



Handbook for External Examiners:

Guidance for the Degree in Social Work

Prepared by:

The Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for
Social Policy and Social Work (SWAP)

The Joint University Council Social Work Education Committee

The four UK Care Councils (the General Social Care Council, the Care Council for
Wales, the Northern Ireland Social Services Council and the Scottish Social Services
Council)

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1. Introduction

This handbook is a website resource about the role of external examiners on the social work degree programmes across the UK. It has been produced by the four UK Care Councils together with the Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Social Policy and Social Work (SWAP), and the Joint Universities Council Social Work Education Committee (JUC/SWEC), all of who are concerned to enhance the quality of external examining for social work. It does not replace formal documentation or guidance produced by higher education institutions (HEIs) as part of arrangements for external examining, or that set out by the four UK Care Councils as to annual monitoring arrangements. It builds on the contributions of experienced external examiners to degree programmes at events held to support them in their role.

We hope this handbook will be of use to external examiners (both those new to the role and those with experience) and to Heads of Department, Assessment Coordinators and Chairs of Examination Boards, as well as staff working in stakeholder and partner organisations.

HEIs approved to offer the social work (Hons) degree at undergraduate and post-graduate levels are required to appoint an external examiner. External examiners are directly recruited by the HEI, according to criteria specified by the HEI itself and the relevant Care Council (see [matrix of UK requirements](#)). They might be social work academics and/or practitioners.

At the time of writing there are some 300 external examiner appointments across UK degree programmes, comprising approximately 150 examiners. The standard of qualifying training for social workers has benefited from consistent high levels of expertise and experience of external examiners and it is important to secure this supply into the future.

The handbook will be updated regularly and we welcome suggestions as to how its contents can be improved. It will only be available electronically for this reason. Please send any comments to: swapteam@soton.ac.uk

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2. The role of the external examiner for social work

HEIs are responsible for all arrangements for external examiners in keeping with the precepts set out in the [Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education \(QAA\) Code of Practice](#) Section 4, for external examining, which describes their function as helping institutions to ensure that:

- the academic standing of each award and its component parts are set and maintained by the awarding institution at the appropriate level, and that the standards of student performance are properly judged against this
- the assessment process measures student achievement appropriately against intended outcomes of the programme, and is rigorous, fairly operated and in line with the institution's policies and regulations
- Institutions are able to compare the standards of their awards with those of other higher education institutions.

The Code states that HEIs should ask their external examiners, in their expert judgement, to report on:

- whether the academic standards set for its awards, or part thereof are appropriate
- the extent to which assessment processes are rigorous, ensure equity of treatment for students and have been fairly conducted within institutional regulations and guidance
- the standards of student performance in the programmes or parts of programmes which they have been appointed to examine
- where appropriate, the comparability of the standards and student achievements with those in some other higher education institutions
- good practice they have identified.

External examiners for social work programmes must ensure that the programme meets the appropriate learning outcomes as set out in the [QAA Benchmark Statement for Social Work \(2008\)](#), the current (2002) *National Occupational Standards for Social Work*, and the rules and requirements of the appropriate UK Care Council for the country/jurisdiction in which the HEI is located (set out in the [UK Social Work degree grid](#)).

Given that social work is a profession, with entry regulated through approved programmes for qualification and by registration, some areas of scrutiny may differ somewhat from traditional academic programmes. Practice learning accounts for up to 50% of student time on the degree and the quality of knowledge and skills achieved through placements significantly determines readiness of social work graduates to enter the profession. It is therefore essential that the External Examiner is able to evaluate and comment on the quality of provision and assessment of practice learning in the programme.

External examiners should give consideration to:

- all Year 1 or Level 4 assessments
- preparation for practice
- assessment of readiness for direct practice
- the provision of sufficient quantity of good quality practice learning opportunities
- assessment of practice learning
- assessment of fitness to practise

- assessment of suitability for social work.

Ultimately the external examiner is the safeguard of the standards for the quality of social workers entering the profession, so their reports should be robust and evidenced. Where the external examiner considers that an issue is impacting on the standard of learning and attainment of social work students, they have a responsibility to address this (see Section 12). Where attempts to address this with the HEI do not lead to improvement or where there are serious concerns that professional requirements are not being met the external examiner should contact representatives of the relevant Care Council.

