

## ENHANCING PROFESSIONAL SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION: ADOPTING THE CAPABILITY PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLAND'S EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

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**Abstract:** This study evaluates the integration of the Professional Capability Framework (PCF) in England's social work education and its potential applicability in the Czech Republic. As England has advanced its social work training through holistic approaches and continuous professional development [1], this paper explores the feasibility of adapting such reforms to enhance the Czech educational system. By conducting a comparative analysis, the research identifies gaps in the Czech framework and suggests tailored adaptations from the English model. This streamlined examination not only furthers the international discourse on social work education but also proposes actionable strategies for cross-cultural educational enhancements.

**Keywords:** Social Work Education, Professional Capability Framework, Educational Reform, Holistic Approach, Continuing Professional Development, Cross-Cultural Analysis, Policy Adaptation.

### 1 Introduction

Social work education in the UK originated from a rich tradition of community-based initiatives and extensive case support delivered by charitable organizations. Initially, university programs were established to equip workers - formerly known as settlement workers or charity workers - with essential skills in administration and psychological theories. Notably, collaborations with institutions like the University of Birmingham and the London School of Economics facilitated these educational efforts, offering a range of qualifications in areas such as youth and community social work, as well as roles within organizational settings like hospitals and government offices [2].

Historically, the term "social work" in England encompassed a broad spectrum of job roles and positions, many of which today might not be recognized under the same term. The lack of a standardized qualification path in social work meant that, until the late 20th century, aspiring social workers could achieve certification through various educational levels—from secondary schools and colleges to master's degrees at universities [3].

Despite numerous efforts to standardize social work education in England throughout its history, a persistent diversity in educational models continues to characterize the British approach to this day. The distinctiveness of the British model was highlighted in 1989 when the European Union (EU) advocated for the mutual recognition of social work education programs that involved at least three years of professionally oriented undergraduate study. However, England's social work qualifications, which did not conform to this EU standard, were not recognized in other EU member states [4].

### 2 Evolution of Social Work Education in England: Policy Reforms and Regulatory Developments

Significant shifts in education policy occurred with the enactment of the Care Standards Act 2000, which set prerequisites for social workers' qualifications and led to the creation of the General Social Care Council (GSC). This body ensured the protection of the title 'social worker' for registered individuals. By 2003, the GSC began registering qualified social workers, marking 'social worker' as a protected title in England. The first social work programs under these new regulations launched in September 2003, emphasizing competence-based standards. The media spotlight on the tragic deaths of children under child welfare supervision, notably Peter Connelly in 2007, spurred reviews of professional training and educational frameworks [6][7][23].

In response to these concerns, the Social Work Task Force was established in 2009, which led to a scaling back of the General Council's functions by 2010. Regulatory responsibilities were

transferred to the Health and Care Professions Council in 2012, which maintained oversight of social work education until 2019, when Social Work England, a government-led body, took over.

The Task Force's investigations culminated in 15 recommendations in 2009, profoundly influencing educational practices. These changes ranged from curriculum overhauls to the implementation of a supervised year for new social workers, and the creation of the Academy of Social Work. The Academy, designed to foster broad professional development, does not serve an educational or regulatory role; instead, it aims to articulate and share the profession's distinct disciplinary perspective. Notably, these reforms introduced a shift towards an education philosophy grounded in a professional competency framework [8].

### 3 Implementing the Professional Competency Framework: A Holistic Approach to Social Work Education

The working group's recommendation led to the establishment of the Professional Competency Framework in England in 2012. This framework, progressively implemented across the social work sector, from initial training to advanced programs for strategic staff, aims to link and unify skills training and foster coherent professional growth and learning [1].

A key feature of the framework is its coverage of both initial qualification training and ongoing professional development, providing a comprehensive set of generic professional competencies that establish consistent expectations for social workers throughout their careers. While the framework does not specify the practical knowledge and skills needed for each job, it serves as a foundational guide for designing and delivering educational activities across a social worker's career path [9].

The framework facilitates the integration of educational initiatives, continuing professional education, and practice through five distinct routes. It introduces a capabilities model, outlines nine professional domains, integrates assessment and learning strategies, works across four levels of qualification, and adopts a developmental approach to both initial and ongoing social work education [10].

