
Education and Training Committee, 9 June 2011

Consultation on the threshold level of qualification for social workers in England

Executive summary and recommendations

Introduction

Last year, The Department of Health published 'Liberating the NHS: Report of the arm's-length bodies review'. That report said:

'[...] we intend to abolish the General Social Care Council and move the regulation of social workers out of the arm's-length bodies sector to make it financially independent of government. We believe that in future, the most appropriate model for the ongoing regulation of the social care workforce is to transfer responsibility for these functions to the Health Professions Council, a well established and efficient regulatory body currently regulating over 200,000 registrants from fifteen professions. (DH, 2010, p22)

Every time we open a new part of the HPC Register, we need to consult on amending our standards of education and training to set the threshold level of qualification for that profession. This takes place alongside a consultation on the draft standards of proficiency for the profession.

The existing professional qualifying training in social work in England is delivered at bachelor degree with honours or above. Currently there are 177 programmes delivered at undergraduate level and 124 at post-graduate level.¹

We are proposing to amend the standards of education and training to set the level for social workers in England as a bachelor degree with honours.

Decision

The Committee is invited to:

- discuss the attached consultation paper; and
- recommend to Council the text of the attached consultation paper (subject to minor editing amendments).

¹ These figures include all the exit pathways which lead to eligibility to apply for registration with the GSCC. The figures taken from the GSCC website and are based on existing provision so may change before the Register transfers.

Background information

Department of Health 'Liberating the NHS: Report of the arm's-length bodies review':

http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_117691

Resource implications

The resource implications include writing up the outcomes of the consultation and revising the standards of education and training.

Financial implications

The costs of producing and mailing the consultation document and type-setting the new standards of education and training are funded by a grant from the Department of Health.

Appendices

None

Date of paper

27 May 2011

Consultation on the threshold level of qualification for entry to the Register for social workers in England

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 We are the Health Professions Council, (the HPC). This paper presents for consultation our proposals in relation to setting a threshold level of qualification for entry to the Register as a social worker in England.
- 1.2 Every time we open a new part of the HPC Register, we need to consult on amending our standards of education and training to set the threshold level of qualification for that group. The existing professional qualifying training in social work in England is a bachelor degree with honours or above. We are proposing to amend the standards of education and training to set the level for social workers in England as a bachelor degree with honours.¹

About this consultation

- 1.3 In this consultation document we propose a threshold level of qualification for entry to the Register. This is the level necessary to deliver the standards of proficiency that we are setting for social workers. We are consulting separately on the standards of proficiency.
- 1.4 The Government has announced that the regulation of social workers in England will transfer from the General Social Care Council to us. Our proposals only relate to social workers in England. Social workers in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland will continue to be regulated by the relevant Care Council and are not directly affected by these proposals.
- 1.5 This consultation will run from **date** to **date**.
- 1.6 The consultation document has been sent to stakeholders with an interest in our work, including professional bodies, education providers and other groups.
- 1.7 You can download copies of this consultation document from our website.²
- 1.8 You can find out how to respond to this consultation in paragraphs 1.13 – 1.19.

About the Health Professions Council

- 1.9 We are a regulator and were set up to protect the public. To do this, we keep a register of professionals who meet our standards for their professional skills and behaviour. Individuals on our register are called 'registrants'.

¹ Bachelor degree with honours level is equivalent to level 6 on the Qualifications and Credit Framework and level 10 on the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework.

² <http://www.hpc-uk.org/aboutus/consultations/>

1.10 We currently regulate 15 professions:

- Arts therapists
- Biomedical scientists
- Chiropodists / podiatrists
- Clinical scientists
- Dietitians
- Hearing aid dispensers
- Occupational therapists
- Operating department practitioners
- Orthoptists
- Paramedics
- Physiotherapists
- Practitioner psychologists
- Prosthetists / orthotists
- Radiographers
- Speech and language therapists

About this document

1.10 This document is divided into four sections which are summarised below:

- Section one provides information about the consultation and explains how you can respond.
- Section two provides background about why we are consulting.
- Section three gives further information about the threshold level of qualification and approval of education programmes.
- Section four outlines the proposal we are seeking your views on.

Consultation questions

1.11 We would welcome your response to our consultation and have listed some questions to help you. The questions are not designed to be exhaustive and we would welcome your comments on any related issue. Please provide reasons alongside your answers where possible.

1.12 The questions are incorporated alongside our proposals in section four of this document. However, they are also listed below.

1. Do you agree that the threshold level of qualification for social workers in England should be set at bachelor degree with honours?
2. Is this level necessary to deliver safe and effective practice in social work?
3. Do you have any other comments about our proposals?