All External Examiners should be familiar with the contents of the [Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education \(QAA\) Code of Practice](#) Section 4, on Assessment.

Beyond the formal role of safeguarding standards, external examiners may often be consulted to provide feedback, information, advice and constructive criticism about the overall programme of study, focussing particularly on how learning outcomes are framed and the requisite assessment procedures.

3. Appointing external examiners

Most HEIs have established procedures for appointing new external examiners. However programme leaders should be mindful of the requirements of the relevant Care Council – this may require at least one examiner to hold a recognized social work qualification (see the [UK social work degree grid](#)). In seeking new examiners programmes might wish to ensure that:

- a balance is kept between experienced examiners and those new to the role
- a practitioner perspective is present at the Exam Board
- there is 'succession' planning to ensure that the turnover of examiners is staggered, so as to retain some continuity.

External Examiners may be:

- current academics from another HEI
- recently retired academics
- current practitioners with experience of assessment
- recently retired practitioners with experience of assessment .

In March 2009, SWAP launched a revised and updated database of External Examiners. The aim of the database is to facilitate the process of recruiting external examiners, making access more open, and ensuring a supply of new examiners, including those from a practice base. The new database includes fields that allow current and prospective external examiners to clarify the areas they are willing to examine such as level (from foundation to PhD), programme (social policy/social work) and areas of interest and expertise. The password-protected list is available to download at www.swap.ac.uk/getinvolved/externalexaminers.html. Heads of Department, Heads of Programmes and Assessment Coordinators can request the password for access to the database by emailing swapenquiries@soton.ac.uk. Current and prospective external examiners may register at www.swap.ac.uk/getinvolved/externalexaminers.html.

4. Establishing a contract for external examining

Each HEI supplies its own contract, covering expectations and responsibilities. Prospective individual external examiners should scrutinise this carefully at the outset to ensure that it covers all the necessary aspects of engagement, taking into account the factors outlined below. It may also be helpful to speak to other people who have been or are currently an examiner on the programme. Some issues may need discussion and verbal agreement, rather than being inserted into a formal contract.

The fee arrangements will also be included at this stage. There is no national guidance on fee levels, but the fee should take into account the cohort size, number of modules/assignments and required attendance at meetings. Some HEI contracts may not have taken into consideration the differences in external examining for a professional course of study.

Key issues to note at the point of contracting are:

Practical issues:

- Access to information about the programme
- A named contact person
- Expected attendance at and schedule for exam boards
- Assessment systems, sampling range and size, marking procedures and guidance
- Modular or whole programme context for examining (some HEIs divide the external examiner role for different modules/year groups)
- External examiner oversight of all fails/borderlines or relevant sampling
- Timescales and notice periods for sampling and expected volume and scale of the activity
- External examiners role on examination boards (e.g. changing of marks)

Contractual issues:

- Summary of roles and duties (full range)
- Induction arrangements/expectations of HEI
- Links with other examiners for the course
- Professional standards & registration issues
- Coverage of Level 1 modules
- Notification of potential conflict of interest
- Premature termination of the contract by either party
- Report dates, template and social work requirements
- Data protection arrangements and confidentiality
- Expenses and fee claim arrangements

On starting you should be provided with:

- Previous external examiner reports
- Student programme handbook
- Institutional guidance on external examining, assessment & moderation (if available)
- Policies in relation to handling concerns and complaints
- Programme documents including approval, validation and annual quality returns and reviews

- Minutes of previous exam boards
- Documentation on fitness to practise and suitability/termination of training processes

During the early stages you should be provided with:

- Assignment details and marking criteria
- Cohort results
- Sample of work across the range with markers' feedback
- Evidence of internal moderation

Do take note of/ask questions concerning:

- Practice learning provision
- Partnership arrangements with local employers
- Date of internal QA and Care Council reviews
- Study support schemes
- Balance of assessment within and between modules
- Quality and consistency of feedback within and across modules, and the balance of formative and summative feedback
- Details of any university/programme regulations on compensation/condonement in marking
- Any statistical analysis provided (e.g. mean and standard deviation of module marks) to help pick out modules with unusual mark pattern.

