Regulating social work education (2001-12)

Learning report
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The General Social Care Council

The General Social Care Council (GSCC) is a non-departmental public body of the Department of Health which regulates the social work profession and social work education in England. It aims to protect the public by requiring high standards of education, conduct and practice of all social workers.

Following a decision from Government, the GSCC will close on 31 July 2012 and the regulation of the social work profession and social work education will transfer to Health Professions Council (HPC). To reflect this, the HPC will change its name to the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC).

As part of our continued commitment to the sector, we are working to ensure that the GSCC’s knowledge of regulating the social work profession is not lost and is captured in a series of learning reports, of which this is one. The three learning reports are: Regulating social workers (2001-12); Regulating social work education (2001-12); and Involving people who use services and their carers in the work of the General Social Care Council (2001-12). These reports will focus on the GSCC’s learning in key areas over the last 10 years. We will also publish two research reports: The supply of social work practice placements: Employers’ views; and GSCC targeted inspections of Approved Mental Health Professionals (AMHP) courses in England (2011-12).

We hope you find this series of reports a useful overview of our work over the last decade.
We think it is crucial that we capture the knowledge and experience that the GSCC has acquired during its existence so it is and is helpful. This report sets out to achieve this for the GSCC’s regulation of social work education.

The report provides an overview of the data that the GSCC gathered during its regulation of initial social work training. This includes summary data regarding the courses the GSCC approved, the students who enrolled onto these courses and the results that these students achieved. Data on practice placements, periods of assessed work-based learning that all social work students must undertake as part of their studies, are also presented. Some of the challenges that the GSCC encountered during its regulation of social work education are also highlighted.

The report also looks at how the GSCC regulated higher education institutions’ delivery of the social work degree. The GSCC always strove to improve the way it worked, both as a result of its own experience and in relation to developments in best-practice in regulation. The changes that were made to the way it regulated are discussed here.

This is one of a number of learning reports produced by the GSCC as part of its closure and transfer programme.

We hope that these reports are able to contribute to a better understanding of the work of the GSCC and assist regulation of the profession in the future.
The GSCC has been responsible for the regulation of social work education since its establishment in 2001. Through undertaking this function the GSCC has gathered a considerable volume of data concerning the social work education sector. It has also developed an insight into the specific challenges that exist with respect to the training of social workers and has developed learning and expertise in how to undertake its regulatory function. This report, one of three learning reports the GSCC is producing as it moves towards closure, aims to capture the knowledge and understanding the GSCC has acquired through the regulation of social work education over the last 10 years.

Section one: How has social work education changed since 2003?

The first section of the report provides key features and trends identified through an analysis of the data that the GSCC holds on social work education. It identifies some of the challenges the GSCC has engaged with during its regulation of the training of social workers.

As well as registering and regulating individual social workers the GSCC also had responsibility for approving and regulating the courses that individuals who wished to train to become social workers in England would undertake.

This section provides information on the nature of the courses the GSCC approved, the characteristics of individuals who enrolled on these courses, the periods of assessed workplace learning that students studying on the social work degree undertook and the results that students studying on social work degree courses obtained. The key learning points identified in this section are:

**Social work degree courses**

- The proportion of approved courses at postgraduate level has been growing markedly in recent years, with a linked trend towards an increasing number of social work students studying at post-graduate level.

- At a national level there appears to be an oversupply of part-time and employment-based courses with only a very small number of students enrolling on part-time courses.

- Certain regions - particularly the North West and North East of England - have noticeable concentrations of social work degree courses.

**Enrolments to the social work degree**

- The introduction of the degree and of a professional regulator for social workers has been associated with a significant increase in the number of individuals training to be social workers.
• The most recent years for which data is available, 2009-10 and 2010-11, have seen the highest ever enrolments to the degree.

• Issues relating to the supply of and demand for social workers, such as current reported difficulties faced by newly qualified social workers in gaining their first period of employment, have been ongoing in the sector.

• During the GSCC existence, systematic workforce planning at a regional and national level had not been taking place in social work. However, this situation changed in late 2011 with the unveiling by the Centre for Workforce Intelligence of a supply-and-demand model.1

• The removal of the age bar for individuals qualifying as social workers has resulted in a significant expansion in the number of individuals under the age of 20 enrolling onto the degree.

• A considerably higher proportion of individuals enrolling to the social work degree declared their ethnicity to be non-white compared to HESA data for all students in the UK.

• This difference is accounted for by a significantly higher proportion of individuals enrolling to the social work degree who declare their ethnicity as black.

• Female enrolments to the degree significantly outnumber male enrolments, reflecting a long established characteristic of the social work profession.

• A tension exists in the sector between the desire to ensure that social work is open to those from all backgrounds, particularly backgrounds where attendance at university has not been common, and a desire to see entrants to the degree with high levels of previous educational attainment. The GSCC did not see it as its role to set national qualifications requirements for entry onto the social work degree.

Practice placements

• The academic year 2009-10 witnessed a record number of practice placements being undertaken.

• The supply of statutory placements has remained steady. However, this is in a context of increased demand.

• Ensuring that a sufficient number of relevant practice placements that are of the required quality is an ongoing challenge.

• Currently at a national level supply does appear to match demand, however, in some regions, particularly the Midlands and Yorkshire, employers were more likely to report a decline in their provision of practice placements.

1. This model can be accessed at: www.cfwi.org.uk/workforce-planning-news-and-review/social-worker-supply-and-demand-model
Section two: How did the GSCC regulate social work education?

The second section focuses on how the GSCC has undertaken the regulation of social work education during its existence, including the rationale for the changes the GSCC made as it learned from its experience. The key learning points identified in this section are:

- Having the requirements that organisations delivering the social work degree were regulated against held by four different organisations created confusion and made it difficult for the regulator to make necessary changes to these requirements.

- The GSCC only had one sanction available to it, to withdraw approval for a course, and significant barriers exist to its use.

- The GSCC has, then, had to develop a range of different ways that it could influence or pressure institutions to address problems or raise the quality of their courses.

- The GSCC’s review of its regulatory framework served to identify a number of important changes. These included:
  - A move away from periodic untargeted regulatory interventions towards risk-based targeted interventions;
The development of a modern risk-assessment framework;

- The systematic gathering and analysis of ‘soft intelligence’;

- Publication of annual monitoring reports;

- The development of a new set of outcome focused standards, to replace the accreditation document.

Whilst it was not possible to fully implement these reforms within the GSCC’s lifetime, their partial implementation greatly improved the GSCC’s regulation of social work education.

Current developments in the social work education sector

This report is an attempt to capture the knowledge and experience that the GSCC itself acquired through regulating social work education for the last decade. As such it does not cover the changes and developments being undertaken by other bodies to address the challenges identified in this report. The challenges are discussed as the GSCC encountered these during its existence.

