



COUNTRY REPORT – UNITED KINGDOM

Intellectual Output 6

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Foreword

This report constitutes the UK country report of a larger Erasmus+ funded project exploring the *Development, Assessment and Validation of Social Competences in European Higher Education* (DASCHE project). The DASCHE project is an international project, which aims to support and promote learning policy between countries and higher education institutions in the domain of social competences and their place in the curricula. The aim of the report is to explore the place of social competence, as defined in the European Qualifications Framework for Higher Education (EQF, 2019), in the UK national context. In particular, the report considers to what extent social competence is evidenced in UK national qualifications frameworks at a national level and within degree programme learning outcomes at a local level. The report will also bring together exemplars of good practice which will be useful to other HEIs both in the UK and elsewhere.

The report starts by offering a brief discussion of the nature and structure of UK higher education. It then turns to a consideration of the qualifications and credit frameworks and processes that govern UK Higher Education before moving on to a presentation of the UK specific case studies. In the discussions of the UK context, consideration will be given to the place of the *European Qualifications Frameworks and Guidance* as it has been adopted and implemented by the UK government.



1. Executive summary

Introduction

This report constitutes the UK country report of a larger Erasmus + funded project exploring the *Development, Assessment and Validation of Social Competences in European Higher Education* (DASCHE project). The DASCHE project is an international project, which aims to support and promote learning policy between countries and higher education institutions in the domain of social competences and their place in the curricula. The aim of the report is to explore the place of social competence, as defined in the *European Qualifications Framework for Higher Education* (EQF, 2019), in the UK national context. In particular, the report considers to what extent social competence is evidenced in UK national qualifications frameworks at a national level and within degree programme learning outcomes at a local level. The report is based on documentary analysis of the available qualifications frameworks and a selection of the subject benchmark statements that underpin course development in UK higher education. In addition four Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) were selected as case studies for the research. These institutions were chosen from a variety of geographical locations, covering England and Scotland, and they reflected different historical and structural backgrounds (Russell Group and Post-1992 universities). In each case study institution interviews were conducted with academic developers, academics responsible for teaching, and students. In addition publicly available documents such as mission statements and education strategy documents were analysed to determine how social competence was conceptualised, validated and assessed.

Higher Education and Social competence in the United Kingdom

The United Kingdom has a long and well-documented history of Higher education that dates back 800 years to the establishment of the first English Universities (Carpentier, 2018). At the present time there are 167 Higher education Institutions (HEIs) in the UK (HESA, 2019). These institutions are autonomous self-governing institutions who have responsibility for setting and shaping their own strategic aims and direction. They have the authority to determine their own programmes of study and internal governance structures, as well as strategic research objectives (QAA, 2019). Higher education in the United Kingdom is financed through a complex system of government funding, student fees and income generated from research or other commercial activities. The precise nature of the funding model is dependent on the geographical location of the HEI, with HEIs in Scotland operating under a different funding model to HEIs in the rest of the United Kingdom. This reflects the devolved nature of UK higher education and is reflective of differentiated forms of higher education in the different geographical regions of the UK. The duration and structure of undergraduate degrees varies between Scotland and the rest of the UK with those in Scotland being one year longer. In addition, the qualifications frameworks that operate in Scotland and the rest of the UK are also different. The two sets of qualifications frameworks do align but they use different level descriptors i.e. an undergraduate degree in England, Wales and Northern Ireland is awarded at level 6 of the *Regulated Qualifications Framework* (Ofqual, 2015) but at level 10 of the *Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework* (SCQF, 2019).

Despite differences in the levels used in both the National Qualifications Framework for England Wales and Northern Ireland and that used in Scotland both frameworks are aligned to *the European Qualifications Framework for Higher Education* and as such demonstrate a high level of overlap and alignment (QAA 2019). To this end it has been possible to treat them as a common framework for the purposes of the present work.

Neoliberal influences on higher education in the UK and more globally, have resulted in an increasingly audit driven approach to higher education, with a stronger culture of accountability and a shift towards the categorisation of students as consumers occupying much of the dominate discourse surrounding higher



education (Barnett, 1990; 2010; Altbach et al, 2017; McGettigan 2013; Molesworth et al, 2011). Despite such influences however, at present HEIs still retain considerable autonomy in setting their own programmes of study and determining their own learning outcomes. They do this within the context of the The Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies (QAA, 2014) and a set of subject-benchmark statements that specify how the discipline is defined and framed for the purposes of academic study and the subject specific knowledge and skills a student should have mastered by the end of a bachelor's degree. These statements are developed by a panel of subject experts in conjunction with the quality Assurance Agency.

Whilst the qualifications frameworks and subject benchmark statements underpin the development of all new programmes of study in the UK, individual institutions retain considerable academic freedom as to their interpretation and the precise nature of their articulation within the individual programme learning outcomes of any specific degree programme. Degree programmes are validated by the institutions themselves who retain principal responsibility for the quality assurance of each programme in terms of its development, delivery and assessment. A system of external audits and quality assurance (quality enhancement in Scotland) reviews serve as an external mechanism to ensure that academic programmes in an individual institution are indeed aligned to the qualifications frameworks, the Quality Code for Higher Education and the subject benchmark statements. These audits happen on a cyclical basis and generally an individual institution is audited once in a five year period (QAA 2019).

In addition to these external audits, the UK operates a system of external examining as a further quality assurance measure. An expert academic from a different institution is appointed to review and comment on the assessment processes, protocols and procedures adopted in relation to an individual programme of study. They are tasked with offering an independent opinion as to whether assessment processes and procedure have been followed appropriately but also make comment on the extent to which the work being assessed meets the learning outcomes of the programme. They will also offer an opinion about the level of work and the extent to which it is commensurate with that which they have seen at their own or other institutions. In this way they provide a sense of whether graduates at one institution are similar to those at another in terms of the end-point of the degree i.e. to consider if the final awards are being made at level 6 or 10 of the relevant national qualifications frameworks.