You are free to ask for or about:

- Preparation and induction activities for new external examiners, including opportunities for shadowing an experienced examiner
- Information about modules other than those you are examining, particularly those focussed on practice learning (if not included)
- Terms of reference of panels, exam boards, practice assessment panels
- Professional issues (relationship with the respective Care Council) including papers and outcomes for annual monitoring and reviews
- Customs and practices of the programme and assessment templates
- Relationship between modular examining and progress across a programme
- Access to materials on the overall consistency of practice within the HEI
- Visits to the HEI outside the Examination Board meetings
- Clarity on meeting with student representatives
- Relationship to other external examiners across modules or disciplines

You may wish/be asked to be involved in or consulted on:

- Reviews of terminated placements/disciplinary hearings
- Changes in assessment strategy
- Approval of assessment tasks/examination questions
- Review of the programme (e.g. by HEI)
- Practice Assessment Panel meetings
- Fitness to practise procedures
- Entry into programmes through AP(E)L arrangements

You should not get involved in:

- Internal moderation
- Direct assessment issues that will impair your own objectivity

- Direct decision making on suitability and conduct issues
- Financial or role assignments that may present a conflict of interest

You should always:

- Be involved in decisions to make an award
- Be informed of decisions to terminate training

Having established the basis on which to work with an HEI, including appropriate lines of communication, external examiners will enhance their ability to work constructively with programmes by building relationships with the programme team. Effective, two-way communication is fundamental to this. The complexity of the role lies in the EE's ability to provide constructive, supportive advice, whilst at the same time safeguarding standards.

5. The external examiner report

Each external examiner produces a report to the HEI on an annual basis. This report is made available to the respective Care Council as part of the annual monitoring process. Each HEI has its own report template, usually designed to cover a range of subject areas. Whilst some templates actively acknowledge the different context for professional programmes, explicitly ask questions about professional standards and regulatory requirements and include sections for reporting on the assessment of practical or clinical placements, others may not. In these cases it may be helpful to negotiate a way in which such issues can be referred to explicitly in the report.

The QAA code of practice on external examining sets out (sections 10-14) the precepts for HEIs in the handling of external examiner reports, including:

'Full and serious consideration should be given by the institution to comments and recommendations contained within external examining reports, and the outcomes of the consideration, including actions taken, should be formally recorded' (Precept 13)

The precepts also make provision for an examiner to make a confidential report to the head of the institution, and for the examiner to receive a timely and considered response to recommendations including actions taken by the institution.

A report based on evidence

Producing the external examiner report is a process that starts with the contract for engagement, access to information on programmes and continued contact, planning and sampling, including visits and consultations. To write an informed report an examiner must be confident that they have accumulated sufficient evidence for measured judgement on standards achieved. External examiners select what to include or omit from the external examining report. It is however, vital that examiners raise any issues relevant to the quality of programme delivery, even where these appear to be resolved. This will help to assure the integrity of the external examiner role and the reporting process. Again, whilst some HEI EE report formats encourage reflective, qualitative analysis and comment, others do not, but EEs may wish to append comments. The cornerstone of an effective report will show:

- the types of contact, nature and frequency that informs the report. Typically this includes dates of meeting, telephone conferences, extent of and range of

sampling activity, advice and consultation, attendance at practice assessment panels and exam boards

- how academic and practice learning is integrated and assessed, including the effectiveness of the internal moderation systems
- full coverage of the identified professional areas to be commented on as outlined in the relevant care council guidance
- symmetry between the general content of the report and recommendations, with reference to actions taken by the HEI in response to previous reports.

Please note that the N.I.Social Care Council issues "Guidance on the Completion of External Examiner Reports" to External Examiners in NI with the agreement of the HEIs.

Finally it is worth noting that the EE report has multiple audiences (the course team, the HEI and the Care Council), which creates some tensions and challenges in how comments should be worded.

6. Care Councils annual monitoring and the external examiner report

For the social work degree HEIs must inform the Care Councils of action taken in response to the external examiner's report, usually as part of annual monitoring information. Each Care Council sets out the annual monitoring process, documentation and timescales. Key attention is given to the external examining report as it provides an independent overview of how course arrangements continue to meet approval requirements. Care Councils will also check continuity with previous recommendations and responses by the HEI.

