

EMPLOYER HANDBOOK

(NORTHERN IRELAND)

**How to implement the Open University
BA (Hons) Social Work programme in your organisation**



**The Open
University**

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INTRODUCTION

This booklet aims to give you guidance on implementing the BA (Hons) Northern Ireland Social Work degree programme in your organisation.

A

STUDY PATTERNS

BA (Hons)

To complete the degree in the minimum of three years, **it is recommended that students commence in October** and follow the set study pattern opposite.

Practice learning modules start in January or February. Other modules at Stages 2 and 3 start in October. K102 has two start dates, February and October. Students studying part time (i.e. 60 credits per year) can choose either start date.

MODULE
YEAR 1
<i>An introduction to health and social care (K102)</i> Start month October or February
<i>Foundations for social work practice (K113)</i> Start month February
YEAR 2
<i>Social work law (K271)</i> Start month October
<i>Applied social work practice (K216)</i> Start month January
YEAR 3
<i>Optional module (K313, K314, K323 or KE322)</i> Start month October
<i>Critical social work practice (K315)</i> Start month January

B

MAIN ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Our programmes are work-based and offered in collaboration with Sponsors. A 'Sponsor' is a Social Work/ Social Care organisation putting forward an employee/ volunteer to participate in the programme and undertaking the arrangement and supervision of their practice learning (placement); this term is used whether or not the organisation is also paying the student tuition fees.

The respective roles and responsibilities of the OU and sponsors are as follows:

THE OPEN UNIVERSITY

It will be the responsibility of The Open University to:

- ensure that all social work students are appropriately selected for training
- provide study materials for students, and support materials for tutors (Associate Lecturers), practice teachers and workplace/onsite supervisors
- provide module tutors to teach, support and assess students through tutorials, assignments and personal contact
- provide a Programme tutor to monitor students' progress, to monitor practice learning arrangements and liaise with agencies
- provide a staff tutor who will recommend tutors for appointment, and oversee their work
- organise and administer all the assessment and award procedures.

SPONSORS

It will be the responsibility of sponsors to:

- work with the OU to select members of staff suitable for training through work-based and supported distance learning
- organise an Enhanced Disclosure Access NI check, with checks against all registers including both children and vulnerable adults. This will take place prior to course start date.
- support students by giving full-time release for the duration of the practice learning placements and release to attend practice learning workshops
- provide a designated practice learning site and be willing to provide appropriate placements, in accordance with the requirements of the NI Social Work degree
- identify a member of staff to make the practice learning arrangements and liaise with the programme. This would be known as the **Agency co-ordinator**.
- appoint a practice verifier/ manager (to verify 10 days of work experience in K113)
- appoint practice teacher (and an onsite supervisor if required) for each of the two practice placements.

C

SELECTION AND PREPARATION OF CANDIDATES

The following notes are intended to clarify the selection and admissions processes required **prior to** candidates' registration on their chosen Social Work degree programme.

ENTRY REQUIREMENTS

- BA (Hons) candidates must meet the UCAS threshold of 96 tariff points. More information can be found at [ucas.com](https://www.ucas.com) and you can access the UCAS calculator at <https://www.ucas.com/ucas/tariff-calculator>. If their qualifications do not meet the UCAS threshold, then we will accept the successful completion of the module K101 or K102 as evidence of their academic ability
- complete an application pack consisting of:
 - Application form
 - Medical Fitness to Practice form
 - Declaration of Suitability for Social Work form
 - Equal Opportunities form/ Hesa form
- have GCSE grade 9–4/A*–C/ Functional/Key Skills Level 2 in English and mathematics, or a certified equivalent
- demonstrate IT competence through self-declaration
- achieve an International English Language Testing Systems (IELTS) score of 7 if English is not their first language
- have an Enhanced Disclosure Access NI Check (which checks against all registers)
- complete a health check. If, in exceptional circumstances, there are serious doubts about a candidate's fitness to practice on health grounds, the University's doctor may ask him/her to undergo a medical examination. This examination will be at the candidate's own expense

Other qualifications may be acceptable. If candidates have relevant UK academic qualifications which fall outside this list it is essential to provide evidence of a certified equivalent numeracy component.



If you need further advice, please contact the Northern Ireland Social Work Team on **02890 245025** or **Ireland-Social-Work@open.ac.uk**

THE SELECTION PROCESS

Sponsors can decide whether to:

- carry out their own assessment of candidates. (Most large organisations are likely to have tried and tested procedures and will carry out their own assessment.) If organisations wish to carry out their own selection of candidates, OU selection resources would need to be used and a member of the OU Social Work staff would sit on the interview panel.

OR

- request that their candidates attend an Open University Assessment Day. (This is likely to be the preferred option for small agencies that are sponsoring staff on a one-off basis and do not have well-developed assessment procedures.)

SELECTION BY THE OU

If you wish your candidates to attend an Open University Selection Day, please contact the Northern Ireland Social Work team to request an Expression of Interest form. Existing Sponsors will be sent a new booking form usually in Mar/April each year. Please return by the deadline on the form. If your organisation is assessed as a suitable sponsor and meets the standards for a Practice Learning site we will send you an application pack. All candidates must bring their original educational certificates and an Enhanced Disclosure Access NI check with them to their Selection Day for verification.