An analysis of both the national qualifications frameworks and the subject benchmark statements for a range of subjects in the social sciences, humanities and sciences indicates that there is no clearly articulated definition of social competence within the National Qualifications Frameworks. Reference is made to communication skills and other attributes and abilities such as personal responsibility but these are framed in relation to employability skills and not specifically in relation to something that extends beyond the workplace. No clear statement of social competence is provided. When we turn to the benchmark statements we see variation in terms of any incorporation of the idea of social competence within them depending on the discipline of study they relate to. Subject benchmarks in the social sciences appear to make the most reference to values, attitudes and attributes that might be associated with social competence such as 'social justice' or the development of global citizens but these are often framed in terms of students being able to make an economic and individual contribution to society rather than as being associated with a broader sense of social or collective responsibility. In the humanities the focus tends to be about the ability to use evidence and arguments from the past to provide explanations for the present and make determinations about how to act on the basis of this analysis. Whilst in the sciences there is relatively little consideration of social competence at all outside of the notions of behaving ethically as a scientist. All of the subject benchmark statements, do however, suggest that students should also develop some transferable skills such as communication and team working which might be associated with social competence to some extent.



The lack of a clear articulation of social competence in the national qualifications frameworks and benchmark statements was echoed by the academic developers, academics and students we interviewed from the case study institutions. They typically shared a belief that higher education was a place of 'public good', a place where learners were developed and a place for exploration and discovery. This was reflected in the way that they defined higher education and in how they spoke about social competence in conceptual terms. Likewise, the mission statements and education strategies of the institutions frequently used words like 'creative', 'inquisitive', 'interested', 'future leaders' and 'global citizens' when talking about the qualities of their students. The language of the mission statements reflects the idea of higher education as a public good, a place for change and innovation and a place for growth. What became clear in discussions with the primary stakeholders however, was that whilst higher education was indeed seen as a place for public and indeed social good and there was a belief that social competence was associated with the enactment of this social good, it was not a concept that was familiar to the stakeholders or something that they could easily articulate. Thus the lack of definition and articulation from the national qualifications frameworks seems to be further complicated by the inability of academics and other key stakeholders to offer a robust or comprehensive definition. It was typically constructed as a 'value', or way of being, which then made it difficult to assess.

The construction of social competence as relating to public or social good, i.e. in value terms, made it difficult for academics to then see it as something that could easily be assessed as part of an academic programme of study. For those teaching professional courses such as nursing, business or even initial teacher education, it became entangled in definitions of professional competencies that needed to be demonstrated. Whilst for others there was an attempt to distill it into a set of skills that were measurable in some way. This re-characterisation of social competence as a set of discrete skills, frequently associated with communication, team work and interpersonal interactions, often meant that the original conceptualisation of social competence as relating to public or social good became lost or distorted as attempts were made to articulate it in ways that could be formally assessed.

The majority of stakeholders believed that social competence could be developed whilst at university but they were less sure about their ability to formally assess it. The interviewees also emphasised that higher education does not exist in isolation and therefore students' social competence development should be seen in relation to their prior educational experience, home and family life. In terms of the role of universities in developing social competences, there was frequently a sense that it was something that might be developed through the students extracurricular activities, such as volunteering, community work or being part of student bodies or groups. All of these activities contribute to the holistic development of students whilst at university but are typically not formally assessed. Some institutions have started to help students to articulate what skills and competencies they have developed during their extracurricular activities through the development of online logs or portfolios that can be turned into a form of student profile or curriculum vitae when they leave the institution, but the specific detail and nature of these programmes varies and attempts to formalise these or measure what a student has achieved or acquired from engaging in extracurricular activities has proven difficult.

The results of the UK case studies indicates that social competence is hard to define and represents a complex concept in relation to assessment. Its lack of articulation in national qualifications frameworks and subject benchmark statements is echoed in the way that key stakeholders in Higher Education conceptualise and attempt to enact it. This lack of clarity has made it difficult to pinpoint specific instances where it is clearly assessed within the frameworks of UK higher education. Aspects of it such as communication skills and team work are embedded within programmes of study and assessed by means of traditional assessments typically used in higher education but these capture only a small fragment of what stakeholders consider social competence to be. In the UK context before truly good practice can be clearly identified more consideration of what social competence is and how it manifests itself is needed. This



might also help to bridge the gap between the shared value contexts in higher education and educational practice.



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2. List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Meaning
CQFW	Credit and Qualifications Framework for Wales
DipHE	Diploma of Higher Education
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
FE	Further Education
FHEQ	Framework for Higher Education Qualifications
FQ-EHEA	Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher
HE	Higher Education
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council England
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HNC	Higher National Certificate
HND	Higher National Diploma
LL	Lifelong Learning
OFS	Office for Students
PGCE	Post Graduate Certificate in Education
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency
QCA	Qualifications and Curriculum Authority
RAE	Research Assessment Exercise
REF	Research Excellence Framework
SCQF	Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service



3. Preparation of the Report

This report was prepared by the UK research team of the DASCHE project. The team comprises two researchers, Dr. Julie Rattray and Dr. Rille Raaper from the University of Durham. The report was reviewed by two of the DASCHE country partners who gave comments on the draft report. In addition, the report was shared with the full project team. The report has also been peer reviewed by two representatives of key stakeholder groups - the President of the Estranged Students Society and a member of the SEDA Executive Committee.

The authors adopted a range of methodologies in the preparation of this report including:

Documentary analysis of publicly available documents such as the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications and Subject Benchmark Statements for individual subject disciplines (QAA, 2018).