External examiners need to be familiar with the annual monitoring guidance and requirements of the relevant Care Council. All four Councils are agreed that an effective external examiner report should cover:

- how the degree is being delivered in relation to approval specifications
- how the degree is meeting the knowledge, skills, values requirements and the integration of academic and practice standards
- the quality of practice learning, preparation for practice and assessment of practice to the levels required together with observations on the quality of practice assessors
- the involvement of people who use services and carers in compliance with the requirements for the degree and standards where they are in place and published by the Care Council
- the quality of assessment processes to ensure consistent, fair and safe results including compensatory marking and HE arrangements to enhance access to learning and assessment for people with a disability or stated learning need

- the quality of interprofessional learning opportunities where this is relevant to approval specifications and delivery mode for a course
- sufficiency of resources to deliver the degree including student to tutor ratios, supply of quality practice learning opportunities and any significant change in resources that might impinge on the standards of delivery in the future
- comparability of standards and student achievement to those in other HEIs
- commentary on innovative and improved delivery
- external examiner recommendations for future delivery.

In the annual monitoring process the following is likely to trigger Care Council interest in the way the programme is operating:

- Non receipt of an external examiner report to a programme
- Ambiguous, sketchy or unsubstantiated content in the external examiner report
- Significant areas of repeated content over time without reference to the evidence base
- Omission of professional practice standards
- Lack of, or insufficient response from the programme to the recommendations in the external examiner report
- Declarations from external examiner of problems associated with their role, in particular gaining access to the relevant information

Each Care Council publishes an annual overview report on quality assurance findings that shows innovations in teaching, learning and assessment, facts and figures, progression and general trends for social work approved courses. Care Councils update annual monitoring information from time to time, in keeping with better regulation and a focus on identified gaps or risks to the standard of delivery across social work programmes (e.g. in response to evaluations of the degree or government interest as to how well it prepares social workers to operate in the specialist fields). In this respect the quality and delivery of practice learning opportunities will always be of key importance to the Care Councils for external examiners to report on.

7. Assessment issues

External examiners have a key responsibility to confirm:

‘the extent to which the processes for assessment, examinations, and the determination of awards are sound and have been fairly conducted’ (QAA Code of Practice)

External examiners report to the head of the institution, giving impartial advice on performance and commentary on the standard of assessment to assure academic and practice competency for student social workers. A key area of interest for examiners is the integration of academic and practice requirements and how it is embedded in teaching, learning and assessment activity. This emphasis is supported through the degree regulatory framework that involves people who use services and

carers in key areas of delivery throughout the life of a programme from admissions to the awarding of the degree final decision.

External examiners must be familiar with the whole assessment framework and related guidance and requirements for the HEI. The *QAA Code of Practice on Assessment of Students* will also provide useful support.

Practical activities may include:

- Monitoring reliability and validity of the assessment process
- Sampling assessed assignments (high, low, borderline pass, fail)
- Scrutiny of procedures for mitigating circumstances

Questions that an external examiner might take into account overseeing assessment standards:

- Are the assessment methods appropriate to the learning outcomes?
- How secure and tested are the assessment methods used?
- Is an appropriate range of assessment methods used (i.e. testing skills, knowledge and values in different ways)?
- Are published marking criteria and grade descriptors available to students?
- How is the pass mark decided? What is the distribution of marks?
- Are assignments double-marked and if so how are these moderated?
- Are assignments marked without disclosing the student's name?
- How are borderline marks handled?
- Is any compensation marking policy clear to all?
- Is there consistency and fairness in how mitigating circumstances are considered and applied?
- Are the standards for each level of the degree applied consistently?
- Are any arrangements for the Assessment of Prior Experience and/or Learning (APEL) satisfactory?
- Is assessment timely and well paced through the course?
- What systems are in place for detecting and responding to plagiarism?
- Are results and feedback made available to students in a timely way?
- Is the student given written constructive feedback for each assignment?
- Is the feedback given of consistent quantity and quality?
- Is the system for re-submission fair and equally applied?
- If peer assessment is used how is this weighted?
- Do service users and carers contribute to assessment?
- How are appeals (and complaints) to the programme from students handled?
- Are the arrangements for assessment of practice related work or assessment in practice fair and equally applied?
- Are 'termination of training' procedures clearly made available to students and conducted fairly and rigorously, and decisions clearly recorded?

