risk assessment and risk management and inviting consideration of client group specific issues.</p> <p>Study of organisational factors bring the students back to some of the earlier materials – for example, enquiry reports and their impact on organisations and work practices.</p>	<p>Knowledge</p> <p>More formalised teaching on research methods takes place in the module</p> <p>Research for ethical and effective practice (see Appendix 1) and students are required to develop a proposal for a small-scale piece of research in accordance with these methods.</p>
<p>Extract from SCQF level descriptor Students should be able to: use their knowledge, understanding and skills, in both identifying and analysing problems and issues and in formulating, evaluating and applying evidence based solutions and arguments.</p>	<p>Application</p> <p>Assignments at this level on the course require students to demonstrate a knowledge base beyond mere description. It is reasonable to expect students to be able to offer a critical appraisal of current practice in risk assessment and risk management with a specific service user group and to suggest or propose alternative, evidence-based solutions.</p>	<p>Application</p> <p>Developing ability to interrogate evidence – what does a particular piece of research evidence actually say? What might be the important contextual factors which need to be considered before applying the message from that research study to a particular service user or carer?</p>



Year 4 – Includes second period of assessed practice

	Risk assessment	Research
Year 4 SCQF Level 10 2nd assessed practice module Honours dissertation Development planning	<p>Application</p> <p>It is reasonable to expect that by now students should have a sound understanding of assessment processes including risk assessment, although this will be further developed during this period of assessed practice.</p> <p>A knowledge and understanding of methods of intervention should also be evident and an ability to discern appropriate and relevant approaches should be developing with guidance.</p>	<p>Knowledge</p> <p>Clear evidence is expected in relation to knowledge base – material from current journals and texts is used. Policy documents are drawn on and students should be able to demonstrate a clear understanding of the context in which these have been drawn up.</p> <p>Current examples might include the Vulnerable Adults protocols or the Hidden Harm report.</p>

<p>Extract from SCQF level descriptor</p> <p>Students should be able to:</p> <p>apply their subject-related and transferable skills in contexts of a professional or equivalent nature where there is a requirement for them to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • exercise personal responsibility and initiative; • demonstrate a capacity for decision-making in complex and unpredictable contexts; • provide evidence of their ability to undertake further developments of a professional or equivalent nature. 	<p>Application</p> <p>Evidence of students being able to manage their own workload should be emerging by the end of this period of assessed practice. Clarity about appropriate levels of accountability should also be evident.</p> <p>Students should demonstrate understanding of a range of possibilities for action rather than a standard approach, and be able to defend their reasoning.</p> <p>Decisions based on best available research evidence should be emerging.</p>	<p>Knowledge</p> <p>Research methods teaching is revisited in preparation for writing the honours dissertation. Students may elect to research an area of interest from either period of assessed practice.</p> <p>The honours dissertation may be used to demonstrate capacity to undertake further development.</p>
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What these grids demonstrate is the potential for social work programmes to map learning across curricular areas to different years and expectations of the SCQF. This then provides a transparent picture of expected student learning which can be shared, debated and further developed with stakeholder partners.

Levels of qualification

The SCQF provides a framework which attempts to signpost levels of student learning (Appendix 2) although translating this, particularly within a work based context, into practice can be a minefield and often fraught with difficulties. These difficulties might include a lack of confidence experienced by those with 'lower' level qualifications (yet years of experience) and a lack of agreed understanding of levels of learning in practice across and between professions.

SCQF levels need to be better understood, accepted and integrated into the whole field of social work education and cannot remain solely the domain of academia, if the concept of partnership working is to survive and thrive.

The commitment to partnership between agencies and the academy does appear to be strong (even if littered with tensions and dilemmas), and so a means to a mutually respectful and constructive relationship needs to be found.

An example of current differences in levels of qualification may help to illustrate some of these tensions and dilemmas.

A 45-year-old social worker, Mary Jones, is likely to have a collection of 'O' levels and Highers, have gone to university or FE college and obtained a CSS, a CQSW or latterly a Diploma in Social Work. Sometimes these professional qualifications are couched within other academic awards and Mary may have been awarded a Diploma in Higher Education from the institution in which she studied as well as the professional qualification. The professional qualification may also be encompassed within an ordinary or honours degree.