Selection Days will be held in Northern Ireland. The selection panel will include representatives from the OU and a service user, where possible.

THE APPLICATION PACK

Application form

All applicants must complete an Application form which requires completing a personal statement, providing contact details for two referees and an employer's endorsement. The purpose of the personal statement is to assess applicants' ability to write clearly in English, as well as their values and qualities as potential social workers. Applicants should be advised to address such questions as: Why do you want to undertake a professional qualification in social work? What experience do you have that is relevant to the social work qualification? What do you hope to achieve as a social worker in the future?



Declaration of Suitability form

It is important that social work programme providers ensure that those who embark upon professional training are suitable to do so. All applicants must complete a Declaration of Suitability form to help us make a well-informed judgement about their ability to enter social work training.

SATISFACTORY HEALTH (FITNESS TO PRACTICE) CHECK

A copy of the statement regarding a health check must be completed. The options are:

Medical check by employer

Health & Social Care Trusts and large organisations which have an Occupational Health Department may have carried out a check on the candidate and will be aware of any recent medical issues affecting the member of staff's employment. If you have an Occupational Health Team within your organisation, we strongly recommend that you ask them to sign Part A of the Medical Fitness to Practice form confirming that the candidate is, as far as they know, free from any serious communicable disease and has no physical or mental health issues likely to compromise their training and work with clients.

Although you can use the private occupational health service, as explained below, you should be aware that any concerns about a candidate's fitness to practice will need to be referred to your own Occupational Health Department or to the candidate's GP (and there is likely to be a substantial charge for a GP's report).

It is important to draw the University's attention to any significant medical issues which have been identified.

Private medical check

If you are a small company which is unable to undertake its own medical checks, we can provide a medical questionnaire for checking by a private company in Milton Keynes, MK Occupational Health. There will be a charge of £25 per student. Should the questionnaire indicate that further investigation is required, any additional costs (for example, the cost of obtaining a GP's report) must be borne by the candidate.

AN ENHANCED DISCLOSURE NI CHECK WITH LISTS

It is the sponsors responsibility to organise for their candidates to have an up to date Access NI Enhanced Disclosure check prior to interview.

It is essential that you request a full disclosure so that checks are made on **all** registers (including adults and children) since students will be working with different client groups whilst undertaking their practice learning. The Enhanced Disclosure Access NI check will be carried out by the sponsoring agency. The candidates are required to bring evidence of this to their interview.

If the Enhanced Disclosure Access NI check is incomplete or out of date, you must request a new check and, in the meantime, sign the Declaration of Suitability for Social Work. It is essential that sufficient time is allowed for this process which can take up to three months. Until there is evidence of a satisfactory Enhanced Disclosure Access NI check, registration on the programme will be conditional. The candidate will not be able to commence the programme until this is provided. **A further Access NI check will need to be carried out by the sponsor when the student goes out on placement to an external organisation.**

When the disclosure is unsatisfactory

If any offences are revealed, a risk assessment will be undertaken. The candidate should provide full details and a reflective statement on their Declaration of Suitability form. The candidate and their employer may be asked for additional information. A decision about the applicant's suitability for training will be taken and the employer will be informed whether the student can proceed to registration.

OPEN UNIVERSITY REGISTRATION DOCUMENTS

If you are paying the student's fees, registration documents will be sent to you separately by the Corporate and Partnerships Team after you have made your provisional booking. The individual registration form (signed by the student) should be enclosed with the checklist. You need to send just one sponsorship form to cover your whole group.

Please ensure that both the Individual registration form and sponsorship form are returned to the Northern Ireland Social Work Team at Ireland-Social-Work@open.ac.uk.



If you need further advice, please contact the Northern Ireland Social Work Team on **02890 245025** or Ireland-Social-Work@open.ac.uk



ENTRY WITH CREDIT FROM PREVIOUS STUDY

EXISTING OU CREDIT

For those who have already completed undergraduate modules currently included in the programme, it may be possible to count them towards the Social Work degree (subject to rules about the age of prior study).

Please contact the Northern Ireland Social Work Team to discuss this further.

Note that if students have already counted a Level 3 module towards another OU Honours degree, they will not be able to count it towards their Social Work degree as well. If students have already counted K313, K323, KE322 or K314 towards an OU qualification, they would be well advised to double-check their situation by contacting the Northern Ireland Social Work Team.

CREDIT TRANSFER

If students already hold a qualification at higher education level, which substantially covers the social sciences (for example, a degree in sociology or social policy, a HND in a relevant subject or a nursing qualification), they may be able to gain exemption from the first module in the programme, *An introduction to health and social care* (K102). Only previous study which is approximately five years old or less will be considered.

If a student holds a relevant qualification over 5 years old or would like us to consider using an OU module which exceeds the time rule towards the degree, they should contact the **Northern Ireland Social Work Team**.