External examiners should also consider the evidence for students' growing ability through the course in:

- Literacy standards
- Critical analysis
- Ability to reflect on practice
- Integration of equality, diversity and ethical issues
- Integration of theory to practice

8. Practice learning

Whilst the assessment of practice learning should be fully integrated with other procedures for assessment, it is often subject to somewhat differing procedures in terms of assessment and examining, hence the separate section in this handbook. Furthermore assessing practice learning presents particular challenges, given the variable quality of practice learning opportunities, differing arrangements and level of experience of practice teachers, and the impact of students' circumstances.

Where the relevant Care Council requires assessment of readiness for direct practice prior to the first assessed practice learning opportunity, the external examiner should also be informed of how this requirement is operationalised, and engaged with decisions taken.

The variation in practice learning requirements across the Care Councils is shown below:

UK Country	Practice Learning	Specification
Wales (CCW)	200 (20)* days	At least 180 days of assessed practice learning/ two learning periods of 80 days or more, and 20 days in a practice setting (shadowing and joint work) prior to direct work with people who use services and carers... Levels specified. Minimum of 12 direct observations. Only the 20 days are subject to AP(E)L.
England (GSCC)	200 (0)	At least 200 days of assessed practice learning, no exemptions, plus a preparation to practice module HEI led and involving people who use services and carers.
Northern Ireland (NISCC)	240 (85 + 25)	240 days of practice learning with 25 days in preparation for direct work, 185 days in direct supervised practice and 30 days in individual practice development. Levels specified and some exemptions allowed.
Scotland (SSSC)	200 (60)	At least 200 days in practice learning, 160 in supervised direct practice, up to 60 days exemptions allowed.

* Brackets denote that Accreditation of Prior Experience and Learning - AP(E)L - is allowed.

Many programmes hold a Practice Assessment Panel (PAP) that is a sub-Board of the Examination Board, where the often-complex issues related to assessment of practice are discussed. Recommendations are made to the full Exam board. External examiners should:

- Be invited to the final meeting, or
- Be sent minutes of the final meeting of the PAP and

It is considered good practice for the Chair of the PAP to attend the full Exam Board. Whatever the procedure adopted in the HEI the external examiner should have access to student practice assessment documentation and see a sample of practice portfolios. This is so that they may look at the standard of portfolios, the standard of supervisor reports, evidence for direct observation of a student's practice, and the consistency of the evidence for marking. Insofar as is possible, given the information made available to them, external examiners should be able to comment on the adequacy of resources in this respect – i.e. the availability of practice learning

opportunities (PLOs) in sufficient quality and quantity that students can undertake PLOs in a timely way.

QAA advice to the Care Councils confirms that external scrutiny is required of all practice learning including first placements.

9. Inter-professional education and learning

Expectations about providing opportunities for interprofessional education (IPE) and learning differ somewhat across the UK. The requirements for English programmes state that students should undertake specific learning and assessment in 'partnership working and information sharing across professional disciplines and agencies.' Otherwise requirements for IPE stem from the *Benchmark Statement for Social Work* and Key Role 5 of the *National Occupational Standards* and the *Scottish Standards in Social Work Education*.

External examiners will need to recognize that opportunities for arranging IPE differ between HEIs. If the social work department is located in a faculty of health and social care, links with other students on these programmes may be more easily established; if in a faculty with education, links with trainee teachers may be more easily established.

The following questions might be considered by the external examiner with the team:

- How does the programme understand and implement inter-professional education?
- Is the IPE actually inter-professional learning (with specified learning outcomes), or shared learning in the same classroom?
- Is IPE located in a discrete module and/or integrated across the programme (e.g. through an assessment criterion for all modules).
- Has IPE been built into practice learning?
- How are the IPE modules planned, assessed and examined?