Case studies of 4 UK Higher Education Institutions. Using interviews with key interest groups including, academic staff, senior leaders, students and academic developers - using interviews and documentary analysis.

4. Basic Terms

Term	Definition	Source
Academic development	Sometimes referred to as educational or professional development, it involves academic and professional staff in planned activities to enhance all dimensions of teaching, learning and scholarship in universities	IGI Global. https://www.igi-global.com/dictionary/change-leadership-management-and-strategies-to-promote-quality-university-teaching-and-learning/56974
Bologna Process	The Bologna Process is a voluntary higher education reform process that aims to reform and internationalise higher education systems and institutions on the basis of a set of key values.	ERASMUS + https://www.erasmusplus.org.uk/ehea-and-the-bologna-process
FHEQ	The Framework for Higher Education Qualifications of Degree-Awarding bodies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland	https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/qualifications-frameworks.pdf
First Cycle	Ordinary Bachelor's degree or Bachelor's degree with honours (Level 6, England, Wales and Northern Ireland; Level 9/10 in Scotland).	QAA (2018) The Right to Award UK Degrees. QAA: Gloucester https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/guidance/the-right-to-award-degrees-18.pdf?sfvrsn=4a2f781_14
Formative assessment	Assessment that is part of the learning process that provides constructive feedback to the learner; which allows students to improve their quality of work.	The Higher Education Academy. https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/formative-assessment
Further Education	Formal learning that follows compulsory education, such as A levels, NVQs and Access to Higher Education courses. Some form of further education is normally required to qualify for entry to higher education.	QAA (2018) The Right to Award UK Degrees. QAA: Gloucester. https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/guidance/the-right-to-award-degrees-18.pdf?sfvrsn=4a2f781_14
Higher Education Institution	Universities, colleges or other organisations that primarily deliver programmes of higher education.	QAA (2018) The Right to Award UK Degrees. QAA: Gloucester. https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/guidance/the-right-to-award-degrees-18.pdf?sfvrsn=4a2f781_14
Learning outcomes	Learning outcomes should: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • be written in the future tense • identify important learning requirements • be achievable and assessable • use clear language easily understandable to students 	The Higher Education Academy. https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/writing_learning_outcomes.pdf
Office for Students	An independent public body, its primary aim is to ensure that English higher education is delivering positive outcomes for students – past, present, and future. 'The OfS will seek to ensure that students, from all backgrounds (particularly the most disadvantaged), can access, succeed in, and progress from higher education.	https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/1441/ofs-framework-28-april-2018.pdf
QAA	'The mission of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) is to safeguard standards and improve the quality of UK higher education. We do this by offering advice and guidance to universities and colleges to help them provide the best student experience possible.	https://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/ABOUTUS/QAA/Pages/Default.aspx
Second Cycle	Taught/Research MA (Level 7, England, Wales and Northern Ireland; Level 11 in Scotland)	QAA (2018) The Right to Award UK Degrees. QAA: Gloucester. https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/guidance/the-right-to-award-degrees-18.pdf?sfvrsn=4a2f781_14
Summative assessment	The process of evaluating learning at the conclusion of a programme of study. Summative assessments include standardised tests delivered by examination.	The Higher Education Academy. https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/summative-assessment



Third Cycle	Doctoral Degree (or Doctorate) (Level 8, England, Wales and Northern Ireland; Level 12 in Scotland)	QAA (2018) The Right to Award UK Degrees. QAA: Gloucester. https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/guidance/the-right-to-award-degrees-18.pdf?sfvrsn=4a2f781_14
United Kingdom (UK)	A kingdom of NW Europe, consisting chiefly of the island of Great Britain together with Northern Ireland	Collins online dictionary. https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/united-kingdom
University	Independent, self-governing organisations that undertake research and teaching and are diverse in size, mission, history, and the range of subjects on offer. The first universities arose from colleges or institutions founded by groups of scholars, often with monastic connections and/or noble or royal patrons. Subsequently, universities have been established by a Royal Charter, Act of Parliament, Papal Bull or by Order of the Privy Council enabling them to develop their own programmes of study and award their own degrees.	QAA (2018) The Right to Award UK Degrees. QAA: Gloucester. https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/guidance/the-right-to-award-degrees-18.pdf?sfvrsn=4a2f781_14
University College	A college attached to, or affiliated with, a university that lacks the right to award its own degrees.	QAA (2018) The Right to Award UK Degrees. QAA: Gloucester. https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/guidance/the-right-to-award-degrees-18.pdf?sfvrsn=4a2f781_14

5. Higher Education in the United Kingdom and National Qualifications Frameworks

5.1 Higher Education in the United Kingdom

The United Kingdom has a long and well-documented history of Higher Education dating back 800 years with the first recognised UK universities in Oxford and Cambridge (Bowen, 1975; Collini, 2012). Following the establishment of these first institutions, growth in UK higher education was initially relatively slow with only a handful of universities existing up until the middle of the 19th century (Bowen, 1975; Collini 2012). However, since this time there has been several periods of rapid expansion in university provision. This rapid growth has been linked to the demands of the emerging business and political class who wanted to establish a system of Higher Education that was accessible and available to their offspring (Anderson, 1992; Carpentier, 2018; Marginson, 2011; Radice, 2013; Scott, 2014). These more locally situated institutions, known as ‘Red Brick’ or ‘Municipal institutions,’ would have a more independent management and governance structure and serve as a counter to the existing Higher Education provision that was dominated by the church (Bowen, 1975; Marginson 2011). The most recent period of expansion started in the 1980’s under the Thatcher government and was largely a result of the 1988 Education Act and the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act (McGettigan, 2013). Today more than 166 Universities and Higher Education Institutions exist with the authority to award qualifications at degree level and above.