Application forms can be downloaded from the website **open.ac.uk/credit-transfer** (or you can contact the Credit Transfer Office on **01908 653077**). Claims may take a while to process so applicants wishing to make a claim for credit transfer must apply before the guaranteed selection date (for further information regarding deadlines please refer to the credit transfer website).

D

ADMINISTRATION

MAKING A BOOKING

If you have never sponsored a student on to any of our Social Work degree programmes, or not within the last 4 years, please follow the guidance for 'New Sponsor'. If you are currently sponsoring students or are a recent sponsor please follow the guidance for 'Existing Sponsor'.

NEW SPONSOR

Complete and submit the Expression of Interest form (EOI) which is available by contacting the Northern Ireland Social Work team on **Ireland-Social-Work@open.ac.uk**. Completed forms should be submitted to this mailbox .

We will send you the application pack to distribute to your candidate(s). You'll be contacted by an OU Staff Tutor to discuss the programme, answer any questions you may have and ensure you're aware of the obligations of sponsorship. If the staff tutor is unable to make contact, we will not be able to process any applications from your employees.

Distribute the student application pack to your candidate(s). This will be emailed to you by the Northern Ireland Social Work team on receipt of your EOI /Continuing Booking Form.

EXISTING SPONSOR

Complete and submit a Continuing Booking Form, which is emailed out to all sponsors every March/April.

If you have not received one, please contact Ireland-Social-Work@open.ac.uk.

If you are putting forward new students, we will send you an application pack to distribute to your candidate(s).

If your organisation is paying for the module fees, our Corporate Partnerships Team will email you a Registration Agreement (for each applicant to sign) and one Sponsorship Agreement (to be signed by the sponsor contact).

Students paying their own fees will be sent a Registration Agreement and Sponsorship form after they have successfully completed the selection process.



ASSESSING APPLICANTS

A SUMMARY – THE SELECTION PROCESS

Before you begin the application process, please ensure your candidate(s) meet the educational entry requirements and can locate the original certificates.

Applicants who cannot provide certificates will not be allowed to proceed. If you wish to be approved to carry out your own selection process, please make contact with us at Ireland-Social-Work@open.ac.uk

Applicants must submit the following to Ireland-Social-Work@open.ac.uk

- Application form
- Equal Opportunities form
- Declaration of Suitability
- Medical Fitness to Practice form/Hesa form
- Copies of their education certificates.

Each application will be checked to ensure it is completed correctly, contains signatures and meets the entry requirements.

Applicants will then be allocated to an Selection Day and emailed an invitation and information about the day.

The Northern Ireland Social Work team will forward the application paperwork for all successful applicants to our Corporate Partnerships Team for registration.

Who will pay the module fees?

Applicant

Sponsor

If the applicant is paying, the Corporate and Partnerships Team will make the reservation and contact the applicant to arrange payment.

If the sponsor is paying, the Corporate and Partnerships Team will make the registration using the completed Registration Agreement and Sponsorship form. Provide purchase order number if applicable.

Once registered, the student will receive log-in details, module materials and will be allocated a tutor.

OPEN UNIVERSITY SELECTION

On receipt of the application form (within the published deadline), applications will be shortlisted and and successful candidates will be notified and invited to attend a Selection day. Following the Selection day, candidates will be notified of the outcome.

Successful candidates will then be advised on how to register for the programme. Students will also be required to register as Social Work students with the N.I. Social Care Council.

REGISTRATION

The Northern Ireland Social Work Team will carry out final checks on all applications and will forward them to our Corporate and Partnerships Team, who will finalise registration.

Students who are paying their own fees will receive:

- Registration Agreement and Sponsorship form
- HESA Data Collection form
- A link to the University's fees and funding page which will provide information on the various payment and loan options available.

It is strongly advisable that candidates begin to make necessary financial arrangements as early as possible to prevent delays with their registration.

PAYING THE MODULE FEES

Sponsors will be invoiced for the fees due for each module soon after the module start in October or February. Invoices will automatically be sent out in time for payment to be made within 30 days.

Students who pay for their own fees will be notified directly of payment deadlines.

PROBLEMS POST REGISTRATION

Conduct issues

If a student commits a criminal offence, receives a police caution, is suspended from work, or is the subject of a disciplinary hearing whilst on the programme, it is the responsibility of the Agency Coordinator/Sponsor and the student to notify us immediately.

Cancellation of a module

If a student decides to withdraw after formal registration but **before** the start date of the module, they are advised to contact The Corporate and Partnerships Team immediately to arrange a cancellation. There will be no fee liability if the module has not started.

If it becomes necessary for a student to withdraw **after** the official start date, then they should contact the Northern Ireland Social Work team immediately to discuss the study and financial implications.

Responsibility for cancellation normally rests with the student and cancellation of non-practice modules **must** be made by the student. Cancellation of practice modules (K113, K216 and K315) must be made by the student's sponsor.

THE COLLABORATION AGREEMENT AND SPONSORSHIP

To clarify the contributions made by the OU and sponsors for the programme offered to students, we ask all agencies to sign a formal Collaboration Agreement. This will be sent to you after registration has taken place; it should be signed and returned as soon as possible.