It may be important to ascertain which programme or department 'hosts' the module? If the module is hosted by another department, the role of the social work external examiner should be ascertained. For example the external examiner for social work might ask to:

- be consulted in planning and/or changes to assessment for such modules
- be informed about the marking procedures and protocols for such modules: including information on whether social work educators mark this work, or if it is marked 'interprofessionally' (if so are there joint marking/'standardisation' exercises?)
- have access to any assignments on request
- see a sample of the assessed work (including borderline)
- be able to compare social work progression with that of other cohorts.

There may be timing issues to take into account depending on when the 'host' department Exam Board is held. Similar questions will also apply to modules taken by social work students from other departments, such as sociology or psychology. When IPE modules are 'hosted' by the social work department, external examiners may be asked to comment on the work of other trainee professionals, and might wish

to consider the points listed above in relation to external examiners from other programmes.

10. Involvement of service users and carers

Across the UK there is an expectation from the Care Councils that people who use services and carers (SU & C) should be involved in selecting students, course design and delivery, monitoring and review and in assessment. This is relevant for external examiners to consider in the following areas:

- Where people who use services and carers have contributed as internal assessors, their participation will be part of the remit of external examiners in ensuring that internal moderation systems are robust. Also, that those taking on the task are properly informed and trained to undertake it and know about marking levels and procedures. The external examiner has a role in standardizing such procedures.
- The external examiner is required to ensure that the curriculum and standards set are appropriate for the award by reference to published national subject benchmarks, professional regulations, national qualifications frameworks and institutional programme specification. Usually the external examiner is asked to answer a question of this nature on the external examiner report form. Thus, were there no or limited service user participation, the programme would not be meeting the required professional standards.

Given their mandate and remuneration, external examiners are not in a position to conduct an investigation of the extent of user and carer involvement (if there was a concern this would be the remit of the relevant Care Council). However, the external examiner should be able to gauge the progress made and the direction of travel. The external examiner could reflect with the programme team on the 'context' of SU&C involvement; that is the varying opportunities in each HEI (some have well established faculty, department or school based networks for user involvement; others have none; some are able to link to well-established community-based user-led organisations, others operate in an area where such networks are not yet established). They could also discuss with staff, in formal and informal meetings, the following questions:

- How is the programme interpreting the degree requirement for involving people who use services and carers, in selection, delivery, assessment and curriculum design and review?
- What strategy/action plan is in evidence to strengthen arrangements and nature of involvement? Are there gaps to address?
- How is the programme interpreting requirements? Is there a lead co-ordinator? Where relevant, how is promotional funding used? What is the range of experience of services that people who use services and carers bring with them? How are they supported, briefed and trained where appropriate?
- Is there evidence of student learning from this engagement?

11. Disability

Legislation requires higher education providers to make “reasonable adjustments” to ensure that disabled students are able to study, and to demonstrate their competence through assessed work. The amendment to the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) (2005) also requires public bodies to promote disability equality. All HEIs should have in place a Disability Equality Scheme.

The following areas have been taken from the former National Disability Team as requiring specific attention from external examiners:

(i) *Strategy, policy and procedures*

- The employing Institution should ensure that all external examiners are aware of, and understand the policies, procedures and practices in place in the Institution relating to reasonable adjustments made to examinations and assessments for disabled students. For example, extra time, marking for content, transcribed oral assessments etc. The advice of the external examiner should be sought on acceptable reasonable adjustments to ensure the maintenance of academic standards.

(ii) *Confidentiality*

- The Institution should ensure that staff and external examiners involved in assessment, grading and moderation activities are aware of and utilise the Institution’s systems for sharing information about disabled students.
- External examiners should be familiar with how the Institution ensures fair practice in moderation and in external examining when a student has disclosed a disability.

(iii) *Examinations, assessment and moderation*

- The external examiner should be informed of any reasonable adjustments made for individual disabled students.
- The Institution should ensure parity and fairness of sampling by external examiners to include assessments for disabled students (e.g. flagging student work and mark sheets to indicate that disability has been taken into account).
- The Institution should inform or work with the external examiner to consider mitigating circumstances in relation to the specific issues presented by disabled students.
- The Institution should engage with external examiners in relation to issues of professional bodies and ‘fitness to practice’ that might impact on assessing the learning of disabled students.