However, it is important to acknowledge at the outset that significant changes are in the process of being implemented. The Social Work Task Force published its final report in December 2009, making a number of recommendations relating to social work education. Since this date, the Social Work Reform Board has worked with a number of organisations in the sector to take forward these recommendations. The GSCC contributed to the Social Work Task Force, and has been working with the Social Work Reform Board in implementing these reforms. It is strongly supportive of this work. Included amongst the changes being implemented which link to challenges identified in this report are that:

- a social work supply-and-demand model has now been developed and is hosted by the Centre for Workforce Intelligence2;

- principles for partnerships between employers and higher education institutions have been produced and are held by The College of Social Work3;

- new standards identifying the professional competencies social workers should possess at different stages of their career have been developed, known as the Professional Capabilities Framework.4 This framework has been integrated within the standards the Health Professions Council will use to regulate the provision of initial social work training.5

The full implementation and utilisation of these reforms will go a considerable way to addressing the challenges identified in this report.

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3. The college’s website can be accessed at: [www.collegeofsocialwork.org](http://www.collegeofsocialwork.org)
4. The framework can be accessed at: [www.collegeofsocialwork.org/pcf.aspx](http://www.collegeofsocialwork.org/pcf.aspx)
5. The Health Profession Council’s website can be accessed at: [www.hpc-uk.org/](http://www.hpc-uk.org/)
Section one: How has social work education changed since 2003?

The GSCC gathered a considerable amount of data on social work education through regulating the delivery of the social work degree. This section presents an overview of the most prominent features and trends identified through an analysis of this data, as well as highlighting the challenges that the GSCC encountered in these areas. The focus is on the social work degree and the analysis covers the period from the introduction of the degree in 2003 to the present.

The purpose of this section is not to attempt to offer an explanation for these trends, or to propose solutions to any problems identified, but to bring this important data to the attention of the sector as the GSCC moves towards closure.6

Social work degree courses

In 2001 the GSCC took over the function of regulating social work education from the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW). In 2003 the social work degree was introduced, replacing the Diploma in Social Work. From 2005 in order to practise under the title ‘social worker’ in England it became a legal requirement for an individual to be registered with the GSCC. The GSCC set the minimum qualification and training requirements that individuals had to meet in order to be

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6. Before closure the GSCC’s data regarding social work education is being transferred to the Social Care Workforce Research Unit based at King’s College London to ensure that this data is still available to the sector.
registered. All entrants onto the Social Care Register had to hold a social work degree, except for individuals who:

- had qualified prior to 2003; or
- were studying the Diploma in Social Work when the degree was introduced; or
- qualified outside the UK;

As well as registering and regulating individual social workers the GSCC also had responsibility for approving and regulating the courses that individuals who wished to train to become social workers in England would undertake.

Since 2003 the GSCC approved 307 social work degree courses at 83 higher education institutions (HEIs). The majority of these approvals took place in the first two years following the degrees introduction, as HEIs switched from delivering the Diploma in Social Work to delivering the degree. Ninety-eight courses were approved in 2003 and 100 in 2004. Since then the number of courses approved each year fell, reaching seven approvals in 2008. From 2008 onwards there was no clear pattern of approvals per year. Although the GSCC has approved 307 courses not all of these have actually gone on to deliver the social work degree. Thirty-seven courses have never recruited students, although 15 of these were only approved recently (i.e. 2011). Twenty-two courses have closed.

Since 2003 the GSCC approved 307 social work degree courses at 83 higher education institutions (HEIs).

7. The majority of institutions that deliver the social work degree are universities. However, a small number of further and higher education colleges are also involved in the delivery of the degree in certain regions. Because of this the collective term ‘higher education institutions’ is used to refer to the organisations delivering the degree.
There are a number of ways in which social work degree courses can differ from each other. Social work degree courses can be undertaken:

• part-time, full-time or via distance learning. Distance learning is where a student is not physically present in a traditional educational setting (like a classroom), but works in their own time using a variety of online and other resources;

• at undergraduate or post-graduate level. An undergraduate course is a traditional degree course. A post-graduate course is shorter than an undergraduate course, and leads to a post-graduate diploma or Master’s level qualification. To study at post-graduate level it is normally necessary to have a prior degree. A relatively new post-graduate option is the Step Up to Social Work course - an intensive 18 month work-based Master’s qualification specifically designed for individuals looking to change career; and

• as employment-based or college-based. Employment-based courses are designed for individuals currently working in appropriate social care roles to study for the social work degree. Such individuals are sponsored by their employer and many study for the degree on a part-time basis whilst continuing to work for their employer. ‘College-based’ is the term used by the GSCC to refer to all courses that are not ‘employment-based’.

Any individual course will take one of the characteristics from each of these categories – for instance a course may be part-time, undergraduate and college-based.
The different types of courses available provide a range of options to individuals contemplating studying to become a qualified social worker. Since the introduction of the social work degree it has been possible to identify a number of trends both in the provision of such courses and in the options chosen by social work students. **Info-point one** sets out the different ways in which the social work degree is provided, whilst **Table 1** gives an overview of the characteristics of all degree courses ever approved by the GSCC.

**Table 1: Characteristics of all social work degree courses approved to February 2012**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basis</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Distance learning</th>
<th>Full-time</th>
<th>Part-time</th>
<th>Grand total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>College based</td>
<td>Postgraduate</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College based total</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance learning</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance learning total</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment-based</td>
<td>Postgraduate</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment-based total</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grand total</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>307</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Since the introduction of the degree there has been an increase in the proportion of approved courses that are at post-graduate level compared to undergraduate level. In 2003 only seven per cent of all courses were at postgraduate level, but by 2005 this had reached 34 per cent before reaching 42 per cent in 2012. This trend towards greater post graduate provision of the degree is echoed in enrolment data - in 2005-06, 21 per cent of those who enrolled onto the social work degree enrolled on a post graduate course. By 2010-11 this had risen to 31 per cent, the highest it has been since the introduction of the degree. It is also worth noting that of the courses that have closed, 95 per cent have been at undergraduate level further suggesting a trend towards increased post graduate provision.

Employment-based courses

Since the introduction of the degree around 75 per cent of approved courses have been college based and 25 per cent have been employment based. However, the data we hold on the number of students enrolling suggests that there is a potential mismatch between the number of students choosing to study on employment-based courses and the availability of such courses. The percentage of students who are choosing employment-based courses is much smaller than would be suggested by the availability of such courses. For example, in 2010-11, even though around 25 per cent of courses were employment-based just 11 per cent of enrolments were on employment-based courses. The contrast between the percentage of approved courses and the percentage
of enrolments suggests an over-supply of employment-based courses although further research is necessary to confirm this.

In general annual enrolments to employment-based courses have averaged at 11 per cent, compared to 89 per cent for college-based. There was a peak in enrolments to employment based-courses in the academic year 2005-06 at 17 per cent. However, both prior and subsequent to this peak there has not been a clear trend, with the annual percentage of such enrolments fluctuating between nine per cent and 12 per cent.