The United Kingdom has a devolved system of education with the 4 regional countries, England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, having responsibility for the precise structure and format of educational provision from pre-school to Higher Education (Carpentier, 2018; British Council, n.d.). In the sections that follow the commonalities and differences in UK Higher Education provision will be outlined and explored where appropriate to try to provide as comprehensive and holistic a picture as possible of the current state of Higher Education in the UK.

In the United Kingdom higher education is offered by a range of different providers, known as Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). A HEI can be a University, University College, Further Education College (FE, in Wales) or an Alternative Provider (AP). At present, all UK Higher Education Institutions receive government

funding, asides from those designated as Alternative Providers. In addition to having a range of higher education provision, the systems of higher education are subject to regional variation in the different UK countries, with Scotland adopting a different structure of provision as compared to England, Wales and Northern Ireland. For example, the standard length of a BA Honours degree in Scotland is 4 years whilst in England, Wales and Northern Ireland it is 3 years. Table 1, below, shows the types and number of HEIs in the UK as of academic year 2017-8, based on submissions to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) (HESA, 2018).

Table 1. HE providers in the UK, by institution type (2018/19)
FEs are colleges in Wales that have some HE provision

HEIs	164
APs	98
FEs	3

(Adapted from: HESA <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/support/providers>)

In the United Kingdom HEI's are further sub-categorised into particular types such as Russell Group, Red Brick or Post-1992. These categorisations denote their characterisation within the UK system as for example research intensive (Russell Group) or with a stronger focus on Teaching and Technology (post 1992) (Carpentier, 2018). Table 2 below shows the categorisations of UK institutions with their associated definitions. These categorisations have been a source of controversy as they are often treated as being hierarchical (Boliver, 2015; Scott, 2014; Shattock, 2012).

Table 2. Categorisations of Universities in the UK

Group	Description	Source
Ancient Universities	For hundreds of years there were only a small handful of universities that were founded in England, Scotland and Ireland. The earliest was the University of Oxford in 1096 and the latest of the Ancient Universities was the University of Dublin in 1592.	https://www.ukuni.net/articles/types-uk-universities
Red Brick Universities	Red Brick originally referred to 6 Civic universities that were given charters in the late 19th Century in the big industrial cities of the UK. The term Red Brick referred to a building at the University of Liverpool which was built from Red Bricks, but the term also referred more generally to "new" buildings/institutions.	https://www.ukuni.net/articles/types-uk-universities
Plate Glass Universities	Plate Glass Universities were the next batch of universities to be given royal charter between 1963 and 1992.	https://www.ukuni.net/articles/types-uk-universities
New Universities	Currently, the term is synonymous with post-1992 universities and sometimes modern universities, referring to any of the former polytechnics, central institutions or colleges of higher education that were given university status by John Major's government in 1992 (through the Further and Higher Education Act 1992) – as well as colleges that have been granted university status since then. Though referred to as new or modern, some were founded without university status as Polytechnics in the early to mid-19th century	https://ipfs.io/ipfs/QmXoypiziW3WknFiJnKlWHCnL72vedxiQkDDP1mXWo6uco/wiki/New_universities_(United_Kingdom).html



Russell Group Universities	The Russell Group represents 24 leading UK universities which are committed to maintaining the very best research, an outstanding teaching and learning experience and unrivalled links with business and the public sector	https://russellgroup.ac.uk/
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Higher education qualifications can be awarded by all the different types of HEI in the UK, but there is variation in the level of qualification that can be awarded. Typically only Universities or University Colleges, or those with an affiliation to one of these HEI types, can award Bachelor's degree level programmes at level 6 (10 in Scotland) of the qualifications framework (see section 5.5). Further Education colleges can award Higher Education certificates at level 4 (8 In Scotland) and Higher Education diplomas at level 5 (9 in Scotland).

In the United Kingdom, higher education is offered at all three cycles as outlined in the Bologna process. Typically, whilst first cycle programmes may be offered by HEIs that do not have full university status, only institutions with university status offer second and third cycle qualifications.

Undergraduate degree courses, typically known as Bachelor's degrees, except in Scotland where they are called Master's degrees, are usually awarded 'with honours', typically take three years to complete in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and four years in Scotland. Courses which include a period of practical work outside the institution normally take four (five in Scotland) years. Degree courses that are considered to be specialist or include a professional or vocational qualification may take longer. For example, medicine and dentistry can take up to six years (not including further specialist training) and architecture up to seven years.

At postgraduate level, a taught Master's degree normally takes one year, a research Master's two years and a doctoral degree a minimum of three years full time study.

There are also a number of vocational 'sub-degree' qualifications offered in the UK, including the Higher National Diploma (HND), the Higher National Certificate (HNC) and the Diploma in Higher Education (Dip HE), which generally take one or two years to complete.

Other qualifications include postgraduate certificates, such as the Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE). In addition, students in the UK can take two-year vocational Foundation Degrees and then take a 'top-up' course to honours degree level on successful completion of the foundation degree.

Under the UK's traditional degree-classification system students are awarded First-class Honours (1st), Second-class Honours, upper division (2:1), Second-class Honours, lower division (2:2), Third-class Honours (3rd) or a pass at ordinary level without Honours.

5.2 Funding

A proportion of all public HEIs budget each year comes from public sector funding. The proportion of public funding that an individual institution receives will vary depending on its size, scope and the nature of provision it offers. Despite receiving public funds, Higher Education Institutions are not run by the UK government(s) or devolved assemblies. They are independent, autonomous, institutions with responsibility for setting their own strategic direction, ensuring an appropriate and effective system of governance and managing and monitoring their own finances. Public funding was traditionally provided to institutions via the Higher Education Funding Councils (HEFC) which were seen as being independent of the government. There were 3 funding councils in the UK until December 2017 - one for England, Scotland and Wales. In Northern Ireland, public money was provided to HEIs via the Department for Employment and Learning.

