

# The Open University BA (Honours) Degree in Social Work (NI)



**Student recruitment and  
selection guidance for  
employers and applicants**



**October 2024 entry**

**Find out more  
about our unique  
employment  
based, distance  
learning  
programme!**

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# Section 1



## Introduction to The Open University

The Open University has pioneered distance learning for over 50 years, delivering exceptional teaching and outstanding support to students across the UK and the world.

The OU is the UK's only university dedicated to distance learning, and is the only UK university to have a significant presence in all four nations.

The OU teaches through its own unique method of distance learning, called 'supported open learning', which is:

- **Flexible** – students largely undertake academic work where and when they choose to fit in with jobs, families and other commitments. Practice learning is less flexible due to partnership and regulatory requirements.
- **All-inclusive** – students get all the high-quality materials they need to study and are provided with the necessary course materials.
- **Supportive** – personal tutors provide academic expertise, guidance and feedback and run online and face-to-face group tutorials (on specific modules); practice tutors support students on placements and specialist advisers are on hand to help with other aspects of OU study and wellbeing.
- **Social** – students get together at tutorials, informal study groups and through online conferencing, study networks and course forums.

OU study allows students to 'earn while you learn' – 70% of OU students work full or part-time during their studies.

OU support over 5,500 students in Northern Ireland on their learning journey and has ranked no.1 for "Overall Student Satisfaction".

# Overview of the programme



# Section 2

The OU has been successfully educating social workers since 1997 and operates across all nations in the UK.

The NI Social Work Degree was approved in April 2020 by NISCC.

The OU are a partner in the NI Degree in Social Work Partnership (NIDSWP).

The OU social work degree is an employment-based, online, distance learning programme.

Students have to be 'sponsored' by an approved agency (DPLP/APLP) and working in social care.

Candidates cannot apply directly to the OU/UCAS – nomination from employer is required. Selection process is very competitive and involves interview. Therefore, not all nominations or organisations will be selected.

Funding routes – Department of Health is the main funder for the vast majority of OU NI social work students, however some employers in statutory sectors also commission a small number of places on the degree. This funding relates to the payment of module fees and practice teacher costs. Students will remain in paid employment during this time. It is not possible for students to self-fund, or apply to this programme independently without a sponsor.

OU students are not entitled to the DoH social work student incentive scheme or student finance – tuition fee payment is in lieu of this.

This is an Honours degree and comprises six 60-credit modules (360 credits in total) over 3 programme levels. Modules consist of academic and practice learning.

Typically, this degree should be completed in 3 years with students studying two 60-credit modules per year. While OU students are categorised as “part-time students”, applicants should be aware that this pathway is equivalent to full-time study at other institutions. In addition, there is a period of overlap, where two modules are studied at the same time.

While this pathway is at full-time study intensity, applicants should be aware that the flexible, distance learning module allows for students to continue working full-time during the degree.

Within this degree, 16-18 hours of distance learning study is required per week, per 60 credit module. This is, however, mostly independent, flexible study in student's own time.

There are approximately 7 tutorials/workshops students to attend, per module. For modules that begin every October, these tutorials are online and typically approx. 2 hours on an evening or weekend. For modules that begin in February, workshops are face-to-face, usually all held in Belfast and may be midweek or weekend. For all modules there is around one tutorial/workshop per month and no lectures to attend.

Students are supported by academic and practice tutors alongside sponsor/ employer for the duration of the degree.

Assessment is based around the 6 Key Roles and The 20 National Occupational Standards through ongoing formative and summative module assessment and practice learning evidence.

Students undertake a number of Tutor Marked Assignments (TMAs) and an End of Module Assessment (EMA), per module. While on placement, students **also** complete a Practice Assessment Report (PAR) which is a portfolio of evidence to demonstrate how key roles and requirements have been met.

Preparation for practice learning is an important element of the degree across all 3 programme levels. In level 1 (K113/123), students must complete 10 practice days and this can be done in their place of work. In level 2 (K216/246) students complete an 85-day practice learning opportunity and this is typically in their place of work, however their role will be as a student social worker. In level 3 (K315) students complete a 100-day practice learning opportunity and this is external to the student's team/organisation. Students can return to their substantive employment/post once placement has completed.