**Part-time courses**

Social work students have also been able to opt to study on a part-time or full-time basis. In general, there has been a trend for the proportion of part-time enrolments to decrease over time. The academic year 2010-11 saw the lowest ever absolute number of part-time enrolments to the degree, with just 280 students enrolling on a part-time basis, despite this year witnessing the second highest number of students enrolling to the degree overall since its introduction.

As is the case with employment-based courses the data also suggests that there may be a mismatch between the provision of courses that are part-time and the numbers of students who are enrolling on to these courses. Seventy-two per cent of approved courses are full-time and 27 per cent are part-time even though only four per cent of enrolments in 2010/11 were to part-time courses.\(^8\)

It is also worth noting that of the courses that were approved prior to 2011

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8. The one per cent difference is made up by distance-learning courses. The figures for Table 1 are the same, 72 per cent and 27 per cent.
and have never recruited students\(^9\), 58 per cent are part-time whilst of those courses which have closed 73 per cent are part-time. As with employment-based courses, this would suggest an oversupply of part-time courses. These two features are related; employment-based courses are far more likely to be part-time than college-based courses.

**Geographical distribution of courses**

London had the most approved courses in the years immediately following the introduction of the degree, but was overtaken by the North West in 2008. Since this date the North West has remained the region with the most approved courses. This is also reflected in student numbers.

Table 2: Approved courses by region February 2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>% of total</th>
<th>Courses by region’s population (per million inhabitants)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>North West (1)</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>London (9)</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yorkshire and Humberside (3)</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South East (8)</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East of England (6)</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Midlands (4)</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South West (7)</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Midlands (5)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North East (2)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>307</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td><strong>6</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

9. Therefore excluding courses that may simply have not had an opportunity to recruit yet.
The proportion of approved courses at post-graduate level has been growing markedly in recent years, with a linked trend towards an increasing number of social work students studying at post-graduate level.

At a national level there appears to be an oversupply of part-time and employment-based courses with only a very small number of students enrolling on part-time courses.

Certain regions - particularly the North West and North East of England - have noticeable concentrations of social work degree courses.

The North-West has the most students enrolling to courses of all English regions - in 2010-11, 20 per cent (one in five) of all social work student enrolments were in the North-West. However, when looking at the number of social work students in relation to the size of the population of each region, Yorkshire and Humberside trains the greatest number of social workers (19 enrolments per 100,000 living in the region in 2010-11), followed by the North West (18). The East Midlands (eight) and South West (eight) train the least.

Section one: How has social work education changed since 2003?
The introduction of the degree and the introduction of a professional regulator for social workers have been associated with a significant increase in the number of individuals training to be social workers. Since its introduction, a total of 43,998 individuals have enrolled to study on the social work degree. Discounting 2003-04 and 2004-05, when significant numbers of individuals were still undertaking the Diploma in Social Work, the average annual degree enrolment is 6,111. This constitutes a 47 per cent increase over the average annual intake for the Diploma in Social Work during the decade prior to the introduction of the degree. Increasing the number of students studying the social work degree was one of the objectives behind the introduction of statutory regulation of social workers with a requirement for a degree level qualification and this has been a significant success.

During the early years of the degree, a large number of students were still studying on Social Work Diploma courses, the qualification that preceded the degree and which the degree replaced. As would be expected, the initial years of the degree witnessed a rapid increase in enrolments as courses were approved and began to recruit students. Enrolments increased from 2,579 in 2003-04 to 4,751 in 2004-05 and reached 6,115 in 2005-06.

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Since 2005-06 the lowest number of students enrolling in any year was 5,671 (2007-08). The last two years for which data are available, 2009-10 and 2010-11, have seen the highest ever enrolments to the degree, 6,577 and 6,364 respectively.
During the GSCC’s existence there were a number of ongoing issues regarding the supply of and demand for social workers.

Workforce planning and student numbers

During the GSCC’s existence there were a number of ongoing issues regarding the supply of and demand for social workers. On the one hand, vacancy rates in local authorities in certain regions of England remained high for a number of years. On the other hand, there have been reports of newly qualified social workers struggling to gain their first employment. Broadly, in some sectors and regions there appear to be issues of oversupply, with too many social workers applying for too few jobs, whilst in other sectors and regions there appear to be issues of under supply, with not enough social workers being available. There was also anecdotal evidence that some employers were reluctant to take on newly qualified social workers, preferring more experienced social workers instead.

One way in which it could have been possible to ensure that the supply of social workers met the demand of employers was through the powers accorded to the GSCC to determine how many individuals could be admitted to social work courses. However, the impetus was to expand the number of individuals who were being attracted to study social work, not to limit this. Further there was a lack of evidence upon which the GSCC could act to impose any limit as there was no systematic workforce planning or workforce planning model for social work in England.
The introduction of the degree and of a professional regulator for social workers has been associated with a significant increase in the number of individuals training to be social workers.

The most recent years for which data is available, 2009-10 and 2010-11, have seen the highest ever enrolments to the degree.

Issues relating to the supply of and demand for social workers, such as current reported difficulties faced by newly qualified social workers in gaining their first period of employment, have been ongoing in the sector.

Systematic workforce planning at a regional and national level has not been taking place in social work.

Moreover, the GSCC was not itself given the function of workforce planning and did not have responsibility for ensuring that the supply of social work students met demand. In practice, during the GSCC’s existence, planning regarding the volume of social workers was undertaken only at the level of individual educational institutions and employers. Therefore, whilst the GSCC did, for instance, require evidence of employer demand for graduates and support when approving a course, during the GSCC’s existence no systematic mechanism to match supply and demand for social workers in the sector existed.
The GSCC collects data on who enrols to the social work degree. This data covers both their characteristics but also their previous educational qualifications.

**Age**

Since the introduction of the degree, between 31 per cent and 36 per cent of all those enrolling have been aged 25-34 years. Between 21 and 30 percent have been aged between 35-44, and 20-25 percent have been aged between 20-24. Between seven per cent and 10 per cent of enrolees have been aged 45 or older.

Since 2004-05, between 11 per cent and 13 per cent of annual enrolees have been under 20. This latter figure can be contrasted with the age profile of those studying for the Diploma in Social Work, where around one to two per cent were aged under 20. This was because prior to the introduction of the degree there was a minimum age requirement (22 years) for an individual to graduate from the Diploma.11

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11. This requirement was imposed by the organisation that preceded the GSCC, the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work. Details can be found in section 7 of the following document: www.sssc.uk.com/component/option,com_docman/Itemid,21/gid,952/task,doc_download/&sa=U&ei=RvW8T8-cjefC0QX6t6VX&ved=0CBYQFjAB&usg=AFQjCNHe6xd_ZKUI-XafW63-2ZGC29kppQ
Section one: How has social work education changed since 2003?

