Practice learning guidance

Use of the PCF and assessment criteria for practice learning
Use of the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) and assessment criteria for practice learning

The aim of the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) is to support judgments about progression in a holistic way across the capabilities, through developing flexible and appropriate assessment strategies linked to the nine domains.

1. Aims of this guidance
- To promote understanding and effective use of PCF capabilities for practice learning.
- To outline the differences between capabilities and assessment criteria.
- To outline principles for the development of assessment criteria by programmes.
- To promote consistency and raise standards in the assessment of students on placement.

Further guidance to support holistic assessment based on the PCF will include a set of principles, templates and case studies. (Link to be added when available)

2. Elements of high quality practice placements
Agreed thresholds for practice placements, linked to the PCF, are part of the new arrangements to be implemented by 2013. It should be noted that programmes will also have to ensure that placements as part of the integrated learning undertaken on social work degrees courses enable students to meet HPC Standards of Proficiency¹ for Social Work (SoPs) if successfully completed.

3. The Professional Capabilities Framework and its role in practice placements

3.1 The Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) sets out the profession’s expectations of what social workers should be able to do at each stage of their career and professional development.

The PCF provides a common basis for the profession to exercise judgment about the quality of practice in a wide range of contexts and at different levels. One of its key uses will be in the holistic assessment of students on placement and at the point of entry to the profession, but it has many other uses as well – for example career progression, CPD, supervision and appraisal systems.

3.2 The PCF will replace the National Occupational Standards for Social Work in England (although these will still apply in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland). The use of PCF represents a different conceptual approach to the assessment of students on placement.

Previously, there was a focus on defining competence (or performance) at a given level, with an expectation that each element had to be evidenced – the so-called ‘tick

¹ [http://www.hpc-uk.org/](http://www.hpc-uk.org/)
box’ approach – leading to concerns that judgments about overall capability could get lost where there is a micro focus on competence.

3.3 Given the significance of learning and development at the early stages of professional development, there is a comprehensive set of expectations for the qualifying level of social work. These have been developed further and broken down into capabilities and thresholds for progression for each of the assessment points during a student’s training:

- Readiness for direct practice
- End of first placement
- End of final placement/end of initial qualification

3.4 The expectations in relation to completion of the final placement have not been specified separately from those expected at the end of the qualifying programme as a whole. Programmes will establish their own criteria for completion of the final placement using the PCF. Assessment of students’ performance and learning on placement is likely to form a substantial part of the final assessment using the PCF, since in most programmes the end of the placement will be very close to the end of the programme. However passing the last placement will not in itself provide sufficient evidence of having met the PCF capabilities at qualifying level as a whole; other assignments will be used to test aspects of the framework, notably the knowledge requirements and also ensure that HPC Standards of Proficiency have been met.

These capabilities are now available [http://www.collegeofsocialwork.org/pcf.aspx](http://www.collegeofsocialwork.org/pcf.aspx)

<table>
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<th>The PCF capability statements form the framework from which assessment strategies and criteria can be developed. It will be for each programme, based on the principles for holistic assessment, to determine how the capability statements become operational as assessment criteria. Partnerships are encouraged to collaborate on such arrangements across local or regional groups wherever possible.</th>
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3.4 There are a number of benefits in using the PCF to underpin the assessment of students. These include:

- giving more scope to the judgment of the practice educator about a student’s suitability to practice
- providing clearer shared national standards about what is expected of students at different points in their programme, highlighting the elements of progression that are significant (e.g. confidence, ability to work more autonomously, professional decision-making, engagement in more complex situations, use of authority)²
- enabling clearer identification by the practice educator of the areas that students need to work on to demonstrate their practice

² These are described fully in the Purpose, development and use of the Professional Capabilities Framework for Social Workers

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• introducing students to the framework for professional development that will be used throughout their career as a social worker

4. The assessment of students on placement
4.1 The PCF provides an opportunity to develop new approaches to the assessment of students on placement. Whilst HEIs will hold the formal responsibility for assessment systems and quality assurance, these will be managed through partnerships of HEIs, employers and service users and carers.

Partnerships will be responsible for:
• developing holistic assessment criteria for placements from the capabilities which integrate with the overall learning of the student on a qualifying programme
• devising methods of gathering evidence to determine whether or not the assessment criteria have been met.
• setting up fair and robust procedures for consistency, moderation and appeals of the assessment of practice.
• ensuring practice educators are sufficiently prepared and supported to undertake this role

4.2 Assessment
4.2.1 Assessment strategies and criteria should be informed by the principles of assessment outlined in the Guidance on assessment strategies and the ‘process curriculum’.