Since 2018 however, responsibility for funding has become the purview of the Office for Students in England and the Scottish, the Welsh Assembly and the Northern Ireland Executive.

Public funding to HEIs is linked to teaching and research activities and does not cover the full running costs of the institution. In addition to the public funding they receive institutions get income from student fees. Student fees for Higher Education in the UK were first introduced in 1998 at a standard rate of £1,000 per student per annum. After the UK instituted a system of devolved government for the four countries from which it is comprised the situation in relation to student fees became more complicated, with the devolved powers assuming responsibility for setting fees. This has resulted in a differentiated fee structure across UK Higher Education. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland all students pay a fee to the institution for their chosen course of study (McGettigan, 2013).

The Browne report *Securing a sustainable future for higher education: an independent review of higher education funding & student finance*. (BIS, 2010) significantly changed the fee structure of higher education in England and Wales and the level of student fees rose exponentially. A cap of £9,000 was set for home/EU students to take effect from 2012. The Browne report (2010) put in place a maximum fee level but did allow for HEIs to charge less, however, by 2016 approximately 75% of all HEIs in England were charging the maximum. The maximum fee for England and Wales has now risen to £9,250, initially this rise was intended to herald the introduction of a regular inflationary increase in student fees however, and there is currently a fee freeze in English and Welsh higher education as a result of a funding review. In other parts of the UK the fee level is not as high, in Northern Ireland the cap is £4,030 and in Scotland ‘young students’ that is those under 25 with no familial responsibilities and who have been out of full time education for no more than 3 years, pay no fees at all. Students over 25 in Scotland or those with children pay fees of between £1,200 and £1,800. If students domiciled in Scotland choose to study in England, Wales or Northern Ireland however, they are liable for the same fees as those students domiciled in that part of the UK. In effect this means that if a student from Scotland chooses to study in England they will pay up to £9,250 for a course of study that would be free to them in Scotland. A student from England on the other hand would pay up to £9,250 irrespective of whether they study in England or Scotland. A system of postgraduate fees is in place across the UK with all postgraduate courses encoring some form of fee. The level of fees charged in England and Wales has been a source of controversy as they are argued to be some of the highest globally (Altbach et al, 2017; Boliver, 2016; Callender & Mason (see table 3 below).

Table 3. A comparative table of HE fees by nation

England	£9250/per year (home students)
USA	Variable (e.g. for public universities from £7,100 (in-state tuition and fees), to £18,300 (for out-of-state tuition and fees)
Korea	£3500/per year
China	Variable (often between £1,320 to £2,400), however, programmes in medicine, engineering and business cost more (£18,319 to £38,166).
Netherlands	£1700/per year
Finland	Free (for home and EU students)
Denmark	Free (for home and EU students)
Germany	Free (both home and international students)



Sources: <https://www.thisinsider.com/cost-of-college-countries-around-the-world-2018-6#finland-0-7>
<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/student/advice/cost-studying-university-china>

Since their introduction student fees have resulted in the systematic reduction in maintenance grants paid to students. These grants have been replaced instead with a system of student loans, which cover both fees, where they are charged, and the associated living costs of higher education. The specific levels of student loans and arrangements for repayment vary across the UK and are linked to the fee level and funding arrangements in the devolved regions. In Scotland for example, where Scottish domiciled and EU (excluding other UK countries) students do not pay fees they can still access the student loans system to cover living costs (McGettigan, 2013; Shattock, 2012)

The funding system for higher education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland has been a significant source of controversy in recent years (Altbach, 2017; Boliver, 2016; Callender and Mason, 2017). The introduction of student fees being seen as a considerable barrier to the widening participation agenda and discourse that has been dominant since the mid 1990's when there was a return to a Labour Government. The tuition fees for home students have witnessed significant increase over the past two decades, from £1,000 per annum in 1998 to £3,000 in 2003 and £9,000 in 2010 (Wilkins, Shams, & Huisman, 2013). They have also been raised in line with inflation up to a maximum of £9,250 for 2019/20 (UCAS 2019). In addition to significant concerns about the impact of student fees on higher Education participation rates, particularly from marginalised groups within society (Atkinson, 2015; Barnett, 2010; Boliver, 2016; Callender & Mason, 2017). Concerns have also been raised about the potential impact on what might be termed 'low income' professions in the UK such as teaching and nursing (Crawford et al, 2016). It is argued that individuals from low income backgrounds will be further disincentivised to study for qualifications in professions such as teaching or nursing because the impact of the current fee/loan system hits them significantly harder, as the salaries associated with these jobs are typically significantly lower than that of many other professions such as dentistry and law, meaning that in real terms the debt incurred by students from low income backgrounds entering low income professions is higher (Crawford et al, 2016).

A recent report, *The Review of the Funding for Post-18 Education and Funding*, commonly known as the Augar Review (GOV. UK), has raised concerns about the disparities that still exist between the 50% of young people who are now accessing Post-18 Higher Education and those who are not. They have made a series of recommendations for addressing these disparities including a reduction in student fees to £7500 (UK Gov, 2019). It is not clear however, how the shortfall in university funding that will inevitably result from this reduction in student fees, no matter how welcome, would be addressed by the UK government.

It is worth noting that the introduction of student fees in England, Wales and Northern Ireland removed the caps on student numbers that had previously been imposed on individual institutions and instead allowed HEI's to determine their own recruitment figures. In Scotland where home and EU students do not pay fees a cap on student numbers is still imposed (SHEFC).

