

AN UPDATE

SWEP Implements Changes in Response to 'Social Work Practice Learning Funding: Research and Evaluation' Report

The Social Work Education Partnership (SWEP) is pleased to share updates on actions taken by key partners to improve practice learning opportunities (PLOs). These steps are informed by the recommendations outlined in the "Social Work Practice Learning Funding: Research and Evaluation" report. Conducted by a research team based at Learning Network West and completed in September 2023, the report offers valuable insights into existing funding arrangements and proposes significant improvements to achieve national consistency and better support for practice learning. Notably, the researchers made recommendations covering a wider scope than just practice learning.

In response, a series of measures have been implemented to enhance the quality, consistency, and accessibility of PLOs. While progress has been made, some areas will require further input and collaboration to address ongoing challenges and achieve long-term objectives.

Key updates:

Standardised Length for Practice Learning Opportunities: The Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) has introduced a minimum of 180 placement days across two PLOs, starting from September 2027. This change aims to create consistency in training standards across Scotland.

Funding for Assessed PLOs Only: From the 2025 academic year, funding will be restricted to assessed PLOs. This ensures resources are directed toward high-quality, assessed placements, contributing to a stronger learning framework.

Qualifications and Regulation of Practice Educators: By 2027, all practice educators must hold social work and practice learning qualifications, with SSSC registration required. This step aims to enhance professionalism and accountability while promoting ongoing Continuous Professional Learning (CPL).

Practice Learning Support Grant (PLSG): In summer 2024, the Scottish Government increased the financial support available to eligible students with an assessed practice learning placement in-year to £750, to support them with costs incurred whilst undertaking their placement. Up to £2000 additional support each is available to students with particularly high travel or accommodation costs. The SSSC administers the PLSG.

Scottish Government will review the first year of implementation of the grant as part of ongoing social work student support policy development and continue to engage with partners in considering how to support practice learning provision in island and remote communities.

Postgraduate bursaries: In July 2024 Ministers approved structural changes to the postgraduate social work bursary administered by the SSSC. These widened access to support for social work study via an increase to the earnings eligibility threshold, and simplified the structure of the bursary, making it easier for potential bursary recipients to consider their options for financial support.

SSSC made 300 bursaries available for non-employer sponsored, home students nominated by their university, with a household income of less than £34,000. Each bursary is comprised of both a contribution of £3,415 towards course fees and a contribution of £120 per week of term towards living costs, each year. The average annual course length this academic year is just under 36 weeks, and therefore eligible for approximately £4300 towards living costs.

The core bursary is complemented by a range of discretionary allowances – Childcare, Disabled Student, Dependants.

In March 2025, Ministers approved an additional discretionary payment of up to £1,500 to bursary students experiencing financial difficulties.

Practice learning provider funding: SSSC is working with practice learning provider partners to introduce a more streamlined payment process. OCSWA and SSSC are scoping a change from the current daily rate to flat-rate payments for placement provision.

Quality Assurance and Local Partnerships: The SSSC, as the regulatory body, oversees the quality assurance of social work qualifying programmes. This responsibility includes involving stakeholders—such as employers, students, people who use services, and HEIs—in the design, delivery, and evaluation of programmes to ensure they meet the Standards in Social Work Education (SiSWE). PLOs also fall under the SSSC’s regulatory framework.

The SSSC is revising its quality assurance processes and building partnerships between HEIs and employers, including third-sector organisations. These partnerships aim to improve workforce planning, streamline student recruitment, and increase accessibility to placements while involving students and service users in a meaningful way.

Engagement sessions conducted by SWEP have highlighted the importance of developing a consistent infrastructure for practice learning. Priorities include establishing a shared professional learning culture, integrating workforce planning early in qualification routes, and ensuring that at least one assessed PLO occurs within a local authority setting.

As part of its strategy, the SSSC conducts annual monitoring of partnership plans to ensure programmes meet the needs of local communities and align with workforce demands. These efforts aim to improve workforce planning, minimise travel requirements for students, and strengthen the connections between HEIs, students, employers, and local communities.

Training and Support for Practice Educators: In September 2025, the SSSC, HEIs and sector partners will host the first-ever Practice Learning Conference. This event will bring educators and professionals together to share ideas and improve practice education. Under the SWEP structures, the Pre and Post Qualifying groups will play an important role in shaping the landscape of social work education. The Pre-Qualification group seeks to enhance the integration and sustainability of practice learning within organisations, developing strong partnerships and communication between educational institutions, local authorities, and other stakeholders to support the group’s activities and objectives. Meanwhile, the post-qualification group supports the development of frameworks like the Newly Qualified Social Worker (NQSW) mandatory year in practice and the Advanced

Practice Framework. These groups ensure that practice educators are equipped with the tools and resources needed to provide high-quality training and mentorship.

To promote this event and other initiatives, the SWEP website will be a key tool, ensuring wide-reaching support for practice education across Scotland. Additionally, the website will serve as a centralised resource hub, offering practice educators access to essential tools, information, and updates to support their professional growth and the consistent delivery of high-quality education.

Workforce Surveys: The SSSC has launched leavers and workforce wellbeing surveys to collect valuable insights into the social work sector. These findings will guide future workforce planning and sector improvements. The first data report will be published in March 2025, with some data tables available on the SSSC website by summer 2025.

Looking Ahead: While these updates reflect progress, SWEP acknowledges that challenges remain. Continued collaboration among stakeholders—including students, educators, employers, and people with lived experience—is essential to build a robust and equitable system that supports everyone involved in practice learning.

SWEP is committed to promoting an inclusive, consistent, and high-quality learning environment for the next generation of social workers.