**This degree is a generic qualification, meaning that students are equipped with the skills, knowledge, values and ethic base, to enable them to work within a range of sectors and service user groups. This is achieved through a balance of professional, academic learning and practice learning opportunities, assessed under the six key roles and 20 standards (NI Framework Specification for the Degree in Social Work).**



**What do students study on the social work degree?**

This degree has three stages, each comprising 120 credits.

Students start **Level 1** in October with a module introducing health and social care, followed by a module in February which introduces social work practice, the key roles, standards of conduct and communication skills for social workers. If you already completed the first module (K101/K102) within the past five years, you may be permitted to skip this module and commence study at the second module. You may also be eligible to apply for 'credit transfer' for relevant prior study and permitted to commence the degree with the second Level 1 module.

**Level 2** starts with a module in October of the next year, covering the law and social work, and is followed by a practice module which includes an 85-day placement. This placement begins at the start of January, while the academic module officially begins in the February.

At **Level 3**, students choose one module from a choice of options which commence in October, and conclude their degree with a practice module where they will undertake a 100-day placement. Again, placement begins in early January and the academic module officially starts in the February of final year.

Students should complete their studies in the August/September of the final year, with degree results available early November. Students can register as qualified social workers after that point.





**OU BA (Hons) in Social Work – 3 year pathway (360 credits)**

**Level 1**

Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept
K102 – Introduction to Health and Social Care (60 credits)						K113 – Foundations for Social Work Practice (60 credits) including 10 days verified practice					

**Level 2**

Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept
K271 – Social Work Law (60 credits)						K216 – Applied Social Work Practice (60 credits) including 85 day PLO					

**Level 3**

Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept
One optional module (60 credits): K314 – Approaches to Mental Health; KE322 – Young Lives, Parenting and Families; K318 – Leading, Managing and Caring; K323 – Investigating Health and Social Care						K315 – Critical Social Work Practice (60 credits) including 100 day PLO					

Please note that some OU modules are scheduled for 'reproduction' in 2024/25. This means that the module name will change and with some updates and rewrites to module material. In 2024/25, K113 will likely become K123 and K216 will become K246. This change will have no negative impact on students. In Level 2 and level 3, placement commences early January, with module start in February.

# Guidance for employers and line managers



# Section 3

## The role of sponsorship

As this is a degree programme in which applicants require 'sponsorship' from an approved social care agency, it is important to consider what being a sponsor entails.

Applicants are required to have a 'sponsoring agency' which is an organisation which delivers social work or social care services. Sponsorship does not always mean funding of tuition fees (as HSCT and voluntary/third sector applicants are eligible for DoH funding), but more of a supportive role and meeting practice learning requirements.

A sponsoring agency must be recognised by the Social Care Council as a Designated Practice Learning Provider (DPLP) **OR** a current agreement to be an Associate Practice Learning Provider (APLP), with a recognised DPLP. If an organisation is not currently an approved Practice Learning Provider, they must speak to the Social Care Council and the OU Social Work Professional Lead urgently, however APLP status may not be given in time for this recruitment round. Statutory agencies such as Health and Social Care Trusts, Probation Board NI, Youth Justice Agency and the Education Authority are already approved practice learning providers (DPLPs).

The sponsoring agency must support the applicant to meet the requirements of the OU social work degree and provide a first (level 2- 85 days) Practice Learning



Opportunity (PLO), **typically** within their organisation\*. Employees will need to be released from their substantive role during this period. The organisation should provide a practice teacher (who is not the line manager) and onsite supervisor, where necessary. The Practice Learning Centre (PLC) and/or practice learning coordinator linked to an organisation may be able to support with this, but please speak to the OU if there are any queries.

The sponsoring agency must release the applicant to complete their final (level 3) Practice Learning Opportunity within an external setting where statutory social work tasks can be completed\* (100 days). This placement will be arranged under regional allocation processes with the NI Degree in Social Work Partnership (NIDSWP). The employee will need to be released from their substantive role during this period.