Higher education institutions also get fees from the growing numbers of international students. At present home students and those from the European Union pay fees as outlined above, students from outside of the European Union are charged considerably more to study in the UK, sometimes the fee is as much as 3 times that of a home/EU student. The ability of HEIs to attract international students who pay higher fees is seen by many as a contentious issue. The 'internationalisation' agenda which has dominated discourse in Higher Education in recent years has been met with scepticism by many, who see it as an opportunity for HEIs to generate income and not as an attempt to diversify the curriculum and broaden the HE population (Knight, 2013)



Universities who carry out research also derive part of their funding from research income. This can be in the form of block funding linked to the institutions performance in the *Research Excellence Framework* (REF). The research Excellence Framework is a UK wide assessment of the quality, impact and research environment of the research carried out in Higher Education institutions. It has three core aims:

“1. To provide accountability for public investment in research and produce evidence of the benefits of this investment. 2. To provide benchmarking information and establish reputational yardsticks, for use within the HE sector and for public information. 3. To inform the selective allocation of funding for research.” (REF, 2021).

The first Research Excellence Framework review was carried out in 2014, replacing its predecessor the Research Assessment Exercise. It is considered to be based on the premise of expert review and is predicated on the principles of transparency and accountability. Disciplines and subjects are organised into 34 Units of assessment arranged into 4 subject panels that comprise senior academics from the UK, International Academics and representatives from those who make use of the research being conducted. Individual departments or groups of departments aligned to the 34 Assessment Units are then reviewed in relation to the quality, impact and research environments associated with their research work. This then results in a ranking of University departments across the UK and a block of funding is released based on these rankings (REF, 2021)

In addition research income can be generated through grants for research projects undertaken. Research projects are funded by a range of different organisations and groups including the UK research councils, charitable and philanthropic organisations and commercial companies

5.3 Oversight of Higher Education

5.3.1 Oversight

In the UK responsibility for overseeing higher education has been devolved to the regional governments and legislatures. This means that in Scotland the Scottish government is responsible for the general oversight of higher education and makes regulatory decisions about the structure of public funding, fee setting and bestows degree awarding status to individual institutions. In Wales this is the purview of the Welsh Assembly and in Northern Ireland it is the Northern Ireland Executive. The Higher Education and Research Act of 2017 merged the Higher Education Funding Council for England with the Office for Fair Access and replaced them with the Office for Students, which covers England. The Office for Students represents a significant shift in the way that higher education is regulated and monitored in England, placing value for money and the student experience at the heart of its regulatory framework:

“The Office for Students' primary aim is to ensure that English higher education is delivering positive outcomes for students – past, present, and future. It will seek to ensure that students, from all backgrounds (particularly the most disadvantaged), can access, succeed in, and progress from higher education.” (Office for Students, 2018).

The office for Students has four primary areas of responsibility reflected in its key objectives as set out in the OfS Regulatory Framework (2018).

“All students, from all backgrounds, and with the ability and desire to undertake higher education:

- Are supported to access, succeed in, and progress from, higher education.

- Receive a high quality academic experience, and their interests are protected while they study or in the event of provider, campus or course closure.
- Are able to progress into employment or further study, and their qualifications hold their value over time.
- Receive value for money.

The regulatory framework is designed to mitigate the risk that these primary objectives are not met. It states how the OfS intends to perform its various functions, and provides guidance for registered higher education providers on the ongoing conditions of registration.” (OfS Regulatory Framework, 2018).

5.3.2 UK Quality Code for Higher Education

In May of 2018 The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) published a revised version of the Quality Code for Higher Education. This is a primary point of reference for all higher education providers in the UK irrespective of geographic location. The Quality Code (QAA, 2018) has been designed to set out clearly the expectations placed upon higher education providers and in so doing offers a level of protection to the public and students in relation to the quality of education they can expect. It was developed by the QAA in consultation with representatives from the higher education sector and on behalf of the UK standing committee for Quality Assessment. The revised Quality Code is being implemented by all higher education institutions registered with the Office for Students in England at the current time and is being introduced through a process of transitions in the rest of the UK (QAA, 2018).

The revised code is based on three key elements expectations, core practices and common practices, in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all three elements of the revised Quality Code are mandatory whereas in England only the first two are (QAA, 2018), as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The elements that provide a reference point for effective quality assurance.



Source: <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code#>

According to the revised Quality code:



Expectations - express the outcomes providers should achieve in setting and maintaining the standards of their awards, and for managing the quality of their provision.

Core practices - represent effective ways of working that underpin the delivery of the Expectations and result in positive outcomes for students.

Common practices - focus on enhancement. (QAA, 2018).

The Quality code (QAA, 2018) is a key driver that assures the quality of provision between higher education institutions in the UK. The code itself does not mandate the specific approaches and processes an individual institution should follow but rather prescribes a set of expectations and practices that should be adhered to. The QAA have developed a set of 12 enhancement themes designed to support institutions in their efforts to ensure their provision is of a high quality but these are simply intended to serve as guidance rather than being required (QAA, 2018).

5.4 Admission to Higher Education and Rates of participation

5.4.1 Admissions

Individual HEIs set their own admissions criteria and procedures for managing the admissions process. The Office for Students in England and other regulatory bodies in the UK have established guidance in relation to fair admissions processes in accordance with higher education legislation in the UK and Europe but they do not involve themselves directly in the admissions process. Prior to the introduction of £9000 per year fees in England for home students the higher education funding councils set caps on the total number of home students an individual HEI could recruit. The caps have now been removed however, and it is up to the individual institution to determine rates of participation on each of its programmes.

Whilst the specific entry criteria and admissions procedures are set by the individual Higher Education Institutions, most home undergraduate students apply to attend an HEI via a centralised admissions system that is operated by the Universities and college Admissions System (UCAS) an independent charitable organisation. Typically students will apply for their preferred course in multiple institutions and their applications will be passed to the admissions selectors in these institutions who will then make a decision about whether to offer the student a place on their chosen course and what kind of offer this will be - conditional, i.e. dependent on them obtaining certain qualifications or grades, or unconditional as they already meet all the entrance criteria. International students and all students applying for postgraduate courses apply directly to the HEI they wish to attend.