Most students sponsored are either full or part-time employees of the sponsor. However, we are aware of agencies who have sponsored non-employees (e.g. volunteers and employees of other agencies linked to them in some way). As this is an employment-based route, agencies must ensure they only sponsor students who can meet the programme's requirements in relation to study days, placement timings etc.

Experience has shown that sponsors come to a variety of financial arrangements with their employees to suit their individual circumstances. Some sponsors pay the full cost of the fees and other associated costs such as travel expenses. Other sponsors meet their obligations towards ensuring the fees are paid (and providing the necessary study leave and practice learning opportunities), but recoup some or all of the fees from employees. Some expect their employee to take unpaid leave to meet the study leave requirements. Many students now take full financial responsibility for their fees and make use of various finance options available. For the latest information on ways to pay please refer to the fees and funding section of the OU Northern Ireland Social Work programme website.



If you need further advice, please contact the Northern Ireland Social Work Team on **02890 245025** or Ireland-Social-Work@open.ac.uk

We do not make recommendations about what kind of sponsorship arrangements are made with staff as long as the agency meets the full obligations of the Collaboration Agreement e.g. the agency ensures that staff undergo a period of 10 days of verified practice learning and are provided with two contrasting practice learning opportunities with a suitable practice teacher, and that study leave arrangements are agreed.

Whatever the nature of the arrangements, make sure you and your student have a written agreement.

If you would like further guidance on different approaches to sponsorship, contact the Northern Ireland Social Work team.

GETTING READY FOR THE PROGRAMME

BA (HONS) APPLICANTS

October intake

Students starting in October will receive their first mailing of study materials, details of tutorials, etc. in September.

February intake

Students commencing K113, K216 and K315 in February will be sent their first mailing of study materials in December/January. Details of tutors and dates and venues of tutorials and workshops will be available online.

Those registered on K113 will receive a mailing which includes guidance notes and a form to pass on to their manager. Those studying K216 and K315 will be sent a Practice Learning Guide for the practice teachers, who will also be invited to attend a regional briefing day during the period January – February.

PREPARATION FOR STUDY

The programme has been designed to introduce students to practice-based learning and to academic study (including work on study skills) as an integral part of the programme. However, some agencies like to give their staff an opportunity to get a taste of study at this level, and to familiarise them with the style of distance learning, and perhaps to re-awaken dormant study. Students are encouraged to access our 'Skills for Study' website: <https://help.open.ac.uk/topic/study-skills>. It contains useful advice and guidance on effective study and provides students with the opportunity to undertake a skills check which will provide them with a personal learning plan.

E

PREPARATION FOR PRACTICE - BA (HONS) NORTHERN IRELAND

It is a requirement that students on all courses leading to a degree in Social Work in Northern Ireland must demonstrate that they are prepared for their practice learning.

K113 students must complete a structured programme that includes 7 skills workshops and 10 practice work experience days. This will prepare them for the first practice learning opportunity at stage 2. This programme of 10 days is not part of the 185 days of assessed practice learning which takes place while students study K216 and K315 at stage 2 and 3.

The programme of practice skills days will consist of the following:

- 10 days of practice experience in a social care setting
- 7 skills workshops run by OU tutors. These workshops are compulsory and usually held on a Saturday. Students will be observed and assessed on their communication skills.

The K113 programme will also prepare students to submit written assignments, which demonstrate their 'preparation for practice' in accordance with the Key Roles and National Occupational Standards for the NI Degree in Social Work. This is a regulatory requirement and will be part of the academic assessment on K113. Students will receive full details with their module materials.

The 10 days of practice experience should take place in the student's normal workplace. We do not expect students to have to do any practice days in addition to their normal employment during their K113 studies. The OU will provide the student with specific activities to complete during the practice experience days. The student will be expected to make appropriate arrangements, as soon as possible after the module start, to undertake these activities with the permission

of their line manager and/or the practice verifier. The activities will include arranging and conducting a conversation with a service user, in addition to shadowing a qualified social worker, if available. An example is shown opposite.

The practice experience days are designed to confirm that the student:

- has the potential to conduct him/herself in a professional manner
- has the potential to engage safely and effectively with service users, and
- is unlikely to present any inappropriate behaviour to service users or colleagues.

Arguably, within the OU programme the student should have shown his/her preparedness for practice already. Students who are sponsored by their employers may have had substantial and successful previous service user contact and may through a process of assessment be deemed to have the capacity and potential to learn from practice. It is a regulatory requirement that all students must complete the assessed preparation for direct practice in order to pass K113 and proceed to level 2 module K216.



If you need further advice, please contact the Northern Ireland Social Work Team on **02890 245025** or **Ireland-Social-Work@open.ac.uk**

THE PRACTICE VERIFIER/MANAGER

The sponsor is expected to nominate a practice verifier, who should be either a qualified social worker or someone who holds an equivalent qualification, for instance a nurse, teacher, community worker, registered manager or doctor. In most cases the verifier will be the student's line manager. The verifier is verifying that the student has undertaken the required period of preparation for practice, has had the opportunity to shadow a qualified social worker, and has had a conversation with a service user. The verifier will also be asked to confirm that the student has behaved in a professional way and that their conduct and attitude towards service users and others is appropriate to begin the process of practice learning.

