Social policy and administration

2007

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Preface

Subject benchmark statements provide a means for the academic community to describe the nature and characteristics of programmes in a specific subject or subject area. They also represent general expectations about standards for the award of qualifications at a given level in terms of the attributes and capabilities that those possessing qualifications should have demonstrated.

This subject benchmark statement, together with others published concurrently, refers to the **bachelor's degree with honours**[1]. In addition, some subject benchmark statements provide guidance on integrated master's awards.

Subject benchmark statements are used for a variety of purposes. Primarily, they are an important external source of reference for higher education institutions (HEIs) when new programmes are being designed and developed in a subject area. They provide general guidance for articulating the learning outcomes associated with the programme but are not a specification of a detailed curriculum in the subject.

Subject benchmark statements also provide support to HEIs in pursuit of internal quality assurance. They enable the learning outcomes specified for a particular programme to be reviewed and evaluated against agreed general expectations about standards. Subject benchmark statements allow for flexibility and innovation in programme design and can stimulate academic discussion and debate upon the content of new and existing programmes within an agreed overall framework. Their use in supporting programme design, delivery and review within HEIs is supportive of moves towards an emphasis on institutional responsibility for standards and quality.

Subject benchmark statements may also be of interest to prospective students and employers, seeking information about the nature and standards of awards in a given subject or subject area.

The relationship between the standards set out in this document and those produced by professional, statutory or regulatory bodies for individual disciplines will be a matter for individual HEIs to consider in detail.

This subject benchmark statement represents a revised version of the original published in 2000. The review process was overseen by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) as part of a periodic review of all subject benchmark statements published in this year. The review and subsequent revision of the subject benchmark statement was undertaken by a group of subject specialists drawn from and acting on behalf of the subject community. The revised subject benchmark statement went through a full consultation with the wider academic community and stakeholder groups.

QAA publishes and distributes this subject benchmark statement and other subject benchmark statements developed by similar subject-specific groups.

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[1] This is equivalent to the honours degree in the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (level 10) and in the Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales (level 6).

The Disability Equality Duty (DED) came into force on 4 December 2006[2]. The DED requires public authorities, including HEIs, to act proactively on disability equality issues. The Duty complements the individual rights focus of the *Disability Discrimination Act* (DDA) and is aimed at improving public services and outcomes for disabled people as a whole. Responsibility for making sure that such duty is met lies with HEIs.

The Disability Rights Commission (DRC) has published guidance[3] to help HEIs prepare for the implementation of the Duty and provided illustrative examples on how to take the duty forward. HEIs are encouraged to read this guidance when considering their approach to engaging with components of the Academic Infrastructure[4], of which subject benchmark statements are a part.

Additional information that may assist HEIs when engaging with subject benchmark statements can be found in the DRC revised *Code of Practice: Post-16 Education*[5], and also through the Equality Challenge Unit[6] which is established to promote equality and diversity in higher education.

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[2] In England, Scotland and Wales

[3] Copies of the guidance *Further and higher education institutions and the Disability Equality Duty*, guidance for principals, vice-chancellors, governing boards and senior managers working in further education colleges and HEIs in England, Scotland and Wales, may be obtained from the DRC at www.drc-gb.org/employers_and_service_provider/disability_equality_duty/sectoral_guidance/ further_and_higher_education.aspx

[4] An explanation of the Academic Infrastructure, and the roles of subject benchmark statements within it, is available at www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure

[5] Copies of the DRC revised *Code of Practice: Post-16 Education* may be obtained from the DRC at www.drc-gb.org/employers_and_service_provider/education/higher_education.aspx

[6] Equality Challenge Unit, www.ecu.ac.uk

1   Introduction

1.1   This revised subject benchmark statement for social policy and administration builds on and extends the work started by its predecessor six years ago. Throughout the six-year period since its publication, and as the review period progressed, it seemed more helpful to publish this subject benchmark statement and one for social work under separate covers.