*\* In some organisations (such as PBNI and YJA), students might undertake their first PLO external to their organisation and complete the final PLO within their team. This will be discussed between OU and the relevant training team.*

Within voluntary and third sector organisations, when the applicant is released to complete their Level 3 PLO, the sponsoring agency must be able to facilitate a 'reciprocal' practice learning opportunity through the NIDSWP Regional Allocation process, to compensate for the placement that is taken out of the 'pot', for an OU student. This means organisations need to offer another placement, in addition to any contracted/commissioned placements. If an organisation is not able to facilitate a Level 3 placement, please speak to the OU.

**As a sponsoring agency, before agreeing to support an application, organisations should consider:**

- If they can release the student from work for the recommended study leave – half day per week (however this is at employer discretion)
- If they can release the student from work for their internal PLO, but support them to remain within the team and meet practice learning requirements

- If they can release the student from work completely for their external PLO within another organisation
- If they can backfill posts during the placement periods.
- While the student is on placement and released from posts, will they continue to receive a salary from the organisation
- If they are willing to support the student to attend any teaching events that may occur during working days/times. It is at the discretion of the employer to release the student for these events without the expectation to make up the working time, or to support the student to reschedule their shift. Full attendance is required at tutorials/workshops and employers must be supportive of the expectations on students.

### **Internal nomination process**

As applicants cannot apply directly to the OU, they must request and obtain 'nomination' from their employer. Following the circulation of this guidance document from OU to organisational leadership or training teams, organisations should consider if they would like to share this with relevant social care staff. If staff are interested in this degree, they should discuss this with their line manager and/or organisational leadership or training team. If it is agreed that a staff member should be considered for nomination, they should complete a nomination form and return this to the relevant department or named person within the organisation, by a date set by the organisation.

The OU will set a cap on how many nominations can be received per organisation and this limit will be communicated to employers. If an organisation has more staff members who are requesting nomination than the permitted number, organisations should instigate their own shortlisting and selection process in order to reduce nomination numbers to the maximum permitted.

If internal shortlisting is required, organisations may wish to develop their own criteria which applicants must meet. Please note that OU (and DoH if relevant) criteria **ALSO** apply, and this may actually assist with shortlisting in the first

instance which should be checked by employers. Below are some criteria suggestions that could be considered in addition for internal shortlisting, however this process is entirely at the discretion of the organisation:

- That the staff member is a permanent employee
- That the staff member has worked in the organisation for a minimum number of years
- That the staff member has completed all mandatory training
- That the staff member has demonstrated commitment to remain employed with the organisation on completion of the degree and qualification as a social worker.

Organisations may also wish to undertake scoring of the personal statement which is completed by applicants in the nomination form or conduct interviews in order to select which nominees are forwarded to the OU. Scoring criteria, if used, should be set by the organisation.

**Organisations should communicate deadlines to applicants for return of nomination forms for internal shortlisting, and ensure to factor in sufficient time to review and approve nominations to meet OU submission deadline.**

### **OU selection process**

Completed nomination forms should be sent by the employer to the OU **by 12pm Friday 19<sup>th</sup> January 2024**, where further shortlisting will be undertaken. Nomination forms which are incomplete or if essential criteria have not been met, these will not be shortlisted for interview. We expect that outcomes of the OU shortlisting process will be shared with nominees and the organisation by 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2024.

Evidence of meeting qualification criteria (exam certificates, provisional statement of results, school letter etc) **must** be attached alongside nomination forms and forwarded to the OU. If this evidence is not available, the nomination

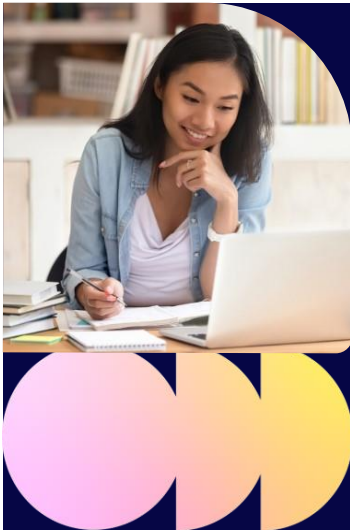
form will not be accepted by the OU. Applicants should be encouraged to submit original qualification certificates if available, however if this is not possible and they are later offered a conditional place of study, they will be required to provide the original certificate by a deadline set by the OU. Applicants are therefore encouraged to order replacement certificates from relevant examination body as soon as it is possible, and as required.