5.4.2 Rates of Participation

Traditionally in the United Kingdom participation in higher education was seen as a privilege for the wealthy classes and not something that was open to the wider population (Barnett, 1990). Indeed in 1950 only 3% of those eligible to attend higher Education, i.e. those aged between 18-25 years old, actually did so. By 1970 this figure had risen to 8%. During the next 30 years there was a period of rapid growth in participation in higher education and by 2000 approximately 40% of those eligible participated in some level of higher education (McGettigan, 2013). The most recent figures indicate that rates of participation are just below 50%. 2018 government statistics indicate it has risen to 49.8% in 2016/17 (https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/744087/Main_text_participation_rates_in_higher_education_2006_to_2017_.pdf). By 2011 this figure had risen to 50% realising an aspiration of the Labour government for the widening of participation in higher education by young people in the UK. It should be noted however that these figures potentially offer an oversimplification of the rates of participation of young people in higher education in the UK. Despite a



number of initiatives aimed at raising rates of participation in higher education of certain under-represented groups there are still massive disparities in participation rates across types of institutions, disciplines and cycles of programme, based on gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status and disability. (Bowers-Brown, 2006; Weale & Barr, 2018; Banerjee, 2018).

Table 4, below, shows the distribution of students participating in the different cycles of provision in England in 2016-17.

Table 4. HE student enrolments by level of study. UK
HE students registered at Further Education (FE) colleges in Wales are included

Postgraduate	Numbers
Doctorate research	100,085
Other postgraduate research	12,435
Total postgraduate research	112,520
Masters taught	313,920
Postgraduate Certificate in Education	24,020
Other postgraduate taught	101,135
Total postgraduate taught	439,075
Undergraduate	
First degree	1,597,825
Foundation degree	36,975
HNC/HND	15,150
Professional Graduate Certificate in Education	1,730
Other undergraduate	114,600
Total other undergraduate	168,460
Total all levels	2,317,880

(Adapted from HESA: <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/11-01-2018/sfr247-higher-education-student-statistics/numbers#>)



5.5 National Qualifications Frameworks and Subject Benchmarks

5.5.1 Qualifications Frameworks

In the United Kingdom a national qualifications framework for higher education was first suggested as an outcome of the *National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education* (The Dearing Report) (DfEE, 1997). This national enquiry into higher education which focused on a range of issues in relation to the governance and quality of UK higher education, serves as a significant landmark in UK higher education and has proven to be very influential in its development. The resulting National Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ, 2001), developed by the UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), came into effect for all students who began a programme of higher education study in the academic year 2003-04. In the UK two complimentary frameworks are in place, FHEQ for England, Wales and Northern Ireland and an equivalent, Framework for Qualifications in Higher Education Institutions Scotland (FQHEIS), for Scotland which has its own system of higher education. The two frameworks work in unison and at the postgraduate level (level 7 and above) use similar structures and programme titles. At the Undergraduate level (6 and below) there is equivalence in the frameworks but the specific terminology and descriptors vary to reflect the higher education context in the different areas of the UK. These frameworks are often treated as a single qualifications framework for UK higher education (QAA, 2018). The table below (table 5) shows the different level descriptors used in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and their Scottish equivalents.

Table 5. Examples of the typical higher education qualifications at each level of the FHEQ and the corresponding cycle of the FQ-EHEA



Within each level, the various qualifications involve different volumes of learning and hence differences in the range of intended learning outcomes.

Typical higher education qualifications awarded by degree-awarding bodies within each level	FHEQ	FQHEIS	Corresponding QF-EHEA cycle
	FHEQ level ^a	SCQF level ^b	
Doctoral degrees (eg. PhD/DPhil, EdD, DBA, DClinPsy) ^c	8	12	Third cycle (end of cycle) qualifications
Master's degrees (eg. MPhil, MLitt, MRes, MA, MSc)	7	11	Second cycle (end of cycle) qualifications
Integrated master's degrees (eg. MEng, MChem, MPhys, MPharm) ^d			
Primary qualifications (or first degrees) in medicine, dentistry and veterinary science (eg. MB ChB, MB BS, BM BS ^e ; BDS; BVSc, BVMS) ^f			
Postgraduate diplomas			
Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) ^g /Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) ^h	6	9	First cycle (end of cycle) qualifications
Postgraduate certificates			
Bachelor's degrees with honours (eg BA/BSc Hons)			
Bachelor's degrees			
Professional Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland ^e	5	8	Short cycle (within or linked to the first cycle) qualifications
Graduate diplomas			
Graduate certificates ⁱ			
Foundation degrees (eg. FdA, FdSc)			
Diplomas of Higher Education (DipHE)	4	7	
Higher National Diplomas (HND) awarded by degree-awarding bodies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland under licence from Pearson ^j			
Higher National Certificates (HNC) awarded by degree-awarding bodies in England, Wales and Northern Ireland under licence from Pearson ^j			
Certificates of Higher Education (CertHE)			

Source: <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/docs/qaa/quality-code/qualifications-frameworks.pdf>

In addition to these qualifications frameworks in the UK there are frameworks for school and vocational qualifications that intersect with the FHEQ. These frameworks fall under the oversight of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) in England, the Credit and Qualifications Framework Wales (CQFW) in Wales and the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) in Scotland. In Scotland the SCQF incorporates the Higher Education frameworks outlined above to provide a single qualifications and Credit Framework for Scotland. In this framework level 6 of the national qualifications framework i.e. Bachelor's degree is level 10. The FHEQ is part of the UK quality code for higher education and it has been revalidated twice since its initial introduction, once in 2008 and then again in 2014. According to the QAA website the FHEQ is currently being updated but no specific detail as to when the revised version will be available is given. The current version published in 2008 and revalidated 2014 is therefore the current working version and the one that all HE programmes in the UK use as the framework against which course provision and development is benchmarked. The FHEQ applies to Certificates, Diplomas, Degrees and other academic qualifications awarded by UK HEIs. It does not apply to honorary degrees or higher degrees at doctoral level that can be bestowed by a University (FHEQ, 2008).