1.2   Although the subject benchmark statement continues to reflect many of the themes and ideas incorporated in the subject benchmark statement for social policy and administration and social work, published in 2000, social policy is a rapidly changing discipline and societal changes over the past six years have inevitably influenced its subject matter, necessitating certain adjustments and additions to key themes and topics. Of particular significance perhaps are the ways in which many issues of concern to the study of social policy are increasingly perceived to have a global or international dimension (and this in addition to the globalisation of higher education itself). There is consequently a need to reflect this dimension in social policy teaching programmes. Equally important have been recent changes within the United Kingdom (UK): the nature and impact of devolution, for instance, is clearer now than it was six years ago - as devolved governments continue to develop both distinct policy trajectories in major social policy areas and divergent policy-making regimes. Increasingly, in significant areas of social policy, the UK model is becoming an English model. Other themes and issues have also become more salient - social care is one example, crime and criminal justice, and the impact of population ageing are others.

1.3   These international and national aspects of social policy as an academic discipline are also being mirrored in other changes concerning the enhanced profile of skills and employability in higher education. At supranational level, the ongoing development of the European Higher Education Area indicates a clear desire for greater mobility and credit transfer across European Union member states, the Bologna process being the vehicle through which they are expected to 'elaborate a framework of comparable and compatible qualifications for their higher education systems, which should seek to describe qualifications in terms of workload, level, learning outcomes, competences and profile' (Conference of Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, September, 2003: 4).

1.4   An awareness of the Bologna process is important because it is increasingly likely to influence how social policy programmes are organised and delivered, and how their graduates are 'perceived' by employers in the UK and elsewhere. Of course, the UK academic social policy tradition is highly relevant to the European 'social agenda' and UK social policy teaching programmes could take a lead in actively shaping the Bologna process by providing students with a range of flexible competencies suited to employers' demands in Europe and more globally.

1.5   Similar expectations about the knowledge, competence and employability skills required of (social policy) graduates are also becoming more firmly established at national level. The development of Sector Skills Agreements, for example, is indicative of government desires to support employer-led initiatives to match skill requirements with training, development and investment in particular sectors - Sector Skills Councils (eg Financial Services Skills Council; Government Skills; Lifelong Learning UK) being created to coordinate employment strategies and planning.

1.6   Social policy as both an academic subject and a programme of study is well placed to engage with these new developments partly because many of the core subject-specific and generic skills which characterise the discipline (eg analytical and research skills; communication skills) clearly enhance employability, but partly, too, because social policy is a critical subject that encourages students to reflect not only on what they are being taught but on how their programmes are structured and delivered.

2   Nature and extent of social policy and administration

2.1   Social policy and administration is about the study of the distribution and organisation of welfare and well-being within societies. Its focus is on the ways in which different societies understand and meet the needs of their populations. The discipline is characterised by the following principles:

- the rigorous linking of theoretical analysis with empirical enquiry

- the identification and understanding of different value positions

- a willingness to engage with a range of intellectual traditions and social science disciplines

- the belief that students should acquire the skills and qualities which enable them to become active and informed citizens.

2.2   Social policy is an interdisciplinary and applied discipline which is concerned with analysing the distribution and delivery of resources in response to social need. The subject draws on ideas and methods from sociology, political science and economics, while also using insights from a range of disciplines including social anthropology, human geography, social psychology and social work. As a discipline in its own right, social policy studies the ways in which societies provide for the social needs of their members through structures and systems of distribution, redistribution, regulation, provision and empowerment. It seeks to foster in its students a capacity to assess critically evidence from a range of social science disciplines and to appreciate how social policies are continuously reconstructed and changed. Students will understand the contribution to these processes from those who come from different value positions and different social, cultural and economic backgrounds. They will also appreciate the fact that some social groups are more able to protect, alter or advance their value positions more effectively than others.

2.3   Social policy has a strong focus on those aspects of the economy, society and polity that are necessary to human existence and well-being. These include adequate food and shelter; a sustainable and safe environment; the promotion of health and the treatment of illness; the social, physical, environmental, educational and financial resources to enable individuals to lead independent lives and participate fully in their societies (while recognising the essentially interdependent nature of human existence).

2.4   In addition, social policy also focuses on wider structural and cultural issues. These include different approaches to social control, risk and regulation; poverty, inequality and exclusion; discrimination and empowerment; the role of beliefs and ideologies; policy-making and administrative processes, and the institutional composition of different welfare systems.