Additionally, the framework's general assumptions make it applicable across all specializations and roles within social work. It supports adherence to professional regulatory requirements and describes a range of roles for social workers, enhancing lifelong career development. The framework's alignment with the Global Definition of Social Work and the Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics underscores its relevance and adaptability. As a 'living' document, it continues to evolve with the profession, aiming to improve practice and support ongoing professional development [11].

Developed in response to critiques of the rigid, bureaucratic nature of competency-based standards, the framework adopts the capability approach. This approach defines capabilities as the integrated application of knowledge, skills, personal qualities, behaviors, understandings, and values across both familiar and complex, changing circumstances. By replacing the competency model with a holistic, integrative, and developmental model, the framework aims to better prepare social workers for diverse challenges, emphasizing ethics and continuous professional growth. The ongoing debate around the distinction between skills and competences highlights a broader agreement that a focus on capabilities can better reflect a social worker's potential for future learning and professional development [12] [13].

In essence, the competences outlined in the framework not only legitimize social work activities but also empower social workers to assume greater responsibility as they gain experience and enhance their professional expertise, enabling them to

effectively navigate and impact complex, uncertain contexts [14] [1].

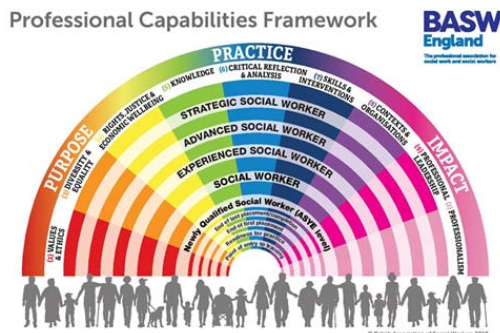
### 3.1 The Evolution and Structure of the Professional Competency Framework in Social Work Education

The Professional Competency Framework, visually represented by concentric circles divided by bisections as depicted in Figure 1, outlines the progression of competencies in social work education. Introduced in 2012 and updated periodically, the framework's layers signify the developmental stages of competencies, while the segments highlight specific competencies. This chapter examines the state of the framework as updated until 2018, detailing its role in guiding social workers through three key phases: initial qualification training, an assessed and assisted first year of employment, and ongoing professional development throughout their careers.

The diagram's colored sections illustrate the nine domains of the framework, which correspond to various levels of experience and are designed to equip social workers with the competencies required to handle increasing levels of difficulty and complexity in their roles. The framework facilitates transitions between experience levels based on the social worker's capability to manage issues varying in complexity, risk, and responsibility across different professional contexts. As of 2018, the framework also incorporates three 'superdomains'—Purpose, Practice, and Impact—that categorize the nine domains into broader areas of focus [1].

A key advantage of this framework is its emphasis on professional development rather than specific job roles, providing a flexible structure that helps both social workers and managers understand expected competencies at various levels. This flexibility supports social workers in leveraging their unique strengths and ambitions, promoting continual professional growth and the attainment of advanced skills applicable in leadership and educational roles [15].

Figure 1 Framework of professional capabilities



### 3.2 Structuring Competencies in Social Work: The Integration of Superdomains within the Professional Competency Framework

The Professional Competency Framework organizes social work competencies into three interrelated superdomains—Purpose, Practice, and Impact—each encapsulating core aspects of social work's mission, execution, and outcomes. The Purpose superdomain centers on the profession's fundamental purpose, values, ethical principles, and philosophies. Practice amalgamates specific domains detailing essential skills, knowledge, intervention methods, and critical thinking capabilities necessary for effective social work. The Impact superdomain focuses on competencies related to leadership, professionalism, and the ability to drive change within organizational settings.

These superdomains do not merely segment the framework into discrete categories; instead, they permeate all areas, demonstrating the interconnected nature of competencies in social work. For instance, Impact is not only about leadership but also encompasses interventions and skills, linking directly to

the Practice superdomain. Similarly, the professionalism inherent in the Purpose superdomain is foundational to all aspects of social work practice.

The framework's nine core domains further elaborate on these competencies: 1) Professionalism, 2) Values and Ethics, 3) Diversity and Equality, 4) Rights, Equity, and Economic Security, 5) Knowledge, 6) Critical Reflection and Analysis, 7) Intervention and Skills, 8) Context and Organization, and 9) Professional Leadership. Each domain is intricately connected to the superdomains, illustrating the framework's comprehensive approach to defining and advancing the competencies required for proficient practice in the field of social work [1].

