Routes into Social Work

The Social Work Qualification

The professional qualification to practise as a social worker is currently an honours degree in social work that involves course work and a minimum of 200 days spent in practice settings. You can set your sights on a career in social work as a prospective student, as a graduate or as a social care worker seeking new challenges. You can also embark on this profession if you wish to change careers altogether. There are various ways of achieving the qualification depending on your educational achievements and work experience. These are the options:

School Leavers

If you are 16 or 17 and are interested in this area of work, you should consider looking for work in social care first. Talk to your school careers service for further advice. You could also visit the website www.socialworkandcare.co.uk for links to national training organisations that give advice about what to do next.

Students

If you are a school leaver or do not have a degree in any subject, you will need to take an honours degree in social work. Like most degrees, this normally involves three years of full-time study. It can otherwise be obtained through part-time study at university or college. If you already work in social care you may be able to study through a work-based route. The degree is vocational and enables you to meet the national occupational standards required for social work. The 200 days spent in practice settings is essential to meeting these standards.

Graduates

If you already have a degree in another subject, some universities offer a shorter postgraduate course in social work, which will enable you to practise as a social worker.

Career Changers

A high proportion of social workers come to the job as a second or third career. Your previous experience will be valued and may be considered in place of formal academic qualifications when considering your eligibility to join a degree course. Bursary support may also be available.

Because career-changers may be older and have family responsibilities, it can be challenging to survive financially while following the course. However, you may be able to find a job as a social care worker or social care assistant, and progress towards the qualification as you work. Your employer may also be able to help with the cost of the training.
What else do you need in order to practise?

To practise as a social worker, in addition to completing the professional qualification in social work, you must also register with the General Social Care Council (GSCC) which is responsible for regulating the workforce.

Are you eligible to apply for the degree in social work?

Universities have their own entrance requirements. Normally, they expect two A level qualifications although they may accept mature students with work experience and without formal academic qualifications. As a minimum requirement for this degree you will need to have at least Key Skills level 2 in English and Maths – the equivalent to grade C in GCSE exams. Social work is about communication and all applicants to courses must demonstrate that they can communicate clearly and accurately in spoken and written English.

Some universities expect applicants to have a certain amount of experience in social work before training begins, for example as a service user, a volunteer or an employee in social care.

You will also need to undergo a Criminal Records Bureau check before you can start training and register with the GSCC.

For a full list of universities and colleges who offer undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, visit the GSCC website at www.gsc.org.uk or speak to an adviser on 0845 604 6404.

Financial support during training

If you are an undergraduate or graduate and seek to practise as a social worker, there may be a bursary available to assist your study towards the social work qualification. The bursary is not means tested and includes payment of tuition fees. Bursaries are administered by the NHS Business Services Authority (NHSBSA). You can contact them by telephone on 0845 6101122 or visit their website www.ppa.org.uk/ppa/swb.htm.

Undergraduate students may also apply for a student loan. You may be entitled to allowances for dependants and special needs too. Graduates do not normally qualify for student loans or Local Education Authority (LEA) funding, but they can apply to the GSCC, which also administers a special means-tested bursary for graduates. Allowances for special needs or for dependants may also be payable.

If you already work in social care, your employer may be able to pay for your training to become a social worker. Some employers can offer traineeships to enable you to study; others will allow paid or unpaid leave to train.