The verified practice experience and the summative assessment of the student's skills are confirmation of the student's 'Preparation for Practice.' Students must pass this distinct threshold within the module.

Example of preparatory activities to be completed on the practice experience days

(Full details to be provided with K113 module materials)

In confirming preparedness for practice, a verifier should be able to confirm that the student has demonstrated:	
A	Some understanding of the range of tasks social workers carry out
B	Some ability to communicate appropriately with service users both in writing and orally
C	Some understanding of the experience service users have of services
D	Their potential ability to meet deadlines, and be punctual and reliable
E	Some understanding of their responsibilities as an accountable member of their organisation
F	The ability to comply with the Northern Ireland Social Care Council's Standards of Conduct and Practice

ORGANISING PRACTICE LEARNING IN THE AGENCY

Agencies which sponsor students on the Social Work degree programme are responsible for identifying practice learning opportunities ('placements') and practice teachers for their staff. This will be explored further with the Open University Social Work Team. All placements need to adhere to the Standards for Practice Learning for Northern Ireland Social Work degree (NISCC, 2018).

For those agencies unfamiliar with the Social Work degree, the terms used in this section are explained below:

TERMS USED IN RELATION TO PRACTICE LEARNING

Practice Learning Opportunity (PLO): also known as 'the placement'. There are two periods of assessed practice learning. One of these can take place in the student's normal place of work (provided it meets the requirements for a designated practice learning site) and one must take place in a contrasting work setting. The contrast must primarily be in relation to the service user group involved. The requirements clearly indicate that the contrast must be as great as possible, e.g. child care and adult mental health. Generally students should have a placement in a childcare setting and experience statutory work in one of the two placements. Sponsors who cannot offer both placements – in their own agency can explore the possibility of accessing an external placement via the Northern Ireland Degree in Social work, placement allocation panel. This needs to be discussed with the NI Social Work team.

BA (Hons)

The first placement (on K216) will last for 85 days, and the second placement (on K315) for 100 days. Students commence placements between Jan-June in both second and third year.

Agency Coordinator: this is the person in the agency who arranges the PLOs, ensures they provide suitable learning opportunities and represents the agency if there are difficulties with the PLO or the student's practice.

Practice Teacher: this is the person who takes on the teaching and assessment tasks associated with practice learning on the programme. Agencies are responsible for appointing practice teachers. Guidance about who can become a practice teacher is given below.

Off-site Practice Teacher: in some circumstances where there is no suitable practice teacher working in the practice setting, an off-site practice teacher can be brought in to undertake the formal requirements of supervision, teaching and assessment. In these circumstances, a workplace supervisor/onsite supervisor is designated to undertake day-to-day support and supervision of the student.



Workplace/onsite supervisor: in circumstances where the practice teacher is not working in the practice setting of the student, day-to-day supervision of the student is undertaken by the Workplace Supervisor. This may be the student's line manager, or someone else with whom they work in the practice setting. For K315 the workplace supervisor should be a registered social worker in a post requiring NISCC registration.

Programme Tutor: For the BA (Hons) a Programme Tutor is also appointed by the Open University. The Programme Tutor liaises with agency coordinators, practice teachers, workplace supervisors and students to agree a work plan (known as the 'Practice Learning Agreement' – PLA) and to monitor the progress of the student in the PLO and in their other work on the programme. They do not find the placements for students – this is the responsibility of the sponsor.

PREPARING FOR PRACTICE LEARNING

We strongly advise agencies to start preparing for their roles and tasks in delivering practice learning as early as possible. This includes the following:

- Discussing the implications of employees undertaking the Social Work degree with managers and colleagues
- Understanding the timing of PLOs and the implications for full-time and part-time employees
- Deciding which PLO will be 'in-house', and which will be 'out-house' (although in certain circumstances agencies may decide both PLOs need to be 'out-house')
- Understanding the requirement for contrast in PLOs
- Understanding the requirement to perform statutory social work tasks in one PLO
- Locating practice teachers (and workplace supervisors if necessary)
- Locating practice learning opportunities

DISCUSSING THE IMPLICATIONS OF STAFF UNDERTAKING THE SOCIAL WORK DEGREE WITH MANAGERS AND COLLEAGUES

Experience has shown that an important factor in the success of employees on the Social Work programme is the support they receive from their employers, line managers and colleagues. To secure this support, managers and others must be given information on what is involved, and how this will affect the work of employees undertaking the degree prior to, during, and immediately after the programme. In particular, it is important that they understand the following:

- That employees on the programme should have their study leave protected, and not eroded by demands to do extra shifts, or pressure to come in because of crises at work or other reasons
- That at least one of the periods of assessed practice learning will be outside the normal place of work, and that the member of employees will be effectively absent for the whole of this period and may need replacing

- **That during assessed practice learning which takes place in the employee's own workplace, they will not be able to do their 'normal job'. Their learning needs may require different work and/or a restriction of their normal workload. Their approach to the work will be affected by the need to be assessed, and by their different role as a 'student' within their normal workplace. This will affect both managers and colleagues and should be discussed and prepared for. Students who are managers normally require some adjustment to their management role to enable them to undertake work with service users.** This is necessary in order for them to demonstrate their competence in relation to the Key Roles and the National Occupational Standards for Social Work in Northern Ireland'.