### 3.3 The Developmental Trajectory in Social Work: Levels of Experience within the Professional Competency Framework

The Professional Competency Framework delineates a comprehensive developmental trajectory for social workers, covering both pre-qualification and post-qualification phases to guide professional growth through structured experience levels. The pre-qualification phase is structured into four levels: 1) commencement of training, 2) readiness for entry into practice, 3) completion of first practice, and 4) completion of final practice. Subsequently, the post-qualification phase progresses through five stages: 1) assessed and assisted first year in employment, 2) qualified social worker, 3) experienced social worker, 4) advanced social worker, and 5) strategic social worker [16].

This framework serves as an alternative to the national social work job standards in England, providing a unique perspective by articulating competency levels specific to various job roles within the social work field. For instance, a social worker might possess the competencies required for an advanced practitioner yet may be performing in a role typically expected of an experienced social worker. This differentiation has practical implications, influencing job descriptions and appraisal schemes as employers increasingly integrate the Framework into formal assessments and role expectations [15].

### 4 Enhancing Early Career Development in Social Work: The Assessed and Assisted Year in Employment

In response to the 2009 Task Force recommendation, the introduction of an 'assessed and assisted year in employment' represents a significant stride in supporting the transition of recent social work graduates into the professional field. This initiative, referred to here as the assisted year, is mandated for all newly qualified social workers through their initial employers. It encompasses a structured blend of support and rigorous assessment aligned with national professional standards. This critical phase allows newly qualified social workers to solidify their academic training within real-world practice settings, thereby fostering the development of practical skills and professional confidence at the onset of their careers. Additionally, to facilitate the implementation of this program, the government offers financial subsidies to employers, ensuring that the assisted year is both effective and widely adopted [8].

Furthermore, the landscape of social work education in England has been dynamically enriched by the introduction of various alternative qualification models in recent years. This expansion is largely fueled by the increasing demand for skilled social workers. These alternative pathways not only diversify the educational options available but also aim to address the specific needs and challenges of the rapidly evolving social work profession, providing more tailored and accessible routes into the field.

### 5 Diversifying Pathways to Professional Qualification in Social Work

The traditional university-based training system in social work education in England, grounded in the Framework and Standards for the Professional Qualification of Social Workers, has been

complemented by innovative training models to meet the evolving needs of the sector.

### 5.1 Apprenticeship Models

Supported by Skills for Care, a group of employers has championed an apprenticeship model certified by the Institute for Apprenticeships. This model not only adheres to specific standards that regulate the training process but also integrates direct social work practice with academic learning, culminating in an examination before an external board. Particularly suited for individuals already employed in social services, this apprenticeship pathway allows participants to earn a Bachelor's degree and qualify for social work practice, thereby providing a practical, work-based route to professional qualification [17].

Additionally, current government initiatives have introduced fast-track programs such as Frontline, Step Up to Social Work, and Think Ahead. These programs are designed for university graduates from non-social work disciplines, offering an accelerated route to obtain social work qualifications. These fast-track options respond to the urgent demand for social workers by shortening the time frame required to transition into the field, thereby rapidly augmenting the workforce with qualified professionals. This approach not only facilitates a swift entry into the profession but also leverages the diverse backgrounds and experiences of participants, enriching the practice of social work [18].

### 5.2 The Intensive Training Model for Child Protection Social Workers (Frontline)

Introduced in 2014, this specialized training model for social workers in child protection illustrates an innovative approach to professional education. The program begins with an intensive five-week summer school hosted by a university, where participants gain essential skills and knowledge pertinent to the field of child welfare. Following this preparatory phase, trainees are grouped in teams of four and assigned to social protection departments. Here, they engage directly with children and families, working under the guidance of seasoned social workers [23]. This hands-on training ensures that upon successful completion of their first year, participants achieve a Bachelor of Social Work degree and gain registration as professional social workers.

The subsequent phase of the program sees these graduates continue their professional journey within social work departments, where they pursue a Master's degree in social work. This model not only accelerates the training process but also addresses the urgent need for qualified child protection social workers. Each year, the program attracts an increasing number of candidates, reflecting its effectiveness and the growing demand for specialized training in this critical area of social work [17].

