Information for Employers
Talk to the Open University about Our Unique Work-Based (Hons) Degree in Social Work

Questions about Sponsorship

1. What employers can sponsor students on the social work degree?
The BA Social Work (Northern Ireland) degree is an employment-based sponsored programme. This means that the degree is restricted to applicants who are employed as social care workers in organisations that provide social care and/or social work services in Northern Ireland. As an employer you must ensure you meet OU sponsorship criteria before nominating staff to apply to the degree. Staff cannot apply directly to OU.

2. What is a sponsor and what does it involve?
A ‘Sponsor’ is a social work/ social care organisation putting forward an employee/ volunteer to participate in the social work degree. Sponsors undertake tasks to support their employees for the duration of the social work degree (a minimum of 3 years). The term ‘sponsor’ is used whether or not the organisation is also paying the student tuition fees. Responsibilities of sponsors include:
- Working with the OU to select members of staff suitable for training through work-based and supported distance learning.
- Organising Enhanced Disclosure Access NI checks, with checks against all registers including both children and vulnerable adults. This will take place on two occasions; the first prior to the student commencing the course and again in year 3, prior to commencement of the final placement.
- Supporting students by giving full-time release for the duration of the practice learning placements and release to attend practice learning workshops. The first placement will last for 85 days, and the second placement for 100 days. Students undertake placements between Jan-June in both second and third year.
- Provision of social work placements and undertaking the arrangement and supervision of their practice learning (placements).
- Identifying a member of staff to make the practice learning arrangements and liaise with the programme. This would be known as the Agency co-ordinator.
- Appointing a manager to verify 10 days of work experience on one of the first year modules.
- Appointing a qualified practice teacher (and an onsite supervisor if required) for each of the two practice placements. Organisations may incur costs for employing practice teachers.

3. What employers can provide social work placements?
A core condition of sponsorship is the provision of social work placements. Practice learning is an important part of the NI Social Work Degree. Social work students complete two different placements as part of their degree and require additional support from employers to do this. This means employers need to provide opportunities for students to undertake social work functions to meet the Practice Learning Requirements for level 2 and level 3. Employers are required to be a
Designated Practice Learning Provider (DPLP) or Associated Practice Learning Provider (APLP). This is a quality assurance and governance framework for social work education in Northern Ireland, in accordance with the Standards for Practice Learning for the Degree in Social Work (Northern Ireland Social Care Council, 2018).

OU would need to check whether an employer is a DPLP or APLP for placements. Employers can enquire about becoming a Designated/Associated Practice Learning Provider directly on the NISCC website or speak to NISCC who can advise. If you are working in the third sector and only one placement can be provided, or your organisation cannot provide a contrasting practice learning opportunity as per the Practice Learning Requirements, the employer should talk to the NI Social Work Team, to discuss reciprocal arrangements for provision of placements. This is required as part of the regional allocation process undertaken via the Northern Ireland Social Work Degree Partnership (NIDSWP).

4. Does sponsorship mean that an employer pays the fees?
Sponsorship does not refer to how a student is funded on the course; it means that the agency/employer agrees to provide two practice learning placements for the student during the 2nd and 3rd year of the degree and commit to undertake other functions as listed above. When sponsoring a student, an agency/employer may agree to pay all or part of a student’s fees, or alternative funding options may be used.

5. What funding options are available?
The rules for the provision of this degree means that OU has permission to provide a set number of places. At present, we have 15 places, and these are funded by the Department of Health. These places are restricted to applicants who are employed as social care workers employed by Health & Social Care Trusts and designated voluntary organisations. Further eligibility criteria apply. The Department of Health pays students’ fees on these places. It should be noted that recipients of this funding are not eligible to apply for Student Loans or the Student Incentive Scheme.

However, there may be circumstances in which we can take additional students subject to agreement of the NIDSWP. There are alternative funding options that may be available:
- Employers can pay students’ fees and other costs as part of the sponsorship arrangements.
- Employers and students can share a proportion of the fees and associated costs.
- Students can pay their own fees but must also be sponsored by an employer.

Up to date information on fees for each module is available on our website or by contacting the social work team.

6. What are the entrance criteria to study social work at the Open University?
The Open University have essential criteria that prospective students must meet to apply for the Social Work degree:
- UCAS tariff threshold of 96 points or equivalent, OR successful completion of OU module K101/K102 An Introduction to Health and Social Care
- GCSE Grade C or above in English and Maths or equivalencies
- Successful performance at interview
- Sponsorship by a social work/social care employer
- Access NI Enhanced Disclosure Check as a Student Social Worker
- Applicants may need to evidence medical fitness to practice
• Completion of Declaration of suitability
• Successful registration as a Student Social Worker with the Northern Ireland Social Care Council

Click [here](#) to access a helpful tool to help you check whether staff qualifications meet the 96 UCAS points.

7. **What is the process for staff to be recruited onto the degree?**
   As the social work degree is an employer-sponsored programme, this means that applicants cannot apply directly to the Open University. Employers nominate staff to apply and work in partnership with the OU Northern Ireland Social Work Team in the recruitment process. Applicants and their employers will complete an application pack. All applicants must undertake an interview with OU, and this is usually done jointly with the employer.

8. **Do employers have criteria for nominating staff to apply for the degree?**
   While there are OU entry criteria that prospective students must meet to apply for the Social Work degree, employers can also set additional criteria to help shortlist and nominate staff. This can include length of service, retention with the organisation for a period after completing the degree.

9. **How many places are available at the Open University each year?**
   Social work education in Northern Ireland is managed in the context of workforce planning. Therefore, the provision of places on the social work degree is also dependent on the provision of social work places as agreed by the NIDSWP.

10. **Can staff continue working while they study for this degree?**
    As our degree is an employment-based programme our students work as social care workers while studying. This is a distance learning programme, so they study in their own time. Students also attend a combination of online and face-to-face skills workshops which are normally delivered at weekends or evenings. This allows for flexible learning around work and family commitments. We recommend that students need 16-18 study hours per week and encourage employers to provide their staff with study time.

11. **What other operational factors need to be considered?**
    It is important to note that the degree involves two substantial periods of placement in year two (85 days) and three (100 days). During this time staff will not be available to undertake their substantive roles, at least one of the periods of assessed practice learning will be outside the normal place of work, so the student/employee will be effectively absent and may need replacing to ensure services are not affected. The university also recommends that students are provided with protected study leave. Employers need to ensure staff can undertake the degree alongside their existing terms and conditions of employment, including provision of annual leave. This will affect both managers and colleagues and should be discussed and prepared for.

12. **How does an organisation become a sponsor?**
    Employers need to meet certain criteria to ensure they can fulfil the functions of sponsorship, which includes being a DPLP or APLP, as outlined above. Employers can find further information in the [Employer Handbook](#). If you have never sponsored a student on our social work degree, or not within the last 2 years, please follow the
guidance for ‘New Sponsor’. If you are currently sponsoring students or are a recent sponsor, please follow the guidance for ‘Existing Sponsor’. Click here for link to handbook which explains how to implement the degree into a work setting.

For more information, contact our Social Work Team
Email: Ireland-Social-Work@open.ac.uk