How to respond to the consultation

1.13 The consultation closes on **date**.

1.14 We have prepared a consultation response form which you are invited to use to submit your response. You can find the consultation response form and further copies of the consultation document on our website.³

1.15 Please send your response to:

Consultation on the threshold level of qualification for social workers in England
Policy and Standards Department
Health Professions Council
Park House
184 Kennington Park Road
London
SE11 4BU

1.16 You may also email responses to consultation@hpc-uk.org or send a fax to +44 (0)20 7820 9684.

1.17 Please note that we do not normally accept responses by telephone or in person. We normally ask that consultation responses are made in writing to ensure that we can accurately record what the respondent would like to say. However, if you are unable to respond in writing please contact us on +44 (0)20 7840 9815 to discuss any reasonable adjustments which would help you to respond.

Please contact us to request a copy of this document in an alternative format, or in Welsh.

1.18 Once the consultation period is completed, we will analyse the responses we have received. We will then publish a document which details the comments received and explains the decisions we have taken as a result. This will be available on our website.

1.19 If you would prefer your response not to be made public, please indicate this when you respond.

1.20 We look forward to receiving your comments.

³ There is more information about consultations on our website here: <http://www.hpc-uk.org/aboutus/consultations/>

2. Background

Regulation of social workers in England

- 2.1 Last year The Department of Health published 'Liberating the NHS: Report of the arm's-length bodies review'. That report said that the regulation of social workers in England would move from the General Social Care Council to the Health Professions Council.⁴
- 2.2 We are therefore working to bring about the transfer of regulatory functions from the GSCC to ourselves. A key part of this work is to set the standards which social workers in England must meet once they are registered with us.
- 2.3 We anticipate that our Register for social workers in England will open in July 2012. The necessary legislation to allow this to happen has not yet been passed so the exact date of transfer may change. However, we believed that it was important to start the work at an early stage so that we could ensure that the standards were subject to wide consultation and were published prior to the opening of the Register.

The Social Work Reform Board

- 2.4 The Social Work Reform Board (SWRB) was set up to take forward the recommendations of the Social Work Task Force for the reform of social work.⁵
- 2.5 The areas that the SWRB is working on in relation to education are:
 - improving the calibre of entrants to the social work degree;
 - reviewing the content and delivery of the curriculum;
 - establishing arrangements for providing high quality placements; and
 - putting in place more transparent and effective regulation of social work education and training.
- 2.6 These areas of work do not directly impact on our proposals within the consultation. However, we believe that the standards that we set and our education programme approval processes will help to support the delivery of the reform agenda in this area.

⁴ Liberating the NHS: Report of the arm's-length bodies review, page 22

http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_117691

⁵ The Social Work Reform Board <http://www.education.gov.uk/swrb>

3. About the threshold level of qualification

- 3.1 The Health Professions Order 2001 does not give us a power to set the qualifications required for entry, but enables us to approve qualifications which meet the standards we have set for entry to the Register.
- 3.2 Our obligation is to set threshold standards of entry to the Register, the standards of proficiency, which a newly qualified applicant needs to meet in order to be able to practise safely and effectively. We may then approve a qualification which delivers those standards, but cannot insist that only a specified form of academic award will do so.
- 3.3 We are consulting on draft standards of proficiency alongside this consultation. The consultation document is available on our website.⁶

The standards of education and training

- 3.4 The standards of education and training are standards which apply to education programmes which lead to eligibility for registration.⁷ We visit education providers to approve pre-registration education programmes against these standards.
- 3.5 The standards of education and training cover such areas as admissions, assessment standards and practice placements. A programme which meets these standards will also allow a student who successfully completed that programme to meet the standards of proficiency.

About the approval of education and training programmes

- 3.6 We only approve programmes that lead directly to an individual's eligibility to register and gain access to the relevant protected title(s) for their profession.
- 3.7 We ensure professional input in our key processes through the use of partners. We use one type of 'partner' called 'visitors' to approve education programmes. Visitors are members of the regulated professions or lay people with appropriate academic or practice experience who visit education and training providers on our behalf. Usually at least one visitor at an approval visit will be from the same profession with which the programme is concerned.
- 3.8 If a programme is approved (having met any conditions if applicable), it is granted open ended approval subject to on-going checks that the programme continues to meet the requisite standards via the annual monitoring and major change processes.
- 3.9 We do not undertake cyclical re-visits of programmes (i.e. every five years). However, if information from the annual monitoring or major change

⁶<http://www.hpc-uk.org/aboutus/consultations/>

⁷ You can find copies of these standards on our website here: <http://www.hpc-uk.org/aboutregistration/standards/sets/>

processes indicates that further investigation is necessary to decide whether the standards continue to be met, we may re-visit a programme.