Chart 2: Enrolments to degree by age-group
Ethnicity

The GSCC also collects data on the ethnicity of students who enrol onto the social work degree. This data has a response rate of 80 per cent. An interesting point of comparison for this data is the data held by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) for students studying all subjects in the UK including social work. The most obvious differences when comparing HESA data is the considerably higher proportion of students on the social work degree who are not white. Seventy-three per cent of students enrolling to the social degree are white compared with eighty-two per cent of the whole UK student population. The difference is due to the fact that 16 per cent of students enrolling to the social work degree are black or black British in comparison with the five 5 per cent recorded in the HESA data. Conversely, a smaller proportion of social work students self-declare as being from Asian ethnic backgrounds compared to all students in the HESA data.

Gender

Throughout the existence of the degree female enrolees have considerably outnumbered male enrolees (with an average of 85 per cent against 15 per cent). This ratio has not changed significantly since the introduction of the degree. Universities and Colleges Admission Service figures show that for successful applicants to all higher education courses including social work, females also outnumber males, but not by such a significant margin (55 per cent against 45 per cent). Social work has long been a profession where women

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outnumber men overall and this continues to be the case in terms of enrolments to the degree.

**Disability**

There has been a decrease in the percentage of students enrolling to the degree declaring themselves as disabled. In 2003-04 this figure was 10 per cent, and in both 2004-05 and 2006-07 this was nine per cent. Since then, the figure has fluctuated between two per cent and four per cent. This data has a response rate of 85 per cent. As a point of comparison, HESA data for first year students indicates a self-declared rate of disability of eight per cent. However, without further research it is difficult to know if this reflects an actual decrease in the number of disabled students studying to become social workers.

**The qualifications of students enrolling onto the social work degree**

On average since 2003, 95 per cent of enrolees at postgraduate level have possessed either a prior degree or a Master’s qualification. In contrast, the profile of undergraduate students is far more diverse. A-Levels are the most frequently identified highest previous qualification, with an average of 31 per cent of enrolees having gained at least one A-Level. Other qualifications that feature frequently include ‘other diplomas or certificates’ (13 per cent), ‘Access to Higher Education’ (11 per cent) and degrees (11 per cent). The least frequently cited qualifications for those enrolling onto the social work degree are Master’s degrees (less than one per cent) and non-certified learning (one per cent). A very small proportion

13. The disability data needs to be treated with some caution as there is a high and fluctuating non-response rate for this.
14. HESA data taken from www.hesa.ac.uk/dox/dataTables/studentsAndQualifiers/download/disab1011.xls
Concerns about the calibre of individuals studying to become social workers have regularly been raised during the lifetime of the GSCC. Often these concerns have focused on the level of qualifications held by those enrolling to the degree. For instance, the Children’s’ Schools and Families Select Committee in its 2009 report on the Training of Children and Families Social Workers noted that:

“Almost half of students entering social work undergraduate degree programmes in 2006–7 had fewer than 240 UCAS points (three grade Cs or equivalent at A-Level), compared to fewer than a quarter of entrants to teaching and nursing degrees”.

Such concerns precede the establishment of the GSCC, and were themselves one of the rationales for introducing a degree level qualification.

The GSCC requires providers of the social work degree to:

“Ensure that, in addition to the university’s own admission requirements for the degree, all entrants have achieved at least Key Skills Level 2 in English and mathematics. This would normally be equivalent to grade C in the GCSE examination in English and mathematics.”

However, these requirements only constitute a basic minimum. Beyond this, the issue of determining the qualifications that entrants to the degree must possess was delegated to the institutions delivering the degree.

Where HEIs have made efforts to increase access to the social work degree amongst people from a wide range of backgrounds, this has sometimes meant opening routes to the degree to individuals who do not have strong conventional academic qualifications but who have been assessed as having the

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15. The report is available at www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmchilsch/527/527i.pdf
potential to become qualified social workers. The Children’s Schools and Families Select Committee noted that a balance needed to be struck between setting rigid qualification requirements and getting the right people to study social work:

“...capable candidates with the right personal qualities, particularly mature candidates, could be discouraged or excluded from social work training by a rigid emphasis on A-Level results.”

The GSCC took the view that it was not the place of the regulator to set national qualification entry requirements for access to the social work degree and that it was down to HEIs to identify the qualifications that entrants to the degree should possess. To set national standards would be to take away from the independence of HEIs and would not be a proportionate or ‘light touch’ response for the regulator to take.

Learning points

The removal of the age bar for individuals qualifying as social workers has resulted in a significant expansion in the number of individuals under the age of 20 enrolling to the degree.

A considerably higher proportion of individuals enrolling to the social work degree declared their ethnicity to be non-white compared to HESA data for all students in the UK.

This difference is accounted for by a significantly higher proportion of individuals enrolling to the social work degree who declare their ethnicity as black.

Female enrolments to the degree significantly outnumber male enrolments, reflecting a long established characteristic of the social work profession.

A tension exists in the sector between the desire to ensure that social work is open to those from all backgrounds, particularly backgrounds where attendance at university has not been common, and a desire to see entrants to the degree with high levels of previous educational attainment. The GSCC did not see it as its role to set national qualifications requirements for entry onto the social work degree.
Practice placements

There has been an increase in the number of practice placements being undertaken annually since the introduction of the degree, as might be expected from enrolment figures. However, it needs to be noted that during the early period of the degree, Diploma in Social Work courses were still running. Therefore, it is arguably only in recent years that a true reflection of the demand for placements for the degree can be identified. The annual number of placements reached 12,698 in 2006-07, and 13,797 in 2007-08.

The academic year 2009-10, the most recent year for which data is available, saw 13,802 placements being undertaken, which is the highest ever recorded.

Info-point two: Assessed work-based learning

As with many other professions, as part of their training, social workers are required to undertake periods of assessed workplace-based learning. These are referred to in the sector as ‘practice placements’ or ‘practice learning opportunities’. Social workers are currently required to undertake a minimum of 200 days of practice placements as part of their course. Practice placements take place in a wide variety of employers, including local authorities, voluntary sector agencies and private agencies.
Section one: How has social work education changed since 2003?

Chart 3: Practice placements undertaken

- 2004-05: 9,000
- 2005-06: 12,000
- 2006-07: 15,000
- 2007-08: 15,000
- 2008-09: 15,000
- 2009-10: 15,000

The number of practice placements undertaken has shown a steady increase from 9,000 in 2004-05 to 15,000 in 2009-10.
In recent years there has been a decline in the proportion of placements that give students experience of social work tasks involving legal intervention - ‘statutory’ placements. This has fallen from 59 per cent in 2006-07 to 54 per cent in 2009-10. However, in absolute terms the number of such placements has remained relatively stable, changing from 7,418 (2006-07) to 7,425 (2009-10). What has happened is that the supply of statutory placements has remained static in a context where there has been a growth in demand for placements as enrolments to the degree have increased.

The supply of placements is largely dependent on the ‘good will’ of employers - there is no requirement on employers to provide such placements. The GSCC does, though, distribute funding for employers as a contribution towards their costs in planning, delivering and assessing students while they are on placement (practice placement funding).