2.5   Social policy is typically taught and learnt through a focus upon particular themes, topics or issues within degree programmes drawn from the substantive disciplinary areas outlined above. This subject benchmark statement includes a list given below of the topics commonly found within UK social policy degrees. This is neither an exhaustive nor prescriptive list: different social policy programmes are likely to include various combinations of a number of these, or other relevant topics:

- ageing and social policy

- children and social policy

- citizenship in theory and practice

- crime and criminal justice policy

- community care

- comparative social policy

- devolution and social policy within the UK

- disability and social policy

- economics, economic issues and social policy

- education and social policy

- environmental issues and social policy

- equal opportunity policies and their impacts

- family and social policy

- gender and social policy

- globalisation/transnationalisation/internationalisation and social policy

- health and health care services

- history and development of social policy in the UK

- housing and urban policies

- income maintenance and social security policy

- local governance, local welfare institutions and their policies

- leisure and social policy

- mixed economies of welfare (voluntary, private and informal sectors)

- organisation, administration, governance and management of welfare institutions

- philosophy of welfare

- policy-making processes, including the formulation and implementation of policies, and processes by which services are provided

- political and social theory, ideology and social policy

- poverty, social exclusion and social policy

- public sector management

- race, ethnicity and social policy

- science, technology and social policy

- service-user perspectives and user involvement in the social policy process

- sexuality and social policy

- social care

- social policy and the mass media

- social policy and the 'virtual society'

- social research methods

- supranational social policy

- transport and transport policy

- welfare rights and social policy

- work, employment, and labour market policies

- youth, youth work and associated policies.

2.6   Not only is the content of social policy diverse and changing but the learning routes or pathways that institutions provide for students vary greatly. It is appropriate that the range of topics and issues studied will vary depending on the interests and expertise of teaching staff. The number of topics and issues and the depth to which they are studied will also depend on the level of study and whether a student is pursuing a single honours degree or is combining social policy with other subjects.

2.7   The above refers to core and optional components of a single honours programme. However, there are joint honours, interdisciplinary and other programmes that do not necessarily lead to named social policy degrees. In these cases, content should be drawn, as appropriate, from the areas listed in paragraph 2.5.

3   Subject knowledge, understanding and skills

Knowledge and understanding

3.1   It is inappropriate to be tightly prescriptive in identifying the knowledge and understanding expected of a graduate in social policy. This is because social policy is a broad and dynamic subject, the content of which, of necessity, has to remain responsive to wider social changes.

3.2   Graduates of single honours social policy programmes in the UK should be able to demonstrate **knowledge** of the:

- origins and development of UK welfare institutions and the social and demographic contexts in which they have operated

- contemporary activities and organisation of the main institutions of the UK welfare systems, including the provision, financing and regulation of social security, education, health and social care, and housing

- framework, operation and financing of the policy process

- operation and impact of non-governmental sources of welfare including the informal, voluntary and private sectors, and of how these interact within mixed economies of welfare

- main features of the interrelationship between social policies and differently placed communities, families and individuals

- ways in which other countries organise their social policies and welfare institutions

- sub-national and supranational dimensions of social policy, including the role and organisation of the European Union

- international and global contexts of social policy

- some of the more significant sources of data about social welfare and the main research methods used to collect and analyse data.

3.3   Students should be able to demonstrate an **understanding** of:

- interdisciplinary approaches to social policy topics and issues

- the key concepts and theories of welfare, including human needs and social welfare; inequality, poverty and exclusion; citizenship, social difference and diversity; theories of the state and policy making; theories and methods of comparative analysis

- how different social groups and individuals experience, respond to and contest social policies

- the political economy of welfare and how values and principles are related to political and economic interests

- the history of contemporary social problems and of social policy responses to them

- how key 'drivers' such as globalisation and demographic change affect social policy making and the nature of the policy process

- how welfare institutions operate within broader welfare systems

- the strengths, weaknesses and uses of social research and research methods.

Subject-specific abilities and skills

3.4   Graduates in social policy will be able to demonstrate that they can:

- use some of the established theories and concepts of social policy and other social sciences to analyse how social needs, social problems and policies themselves are constructed and understood in both national and international contexts

- seek out, use and evaluate qualitative and quantitative data derived from social surveys and other research publications

- undertake either on their own, or in collaboration with others, investigations of social questions, issues and problems. This will involve skills in problem identification; the collection, storage management and manipulation of data, including secondary data, and other information; the use of archival sources; the construction of coherent and reasoned arguments; and the presentation of clear conclusions and recommendations

- distinguish among and critically evaluate different theoretical, technical, normative, moral and political approaches to social problems and issues.

