

Joint Oireachtas Committee on
Education, Further &
Higher Education, Research,
Innovation, and Science

Professional Accreditation of Higher
Education (HE) courses with specific
reference to Health Care Professions
(Social Care)

THEA opening statement

May 2023

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Introduction

Chair, members of the Joint Committee, good morning, my name is Mary McHugh, Social Care Lecturer and Programme Director in Technological University of the Shannon Athlone. On behalf of THEA, it is my pleasure to make this statement regarding Professional Accreditation of Higher Education (HE) courses with specific reference to Social Care

We welcome the opportunity to make a submission regarding Professional Accreditation of Higher Education (HE) courses with specific reference to Social Care. THEA members, educational providers, Social Care staff and students have welcomed and embraced CORU's approval process over the past 5 years.

Educational Providers

THEA represents 4 different educational providers, which collectively some 10 full time and one part time social care courses, approved by CORU. **TUS Athlone** has two full time and one part time course and **TUS Midwest** delivers one course over 3 different campuses. **Atlantic TU** delivers courses in Sligo and Castlebar. **South East TU** have 3 courses in Waterford, Wexford and Carlow. Finally, **Dundalk IT** has received CORU approval to deliver one Social Care course.

Each educational provider has actively engaged with CORU throughout the process. We will continue to collaborate with the Social Care Sector, statutory, voluntary and private organisations, representative bodies like *Social Care Ireland* and *Irish Association of Social Care Educators* to ensure graduates have the necessary skills and knowledge to meet CORU's Standards of Proficiency, which are required to register as a Social Care Worker.

Wider Context

Our members have had a long history in the provision of Social Care Education in Ireland. Courses were born out of the need to address serious deficits in the provision of residential care and other Social Care services. Social Care Ireland and Irish Association of Social Care Educators have worked tirelessly throughout this process advocating for recognition for social care profession and supporting social care workers and educators navigating this new landscape.

As educators and social care workers, we have embraced CORU's programme approval journey. Our values are fully aligned with CORU's overall mission of creating quality standards with the sole aim of ensuring 'safety of the public'. The journey began 20 years ago with the initial Health and Social Care bill, followed by the Health and Social Care Act 2005. It will culminate, on November 30th 2023, with the opening of CORU's register for Social Care workers. From that point, '*Social Care Worker*' will become a legally protected title in Ireland. This has proved a dynamic journey both for regulator and providers and we have learned much in recent years.

Social Care Profession

The title Social Care Profession is likely to be truly transformative for the sector. Firstly, it will inspire greater confidence in the public and Individuals and families who need to access social care services. In addition, independently verification by the regulatory body CORU will help shape the emerging identity of the entire profession of Social Care Workers.

The opening of CORU's register this November launches a 2-year transition period for the existing diverse sector of social care practitioners to apply to join the register. Once that 2-year 'grand-parenting' process ends in late 2025, access to the register will be restricted to graduates who successfully complete one of CORU's list of approved social care course mentioned above.

Future Considerations and Implications

There are a number of considerations or issues to reflect upon.

Firstly, **practice placement** is an integral part of social care programmes with every student requiring to complete a minimum of 2 placements spanning 800 hours during their social care programme. We appreciate that individuals and groups that avail of Social Care Service allow Social care to engage and experience Social Care Practice under supervision in their Social Care settings. This practice experience allows students to demonstrate they are meeting CORU's Standards of proficiencies. Quality placements require resources to support students and their Practice Educators. These requirements demand significant investment by the placement agencies, which provide learning opportunities for students. This requires careful planning - preparing students for placement, carefully placing students to ensure the experience meets their learning needs, investing time to find suitable agencies and build capacity, liaising with agencies during placements, monitoring student progress, providing training and supports for supervisors and agencies.

Another consideration is ensuring wider **access to social care education**. Government led initiative and individual colleges initiatives have ensured that under represented populations secure access to third level education and this is very evident especially in Social Care.

Current initiative like DARE and HEAR and various bursaries and initiatives support students in gaining access to social care education. The University of Sanctuary has supported those in direct provision to access third level education and Social Care in particular. Other supports such as the 1916 Bursary provides opportunities for applicants who have experienced disadvantage to become Social Care Workers. Further development and funding of those initiative are vital in ensuring successful completion of a Social Care course and therefore ensuring equality and access to Social Care programmes for all and to ensure that all of our citizens are represented in Social Care.

Part time provision is another consideration, which is lacking in Ireland. TUS Athlone offers one out of a total of two CORU approved part time social care courses aimed at those applicants wishing to pursue a qualification or longer-term career pathway in Social Care, culminating in joining the Social Care register. Most of these applicants for part-time study are working full time in the social care sector. The majority are self-funded. This demonstrates their commitment to Social Care and

represents a significant challenge as they balance study, work, and family. This is worthy of consideration in terms of financial support or tax breaks to support those students. Part Time courses are meeting the demands of Social Care Practice.

CPD and Post Graduate Education Students who go through accredited programmes will have met the threshold standards to enter the register and profession, there also needs to be consideration given to post qualification CPD and post graduate qualifications that further develop skills of Social Care Workers who may go on to work in a diverse range of areas within Social Care and who may require more specialist skills and knowledge.

Balancing academic and professional requirements

Like other professions in the Health and Social Care we have experienced challenges aligning professional accreditation bodies' requirements and academic requirements. This is something that can be a challenge for some students on Social Care programmes.

To conclude, there has been positive developments in Social Care Education in response to the changing practice landscape. We are now at the cusp of the next phase of growth and progress and the recognition, which Social Care educators and the profession has been striving for since the origins of Social Care education.

Finally, I would like to thank the members of the committee for your attention and time. I will be happy to answer questions.