12. Suitability for Social work

External examining to social work courses has always involved consideration of termination of study and issues of suitability. These are now particularly important in the context of registration, protection of title for social work, and the codes of practice. External examiners need to be aware of the mutual responsibilities of HEIs and Care Councils to ensure that only those suitable, fit to practise and competent should qualify. The examiner's role should focus primarily on ensuring that appropriate procedures are in place and that they are followed.

When a student is registered on the social care register they will have satisfied the criteria for physical and mental fitness (this criteria does not apply in Scotland), that they are of good character and that they have signed up to comply with the social care code of practice. The HEI will have processes for investigating suitability where a concern is raised and will exercise the protocol established with the relevant Care Council.

An external examiner may come across information in a variety of ways:

- Through sampling and seeing practice shortcomings that give rise to concern in terms of ethics and values, rights and safety of service users and carers
- Through their direct contact within the university, witnessing or being party to information that gives rise to concern
- Through recognising shortfalls in the way HEI systems have processed and/or concluded investigations into suitability
- Using the EE role to ensure that only students who are competent and who meet the standards of the course are awarded the degree in social work
- Through advice giving on professional standards

The UK wide social care codes of practice, set out what social workers and students preparing to be social workers must do at all times. This includes a list of statements that describe standards of professional conduct, under six key headings as follows:

1. *Protect the rights and promote the interests of service users and carers*
2. *Strive to establish and maintain the trust and confidence of people who use services and carers*
3. *Promote the independence of people who use services while protecting them as far as possible from danger or harm*
4. *Respect the rights of people who use services while seeking to ensure that their behaviour does not harm themselves or other people*
5. *Uphold public trust and confidence in social care services*
6. *Be accountable for the quality of your work and take responsibility for maintaining and improving your skills and knowledge*

The codes apply to conduct both within and outside the workplace/study environment, and whether behaviour is likely/or not to constitute a risk to people who use services and carers. It requires that social workers and those preparing to be social workers uphold public trust and confidence in social care services by not behaving in a manner that would call into question their suitability to work in social care services.

The Care Councils have not listed behaviours that automatically breach the codes as each incident is treated on a case-by-case basis and understood in its context.

External scrutiny and the role of examiners is a way of assuring that the learning, assessment and marking systems in place are robust, fair and consistent to enable safe decisions to be made as to competence at the entry point to the profession of social work. Learning from conduct cases (GSCC 'Raising Standards' 2008) shows that of the 1% of the registrant population who were subject to conduct referrals a significant number related to:

- Competence
- Professional boundaries and inappropriate relationships with people who use services
- Multiple and related transgressions
- Behaviours that eroded trust and confidence in social work

There are more details on HEI and Care Council procedures for handling suitability issues as well as low to high risk categories for different types of behaviour as indicative guidance contained in '[Suitability for Social Work](#)' (GSCC/JUC-SWEC 2007 England) and in '[Suitability for Social Work – Ensuring the Suitability of Social Work Students to Access and Continue their Training](#)' (to be published by the Care Council for Wales in 2008). The SSSC report on [Initial and Continued Suitability for Registration](#) (2008) also has useful information. It is recommended that you check the web-site of the appropriate Care Council for recent resources and guidance on this topic.

HEIs should make sure that each student is aware of the codes (reinforced through the student registration process), and the kinds of behaviours and interactions that are likely to breach them.

The HEI student handbook for the degree in social work may also set out what is expected from students in the course of their study to ensure honesty and integrity in the learning process. Most programmes provide guidance on what constitutes plagiarism together with first warnings and sanctions. The extent of plagiarism, with intent to deceive, raises questions as to integrity and honesty, and suitability to take on the entrusted role of a social worker.

Similar to termination of training issues the external examiner will make comment as to how effectively these issues are handled within the context of approval requirements and agreed systems within the programme.

The *Code of Practice for Employers* outlines their responsibilities to employees in social care. While students are not normally employed by the agencies providing PLOs, employers are still governed by these codes in relation to the provision of properly supported learning opportunities.

13. Raising concerns

Many social work degree programmes have provision of a high standard. However, from time to time external examiners may have concerns about the quality of provision. This may be about specific assessment issues, about resources or staffing, about the calibre of students entering the programme or about the quality and quantity of practice learning opportunities. Potentially the external examiner is affected by the fact that the host HEI (because of the contractual arrangement) is effectively their employer; also the external examiner may be mindful of the consequences of raising concerns for the social work provision in the HEI. However, where the external examiner considers that an issue is impacting on the standard of learning and attainment of social work students, s/he has a responsibility to address this.