UNDERSTANDING THE TIMING OF PLOS AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR STUDENTS

In order to plan for the required number of practice learning days in the time available, agencies should take into account our recommendation for study leave for students on the degree programme: 36 days per study year for students undertaking 120 credits (i.e. two 60 credit modules simultaneously) and 18 days for students undertaking a 60 credit module.

DECIDING WHICH PLO WILL BE 'IN-HOUSE', AND WHICH WILL BE 'OUT-HOUSE'

The programme is designed in such a way that students can usually undertake one period of practice learning in their own workplace, and one in another workplace. Usually the first PLO would be in the student's workplace if appropriate however this can be discussed with the OU Social Work Team. The practice learning opportunities that are outside the students' own workplace do not have to be in another agency. The PLO can be in another part of their own agency if it offers an appropriate 'contrast' and meets their learning needs. Contrast in workplace setting is important but it is crucial that the student should work with contrasting service user groups.

There may be a few students who need to undertake both placements outside their usual workplace setting to obtain sufficient opportunities to demonstrate their ability to meet the Key Roles and the National Occupational Standards for Social Work in Northern Ireland at the required level. There may also be a conflict of interest which may arise in some organisations. As a last resort, if these matters cannot be resolved in any other way, the programme reserves the right to require a sponsor to find two external placements for a sponsored student.

UNDERSTANDING THE REQUIREMENT FOR CONTRAST IN PLOS

The social work regulatory requirements are based on the principle that a social worker trains and qualifies with a broad experience and understanding of the profession, in a variety of settings and service user groups. This means that all students need to be offered broad practice experience to be able to meet the standards when they have completed their training.

In practical terms this means that each practice learning opportunity must be with a substantially different service user group and at least one placement must be outside the student's normal work setting. In addition, students must gain experience of performing statutory tasks usually in their K315 final placement, however it only needs to be in one of the two placements. Furthermore, one placement must also focus on children. These issues of contrast need to be considered before the practice learning opportunity for K216 is planned and again before K315.

As mentioned previously, normally, the student would complete their first placement in their own setting (if deemed appropriate) and their second placement would be in an external setting and allocated via the NIDSWP Placement Allocations Panel unless the sponsor is able to provide an alternative contrast that meets the requirements for Practice Learning for the Northern Ireland Social Work degree.



UNDERSTANDING THE REQUIREMENT TO PERFORM STATUTORY SOCIAL WORK TASKS

It is also important to remember that a social work student must be able to demonstrate that they have performed 'statutory social work tasks'. This does not mean that the practice learning opportunity must be in a Health and Social Care Trust or other statutory body, although, if this were the case, it would be clearly advantageous in meeting this requirement. Many voluntary and independent organisations perform functions and tasks which are directly related to the statute and could therefore provide appropriate learning opportunities.

The K315 placement setting should, however, be one in which the student will not be the sole social work representative. This is to meet the OU and regulatory requirement in order to support the development of professional identity. In the last placement the student must work alongside a qualified social worker who is in a post requiring registration. This person would normally be the practice teacher or – if the practice teacher is off-site – the workplace/onsite (see below for further advice).

Some agencies may offer their OU students statutory experience in their first (K216) PLO. If statutory duties are undertaken on the K216

placement it is important that the work is appropriate for a K216 student and enables them to demonstrate the Key Roles and National Occupational Standards at the relevant level. Further advice can be obtained from the Programme Tutor. Statutory tasks only need to be undertaken in one of the two placements.

It is especially important to note that students undertaking statutory tasks will need to be appropriately supervised and supported.

A 'statutory social work task' has the quality of being something that a social worker or social care worker must do or has the power to do because of legislation.

Examples of Statutory Social Work Tasks

Mental health

Contributing to the provision of statutory after-care supervision and support to a formerly detained patient who has returned to live in the community.

Contributing to an assessment of a patient who may need to be detained in hospital. Such assessments are undertaken formally by a qualified Approved Mental Health Professional, but students may assist in the process.

Learning disability and older people

Contributing to a community care assessment of a person over the age of 18 who may be eligible for a statutory assessment of their community care needs.

Youth offending

As a member of a multi-disciplinary Youth Offending Team, or other statutory agency, contributing to the supervision of a young offender sentenced to compulsory supervision in the community.

Children and family work

As a member of a local HSC Trust children and families team, contributing to an assessment of need, including issues of abuse and neglect.

As a staff member of a voluntary organisation working with children subject to care proceedings, making a report to appropriate Health and Social Care Trust staff for the purposes of assessment of need; or providing evidence, either written or oral, to a court regarding the needs of a child.

In both K216 and K315 students must be able to meet the Key Roles and the National Occupational Standards for Social Work in Northern Ireland at the relevant level. In K315 students must be able to demonstrate that they can work with an appropriate level of complexity, independence and autonomy.