- 3.10 This is designed to strike a balance between fulfilling our duty to ensure that programmes continue to meet our standards, and reducing the anticipated regulatory burden on education and training providers. Once a programme is approved, someone who successfully completes that programme is eligible to apply for registration.

Opening of the Register

- 3.11 We anticipate, subject to parliamentary approval of the necessary legislation, that our Register for social workers in England will open in July 2012.
- 3.12 We will approve all those education and training programmes, historic and current, that led or lead to registration with the GSCC. Once we have opened the Register, we will then visit programmes to check that they meet the standards of education and training.

About SET 1: Threshold level of qualification for entry to the Register

- 3.13 Standard 1 of the standards of education and training ('SET 1') sets out the threshold level of qualification for entry to the Register.
- 3.14 SET 1 provides the threshold levels of qualification 'normally' expected to meet the remainder of the standards of education and training and thus the standards of proficiency. We include the word 'normally' within the standard to ensure that we can retain flexibility in our decision making. It would be unlawful of us to refuse to approve a programme which delivered the standards of proficiency and the remainder of the standards of education and training solely on the basis that it did not lead to the award of a qualification specified in SET 1.
- 3.15 We have to set the threshold level at the level necessary for people to successfully complete a pre-registration education programme to meet all the standards of proficiency.
- 3.16 In setting the threshold level of qualification for entry, we are setting the threshold level of qualification which we would normally accept for the purposes of an approved programme which leads to registration. As the threshold is the 'minimum', programmes above the threshold level may be approved. When the Register opens, we will approve both degree level and masters level programmes approved by the GSCC as leading to registration with them.
- 3.17 The threshold academic level of qualification for entry to the Register applies to pre-registration education and training programmes seeking approval rather than to individuals. Therefore, it would not affect individuals who might have followed education programmes delivered at levels below the threshold in the past, if those education programmes were approved by

the relevant body such as the GSCC. This means that we would be able to register social workers who had completed the social work diploma if they applied to us for registration.

3.18 The standard currently reads:

1.1 The Council normally expects that the threshold entry routes to the Register will be the following:

Bachelor degree with honours for:

- biomedical scientists (with the Certificate of Competence awarded by the Institute of Biomedical Science, or equivalent);
- chiropodists / podiatrists;
- dietitians;
- occupational therapists;
- orthoptists;
- physiotherapists;
- prosthetists / orthotists;
- radiographers; and
- speech and language therapists

Masters degree for arts therapists.

Masters degree for clinical scientists (with the Certificate of Attainment awarded by the Association of Clinical Scientists, or equivalent).

Diploma of Higher Education for operating department practitioners.

Equivalent to Certificate of Higher Education for paramedics.

Professional doctorate for clinical psychologists.

Professional doctorate for counselling psychologists, or equivalent.

Professional doctorate for educational psychologists, or equivalent.

Masters degree for forensic psychologists (with the award of the British Psychological Society qualification in forensic psychology, or equivalent).

Masters degree for health psychologists (with the award of the British Psychological Society qualification in health psychology, or equivalent).

Masters degree for occupational psychologists (with the award of the British Psychological Society qualification in occupational psychology, or equivalent).

Masters degree for sport and exercise psychologists (with the award of the British Psychological Society qualification in sport and exercise psychology, or equivalent).

Foundation degree for hearing aid dispensers.

4. Our proposal

- 4.1 Since 2003, the professional qualifying training in social work in England has been provided at bachelor degree with honours level or above.⁸ Most courses are delivered at this level, although a number are delivered at Masters level.
- 4.2 In making a recommendation about a threshold level of qualification we can have regard to the existing level of qualification delivered. However, our primary consideration must be that the level of qualification must be that necessary to achieve the standards of proficiency and the level cannot be aspirational.
- 4.3 We believe that the threshold level of qualification for entry to the Register for social work in England should be a bachelor degree with honours
- 4.4 We would welcome your response to our proposal and have listed some questions to help you. The questions are not designed to be exhaustive and we would welcome your comments on any related issue. Please provide reasons alongside your answers where possible.
1. Do you agree that the threshold level of qualification for social workers in England should be set at bachelor degree with honours?
 2. Is this level necessary to deliver safe and effective practice in social work?
 3. Do you have any other comments about our proposals?

⁸ <http://www.gsc.org.uk/page/118/Social+work+degree.html>