

The current and future state of Social Policy teaching in UK HEIs

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Executive Summary

In a climate of significant reforms to student finance, it is important to generate baseline data regarding where and in what degree combinations Social Policy is currently taught in UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). A context which includes the demise of the Social Policy and Social Work Subject Centre (SWAP), the folding of the Joint University Council Social Policy Committee (JUCSPC), and the withdrawal of Social Policy teaching at some universities makes such a project particularly timely and pertinent.

This report details findings from a small-scale study designed to explore the teaching of Social Policy in UK HEIs, while also gathering information on experiences of teaching Social Policy, examples of good practice and the training / support needs of teachers themselves. The research project also generated attitudinal data regarding the future of the subject and perspectives on how best to safeguard Social Policy in these times of change. The project was commissioned by the SPA with funding provided by SWAP. The closure of SWAP was a particularly important factor behind the survey; although the Higher Education Academy has retained one social work and social policy subject specialist, her capacity to support teaching and learning activities is very much reduced and therefore consideration is needed as to what the SPA can do to complement this work.

The research consisted of three central components:

- an audit of the teaching of Social Policy capturing baseline data regarding which HEI institutions teach the subject at both undergraduate and postgraduate level
- an internet survey exploring experiences of teaching Social Policy and attitudes to the future of the subject given the changing context of student finance and government support
- three qualitative interviews with Social Policy lecturers to explore their experiences of teaching Social Policy and expectations of how the subject will fare during times of change

174 individuals responded to the survey which generated rich data on both teaching experiences and attitudes to the teaching of the subject. Notably, a majority of respondents (53.4%) were not currently members of the SPA suggesting real scope for further efforts to extend recruitment to those identifying themselves as teaching Social Policy who are not currently members of the learned society.

Data from the audit of Social Policy teaching found that 69 HEI institutions offered degree courses that included some Social Policy teaching at undergraduate level, with 59 institutions offering Social Policy at postgraduate level. Single Honours Social Policy was available at just 16 HEIs for 2011/12. From 2012/13, Single Honours Social Policy will no longer be taught at either Stirling University or London South Bank University, reducing the range of institutions where Single Honours Social Policy is available by 12.5%. Findings highlighted that Social Policy is today taught in a range of contexts, and is often incorporated within broader degree courses such as Social Sciences.

The internet survey and qualitative interviews offered insights into the experiences of Social Policy teachers in 2011, alongside considerations of what constitutes best practice within the subject. Findings suggested whilst most Social Policy teachers are making use of more traditional teaching methods such as lectures and seminars, there is evidence of a growth in the use of placements and online teaching methods within the subject area. Ensuring that teaching materials were up-to-date and current was seen as best practice in Social Policy teaching and learning. Whilst this was seen as challenging, updating materials regularly was common. Research-led teaching was also generally considered to be one of the hallmarks of good practice, with research findings indicating that practices of research informing teaching varies across Social Policy teaching. The experiences of teachers within the subject are likely to be subject to significant changes in coming years. This research provides a useful baseline against which to track such developments.

As part of the internet survey, respondents were asked about what tangible impacts they expected their department to experience as the changes to student finance are introduced in 2012. It seems there is a widespread expectation that undergraduate student numbers will decline and this will inevitably impact on other aspects of the teaching and learning experience. Indeed, 41.2% of respondents expect the number of undergraduate students studying Social Policy at their institution to fall in 2012. This contrasted with just 28.1% who thought student numbers would stay the same, and 1.9% who actually predicted that student numbers would increase. With regard to postgraduate student numbers, the most common expectation from respondents was that postgraduate student numbers would stay the same in both 2012 and over the next five years.

Findings from the internet survey also show that there is concern that in the future departments will be affected by redundancies, amalgamation with other departments and the withdrawal of courses. In terms of departmental changes over the next two years, 20.1% of respondents thought that amalgamation with another department was quite or very likely, while only 4.5% thought that the closure of their department was either quite or very likely. With regard to staff redundancies, a considerable proportion (9.3%) thought that redundancies in their department over the next two years is a very likely outcome, while 24.7% thought this was quite likely. The possibility of programmes or courses being withdrawn from their department was also seen as a fairly common possibility, with 42.4% of respondents reporting that the withdrawal of programmes or courses from their department was either very or quite likely over the next two years.

This research also explored ideas for how to best safeguard and protect Social Policy in times of uncertainty and against a backdrop of expected contractions in student numbers. Both the internet survey and qualitative interviews generated rich data on these themes, with particular attention paid to the role of the SPA in supporting Social Policy over the coming years. Survey respondents felt there was scope in efforts to market Social Policy more effectively in schools, while there was also seen to be potential in putting more emphasis on employability and offering more placements as part of degree and postgraduate courses. Importantly, the internet survey and audit uncovered pockets of good practice in terms of offering placements to students and placing emphasis on employability. A number of respondents highlighted the importance of attempts to increase awareness of Social Policy as a subject area, with work needed to make more explicit the close links between central contemporary issues such as welfare reform and public sector changes and the academic subject of Social Policy. Indeed, a significant number of respondents suggested that a key strength of Social Policy is its close alignment with the key issues of the day.

With regard to how best to support those already teaching Social Policy, a large majority of respondents (82.2%) said they would welcome the opportunity to share their experiences of teaching Social Policy with others. This is undoubtedly one area where the SPA could play a role by facilitating those teaching Social Policy coming together to reflect on their experiences and to discuss issues related to teaching and learning. Some survey respondents also suggested that the SPA might want to consider increasing its focus on teaching and learning issues more generally, a finding which in fact resonates closely with the SPA's own priorities for the future.

As the reforms to student finance take effect, it will be critically important that the SPA and wider Social Policy community continue to monitor changes in the teaching of Social Policy, while also taking action to try and safeguard the subject area.