During the GSCC’s existence there have been concerns in the sector for a considerable period of time about the supply, quality and relevance of practice placements for social work students. Given that a large proportion of social work employers and providers of practice placements are within the public sector, concerns more recently have focused on whether the current restrictions on public spending may be placing additional pressure on the supply of placements. Such concerns have not, though, been fully supported by the data that the GSCC itself gathered through regulating social work education and training.
Higher education institutions are required by the GSCC to audit the practice placements that their students are undertaking. In response to concerns regarding the quality of placements, the GSCC took an important role in developing a tool that all institutions could use for this quality assurance process, the Quality Assurance of Practice Learning (QAPL) tool. This set of quality assurance standards for institutions to use in their auditing of practice learning placements, was made compulsory for all institutions to use from October 2010. Its use ensured that consistent data regarding the quality of placements undertaken was gathered.

More recently the GSCC has undertaken research into employers’ views on the provision of practice placements. The research, *The supply of social work practice placements: Employers’ views*, reports on how employers are experiencing current issues around supply. The results show that while the current situation is challenging, overall the employers responding to the survey have managed to keep the supply of practice placements stable during the period covered by the research (2009-10 to 2011-12).

This report did show, though, that the supply of practice placements at the level of individual employers fluctuated considerably during the period covered by the research and in some regions, particularly the Midlands and Yorkshire, employers were more likely to report a decline in practice placements.

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17. The report is available at [www.gscc.org.uk/cmsFiles/News%20items/GSCC_The_supply_of_social_work_practice_placements_research_report.pdf](http://www.gscc.org.uk/cmsFiles/News%20items/GSCC_The_supply_of_social_work_practice_placements_research_report.pdf) until 31 July 2012 and then via the National Archives.
In addition to concerns about the decline in the number of practice placements there was also considerable concern about the quality of practice placements. The GSCC developed a quality assurance tool (QAPL) that institutions were required from 2010 to use to gather data regarding the quality of the placements that their students were undertaking (see Info-point three).

Central to the effective provision of high quality practice placements is the relationship between the institution delivering the social work degree and the employer providing the placement. Whilst the GSCC has been involved in initiatives to attempt to strengthen this relationship, it has relatively limited powers in this respect. In practice, as the regulator of the social work degree, the GSCC has operated one step removed from the relationship between the employer and the HEI. It has had no powers over employers to compel them to provide placements or to monitor the quality of the placements that they were delivering. The GSCC also needed to be mindful of the difficulties that both parties face - institutions delivering the degree trying to secure an adequate supply of placements for their students, and employers dealing with the pressures of a difficult economic climate.
The academic year 2009-10 witnessed a record number of practice placements being undertaken. The supply of statutory placements has remained steady. However, this is in a context of increased demand. Ensuring a sufficient number of relevant practice placements that are of the required quality is an ongoing challenge. Currently, at a national level, supply does appear to match demand. However, in some regions, particularly the Midlands and Yorkshire, employers were more likely to report a decline in their provision of practice placements. The provision of placements largely depends on the goodwill of employers. The relationship between the institutions that provide the degree and local employers is essential to ensuring a sufficient supply of relevant placements of acceptable quality.
Results of those who have enrolled on the social work degree

Of all those who have enrolled onto the degree since its introduction, 25,618 individuals have received a ‘final’ result. Of these, 80 per cent (20,401) passed, 17 per cent (4,387) withdrew and three per cent (830) failed.

Analysis of final results by students characteristics

Since before the introduction of the social work degree there has been a general concern about differences in the performance of social work students with different demographic characteristics. In particular, there has been a concern that students with certain characteristics were performing less well than other students. The data presented below shows that this is a continuing issue for the sector.

Addressing this issue is complex as the reasons for lower pass rates and higher withdrawal rates among different groups are numerous and it is not possible for the regulator to seek to address these at a national level. As public bodies, HEIs are subject to the Equality Act 2010 and the public sector equality duty which requires them, amongst other things, to promote equality of opportunity.18

The GSCC’s role has been to ensure that effective monitoring of equality and diversity issues has taken place within HEIs and that the relevant data was collected and reported upon. The GSCC also worked with King’s College London’s Social Care Workforce Research Unit to look in more detail at differential performance

amongst different groups. This led to the publication of a report in 2009 on *Variations in Progression of Social Work Students in England: Using student data to help promote achievement.*

### Age

The lowest pass rate was for those who were under 20 on enrolment, with just 72 per cent passing the course. The main reason for this is the fact that 24 per cent of this group withdrew from the course. In contrast, the highest pass rate (83 per cent) was amongst those who enrolled between the ages of 25-34. Rates of failure are broadly similar across all age categories with the main differences being in withdrawal rates.

Prior to the introduction of the degree there was a minimum age requirement (22 years) at which students could qualify to be a social worker. With the removal of this age bar, some 1,457 individuals have graduated from the degree whilst being younger than 22. However, it should be noted that only 141 were aged under 21 at the point of graduation whilst 1,316 were aged 21-22. Therefore removing the age requirement has served to open up social work training to younger age groups without very young graduates entering the profession.

### Ethnicity

Chinese students had the highest pass rate (82 per cent) of all ethnic groups and this was followed by white students (81 per cent). The lowest pass rate was amongst black students (74 per cent), and black students also had the joint highest withdrawal rate (19 per cent).

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Section one: How has social work education changed since 2003?

Gender

Men had a lower pass rate than women (75 per cent compared to 80 per cent), a higher fail rate (four per cent compared to three per cent) and were more likely to withdraw from the social work degree (21 per cent compared to 16 per cent).

Disability

Those who declared themselves as disabled had a considerably lower pass rate (70 per cent) than those who did not declare themselves as disabled (81 per cent). There is also a much higher withdrawal rate for those declaring a disability compared to those who did not (24 per cent versus 16 per cent).

Highest previous educational qualification

As Table 3 shows, there is a general tendency for those with the highest previous educational qualifications at enrolment to have the highest pass rates. Therefore, possession of a Master’s (90 per cent), NVQ Level 4 (86 per cent) or a degree (85 per cent) at the point of enrolment were most strongly associated with passing the social work degree. In contrast, possessing no previous qualification (67 per cent) or NVQ level 2 (72 per cent) at enrolment was most strongly associated with lower pass rates.
The exception to this trend is those enrolling with A-Levels, who have a lower than expected pass rate, given their level of the qualification. This would appear to be related to the link between age and pass rate, where the lowest pass rate was experienced by those under 20 at enrolment. Of the 7,907 individuals with a final result who enrolled with an A-Level as their highest previous qualification, 33 per cent of them were under 20 years old when they enrolled.

