

Introduction to the Practice Learning Qualifications (PLQs)

What are the PLQs?

The PLQs are qualifications that can be gained by anyone helping to contribute to other peoples learning within a social work or social care setting. By helping people learn new skills and understand why they do what they do, it is hoped that they will learn to do a better job and that services for service users and carers will be improved.

The qualifications can be taken at an introductory level and then at a further three increasingly advanced levels. The introductory level will give people new skills and understanding about supporting learning and build on many skills that people are already using effectively in the workplace. By supporting learning we mean for example, helping new staff be inducted into a workplace or supporting students whilst on practice learning experiences.

Social work departments, voluntary agencies and private providers all take a variety of students studying for HNCs, degrees and other qualifications. Currently staff within many settings, help these students learn in a range of different ways. Some give informal support and guidance, others provide day to day coaching and feedback whilst others are involved in more formal assessment.

These qualifications recognise that all these inputs are valuable and a source of learning for the student. By setting up the qualifications in the way they have been, everyone helping students and other colleagues to learn, now have the opportunity to have this effort recognised and rewarded.

Anyone successfully completing one of the PLQs will get a certificate and credits awarded by a recognised awarding body in Scotland ie a university or the Scottish Qualifications Agency (SQA)

Involvement of Service Users and Carers

The PLQs were developed with the help of a panel of service users and carers as well as a service user and a carer being part of the small development board who wrote the qualifications. Their combined contributions helped to shape the qualifications as they are today.

Since the introduction of the *Framework for Social Work Education in Scotland* in 2003, service users and carers have increasingly become involved in developments associated with the new degrees in social work. Although involvement levels vary between different universities, many service users and carers across Scotland are now heavily involved in selection processes, governance issues, teaching, developing materials and assessing students.

The PLQs have been designed to allow the enormous contribution service users and carers make to student teaching and learning to be recognised and valued. The entry requirements at the introductory level are such that service users and carers would be able to gain entry by demonstrating their past experience rather than having a previous qualification in relation to supporting learning. At all other levels, service users and carers, alongside everyone else taking these qualifications, would have to demonstrate they could learn at that level. It has been an important feature within the development of these qualifications not to set people up to fail by allowing access to different levels to be too easy. Care has been taken to maintain standards while making the qualifications accessible to as wide a range of potential learners as possible.

It has been noted that opening access to service users in this way underpins the concept and ideal of 'recovery' in line with national work currently being carried out by the Scottish Recovery Network by providing a challenge to support individual recovery.

By having the opportunity to gain these qualifications, service users and carers may be inspired to move on to access further training or work

opportunities but more importantly, in the first instance, it gives them recognition and credit for their expertise in this area.

Standards within the qualifications

At each of the 4 levels of the qualifications, there are a set of 8 standards or subject areas that each candidate has to meet. Anyone taking the qualification has to provide evidence that they are supporting the learning of others in a variety of ways and clear guidance will be given about what sort of evidence is required. All this evidence is gathered together into one place –a portfolio or folder –which is then assessed by two people.

An example to illustrate how to meet the standards

One of the standards, is called, 'Establishing Effective Working Relationships' and requires candidates to show how they make effective relationships with students, colleagues, academic staff and/or others that support learning.

This standard suggests that candidates need to understand their role and responsibilities when working, for instance, with a group of students. It requires them to understand the wider context within which the students are working and some of the tensions for them of working, for example, with other professions.

In this example the candidates are also asked to provide evidence of how they might communicate effectively with students and others and listen to concerns and ideas from them.

Evidence provided within portfolios can be flexibly presented, allowing people who have different ways of communicating to present information creatively ie videos, storyboards, verbal presentations and computer supported submissions.

Support when doing the qualifications

The qualifications have been designed so that any candidate doing any level will have the support of a tutor to guide their study and a mentor to help them understand what is required by the qualification. It was also hoped that candidates would work together in groups to support each other through the

qualifications although because of geographic distance this might for some be difficult face to face although this could still be achieved on-line. Learning can be very exciting but it can also be daunting, especially for those returning after a long break, so some support and guidance during this process is essential.

Title of the Qualifications

Anyone who can be registered by the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) and does one or more of these qualifications will be awarded the PLQ (Social Services). All other people, including service users and carers, will get an award entitled PLQ. This is for legal reasons in that the SSSC cannot approve a qualification other than for those people they can register. Both the PLQ(SS) and the PLQ are the same award, carry the same academic credits and will be accepted within the sector as the qualification to support learners in exactly the same way. The only difference is that one (PLQSS) will be known as an SSSC specialist course and the other (PLQ) will not.

Ways of doing the qualifications

The thinking behind developing the qualifications in their current format was to ensure that candidates could build on their achievements as well as learning new skills and gaining new knowledge about how to do things even better.

It is envisaged that some people will already have a lot of evidence to present in a portfolio about things they are already doing to support learning whilst others may be starting more or less from scratch. In the latter case, a candidate would need a lot of guidance and would be encouraged to attend a course to support their learning. The former candidates however, who are more likely to be doing one of the higher qualifications, may choose to work more independently, seeking support from their mentor and tutor whilst using learning materials which will be available on-line.

Some of the money from the Scottish Executive to develop these qualifications further has been targeted at the production of high quality learning materials which will be available to everyone on-line. As these are

new qualifications, not all the materials will be available at the beginning but over time these will increase.

Finally, it was a real vision of the Scottish Executive and the SSSC through the PLQ development board that these qualifications would be made available across the whole of the social services workforce, recognising the very valuable contribution service users, carers and a wide range of staff, at all levels, make to the learning of students and others. This is the first suite of qualifications that have not only been shaped by service users and carers but also provide the opportunity to have their unique contribution to learning within the social services workforce recognised by including them as potential participants.

Prepared by the Scottish Institute for Excellence in Social Work Education in collaboration with PLQ service user and carer development board members.