Generic skills

3.5   In addition to subject-specific skills, the study of social policy equips students with combinations of personal and general skills. These skills are often highly transferable and valued by potential employers. They also provide a foundation for continuing and lifelong learning and for active engagement as citizens in the wider life of a society. They broadly consist of:

- problem-solving skills: social policy encourages imagination and flexibility in seeking solutions to social problems

- data collection and research skills: to discover information, to manipulate data and to discover their meaning

- evaluative and analytical skills: social policy teaches students to summarise and analyse arguments, reports, documents and other written and verbal data

- sensitivity to the values and interests of others: the teaching of social policy contributes to the development of students' capacity for self-reflection and in particular their ability to listen and interact with others, and to take account of their own normative and moral positions in order to understand how human needs are experienced and met.

3.6   In addition to the above, social policy students will have developed the following generic skills in the course of their studies:

- communication skills: the ability to convey ideas and arguments effectively to others, using a variety of media, to a range of audiences. This would include the ability to write, discuss and present arguments and ideas using appropriate academic conventions

- self-management of learning: the ability to work autonomously supported only by broad guidance as to sources and objectives. Graduates will be able to organise their learning in terms of planning, timing and presentation. Furthermore, they will be able to reflect on their learning in ways that enhance their personal and professional development

- teamwork skills: social policy graduates will have developed interpersonal skills that allow them to collaborate with others in research and problem solving

- information and communications technology skills: social policy graduates will be able to use information technology and software to word process, store, retrieve and analyse data, and conduct various forms of computer-based analysis. They will use email and other communications technologies, and know how to obtain and evaluate information relevant to their studies from the internet, conduct online electronic database searches, and use interactive learning and teaching software.

4 Teaching, learning and assessment

4.1 The objectives for a degree in social policy are to produce independent learners who are competent in a range of knowledge, resources and skills appropriate to their level of study. Social policy shares in common with other social sciences a range of different teaching methods and techniques. Social policy is especially keen that students should directly engage with the current debates and arguments surrounding social and policy issues. To this end, in addition to the imaginative deployment of traditional teaching methods and academic materials, students will be expected to draw upon appropriate alternative resources such as:

● contemporary mass media

● video/DVD material

● work placements and visits to relevant organisations.

4.2 Constructive alignment of learning outcomes and methods of assessment encourages clarity in curriculum design and transparency in the links between assessment and learning. Methods of assessment should reflect progression within undergraduate programmes and assessment strategies will include a range of methods which allow students from different backgrounds and with diverse life experience to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of the discipline effectively.

4.3 It is appropriate to use a range of assessment strategies, which could include the following:

● unseen examinations

● seen, open-book or take-away examinations

● essays and reports

● critical reviews and commentaries

● analytical exercises

● individual or group presentations

● a project-based or work-experience report

● a dissertation

● computer-based assessments.

5 Benchmark standards

5.1 It is recognised that many students studying social policy will be taking joint degrees, or taking social policy modules in the context of a wider social science programme. However, in turning to the question of standards, guidance is based on the achievement expected of a BA (or equivalent) single honours graduate in social policy and administration. Drawing upon *The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*, honours graduates in social policy will have developed 'an understanding of a complex body of knowledge' and will have also developed 'analytical techniques and problem-solving skills that can be applied in many types of employment'.

5.2   The standard expected of two types of graduate is addressed in this document - a **threshold** graduate and a **typical** graduate. The former describes the standard achieved by a minimally acceptable honours graduate. The typical level of achievement describes student performance around the median, which is where the performance of the majority of students currently lies. It is important to note, however, that a significant proportion of graduates will perform above this 'typical' level.

Threshold graduate

Knowledge and understanding

5.3   Threshold social policy graduates will be able to demonstrate a basic knowledge and understanding of the topics in the course of study that they have undertaken, as outlined in section three, and a working knowledge of the principal institutions of the UK welfare systems. Threshold graduates will be able to demonstrate a basic understanding of core social policy issues and also be able to offer some critical reflection of the theories and concepts that are presented in teaching and in relevant literature.

Subject-specific skills

5.4   Threshold graduates will be able to demonstrate:

- well-developed descriptive skills and basic analytic skills

- an ability to distinguish between some of the core theories, concepts and approaches in social policy

- a basic ability to seek out, use and evaluate data derived from social surveys and other research publications

- a basic ability to undertake investigations of social questions, issues and problems

- a sufficient grasp of research methods and their application to enable them to comment on research evidence.