On the other hand, it is obvious that students will not be able to acquire skills and knowledge for all the specific and different groups of children they may encounter in the exercise of social and legal protection in a short time [24].

### 5.3 "Step Up to Social Work": An Accelerated Interdisciplinary Training Program for Social Work in England

Since its inception in 2010, the "Step Up to Social Work" program has represented a pivotal shift in social work education, offering a 14-month accelerated pathway to a bachelor's degree in social work. This program contrasts with other fast-track initiatives like Frontline by providing a bachelor's qualification rather than a master's, catering specifically to graduates from non-social work disciplines who possess prior experience with children, young people, and families. The curriculum integrates theoretical education provided at universities with intensive, practical field experience.

Designed in close collaboration with employers, Step Up facilitates a unique educational environment where practicing

social workers and academics jointly contribute to the training process. This collaborative approach is credited by the program's designers for significantly hastening the educational trajectory compared to traditional university-based models. The program's reach and impact have markedly increased over the years; it started with 42 local authorities participating in its first year and expanded to include 136 by 2020, covering 89% of all local authorities in England. This expansion underscores the program's effectiveness and the strong demand for innovative, interdisciplinary training models in the field of social work [17].

### 5.4 "Think Ahead": A Specialized Training Program for Mental Health Social Workers

"Think Ahead" is a tailored two-year training program initiated as a modified version of the Frontline model, specifically designed for graduates from non-social work disciplines who aspire to specialize in mental health social work. The program commences with a six-week summer school that equips students with the foundational knowledge and skills necessary to enter the mental health workforce. This preparatory phase is followed by a year of intensive, hands-on training within community-based services catering to individuals with mental health issues.

During this first year, students work in small groups under the guidance of an experienced social worker, handling progressively challenging caseloads—from an average of 21 cases in the first half of the year to 35 in the latter half. The supervising social worker retains ultimate responsibility for these cases, ensuring professional oversight and learning continuity for the students. Upon completing the first year, participants earn a Bachelor's degree in social work and gain eligibility for registration as professional social workers.

The second year of the program offers the participants an opportunity to secure paid positions while they continue their education towards a Master's degree in social work. This structured approach not only provides the necessary academic credentials but also embeds practical, real-world experience, making it a comprehensive training model for future mental health social workers.

Currently, it is not well explored how these fast-track methods of educating social workers will impact their professional identity [25]. It is, however, very likely that this accelerated method of education will affect the ability to form complex professional judgment and assess the nature of a social problem in its entirety.

### 6 Continuing Professional Development in Social Work: Autonomy and Accountability in England

Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is mandated in England as a core requirement for maintaining registration with the regulatory body, ensuring that practicing social workers meet ongoing professional standards. This system is distinctively designed to emphasize broader professional development rather than mere educational attainment. The onus of determining the content of CPD activities lies with individual social workers, based on a presumption that they are best positioned to identify their own developmental needs. This approach is widely regarded as beneficial, reinforcing professional autonomy and encouraging personal responsibility for career-long learning [19].

During the annual registration cycle, social workers engage in various developmental activities, the details of which are recorded in an online account. At the cycle's end, each social worker must affirm their completion of the required CPD activities through this account. To ensure compliance and quality, approximately 2.5% of registered social workers are randomly selected by the regulator each year to undergo a detailed review of their documented CPD activities.

CPD in social work extends beyond formal training and coursework. It encompasses a variety of activities that social workers believe will enhance their professional capabilities and enrich their practice. These activities might include engaging

with feedback from peers, supervisors, and service users, reflecting on client complaints, or consuming professional literature and multimedia resources like podcasts and articles. The integration of self-reflection and feedback is a critical component, underscoring the comprehensive nature of CPD as a tool for continuous improvement and adaptation in social work practice [20].

### 7 Comparative Analysis of Social Work Education: England and the Czech Republic

Social work, inherently a socially constructed profession, exhibits significant variations in its structure and educational approaches across different nations due to cultural, societal, and policy influences [21]. In England, the field of social work not only garners substantial public attention and support but is also prominently influenced by public discourse often sparked by high-profile tragic events. This heightened visibility has contributed to a well-established and comprehensive institutional framework for social work that includes entities such as Social Work England and the Academy. Such structures, which are deeply embedded in the professional landscape of England, starkly contrast with the situation in the Czech Republic, where the institutional base for social work is considerably less developed and lacks analogous professional bodies.