To translate this into the current equivalent in SCQF terminology Mary would have qualifications at

SCQF level 5	'O' levels
SCQF Level 6	Highers
SCQF Level 7	Certificate in Higher Education
SCQF Level 8	Diploma in Higher Education
SCQF Level 10	Practice Teaching Award



The student Mary is about to supervise has a slightly different journey – or a similar journey with new signposts or directions.

John Black is 19 years old and about to come out into his first period of assessed practice. He has had a very traditional educational experience and has the following qualifications:

SCQF level 5 Standard grades

SCQF level 6 Highers

Year 1 of his degree at SCQF level 7

Due to be assessed in this first period of assessed practice at SCQF level 8 – the level at which Mary qualified some 10 years ago.

In this example the potential begins to emerge for some misunderstanding of what is required in terms of level of assessment. Mary is assessing practice at a stage approximately half-way through the new degree programme, although this is the level at which she qualified. Should John's class mate, Shuvita, come to Mary for a second period of assessed practice in Year 4 she will be assessed at level 10 – the level which Mary had to demonstrate to achieve her Practice Teaching award.

This is where some exploration of the nature and purpose of the SCQF

framework might have some value – do the levels actually indicate equivalence, or should the interpretation of the levels be more fluid than simply comparing one level 10 qualification with another?

Is a national qualifications framework a helpful tool?

The question of whether a national qualifications framework is a helpful tool or a necessary evil is one which is hotly debated. In broad terms it can be argued that some level of regulation and standardisation is necessary in order to have a common language in which to communicate. On the other hand, too rigid or literal an interpretation of equivalence can lead to comparisons which are not sound or valid, as they are not comparing like with like. The whole issue of experience is not touched upon here, but it is obviously important to recognise the contribution which this makes to the quality of the periods of assessed practice which students undertake. Processes are being developed within the SCQF framework to explore ways of acknowledging and credit-rating prior informal learning (RPL – recognition of prior learning), but these fall outwith the scope of this report. More information on this development can be found on the SCQF website at www.scqf.org.uk.



The introduction to the 2003 SCQF Handbook states that the SCQF aims to:

...enable employers, learners and the public to understand the full range of Scottish qualifications, how they relate to each other and how they can contribute to improving skills.'

If this aim is to be realised the framework needs to be much more widely understood and shared across academic and practice arenas.

Owning the process

It is necessary to discuss and debate the issues raised in this project in order that the whole process is owned by all its constituents. Students undertaking qualifying training are also engaged in academic study, and the linking of these two dimensions inevitably means that the qualification level has increased significantly in a relatively short space of time. Since the responsibility of any professional is to maintain and improve the standards in their field, this is to be welcomed in social work practice. It does, however, present dilemmas in the bedding in of the process, as it is likely that some students will be able to demonstrate excellent interpersonal skills without necessarily being able to produce supporting written evidence of the required standard to meet the relevant SCQF level. Some of the tensions in

respect of views about what makes a good practitioner are inevitably likely to exist for the foreseeable future.

If one were to pose the question as to whether when one is ill, it is more desirable to have a doctor who has a good bedside manner than one who is a good surgeon, I guess many of us would want to see our medical needs catered for by the latter. If then, when one is in crisis in terms of family, personal or social circumstances it would similarly be important to have a social work practitioner who is able to risk assess, analyse and offer an evidence-based approach to those difficulties, rather than someone who is able to befriend and comfort but not to venture beyond that stage. The best practitioners will be able to do both, and this is the least that vulnerable service users and their carers should be able to expect from social workers in the 21st century.

The aim of SiSWE and SCQF is to drive up standards in social work education, but they will only do so if they are jointly owned and understood by the academy and the field. We would argue that, in the future, this requires more collaboration of approach and clearly written and articulated guidelines to aid common understandings and a partnership approach.