When considering the implications of these requirements, agency coordinators must keep in mind that the two periods of practice learning on the programme should be designed to give the student an opportunity to meet the requirements of Key Roles and the National Occupational Standards for Social Work in Northern Ireland at the relevant level. Although the learning needs of students will, to some extent, depend on their existing knowledge, skills and experience, they must have the opportunity in each of the two periods of practice learning to assemble evidence of their ability and to demonstrate this to the satisfaction of their practice teachers and the Assessment Board.

At the end of both practice learning opportunities there will be a meeting called the End of Practice Learning Review. In K216 the focus of this meeting will be looking ahead to the K315 practice learning opportunity and discussing the type of PLO required in K315. The meeting would also discuss the kinds of PLO which would be appropriate for learning in K315 to satisfy contrast requirements. This discussion would be recorded and provided to the Agency Coordinator and the student

would bring this record to the K315 practice learning agreement meeting. In K315 the focus of the End of Practice Learning Review meeting will be the Continuing Professional Development needs of the student undertaking their Assessed Year in Practice as a Social Worker.

LOCATING PRACTICE ASSESSORS AND WORKPLACE SUPERVISORS

To meet the requirements for both K216 and K315, the Practice Teacher should:

- be a qualified social worker who has gained the Northern Ireland Practice Teachers Award in Social Work
- have a working knowledge of the Key Roles and NOS as well as the NISCC Standards of Conduct and Practice for Social Workers and students.

Practice teachers should **not** be:

- someone with direct line management responsibility for the student within the sponsor.
- someone who owns or is a director or chief executive of the sponsoring agency.
- should not be a relative or personal friend of the student.

Agencies should give careful thought to recruitment of practice teachers as the experience of the practice teacher is an important factor with respect to both learning and assessment on the programme.

If you wish to appoint a practice teacher who does not fit these requirements, you must get the agreement of the NI Social Work Team first.

Locating practice teachers may depend on whether the PLO is in the agency, or in another 'outside' agency (see below). Where the practice teacher is in a different workplace from the student, or indeed is independent of the agency, a workplace/onsite supervisor will need to be appointed. This will normally be an experienced practitioner (or the student's line manager) in the placement setting, who can provide day-to-day supervision and support.

Students are required to have a different practice teacher in each PLO. If agencies are unable to meet this requirement, they should contact the Northern Ireland Social Work team for advice.

If it is necessary to appoint both a practice teacher and workplace supervisor (see above), please note the following requirements for workplace/onsite supervisors:

- In K216 the workplace supervisor may be a registered social worker, but this is not essential, and they need to be competent to provide day-to-day supervision to social work students and be located in the student's practice learning workplace.
- a K315 workplace/onsite supervisor must be a registered social worker in a post requiring registration on the social work register.

LOCATING PRACTICE LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

It is important to take account of the responsibilities of the agency with respect to sponsoring a student on the degree. These are included in the Collaboration Agreement which the agency signs with The Open University.

Agency contractual responsibilities with respect to practice learning

- The agency is responsible for finding two periods of assessed practice learning which meet The Open University/regulatory requirements and the student's learning needs for each student they sponsor on the programme. If not possible, a second placement can be allocated via the NIDSWP Allocation Panel provided the sponsor is willing to offer a placement for an alternative student.
- The agency is required to provide the student with a practice teacher who meets the programme's requirements for both periods of assessed practice learning.
- The agency/sponsor is responsible for carrying out an Enhanced Disclosure Access NI check prior to the student going out on placement.
- The agency is responsible for ensuring the student maintains their registration on the NI Social Care Council social work student register.

PRACTICE LEARNING OPPORTUNITY QUALITY STANDARDS

The Open University Social Work programmes have laid down certain standards for practice learning opportunities. These standards govern (i) the content of the practice learning agreement, (ii) the quality and quantity of practice assessment, and (iii) reporting procedures, including that the practice teacher's final report is submitted on time. Full details of the standards are included below.

The Open University Social Work Degree also adheres to the Practice Learning requirements for the Northern Social Work degree (NISCC, 2010, the Standards for Practice Learning, 2018 for Northern Ireland Degree in Social work, the Northern Ireland Framework Specification for the degree in Social Work, 2015). For all providers the following Quality Standards are to be applied to all practice learning opportunities funded under the arrangements.

1 PRACTICE LEARNING AGREEMENT

Agreement is written and signed by student and representatives of both programme and provider.

Agreement identifies learning needs and practice learning opportunities.

Agreement is explicit about how the student can access (i) support arrangements and (ii) systems for complaints.

Agreement specifies the duration and frequency of supervision.

2 PRACTICE ASSESSMENT

Practice teacher meets minimum requirements specified by the OU Programme.

The student receives the supervision as set out in the Agreement.

Provider has established support systems and training for practice teachers or access to such arrangements.

The practice teacher will ensure that the student is made aware of the provider's health and safety procedures and other relevant policies and procedures.

3 REPORTING

The student has read and contributed to the Practice Assessment Report and countersigned to this effect.