Once all stages of shortlisting have completed, interview invites will be sent to applicants. Interviews will take place online or face-to-face with an OU and employer representative (not the organisation nominating the applicant). Dates for interview are yet to be determined, but we **estimate** that these will take place approx. 11<sup>th</sup> March – 19<sup>th</sup> April 2024. Applicants will be given at least 2 weeks' notice of interview date, by email. Applicants should ensure to provide their personal and work email address on the nomination form, so that important correspondence from OU is not missed.

Following the interview process, scores will be ranked (within each organisation) and places on the programme will be offered accordingly. Please note that due to the competitive nature of this degree, not all organisations/directorates will have a nominee successful at the interview stage and not all nominees will receive an offer of study. A reserve list will be in place for 3 months, should a successful candidate withdraw and subsequent places will be offered in accordance with rank position.

Applicants who are successful at interview and given a conditional offer will be sent a 'Suitability for Social Work Training' self-declaration form. This document contains a number of important sections and may require a signature from the organisation. There will be a deadline for return of these documents and this will be clearly stated in the degree offer letter. It is the successful candidate's responsibility to ensure these documents are fully completed and returned within the timeframe set, however support from the employer is also required. Full information will be provided in offer letters to candidates.

**This is a fantastic opportunity to enable skilled and motivated social care workers to gain a social work qualification, while remaining in employment and enhance their social work practice, whilst employed by the organisation. Should you have any queries, please do not hesitate to contact the OU Professional Lead for Social Work Northern Ireland, Dr Amanda Shields: [Ireland-SW-Applications@open.ac.uk](mailto:Ireland-SW-Applications@open.ac.uk)**



## Considerations for applicants

# Section

# 4

**This degree is a professional programme which leads to a qualification in social work. As such, the study commitments are doable, but can be challenging. Whilst this is a very enjoyable course, there are a few things you should consider before applying. Some of these considerations are things that you should discuss with your employer.**

- ❖ Why are you interested in social work and want to apply at this time – what do you plan to do after the degree?
- ❖ Are you ready to undertake **academic** study on a professional programme at university level?
- ❖ Do you have support from family and friends to help manage work, study and home commitments? Your support network will be very important to ensure you can attend workshops, complete assignments etc. We recommend discussing your study intentions with your support network before applying.
- ❖ Carefully consider how you will manage continuing to work (full time for most students) while also undertaking the degree (at full time study intensity).
- ❖ Speak to your employer about backfilling your post when you are on placement – will they continue to pay your full salary during this time? If not, how will you manage financially?



- ❖ Speak to your employer about supporting you to take study leave – OU recommends half day per week (per 60 credit module) but this is at employers' discretion.
- ❖ Although you will be a social work student, you will still be an employee with terms and conditions, such as annual leave entitlement. Annual leave during placement periods is extremely limited, therefore holidays and major life events should be avoided during this time (Jan–May of year 2 and Jan–June of year 3). If you cannot take leave during placement, will your employer support you to take this at other times?
- ❖ Both placement periods are full time. If you do not currently work full time, do you have the capacity and ability to undertake placement at this level, while remaining on the same part time salary?
- ❖ Placement in year 3 (100 days) will be external to your own team and you may be placed somewhere outside of your locality. Additionally, some placements do not follow a Monday–Friday 9–5pm work pattern. You should bear these placement requirements in mind.
- ❖ If you are currently working higher than a band 5 (or equivalent), are you prepared to work band 5 (if required by your employer) for one year to complete the Assessed Year in Employment (AYE)?

**These are just some suggestions for you to think about. This degree may be a challenging 3 years for some, however we have an extremely high student success and retention rate! There is an array of support from your tutors, student advisors and also your peers who will be there with you at every step of the journey.**

**If you do not yet feel ready for academic study and applying for the social work degree, please speak to us about other options and modules we offer.**

# Entry criteria



# Section

# 5

To be eligible to request nomination and apply to this degree, there are certain entry criteria that must be met. The OU have a number of criteria and in addition, the Department of Health (if you are a HSCT or voluntary/third sector applicant for a DoH funded place) have also set criteria. The below information outlines these. You should also bear in mind that your employer may also include other criteria, as part of their agreement to sponsorship, which must be met. You should discuss eligibility with your employer in the first instance. However, it is **your** responsibility to ensure that these criteria are met and can be evidenced by the dates set by the OU.