Final Recommendations drawn from both elements of the Project

- Universities that deliver social work education and all their stakeholder partners, including students, should engage in a national conversation about expected student levels of learning and assessment.
- Based on the above, universities that deliver social work education and their stakeholder partners, including students, should work towards adopting common understandings of and agreement about expectations of student learning at different SCQF levels.
- This understanding should be clearly written, articulated and widely available to all stakeholder partners.
- Ongoing developments with the social work honours degree and equivalent post graduate routes would benefit from greater collaboration with stakeholder partners.
- Work should be undertaken to align generic SCQF level descriptors more closely with the social work context.



Appendix 1

GSSW Programme Structure

The basic structure of the four years is as follows:

	Semester 1 modules	Credits	Semester 2 modules	Credits
1	Learning to Learn (incorporating ICT)	20	Families and Carers	20
	Social Science for Social Work	20	Social Work in a Diverse Society	20
	Envisioning Social Work	20	Ethics Values and Justice	20

2	Human Agency and Social Contexts	20	Practice Learning I	60
	Social Work Processes and Practice I	20		
	Law and Legal Frameworks	20		

3	Risk and Protection	20	Research for Ethical and Effective Practice	20
	Globalisation and Social Work	20	Social Work in Diverse Settings	20
	Professional Roles in Organisational Contexts	20	Social Work Processes and Practice II	20

4	Practice Learning II	60	Development Planning	20
			Honours Dissertation	40



Year to year development

Year 1 curriculum is designed to give a broad introduction to the nature of social work practice in its wider context and to provide the key underpinning knowledge and skills for competent learning and social work practice.

Year 2 introduces more detailed and specific knowledge of aspects of social work, including methods and skills in intervention. Students are expected to demonstrate not only understanding but also a developing ability for critical evaluation; they should also be able to identify and comment on the dilemmas and conflicts that characterise social work practice. Students are expected to be able progressively to take greater responsibility for their own learning (e.g. in project work or in independent study for assessed work).

Years 3 and 4 expect students to demonstrate a more sophisticated understanding of policy and practice issues and to be able to reflect on their own practice with greater acuity. They are expected to be able to manage increasingly complex work in their practice learning, be able to use supervision constructively, and identify their own learning needs, putting into action, plans to meet these needs. They are expected to develop the capacity for a certain degree of independent study (e.g. in the Year 4 dissertation) using skills of information collection, analysis and synthesis. This increase in the depth and breadth of knowledge and understanding and in skills development will be reflected in the learning outcomes for each year.



Appendix 2

Scottish credit and Qualifications Framework

The Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework				
SCQF Levels	SQA National Units, Courses and Group Awards	Higher Education	SVQs	SCQF Levels
12		Doctorate*		12
11		Masters*	SVQ5	11
10		Honours Degree*		10
9		Ordinary Degree*	National Progression Awards SVQ4	9
8		Higher National Diploma		8
7	Advanced Higher	Higher National Certificate	SVQ3	7
6	Higher			6
5	Intermediate 2/Credit Standard Grade		SVQ2	5
4	Intermediate 1/General Standard Grade	National Progression Awards	National Certificates SVQ1	4
3	Access 3/Foundation Standard Grade			3
2	Access 2			2
1	Access 1			1

*Benchmark Qualifications of Higher Education Institutions



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Glossary of Terms

CQSW	Certificate of Qualification in Social Work
CSS	Certificate in Social Services
DipSW	Diploma in Social Work
Employers	Voluntary, statutory and private organisations that provide direct services within the social services sector
GSSW	Glasgow School of Social Work (a joint venture bringing Glasgow and Strathclyde Universities together in one school)
HEI	Higher Education Institution or University
IRISS	Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services (formerly known as SIESWE)
Link Workers	Practitioners in organisation who support and contribute to the assessment of social work students
PBL	Problem Based Learning
Practice Teachers	Professionals working within the social services sector who support and assess learning in practice of social works students (usually holding a post-qualifying award)
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
SCQF	Scottish Credit & Qualifications Framework
SIESWE	Scottish Institute for Excellence in Social Work education (now known as IRISS)
SiSWE	Standards in Social Work Education
Social Work Programme Stakeholders	Practice teachers, link workers, practitioners, service users, carers and students
SSSC	Scottish Social Services Council or Regulatory body of social services





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