Report states that the student has or has not provided evidence of his/her ability to meet the Key Roles and National Occupational Standards at the relevant level and refers to the appropriate evidence for this.

Practice Teacher Report is completed and submitted to the OU on time.

HEALTH AND SAFETY ISSUES FOR STUDENTS IN PRACTICE LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Employers are accustomed to giving advice to staff on the necessity for vaccination against hepatitis B if the nature of their work is likely to put them at particular risk. However, the issue may be overlooked where a student is going out of their normal work environment into a new setting for a practice learning opportunity.

We strongly recommend sponsors and students to take advice from the agency providing the practice learning opportunity, from their own Occupational Health Department or the student's own GP if there are worries about a risk of hepatitis B infection while a student is on placement.

HEPATITIS B

Hepatitis B is a viral infection which is usually spread from person to person by blood to blood contact, including injury with sharp objects or sexual intercourse. Transmission has also rarely followed bites from an infected person. It is not passed on by normal everyday contact.

The illness can be anywhere between mild and very severe and usually causes jaundice. Hepatitis B can lead to long-term liver and health problems.

RISK ASSESSMENT

Vaccination is recommended for individuals who are at risk of contracting hepatitis B because of their lifestyle, occupation or some other factor.

A higher prevalence of hepatitis B carriage has been found among certain groups of people with learning disabilities, both in residential accommodation and in special schools, than in the general population. Decisions on immunisation should be made on the basis of a local risk assessment.

Employers are required to undertake a risk assessment where there may be a risk to workers because of their occupation, and to take necessary measures to protect workers and others who may be exposed, as far as reasonably practicable. The risk assessment must be made available to and understood by anyone it applies to. If the risk assessment highlights a requirement for vaccination against hepatitis B, then all those who are undertaking the work must be able to prove they have been vaccinated.

VACCINATION

Where vaccination is indicated, the course consists of three injections and should be commenced at least two months before any possible exposure to hepatitis B.

Immunisation against hepatitis B is not a substitute for good hygiene practice. Universal precautions must be maintained.

ACCESS NI

It is the responsibility of the sponsor to ensure that the student has an up to date Enhanced Disclosure Access NI check at interview stage and also prior to going out on placements, as required by the Northern Ireland Degree in Social Work Partnership. Confirmation of a clearance check will have to be provided to the Open University at key points in the Social Work programme.

NISCC

All students must register with the Northern Ireland Social Care Council as student social workers prior to commencing the new Northern Ireland Social Work degree. Sponsors must ensure this is in place throughout the programme.



If you need further advice, please contact the Northern Ireland Social Work Team on **02890 245025** or Ireland-Social-Work@open.ac.uk

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ISSUES OR PROBLEMS ARISING AFTER THE PROGRAMME START

HELP FROM THE OU

Help, advice and information are available from a range of OU staff in Northern Ireland and the student's programme tutor. If you need further advice, please contact the Northern Ireland Social Work Team on **02890 245025** or **Ireland-Social-Work@open.ac.uk**.

NOTIFYING THE OU WHEN THINGS GO WRONG OR CHANGE

The Agency/sponsor should notify the OU team as soon as possible about:

- changes which affect a student's position on the programme
- any problems they encounter as a result of programme procedures
- change of name or address of student.

It is very important to let us know immediately if:

- a student leaves the agency's employment
- a student is suspended from work or is the subject of a disciplinary hearing
- a student commits a criminal offence or receives a police caution

- the agency is contemplating suspending or terminating a placement for any reason
- there are any changes in agency-appointed personnel: agency coordinator, practice teacher or workplace/onsite supervisor (or their contact details)
- a significant new health issue has arisen in relation to the student.

If an agency is concerned about any aspect of the programme, please do let us know by contacting the Northern Ireland Social Work Team.

USEFUL CONTACTS

NORTHERN IRELAND

If you are an employer or potential student and would like to find out more about the Social Work programme in Northern Ireland, please contact the Northern Ireland Social Work team on **02890245025**.
Email: ireland-social-work@open.ac.uk

STUDENT SUPPORT TEAM

(for on-module support)

The Open University
10 Great Victoria Street
Belfast
BT1 3GN
Tel: **02890 245025**

CREDIT TRANSFER CENTRE

(for queries relating to transferring external study to The Open University)

Credit Transfer Centre
The Open University
PO Box 80
Walton Hall
Milton Keynes
MK7 6AS

Tel: **01908 653077**
open.ac.uk/credit-transfer

EXAM CERTIFICATES

For anyone requiring replacement certificates please contact the following: <https://www.gov.uk/replacement-exam-certificate>

UCAS

For any queries relating to UCAS credit please go to the website, www.ucas.com – please use the link to calculate UCAS points <https://www.ucas.com/ucas/tariff-calculator>.

OVERSEAS STUDENTS

Students who hold overseas awards will need to provide a Statement of Comparability with UK qualifications. This can be obtained from:

UK NARIC, Oriel House, Oriel Road,
Cheltenham, Glos., GL50 1XP.

(Or visit naric.org.uk).

There is a charge for this service.