Generic skills

5.5   Threshold graduates will be able to demonstrate achievement of the following generic skills:

- problem-solving skills: evidence of an ability to propose alternative solutions to social problems

- data collection and research skills: a basic ability to collect and understand data

- evaluative and analytical skills: an ability to provide accurate descriptive summaries of arguments, reports, documents and other written and verbal data

- sensitivity to the values and interests of others: a basic ability to identify and take account of different normative and moral positions in order to understand how human needs are felt and met

- communication skills: a basic ability to communicate a line of argument both verbally and in writing: an ability to prepare and deliver a basic presentation using appropriate technical aids as necessary

- self-management of learning: a basic ability to work autonomously and to organise learning in terms of employing basic time management skills and working to deadlines

- teamwork skills: a basic ability to engage in small group work or projects

- information and communications technology skills: a basic ability to demonstrate knowledge of, and ability to use, a limited range of information and communications technology skills

- academic conventions: a basic ability to understand and use a standard referencing system (eg Harvard) and be able to construct a basic bibliography.

Typical graduate

Knowledge and understanding

5.6   Typical social policy graduates will be able to demonstrate a thorough knowledge, critical and systematic understanding of key aspects of social policy including a critical understanding of the functioning of the institutions of the UK welfare state and at least some of the other welfare systems operating in other parts of the world. They will be able to demonstrate an ability to review, consolidate, extend and apply their knowledge and understanding across a wide range of social policy issues and be able to reflect critically on ideas that are presented in teaching and in relevant literature.

Subject-specific skills

5.7   Typical graduates will be able to demonstrate:

- well-developed descriptive and analytic skills

- an ability to understand the core theories, concepts and approaches in social policy and a clear ability to distinguish among them

- an understanding, and ability to reflect upon, the underlying value base of many policy proposals and distinguish clearly between normative and empirical arguments

- a sufficient grasp of research methods and their application to enable them to comment on research evidence

- a strong familiarity with a range of research methods and an ability to reflect critically on their use in various research studies.

Generic skills

5.8   Typical graduates will be able to demonstrate achievement of the following generic skills:

- problem-solving skills: a strong ability to propose and critically evaluate alternative solutions to social problems

- data collection and research skills: an ability to retrieve, synthesise and analyse information independently from varied sources

- evaluative and analytical skills: an ability to critically assess and summarise arguments, reports, documents and other written and verbal data

- sensitivity to the values and interests of others: an enhanced ability to identify and understand the different normative and moral positions in order to appreciate how human needs are felt and met - and to incorporate this understanding into social policy analysis

- communication skills: an ability to develop a strong line of argument both verbally and in writing; an ability to prepare and deliver a well-focussed presentation using appropriate technical aids as necessary

- self-management of learning; an ability to employ well-developed self-directed study and learning skills, and to organise learning in terms of employing time management skills, and a capacity to work to deadlines

- teamwork skills: an ability to contribute effectively to successful group work and collective projects

- information and communications technology skills: an ability to demonstrate knowledge and application of a wide range of information and communications technology skills

- academic conventions: an ability to understand and use a standard referencing system (eg Harvard) and be able to construct a complex bibliography.

Appendix A - Membership of the review group for the subject benchmark statement for social policy and administration

This subject benchmark statement is produced by the Executive Committee of the Social Policy Association in association with the Joint University Council Social Policy Committee. The lead authors are:

Professor Nick Ellison (Chair)   University of Leeds

Dr Jim Goddard   University of Bradford

Dr Sandra Shaw   University of Salford

Mr Adam Whitworth   University of Oxford

Appendix B - Membership of the original benchmarking group for social policy and administration and social work

Details below appear as published in the original subject benchmark statement for social policy and administration and social work (2000).

Professor P C Alcock (Chair)	University of Birmingham
Mr J Baldock	University of Kent at Canterbury
Dr M Cahill	University of Brighton
Professor D Cook	University of Wolverhampton
Professor J S Ditch	University of York
Professor E Evason	University of Ulster
Dr D Gladstone	University of Bristol
Professor H Glennerster	London School of Economics and Political Science, University of London
Dr M May	London Guildhall University
Dr R M Page	University of Leicester
Ms S Tester	University of Stirling