

# Teaching, learning and assessment of law in social work education



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## Introduction

If social workers do not know relevant law and how to apply it there can be serious consequences for service users, practitioners and managers.

The UK Department of Health's *Requirements for social work training* strongly emphasise the teaching, learning and assessment of law. This knowledge review aims to identify good practice in these areas through:

- a review of international theory and research literature
- a survey of current UK social work education
- consultation with stakeholders, including service users and carers.

## Key findings

### Why teach law?

The literature demonstrates that the relationship between law and social work differs internationally. However, legal knowledge is a core requirement of professional bodies in the UK. Without it, social workers cannot:

- advise clients or advocate effectively for them
- fulfil their legal responsibilities
- communicate appropriately with other professionals
- promote social justice and human rights.

Social workers also need to be able to question procedures, roles and the social impact of law. They must be critical thinkers as well as skilled technicians.

The literature points out that relationships between lawyers and social workers can be strained, but although collaboration between agencies and disciplines is increasingly seen as a priority, there are few accounts of law and social work students learning together and no evidence about whether this is effective.

In teaching practice, the emphasis is both on conveying knowledge and on developing students' skills in applying that knowledge in complex real situations.

### **What should be taught?**

The literature argues that social workers need to be familiar both with the legal background – the functions of law in society and its social impact, for example – and with specific laws and regulations relevant to particular client groups. Similarly, students should be able to apply their legal knowledge in skills such as policy analysis

and legal research as well as in core practical skills, such as recording, advocacy, report writing and problem solving.

Existing educational programmes in the UK have a core focus on legislation relating to community care, child care and mental health. They vary in the degree to which they aim for depth or breadth of knowledge. Other subjects that may be covered include criminal justice, housing, healthcare and employment.

Many social work educators say their law teaching emphasises underlying values, and all programmes cover the *European Convention on Human Rights*. The importance of an ethical perspective is also recognised by academics and service users.

Overall, there is general agreement that law education should focus on the circumstances that social workers are likely to meet in their working lives. However, many graduates say they find it difficult to apply their knowledge to real situations.

### How should law be taught?

There is debate in the literature about the extent to which law should be taught separately or integrated with the rest of the curriculum. No clear evidence of the best balance emerges.

Educators say that teaching law separately helps them to define and control content, but may challenge students' stamina. Integrated teaching has the benefit of emphasising application and practical skills. In practice, programmes tend to introduce law as a separate subject and then develop it later within other modules. The number of hours specifically devoted to law varies widely.

The literature recommends that a range of teaching methods is used, and students also favour a varied approach. Methods described include case studies, problem-based learning, and approaches based on decision making or 'ecology' (that is, taking into account clients' wider background and relationships). But little hard evidence is available as to what works best.

Current academic teaching practice generally favours lectures combined with group exercises. Other approaches include seminars, guided independent research, skills workshops, and computer-based learning (which is set to become more widely used). The use of case studies is very common. Problem-based learning, which actively involves students, is also popular.

Service users say that law should be an important part of the curriculum throughout and should be linked with skills in working with people. They also say that students would benefit from their input and experience.

The curriculum for continuing law education in placement and in post has been neglected, the literature argues, and many practice teachers do not feel qualified to help students with law learning. The practice survey supports these findings: most practice programmes currently do not include formal law-related learning objectives for students on placement. But practice teachers tend to draw attention to the legal context of casework and written work often involves some legal content. Nevertheless, students are not satisfied with this aspect of their learning and struggle to put knowledge into practice. Service users see practice education as a vital opportunity for social workers to learn how to apply law to individual circumstances.

### Who should teach law?

The reviewed literature recommends varying balances of expertise in law and social work, both for individual teachers and for staff as a whole. Again, there is a shortage of hard evidence of what works best. Existing programmes use a wide range of staff, and this inclusive approach is supported by services users. Service users also wish to be involved themselves.

### How should students be assessed?

Assessment methods that reflect the types of activities and judgements actually required of social workers are recommended. Examples

include case studies, extended scenarios, oral assessment, project work, and self- and peer-assessment. Students are said to value problem-solving tasks and oral exercises, and multiple-choice formats were found to be effective. But there is no research into which methods work in predicting retention of knowledge.

Currently students are mainly assessed through coursework, examinations or a combination of the two. Assessment aims to test both knowledge and the ability to apply it. Some programmes also test critical analysis skills and the integration of law with social work values.

## Conclusion

Most of the literature is descriptive, theoretical and anecdotal, and there is a shortage of hard evidence evaluating different approaches.

Existing methods of teaching and assessment tend to reflect the skills social workers need in practice. However, law teaching seems to lend itself to a variety of methods, and no consensus emerges on the best combination. Beyond a common focus on the application of law, and a relatively small shared core of content, the curricula of different programmes varies considerably. Students learn effectively if their interest is engaged, but some have difficulty with the application of the law, with critical analysis, and with ethical issues.

The continued teaching of law when students are on practice placement and in post is neglected, and programmes need to address this, for example by formally including law in the practice curriculum and by supporting practice teachers.

More systematic research is now needed into what enables students both to acquire and to retain legal knowledge and skills.

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