## **OU criteria – all must be met**

- UCAS tariff threshold of 96 points or equivalent, **OR** previous successful completion of OU module K100/101/102
- GCSE Grade C or above in English **and** Maths or certificated equivalent (Functional/Key/Essential Skills **Level 2**). If you have completed K100/101/102, this can be accepted in lieu of GCSE English.
- Successful performance at OU interview
- Sponsorship by an approved social work/social care employer
- Access NI Enhanced Disclosure Check as a Student Social Worker
- Completion of 'Declaration of Suitability'
- Evidence of medical fitness to practise
- Successful registration as a Student Social Worker with the NI Social Care Council

### **DoH funded places criteria – all must be met**

- Are delivering or managing direct social care services and will be for the duration of the degree.
- Have more than 2 years' experience in the delivery or management of direct social care services.
- Can provide evidence of the explicit approval and support of their employer to undertake all parts of the curriculum of the OU Degree in Social Work.
- Will commit to completing all the requirements of the curriculum of the OU Degree in Social Work within 3 years of commencement.

**In 2024, 4 DoH funded places per Trust will be available, alongside 5 places across the voluntary/third sector. DoH funding relates to tuition fees and practice teacher costs only.**

Applicants will be asked to demonstrate how they meet all of the criteria and evidence will be requested, where needed. If applicants are unsure if their qualifications meet the 96 UCAS tariff points, please refer to the UCAS calculator (<https://www.ucas.com/ucas/tariff-calculator>)

If applicants still remain unsure, please contact us directly at [Ireland-SW-Applications@open.ac.uk](mailto:Ireland-SW-Applications@open.ac.uk).

Examples of achieving UCAS tariff points include (list is not exclusive. Applicants should refer to UCAS tariff calculator and obtain point equivalent themselves <https://www.ucas.com/ucas/tariff-calculator>):

- A-levels e.g. grades CCC, ACE, BBE, BCD, AA, or A\*B minimum
- BTEC Extended Diploma – Grades MMM.

- BTEC Level 3 National Diploma – Grades DD
- BTEC National Diploma at grades MMM
- BTEC National Certificate at grades DD
- Access to Higher Education Diploma 45 credits at Level 3
- HNC
- HND
- Level 4 and 5 qualifications (e.g. undergraduate degree) are levelled alongside Higher Education qualifications and may be used to enter university and UCAS points not needed.
- Successful completion of OU module K100/101/102

Please note that NVQs are vocational (professional) qualifications, and do not come with academic UCAS tariff points. However, a small selection of courses do carry a UCAS tariff points value with a pass grade at NVQ level 3. Please check to ensure any NVQ qualifications can meet OU entry criteria.

**As a general rule of thumb, qualifications for university entry must be levelled at Level 3 or higher.**

Evidence of meeting qualification criteria (exam certificates, provisional statement of results, school letter etc) **must** be attached alongside nomination forms and forwarded to the OU. If this evidence is not available, the nomination form will not be accepted by the OU. Applicants should be encouraged to submit original qualification certificates if available, however if this is not possible and they are later offered a conditional place of study, applicants will be required to provide the original certificate by a deadline set by the OU. Applicants are therefore encouraged to order replacement certificates from relevant examination body as soon as it is possible, and as required. Successful applicants

will also be required to attend an in-person appointment with OU on 7<sup>th</sup> June 2024 to present their original certificate (not copies) for verification and to also complete an Access NI check. **Applicants are only required to submit evidence relating to the qualification entry criteria. It is not necessary to share all qualifications or certified training courses that you have achieved.**

*The OU cannot accept any applications if the qualification will still be in progress at the time of interview, or the result is pending (this excludes K102).*

*Please note the qualification provider/examination board for the qualification you are presenting for entry criteria must be on the Register of Regulated Qualifications: <https://register.ofqual.gov.uk/AdvancedSearch>*

*If your qualifications were awarded overseas or outside of the UK (including Republic of Ireland qualifications), you may be asked to provide a UK ENIC statement of comparability: <https://enic.org.uk/Default.aspx>. It is the applicant's responsibility to demonstrate how their qualifications are equivalent to the stated criteria, and any associated costs lie with the applicant.*

Applicants must meet **both** qualification criteria noted above. It is **the applicant's responsibility** to ensure that they state the name of the qualification and grade awarded correctly on the nomination request form and this matches your qualification certificate/evidence. If your qualifications were completed under another name, OU will ask you to provide evidence of marriage certificate or deed poll.