The diversity of educational pathways in England is another distinguishing feature when compared with the Czech system. In England, this diversity includes an array of training models, from traditional university degrees to more recent accelerated courses designed to quickly address shortfalls in qualified social work professionals. These "crash courses" are a response to the urgent demand in the labor market and represent a pragmatic, albeit controversial, approach to workforce development. While effective in swiftly augmenting the number of practicing social workers, this strategy may not necessarily serve as a sustainable or replicable model for other contexts, such as in the Czech Republic.

Furthermore, a significant evolution in the English social work educational paradigm is the emphasis on a professional capabilities model. This model advocates for lifelong professional development, emphasizing continuous learning, professional autonomy, and the adaptive capacity of social workers. This approach seeks to equip social workers with the resilience and competence necessary to navigate the complexities of modern societal needs and challenges.

These divergences in social work education frameworks between England and the Czech Republic highlight the influence of societal values, government support, and professional regulation in shaping the training and practice of social workers. Understanding these differences is crucial for fostering dialogue on best practices and potential reforms in social work education globally, particularly in how professional capacities are developed and sustained throughout a social worker's career [11].

### 8 Strategic Recommendations for Enhancing Social Work Education in the Czech Republic

- A. Establishment of a Professional Regulatory Body: Drawing from the English model, the Czech Republic could benefit from establishing an independent regulatory body for social work. This body would set standards, oversee professional qualifications, and ensure the quality and ethics of practice across the country.
- B. Development of Diversified Educational Pathways: To address diverse learning needs and career aspirations, the Czech Republic should consider implementing a variety of educational pathways similar to those in England. This could include traditional university programs, vocational training, and accelerated courses for career changers, thus broadening access to the profession.
- C. Introduction of a Capabilities Framework: Adopting a professional capabilities framework could significantly enhance the quality of social work education and practice

in the Czech Republic. This framework should focus on continuous professional development, adaptability, and a holistic approach to social work that integrates theory with practice.

- D. Government Support and Public Awareness Campaigns: Increased government support for social work programs, coupled with public awareness campaigns, could elevate the profile of social work in the Czech Republic. Highlighting the critical role of social workers in society and ensuring adequate funding for education and professional development would help attract more individuals to the field.
- E. Collaboration with International Experts: To foster best practices and continuous learning, partnerships with international universities and professional bodies could be established. This would allow for the exchange of knowledge, educational resources, and innovations in social work education and practice.

Implementing these recommendations could help diversify and strengthen the social work education system in the Czech Republic, making it more responsive to the needs of society and aligned with international standards. While these recommendations aim to advance social work education and practice, they must be implemented with a keen awareness of professional boundaries, which are essential for protecting both clients and social workers. Professional boundaries help define the limits of relationships and interactions in social work, ensuring that they remain beneficial and non-exploitative [22].

### 9 Final discussion: Professional Identity and Boundaries Issue

The introduction of varied educational pathways and practice settings can create environments where boundary and identity issues might arise more frequently. For example, accelerated courses and on-the-job training programs, while beneficial for rapid qualification, might not provide sufficient depth in training about professional identity and boundaries. This could lead to challenges in practice where social workers may inadvertently overstep professional limits due to a lack of comprehensive training.

To mitigate these risks, it is critical that training programs, whether academic or vocational, incorporate robust modules on professional boundaries. These should cover scenarios that social workers are likely to encounter in different settings, from clinical to community-based environments. Educators and supervisors must emphasize the importance of boundaries in maintaining the integrity and effectiveness of social work practice.

Continuing professional development (CPD) programs should include refresher courses on professional boundaries to help experienced practitioners navigate complex and evolving social interactions. This is particularly vital in a field where social workers frequently deal with vulnerable populations and ethically challenging situations.

The strategic enhancement of social work education in the Czech Republic, coupled with a strong emphasis on professional identity and boundaries, will not only elevate the practice but also ensure it is conducted within a framework that protects and benefits all stakeholders. By fostering a robust educational system and clearly defined professional standards, the Czech Republic can better prepare its social workers to meet the challenges of a demanding and ever-changing social landscape.

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