External examiners should have the confidence to raise any concerns constructively. It may be useful if the EE is the first line of independent observation on a potential problem. Generally, it is much better for the EE to raise any issues that might be a concern at an early stage. If the issue is left to grow, it may turn into a much more serious problem for the institution and its staff. It can also be useful to reflect on how one might like any critical comments to be raised about one's own programme or performance ('do-as-you-would-be-done-by' principle) to be effective in enabling change to take place. The EE's interventions may also be welcomed, where they are advocates for additional resources for example.

One area that should definitely be raised as a concern is where the HEI procedures or practices mean that the EE is not able to undertake his/her role effectively (e.g. sending samples of work very late, or unclear moderation).

External examiners need to consider carefully the best way of raising concerns in the first instance, for example:

- taking informal soundings with staff and/or other Examiners (within the programme or elsewhere e.g. in external examiner training events)
- requesting a meeting with and/or sending a letter to the Assessment Convenor/Head of programme/Chair of the Exam Board
- asking for the issue to be raised as an item at an Exam Board (this should be minuted, thus enabling tracking of action taken at a later date).

The issue may in due course need to be referred to in the external examiner report, if appropriate listing the actions taken to address the concern. The proposed actions in response by the HEI can then be monitored by the appropriate Care Council and/or external examiners in future years. Ultimately the external examiner is one of the safeguards of the standards for the quality of social workers entering the profession, so their reports should be robust and evidenced if this is needed. Should they be concerned that this system is still not addressing a major issue, they are advised to contact representatives of the relevant Care Council.

14. Further resources

Quality Assurance Agency for Higher education (www.qaa.ac.uk)

- [Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education](#)
 - Section 4: External Examining
 - Section 6: Assessment of Students
 - Section 3: Students with Disabilities
- [Benchmark Statement for Social Work Education](#) (revised 2008)

Higher Education Academy (www.heacademy.ac.uk)

- [Supporting external examiners.](#)

Subject Centre for Social Policy and Social Work (SWAP) (www.swap.ac.uk)

- [Information for External Examiners and database register](#)
- [Resources on Assessment](#)
- [Resources on Inclusion and Disability](#)
- [Resources on Inter-professional education](#)
- [Resources on plagiarism](#)
- [Grid showing requirements for the social work degree across the four UK Care Councils](#)

General Social Care Council (England) (www.gsc.org.uk)

- [Suitability for Social Work \(GSCC and JUC/SWEC 2007\)](#)
- [Social Care Code of Practice](#)
- [Raising Standards, Social Work conduct in England 2003-08](#)
- [Social Work Education in England: delivering quality, recognising success](#)

Northern Ireland Social Care Council (www.niscc.info/)

Scottish Social Services Council (www.sssc.uk.com)

Care Council for Wales (www.ccwales.org.uk)

- [Raising Standards - The Qualification Framework for the Degree in Social Work](#)
- [Standards for Practice Learning](#)
- [Standards for Involving Service Users and Carers in the degree in Social Work in Wales](#)
- Guidance for Black and Ethnic Minority Students: available from CCW
- Suitability for social work: Ensuring the suitability of social work students to access and continue their training (will be available in 2009 from CCWales)

JISC TechDis (www.techdis.ac.uk) : An educational advisory service for disabled students and staff in HE

Open University [Making your teaching inclusive](#): alternative assessment strategies

[Accessible Assessments – Staff Guide to Inclusive Practice](#) Sheffield Hallam University

[Resource Guide 2: Involving service users and carers in social work education](#) (2004) Enid Levin. SCIE

[Involvement of Service Users and Carers: practice audit](#) (2004) Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services (IRISS) *formerly SIESWE*

[Service user and carer participation in social work education in a Northern Ireland context](#) (2006) Joe Duffy (University of Ulster)

[Learning from experience: involving service users and carers in mental health education](#) (2004) Tew, J., Gell, C. and Foster, S. (Higher Education Academy, NIMHE & Trent Workforce Development Confederation)