**If applicants change employment during the course of the degree or are in a position where they are no longer sponsored by an approved agency, they will need to raise this with the OU immediately.**

# Section 6

## Application process and next steps



Essentially there are three stages to the application process. The first stage involves candidates and employers considering their interest and eligibility in the programme. The second stage is where employers undertake an internal nomination process.

### Consideration stage

- OU share application guidance with employers
- These organisations circulate guidance document with relevant staff, as appropriate
- If interested, staff discuss this with line manager
- Applicant ensures that all entry criteria can be met and evidenced

### Internal nomination stage

- Staff, with permission from the organisation, complete a nomination form and this (alongside qualification evidence) is sent to organisation leadership for internal approval and shortlisting
- If more than the maximum permitted number of requests for nomination are received by the organisation, employers must apply their own internal selection criteria and process
- Organisation send selected nomination forms and qualification evidence (no more than permitted maximum) to OU **by 12pm 19<sup>th</sup> January** to [Ireland-SW-applications@open.ac.uk](mailto:Ireland-SW-applications@open.ac.uk)



**This third stage is where OU commence the selection process through shortlisting and interview of nominees who have been put forward by their employer.**

**OU  
selection  
stage**

- OU undertake shortlisting and outcome letters sent to nominees and sponsor **by approx. 23<sup>rd</sup> February**
- Interviews take place with OU and employer representative (online or face-to-face) **approx. 11<sup>th</sup> March – 19<sup>th</sup> April.** Candidates will be given minimum 2 weeks' notice for interview.
- Places on the programme are limited and interviews will be a competitive process.
- Interview scores are ranked and **conditional** offers of study given accordingly.
- Interview outcome letters sent by **approx. 26<sup>th</sup> April.**
- Successful candidates required to accept offer of study and complete OU documentation and processes, by deadline set by OU. Failure to adhere to deadline may result in withdrawal of study offer.
- Successful candidates required to attend a face-to-face appointment on 7<sup>th</sup> June 2024 with OU in Belfast, to complete Access NI check and produce original qualification certificates for verification.
- If Occupational Health Assessment is required, this will be organised by OU.
- Students sent registration documents by central OU teams. These must be completed and returned by the deadline set by OU, as this may impact student being on the degree and commencing study.
- **It is the candidate's responsibility to ensure all requests by OU are met prior to commencing the programme in October and by the set deadlines.**

## **Next steps for those interested in applying:**

- ✓ Ensure that you and your employer have read this guidance fully.
- ✓ Speak to your line manager and/or organisational leadership about your interest in applying.
- ✓ Visit our website to read more about the degree.  
<https://www.open.ac.uk/courses/social-work/degrees/ba-social-work-northern-ireland-r61>
- ✓ Read our Frequently Asked Questions document, circulated with this guidance document.
- ✓ Ensure that you meet all the relevant criteria and can provide qualification evidence with the nomination form.
- ✓ Alongside your employer, you should complete the Request for Nomination Form (Appendix 1) fully alongside the Equal Opportunities Monitoring form (link in nomination form).
- ✓ The nomination form and qualification evidence should be returned to your employer for shortlisting by a deadline set by your employer.
- ✓ Your employer should return selected nomination forms and your qualification evidence to the OU by 19<sup>th</sup> January 2024 for shortlisting.
- ✓ Contact our student support team <https://www.open.ac.uk/contact> or the Admissions Team at [Ireland-SW-Applications@open.ac.uk](mailto:Ireland-SW-Applications@open.ac.uk), if you require any additional information.

**Thank you and good luck!!**