This should include direct observation and feedback from other professionals and service users. The choice and combination of assessment methods will be made by the partnership, but they should be underpinned by two important principles:

• Practice educators should be empowered and supported in making overarching judgments about the quality of a student’s practice. Whilst giving due consideration to a student’s progression in relation to the nine domains in the PCF, practice educators must be able assess a student’s overall capability to work at the level required for the placement concerned based on clear evidence.

• The criteria for passing the first and last placement should be clearly linked to the student’s progression in meeting the PCF as a whole, through other assessed work at an appropriate level. At the point of qualification, this means that passing the final placement should form a substantial part of the final assessment but will not be the only expectation that has to be met.

3 See resource paper ‘Guidance on assessment strategies’

4 See resource paper ‘Process curriculum – Enhancing the professional nature of social work education’

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4.2.2 A key component of the many current approaches to assessing practice is the portfolio, which students write to provide evidence about themselves and how they have met the expected standards. While there remains a central place for self evaluation and critical reflection in professional development that can be demonstrated and assessed through the production of a portfolio, significant weight must be given to assessments made by the practice educator, who has observed the students, in practice and in supervision, and has made a judgment about their abilities.

4.2.3 One outcome of this approach will be to reduce the requirement for documentary evidence, currently needed to evidence specific elements of each unit in each key role of the NOS, both by the student and the practice educator. The more holistic approach can be evidenced in shorter, narrative forms, making reference both to the overall progress (or areas for development) and to each of the nine domains. The specific capability statements will be useful as reference points to identify areas of concern, but do not all need to be addressed individually.

Examples of this approach might include:

- **Development of holistic practice**: Students write an analysis of one or more specific pieces of work, with a reflection on their practice, cross-referenced to the nine capabilities. The practice educator might provide a short commentary at the end.

- **Development of a specific capability** (e.g. PCF 8: Contexts and organisations): Students write a case-study of a piece of work, and provide a commentary about what this demonstrates about their performance in relation to a specific capability. The practice educator writes an overarching narrative on the students’ ability to practice effectively at qualifying level for this capability, drawing on:
  - the students’ case study and commentary
  - the practice educator’s observations of the students in practice
  - discussions in supervision
  - agency records/reports on the case produced by the students

The College is currently undertaking further work to support the consistent use of the PCF in holistic assessment.\(^5\)

**4.3 Systems to support assessment**

4.3.1 In developing an assessment process that gives weight to the judgments of practice educators, it will be important for HEIs and their partners to review their systems for standardisation, moderation, borderline decisions, disputes and appeals to ensure they are robust and fair.

4.3.2 A range of systems should be in place to provide a framework that supports the individual decisions of practice educators. This is likely to include:

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\(^5\) See paper in resource section called ‘Understanding what is meant by Holistic Assessment’
• Processes to prepare/train practice educators for standardisation of assessment prior to taking a student (e.g. using case studies of failing/borderline/good practice).

• A process to review practice placements, especially where there are difficulties or where a borderline or fail might be recommended. This can be undertaken by a Practice Assessment Panel, or an independent practice assessor with experience of social work, practice learning and managing complaints.

• A process to moderate practice educators’ work, where one person or a small group takes an overview of the marking to ensure this is appropriate. This does not usually change individual marks, but exceptional issues would be referred to an Assessment Board or Practice Assessment Panel for re-marking/consideration.

• A transparent process for appeals. These would not usually be allowed on the grounds of the practice educator’s judgment, but on a procedural or context issue for which there was evidence (e.g. the agency was in chaos and the student did not get sufficient supervision to have the opportunity to learn and demonstrate competence).

• An approach to enable students who are assessed as not competent to practice as a social worker to leave the course, wherever possible transferring to a non-professional degree (‘exit’ route).

4.4 Implications for practice educators
4.4.1 Any changes to present methods will have considerable implications for the re-training and CPD of practice educators, and it will be the responsibility of the partnership to ensure all practice educators have opportunities to develop and extend their existing skills, in order to use the holistic approach and feel confident in exercising judgment in the assessment of students.

5. Summary of outcomes for partnerships – use of PCF and assessment criteria in practice learning

Can you show that:
• Your assessment criteria for placements has been developed from the PCF based on the principles of holistic assessment?

Have you:
• Devised methods for gathering evidence to determine whether or not the assessment criteria have been met?
• Reviewed procedures for consistency, moderation and appeals?
• Planned and delivered training for practice educators in use of the PCF, new assessment methods and the exercise of professional judgments?

6. Further information