Table 3: Final results by highest previous qualification at enrolment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qualification</th>
<th>Passed (%)</th>
<th>Failed (%)</th>
<th>Withdrawn (%)</th>
<th>Number (=100%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>327</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S/NVQ Level 4</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>279</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5,339</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foundation degree</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S/NVQ Level 3</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GCSE or equivalent</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>147</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other diploma/certificate</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2,483</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O’ Levels or equivalent</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>506</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher diploma</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1,031</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-certified learning</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-Levels or equivalent</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>5,607</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access To Higher Education</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>904</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S/NVQ Level 2</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not provided</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7,601</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>25,618</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In terms of age-groups, the lowest pass rate was experienced by those under 20 at enrolment. Self-identification as Chinese was associated with the highest pass rate of all ethnic groups. Self-identification as black was associated with the lowest pass rate of all ethnic groups. Men have a lower pass rate than women. A declaration of disability at enrolment was associated with a considerably lower pass rate than a declaration of no disability. In general, those with the highest previous academic qualifications at the point of enrolment had the highest pass rates. An exception is those with A-Levels, held by many of those enrolling under the age of 20, which were associated with a lower than expected pass rate.
The development of a new post-qualifying (PQ) framework

The framework of training for qualified social workers in England, which the GSCC had inherited from its predecessor body the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW), came under review in 2003.

A consultation was held at this point which looked at the effectiveness of the framework to ensure it was relevant to changes that had taken place in the sector, such as the introduction of the new degree and the opening of the Social Care Register.

It was agreed that a new, up-to-date framework for professional development was necessary to encourage ongoing learning and excellence in practice, and in 2004 a new framework was agreed following an extensive consultation.

The new post-qualifying (PQ) framework was made up of three awards: the Post-Qualifying Award in Specialist Social Work; the Post-Qualifying Award in Higher Specialist Social Work; and the Post-Qualifying Award in Advanced Social Work.

Courses covered five different specialisms: Children, Young People, their Families and Carers; Leadership and Management; Mental Health; Practice Education; and Social Work with Adults.

A separate report evaluating GSCC data on post-qualifying courses will be published by the Social Care Workforce Research Unit at King’s College. The most recent year that the GSCC analysed this data was 2010. At this point:

- a total of 332 post-qualifying courses had been approved under the new framework. The most frequently approved course was Children, Young People, their Families and Carers, with 105 approvals;
- this was reflected in enrolments, with 55 per cent of enrolments being to Children, Young People, their Families and Carers courses;
- of all courses approved, 164 were at specialist level, 99 at Higher Specialist Level and 69 at Advanced Level; and
- a total of 9,403 individuals had enrolled on these courses.
This section focuses on the approach that the GSCC took to regulating social work education. Some of the factors that influenced this approach are identified and how the GSCC changed this approach as it learned from its experience over time is discussed. It sets out the initial approach taken by the GSCC to regulating social work education, the powers that it had available to it to bring about improvements to the provision of social work education and how the GSCC sought to change its approach in the light of the experience of regulating the sector.

In contrast to the other main functions of the GSCC, the regulation of social work education had been undertaken in England prior to the GSCC’s establishment. The Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW), had been responsible for setting standards and approving social work education since 1971.

The establishment of the GSCC and the inheritance of CCETSW’s legacy

In contrast to the other main functions of the GSCC, the regulation of social work education had been undertaken in England prior to the GSCC’s establishment. The GSCC’s predecessor in this role, the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW), had been responsible for setting standards and approving social work education since 1971.

CCETSW’s functions focused solely on education and training and the GSCC took over CCETSW’s functions in late 2001 at which point it was abolished.

Amongst other activities, a central role played by CCETSW was that of helping institutions to develop and maintain high quality courses. It worked in partnership with the organisations delivering these courses, providing assistance and advice. For example the CCETSW staff who visited institutions had the job title of ‘education adviser’.
Formal differences between CCETSW’s and GSCC’s role in social work education

One central difference between CCETSW and the GSCC was that CCETSW was itself an awarding body for qualifications. This meant that it was CCETSW who issued certificates to individuals who had completed a course of training which it had approved. In contrast, the degree in social work is awarded by the higher education institution approved by the GSCC to offer courses.

A second difference was that CCETSW had sole responsibility for the standards and requirements that HEIs delivering the social work degree had to meet. In contrast the GSCC regulates institutions delivering the social work degree against a number of standards and requirements that it does not set itself.

A third difference was that CCETSW had UK-wide responsibility for a range of qualifications across the social care sector, including National Vocational Qualifications, and therefore had responsibility for qualifications undertaken by individuals other than current or social work students. In contrast the GSCC has only been directly involved in the regulation of the social work degree and post-qualifying social work education.
Section two: How did the GSCC regulate social work education?

The GSCC’s initial approach to regulating social work education

The GSCC’s initial model for regulating the delivery of the social work degree had the following main components. Higher education institutions were initially assessed by the GSCC to determine if they should be ‘accredited’ to provide a social work degree course or courses. This process focused on whether the institution had the resources and ability to support such a course or courses. The proposed degree course was then assessed to determine if it should be approved and the GSCC then undertook ongoing monitoring of the institutions where the delivery of the course then took place. Ongoing monitoring of the HEI involved:

- analysing an annual return from the university, which provided the GSCC with required data and answers to set questions;
- regular inspection visits to institutions; and
- a five-yearly ‘re-approval’ process which was a periodic in-depth re-examination of the institutions delivery of a particular course or courses.

During the early period of the GSCC’s existence, the approach the GSCC took to regulating the social work degree was a ‘quality assurance approach’ and this was the term that was often used by the GSCC to describe its practice in regulating social work education. These activities involved the GSCC gathering and assessing a range of data to assure itself that the institution and social work degree course in question was meeting the set requirements.
The standards for social work education

The initial and ongoing assessment of institutions and courses was undertaken against a number of requirements, not all of which were set by the GSCC:

- the Quality Assurance Agency’s Subject Benchmark Statement and accompanying Codes of Practice;

- the Department of Health’s Requirements for Social Work Training;

- the National Occupational Standards for Social Work; and

- the GSCC’s Code of Practice for Social Care Workers.

The GSCC’s Accreditation of universities to grant degrees in social work document was produced in 2002. It set out in more detail the stipulations that HEIs delivering the degree would have to meet, based on the various threshold rules and requirements identified above. It was used both for the initial accreditation of an institution to deliver the social work degree, as well as for the initial approval and ongoing monitoring of courses.

Collectively the four sets of requirements formed a complex matrix that institutions delivering the degree had to meet. The fact that these were held by four different organisations produced a degree of confusion amongst HEIs and the wider sector regarding which organisations HEIs were accountable to.
This also meant that it was not in the GSCC’s direct power to change any of the requirements other than those that it was directly responsible for (the codes of practice and the accreditation document). The GSCC consistently argued for some rationalisation of these requirements to both increase clarity regarding lines of accountability and to increase clarity regarding what was expected of institutions delivering the social work degree.

There has never been a detailed prescribed curriculum for the social work degree and this, together with the high-level nature of the requirements, gave institutions a degree of flexibility in the development of courses. This helped to enable a range of different types of social work degree courses to be developed during the GSCC’s period of regulation including, for instance, the distance-learning course delivered by the Open University and the intensive Master’s level ‘Step Up to Social Work’ courses developed by the Children’s Workforce Development Council. Further, whilst the social work degree is a generic degree, many of the institutions delivering the degree have specialist interest and knowledge in certain areas of social work practice and – whilst having to meet the same requirements – courses have tended to reflect that specialised interest and knowledge to a greater or lesser extent.

