

## ECDL Online Survey Report

### Introduction

A short online survey on social work programmes' experience of using ECDL and integrating ICT skills into the curriculum was available via the SWAP website between December 2006 and January 2007. The data from the survey was intended to support work being undertaken by the GSCC looking at the place of ECDL requirements in the social work degree curriculum in England.

Of the 17 respondents, six identified themselves as working in England, one in Scotland, two in Wales and eight as working in more than one country. Of the 13 respondents who gave personal details two were students, seven worked for the Open University, two with other academic institutions and two were from local authorities.

### Results

Respondents were asked three questions. Answers to each of these questions have been collated and are summarised below.

#### ***What added value or benefits do you think the ECDL requirements or computer skills bring to the professional profile of social workers?***

There was general agreement that computer literacy is an essential skill for social workers, for a range of reasons including:

- for effective communication
- helps to handle systems well, ease data collection and availability skills
- essential in effective time management and information sharing
- for making case recording easier
- equipping students to work more effectively with a range of media, and so be more responsive to the varied needs of service users
- enhancing social workers' capabilities to meet organisational needs
- helps workers to access latest research and evidence based practice
- presenting more professional reports etc. to other agencies
- helping with organisational skills
- word processing knowledge and file management
- to help change the public image of social work and make it part of the real world to develop a more computer literate workforce
- should enable social workers to become more involved in meaningful debate and dialogue on service developments

However, one person felt that as *Care First* is used in many agencies ECDL was not helpful for learning to use this package and is also very time consuming. Three other people, whilst recognising the importance of computer skills, questioned whether

ECDL is necessary or appropriate. One person felt that ICT skills training gave no added value as *most young people are IT literate*.

***What problems, issues or concerns do you have about the requirement to meet the ECDL or its equivalent? (England only)***

This question elicited strong views from most respondents as the following quote from a student exemplifies.

*ECDL is too much! I don't need to know about the internals of a computer! As long as I know how to use the programs, that should be enough! It's so time consuming, and we have so much to do! I think a specialised computer course should be developed and used.*

One person recognised the need to find appropriate motivation to engage students in ECDL and felt that some might seek to avoid the teaching sessions associated with it.

Another respondent felt that the amount of time students are required to spend on ICT skills seemed disproportionate, especially in the first year of their studies. However, linked to the first point about motivation this person also recognised that the sense of achievement amongst students with very little ICT skills at the start was high, although they often required a lot of support to achieve the requirements.

Several people felt a different measure of competence rather than ECDL should be used, which has more relevance to the nature of the work and organisational contexts. A compromise would be to require students to do some rather than all of the different module requirements.

Inequitable access to equipment was also a concern for enabling all students to achieve the requirements and support generally was an issue to enable students to meet the requirements successfully.

One person drew upon their own student survey to identify some of the problems. These included:

- Finance, with students having to pay on average £230 for this extra qualification, which they all agree should be financed by the GSCC.
- Time, with students having to study the course outside of the social work department. So not only do they have to invest extra study time they also have to locate a convenient provider to take the course.

Again this respondent felt that the GSCC should stipulate that ECDL should be delivered as a core module.

The implications of this approach were brought into sharp focus by the experience of one respondent who was involved in an exam board at which students who had passed the other parts of their course did not qualify because they did not have all of their ECDL requirements. This concern was raised by three other respondents and one student said they had not been able to access a course.

This reinforces other points made that some ECDL requirements are too difficult, exacerbated by the lack of fit to social work contexts, and that there are question marks with regard to the quality of provision of some providers. The following quote provided a useful summary of the concerns expressed.

*In the present climate where there is a shortage of qualified social workers and because ECDL does not completely fit with the duties and responsibilities of a social worker, I would advise a re-thinking of aspects of the ECDL requirement providers.*

As another respondent said, it also appears that there is a *need to ensure that ECDL requirement is not off-putting to potential students - has to be 'sold' as an integrated part of the degree rather than stand alone.*

***What do you think are the implications for practice learning settings of the increased emphasis on computer skills and information literacy?***

The dominant issue to emerge in response to this question was the need for students to have timely access to adequate facilities, with the current situation presenting inequities. Although specific issues related to organisational size and part-time/full-time routes were cited, the issue of differential access seems to be widespread. Students experience varied access to resources in terms of physical equipment, software, time and expectations, for example with regard to home working and internet research. Comments were made that this situation will become untenable as the time will come when students and HEIs will be demanding that practice learning settings provide access to computers and this means practice assessors will need to be skilled and trained in ICT as well. One person felt there is *a need to set nationwide and nation-specific PC specifications and requirements for social work practice.*

One respondent made an interesting observation with regard to the importance of students being equipped to appraise the usefulness of information systems and implications for service users e.g. information sharing etc. Another respondent made a similar point, arguing that whilst the ICT element should not detract from their focus on practice interventions and outcomes *it is important that students can understand the advantages and the disadvantages of ICT usage so that they can utilise ICT in a critical manner.* Developments in e-learning and blended learning provision needs to be allied with progress in provision in practice learning settings. This will lead to, as one person said, to *short term pain - for long term gain.*

## **Conclusion**

Overall it appears that there are significant concerns with the implementation of the GSCC's decision to include ECDL requirements as part of the social work degree.

Concerns centre on:

- Lack of relevance of aspects of the ECDL requirements to social work activity
- Time required of students to complete the ECDL
- Implications of students not achieving the requirements and not being able to graduate
- Unfairness and inequity of students having to undertake and pay for an ECDL course outside the social work course
- Further disparity in experiences of students on Practice Learning Opportunities (PLOs) being able to work on ECDL skills and requirements due to differences in resource provision and expectations of PLO providers

The survey, although limited, suggests that the GSCC should reconsider the requirement for social work students to meet all the ECDL requirements and to focus

on skills and knowledge of most relevance to social work activity. The GSCC may wish to consider the route taken by the health professions. The new ECDL Health Unit, launched in March 2007, is the result of seven years collaborative work between the BCS and NHS Connecting for Health to develop a computer skills syllabus specifically for users of healthcare information systems<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bcs.org/server.php?show=ConWebDoc.10638>