However, without a single set of standards which the GSCC owned and was able to assess, the performance of HEIs against this made the task of regulating complicated. In general the GSCC treated the four sets of standards as a ‘threshold’ which universities had to meet in order to continue to maintain their accreditation and approval to deliver the social work degree.
Having the requirements that organisations delivering the social work degree were regulated against held by four different organisations created confusion and made it difficult for the regulator to make necessary changes to these requirements.

The powers available to the GSCC to improve the quality of the social work degree

In practice the way in which the GSCC monitored institutions delivering the degree against the four requirements developed over time. In the initial years of the GSCC’s regulation evidence emerged that a proportion of institutions were not meeting certain requirements, specifically those relating to the involvement of service users and carers in the degree, the provision of practice learning opportunities, and the monitoring of recruitment and progression rates in terms of diversity. In response the GSCC increased the range of questions it asked of institutions and, therefore, the volume of data that it was collecting. In addition further data was also gathered to ensure that the GSCC could
Section two: How did the GSCC regulate social work education?

meet external expectations regarding its ability to provide overview data concerning the social work education sector. This meant that the GSCC’s regulatory activity became more resource intensive both for the intuitions and for the GSCC.

In addition to this ongoing monitoring, the GSCC also had systems in place to enable students, staff, service users, carers and employers to get in contact if they were concerned that courses were not meeting the requirements of the degree. Most universities have robust complaints and whistle-blowing procedures to receive concerns, but the GSCC provided a backstop for when individuals had found it difficult to access these procedures, or were worried about the consequences of doing so.

Through its regulation, then, the GSCC would identify institutions which were either not meeting requirements in certain areas, or where the GSCC identified areas of weakness in its delivery of the degree.

When faced with an institution or a course that was either not meeting the requirements, or had weaknesses in certain areas, the GSCC only ever had one formal sanction available to it which was to withdraw approval for that particular course. The GSCC does not have any intermediary sanctions it can use such as, for example, the power to impose a fine on an institution, impose ‘special measures’ or suspend courses for a period of time.
The GSCC never withdrew approval from a course during its existence. In this respect the GSCC is not unusual amongst organisations with a responsibility for regulating the delivery of entry level education for a profession. Withdrawing approval is a relatively severe and blunt instrument which would have a number of consequences that need to be taken into consideration when its use is being contemplated, not least the lengthy process and disruptive effect on staff and students studying on the programme.

The GSCC has always made the decision to put pressure on the institution to improve the provision rather than close it down. The GSCC has addressed problems and placed pressure on institutions to increase the quality of courses using four main methods:

1. **Building relationships with HEIs**

   Firstly, the relationship between individual inspectors and institutions was utilised. In general, social work educators are motivated to deliver high quality courses and the GSCC found them to be responsive to the observations/identification of issues by its inspectors. In many cases issues could be addressed through this direct relationship, by bringing the issues to the attention of the relevant social work educators. For example, in a small number of cases institutions were persuaded through such engagement to suspend their intake of students in order to address shortages or problems in placement provision or staff.
2. Using inspection visits

Secondly, in effect, the GSCC could put an institution under pressure to improve. Demanding further information or undertaking an inspection visit or visits to an institution is resource intensive for the institution concerned. Visits, for instance, have to be planned for and take up both staff time and other institutional resources when they are being conducted. Further, visits can serve to bring the fact that a particular course or courses are experiencing difficulties to the attention of those with overall responsibility for course provision, such as a university’s vice-chancellor or dean.

3. Publicising information

Thirdly, the GSCC used its ability to make information publicly available. In 2010, the GSCC began to publish its monitoring reports on its website. Making these reports easily available to students when they are deciding where to study helped to create an additional incentive for institutions to try to ensure that they were performing well. This constituted an addition ‘market’ mechanism to encourage and put pressure on institutions to improve.

4. Disseminating good practice

Finally, the GSCC also worked to identify instances of good practice either during its routine monitoring of institutions or through research work in particular areas. Such instances of good practice would then be brought to the attention of the sector either through the GSCC’s annual report on social work education, the publication of reports focused on particular issues, or through the GSCC’s hosting of events. An example of the latter was the GSCC’s organisation in 2008 of a conference to share knowledge on what works in inter-professional learning.
The GSCC only had one sanction available to it, to withdraw approval for a course, and significant barriers exist to its use.

The GSCC had to develop a range of different ways that it can influence or pressure institutions to address problems or raise the quality of their courses.

**Monitoring of the performance of providers of the social work degree**

In its monitoring reports, the GSCC placed institutions into one of three categories according to its assessment of the institutions performance against the requirements:

1. continuing to meet requirements;
2. continuing to meet requirements and taking some actions; and
3. at risk of not meeting requirements.

The most common category for a provider of the social work degree to fall into was the second category. These HEIs had been assessed as meeting the standards for the degree but areas of weakness had been identified which were highlighted in the annual monitoring report. This indicated to the institution that improvements would be expected, and progress would be followed up subsequently.
Section two: How did the GSCC regulate social work education?

either through requesting further information or through visits.

To give the example of one particular academic year, in 2008-09, 20 per cent of institutions were identified as meeting all requirements and three per cent were identified as being at risk of not meeting requirements. The remaining 77 per cent fell into the second category, whereby they were recognised by the GSCC to be meeting all requirements but the GSCC also requested them to make improvements in one or more areas of their course.

Those institutions which had one or more areas where the GSCC asked for improvements would then be followed up. For instance, of those areas that were identified for improvement in the 2007-08 annual monitoring process, in 2008-09, 150 (76 per cent) had subsequently been completed to the GSCC’s satisfaction; 14 had been partially completed (seven per cent) and 28 (fourteen per cent) had not yet been completed. In five cases (three per cent) the GSCC was waiting for further information.

In general, through identifying areas where courses could improve, using the relationship that GSCC inspectors had with those institutions, putting pressure on institutions where there were issues, and publicising difficulties, the GSCC was able both to address problems and act to increase the quality of institution’s courses.
Involvement of service users and carers

A key policy development taking place at the point when the GSCC was established was the move towards what is known as ‘personalisation’. In essence this agenda argued that rather than being perceived as passive recipients of standardised services, service users should be treated as active citizens shaping those services to their own needs. This entailed a view that services should be delivered through a more equal partnership between service users and professionals, with institutions being open to service user involvement.

The GSCC has been strong advocates of this aspect of the personalisation agenda in its regulation of social work education. The most important ways in which this was reflected in the GSCC’s regulatory model were:

- robustly regulating against the stipulation in the Department of Health’s Requirements for Social Work Training that institutions should involve service users and carers in the provision of teaching as well as in the recruitment of students onto the degree course; and
- building up a team of ‘visitors’, service users who accompanied GSCC inspectors on their visits to institutions delivering the social work degree and who contributed to the assessment of whether those institutions were meeting requirements.

The GSCC has produced two reports that analyse and identify lessons from the involvement of service users in its work. Firstly Inspecting social work degree courses: A report on the contribution and effectiveness of people who use social work services and, secondly, a learning report entitled Involving people who use services and their carers in the work of the General Social Care Council. These can be accessed at: www.gscc.org.uk until 31 July 2012 and then via the National Archives.
In March 2008 the GSCC instigated a specific project to systematically review and develop the approach it had been taking to regulating social work education.

Reviewing and changing the GSCC’s approach to regulation

In developing the way it regulated, the GSCC had to take into account the principles of ‘light touch regulation’, identified by Sir Philip Hampton in his report *Reducing administrative burdens: effective inspection and enforcement.* This report identified a number of principles that should be applied throughout the regulatory system. In a broad sense, the ‘light-touch’ agenda created a culture where regulatory bodies were encouraged to focus on the question of whether a particular procedure or action on their part was absolutely necessary.

The GSCC worked to review and amend its inspection and regulation of degree providers to ensure that this was in line with best practice in regulation. One example of the GSCC’s participation in this agenda was its signing up in 2008 to the *Concordat on quality assurance arrangements and data collection for higher education for institutions in England.* Through this the GSCC committed itself to working with other relevant bodies, such as the Higher Education Statistics Agency, to reduce duplication in the collection of data from institutions.

In March 2008 the GSCC instigated a specific project to systematically review and develop the approach it had been taking to regulating social work education. Despite being a relatively new regulator, a sufficient period had elapsed since its establishment to allow the GSCC to reflect on what it had learned from the initial period of regulating.

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This process involved commissioning research, examining other models of regulation, developing expertise amongst staff in relation to regulatory theory, responding to external inquiries and reviews, and reflecting on the experience that the GSCC had acquired. Through this a number of areas of improvement to the approach that the GSCC had previously been operating with were identified.

Due to the announcement of the transfer of the GSCC’s functions to the Health Professions Council it was only possible to partially implement some of these developments. However, an overview is given here of the whole programme of changes as this may be useful to other organisations.

On the basis of this review the following changes were made, or were planned to be made, to the model for regulating social work education:

a. Ending the re-approval of courses

The process of undertaking the five-yearly re-approval of courses was identified as being unnecessary and was, therefore, discontinued. In the development of the new approach it was agreed that issues or problems relating to courses should be picked up through ongoing monitoring rather than through specific periodic in-depth reviews.
Section two: How did the GSCC regulate social work education?

b. The introduction of risk based and targeted inspections

The way in which institutions report to the GSCC, and the way in which the GSCC allocated its resources to follow up and investigate issues was also changed. In essence these changes involved the GSCC markedly reducing the volume of information it gathered from institutions, and therefore the general burden it placed on them, whilst developing a more sophisticated method for assessing the risk that any particular institution presented of not meeting the relevant requirements/standards. The GSCC’s resources could then be better focused on those institutions which constituted the most significant risks.
Developing risk-based regulation

One of the key aspects of the GSCC’s approach that it extensively reconsidered at this point was the way in which it gathered information from institutions, assessed that information and targeted its resources at those institutions where problems existed.

The volume of information that the GSCC was routinely gathering from institutions was identified at this point as being more than was necessary. In part, this volume of data gathering related to the nature of the requirements that the GSCC had to assess the performance of institutions against. In part it also related to external expectations regarding the types of data that the GSCC would hold and provide to the sector.

In a considerable departure from the previous approach it was decided that instead of this routine gathering of data, institutions would be asked to self-declare their status as red, amber or green.

The evidence from other regulatory sectors was that with such an approach – as long as supported by a system of checking and significant sanctions if institutions were found to be providing false declarations – institutions would be honest with the regulator. In this respect it was planned that a certain small percentage of inspection visits would be undertaken at random. These inspections would be supported by an ‘Intel’ software programme that would help to collate and analyse ‘soft intelligence’ about institutions’ performance. Institutions which had been found to be providing false information to the GSCC would be treated harshly.

Institutions risk status would be made public and there would be clear proportionate regulatory interventions based on the identified risk status. A new risk assessment framework was developed to enable this.

With hindsight, the previous approach the GSCC had taken to regulation involved the GSCC itself quality assuring courses, rather than regulating institutions’ own internal quality assurance processes. The new approach identified more clearly the respective responsibility of the institution and the regulator.
c. Publication of data on the performance of providers of the social work degree.

It was also decided that the GSCC should publish its monitoring reports on the institutions delivering the social work degree, and this was implemented from 2010. This publication was aimed at increasing transparency whilst also introducing a market mechanism to improve institutions’ performance, as students could use these reports to decide which institution to study at.

d. Development of an accreditation document focused on outputs

In the light of this development work the requirements in the GSCC’s existing Accreditation document were recognised as being too abstract and not sufficiently output focused. A replacement set of standards were developed that were both clearer and more transparent.

Whilst it was not possible to implement all these changes in full, the process of undergoing this review led to a significant alteration in the way in which GSCC staff perceived the function or regulating social work education.21 The language of ‘regulation’ became more common amongst staff, replacing that of quality assurance. More importantly, the partial implementation of the new approach enabled the GSCC to considerably reduce the routine regulatory burden placed on institutions delivering the social work degree, whilst focusing resources more clearly on the minority of institutions where problems existed.

21. The risk framework and new standards can be downloaded from the GSCC’s website www.gscc.org.uk until 31 July 2012 and then via the National Archives.
The GSCC’s review of its regulatory framework served to identify a number of important changes. These included:

▸ a move away from periodic untargeted regulatory interventions towards risk-based targeted interventions;

▸ the development of a modern risk assessment framework;

▸ the systematic gathering and analysis of ‘soft intelligence’;

▸ publication of annual monitoring reports; and

▸ the development of a new set of outcome focused standards, to replace the accreditation document.

Whilst it was not possible to fully implement these reforms within the GSCC’s lifetime, their partial implementation greatly improved the GSCC’s regulation of social work education.
Further information

If you would like more information on the work of the GSCC or to access an electronic version of this and the other reports in the series please visit:

www.gscc.org.uk

Please note the GSCC will close on 31 July 2012 and the regulation of the social work profession and education will transfer to the Health Professions Council (HPC). To reflect this, the HPC will change its name to the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) from 1 August 2012.

After this time the GSCC website and all of its content will be archived for reference. To access an archive of the website please visit the National Archives:

www.nationalarchives.gov.uk.

You can contact the HPC through their website:

www.hpc-uk.org
This report is part of a suite that focuses on the GSCC’s learning and research and key areas over the last 10 years.

The reports in the series are:

**Learning reports**

- Regulating social workers (2001-12)
- Regulating social work education (2001-12)
- Involving people who use services and their carers in the work of the General Social Care Council (2001-12)

**Research reports**

- The supply of social work practice placements: Employers’ views
- GSCC targeted inspections of Approved Mental Health Professionals (AMHP) courses in England (2011-12)