All of the national frameworks for higher education that have been developed in the UK have been designed with student mobility in mind and in accordance with the Bologna Declaration. As such they are aligned to the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (FQ-EHEA). The need for alignment has resulted in terminology being used in the UK frameworks that replicate that used in the FQ-EHEA. Accordingly, programmes are described as short cycle, first, second and third cycle. It is worth noting however, that whilst these descriptors are used in the frameworks they do not comprise common discourse within institutions where the type of course is still referred to as diploma, degree or undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications. Table 3 shows how the UK qualifications frameworks and awards map on to the European framework.

The Qualifications Framework utilises a series of Qualification Descriptors to indicate 'nature and characteristics of the main qualification at each level' (QAA, 2014). Qualifications descriptors include two distinct parts. The first provides a statements of outcomes i.e. what a student should be able to do/demonstrate at the end of their period of study. These outcomes reflect the assessable components of the programme of study and what a student must be able to evidence in order to receive the award of the related qualification. The second aspect of the qualifications descriptor is a statement about the wider qualities or abilities that the student might develop whilst studying for a qualification at this level. Appendix A shows an excerpt from the Qualifications Framework for level 6 Bachelor's degree.

5.5.2 Subject Benchmarks

Whilst national qualifications frameworks exist, individual institutions have autonomy over the specific design and delivery of individual programmes and curricula. The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) however, has created a series of subject benchmarks which indicate the core competencies and skills that any honours graduate in a particular discipline should have acquired or be able to demonstrate. The subject Benchmarks reflect the minimum threshold that all students who obtain a Bachelor's degree in the specified subject area should be able to evidence. These subject benchmarks are used by HEIs in planning programmes of study and typically influence the learning outcomes of individual programmes. An example of the subject benchmark statements for Education Studies is shown in Appendix B.

The subject benchmark statements for a specific discipline or subject area are developed by a panel of experts, including academics, representatives from learned Societies and/or external accreditation agencies in conjunction with the QAA. They typically reflect a view of what studying the specific discipline/subject should be like and what students should achieve.

The subject benchmarks are typically framed in a series of broad statements which represent general expectations about standards, particularly at the threshold level, for the award of honours degrees in the field. The Subject Benchmark statements have been updated twice since their original introduction in 2000 once in 2007/8 and then again in 2014/15 and are publicly available on the Quality Assurance Agency website (<https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code/subject-benchmark-statements>).

6. Methodology

This section outlines the methods and strategies adopted by the UK team in planning and conducting the research project. The key objective of the empirical study was to establish exemplars of good practice within higher education teaching and learning contexts. The section will start by outlining the sampling



process used in the study, data collection methods applied, and the example interview questions used to engage with research participants.

6.1. Sampling process and the case study universities

The UK team developed 4 case studies of higher education institutions in England and Scotland. The case study universities and participants for interviewing were selected based on purposive sampling technique which reflects an approach in which the researchers choose to study contexts, documents and people that are particularly relevant to the overall research problematic (Bryman, 2004). Furthermore, purposive sampling enabled to increase the variation in the sample by including various sides of the research phenomenon (Gobo 2007). This also explains the reason why the UK team decided to include case study universities that covered a variety of geographical areas (England and Scotland) and institutional types (Russell Group and Post-1992 universities). The detailed overviews of the 4 case study universities are provided in the section 9 of this report.

In terms of participant recruitment from the selected case study universities, the researchers engaged with three key stakeholder groups as outlined below:

Academic developers: university employees who develop and advise the enhancement and accreditation of teaching and learning practices in their universities. They also teach academics on programmes such as the PG Certificate in Academic Practice or equivalent. Academic developers often work across their institution, providing them with a cross department and cross discipline overviews of educational practice and development.

Academics in this study were from a variety of disciplines, including Business, Nursing and Education. They were selected to reflect the more traditional as well as professional subject areas. All academics interviewed in this study were involved in teaching and/or supervising students in their day-to-day practice.

Students in this study were selected based on the recommendations from academic developers and academics. The student group included students who were able to share good educational experience on their social competence development and/or they were engaged in strategic work for students, e.g. actively participating in the work of students' union.

While participants were selected purposefully to reflect these stakeholder groups, it also became necessary to supplement the sampling process with snowball techniques where new participants were recruited for interviews based on the recommendation of existing participants (Gobo 2007). The academic developers became particularly helpful in finding the most suitable academics to be interviewed. Similarly, many of the academics suggested student participants for this study. All invitations for interviews were sent via email which included the participant information sheet and the consent form.

6.2. Data collection methods

The empirical study involved a number of stages which are outlined below:

Stage 1: Documentary analysis of learning and teaching policies and strategies which are publicly available to establish the stated place of social competence in the documentation. It also included a review of the universities' mission statements and strategic visions. No direct quotations from these documents have been used in this report to protect the anonymity of the case study institutions and participants. In addition National qualifications frameworks, subject benchmark statements and codes of practice that relate to UK



higher Education in its many forms were analysed to establish where social competence was located within them.

Stage 2: individual interviews with academic developers. These interviews were conducted via Skype or phone, to allow academic developers to suggest the most suitable time and method for conversation.

Stage 3: Individual interviews with academic staff. These interviews were conducted in person, via Skype or telephone, depending on the preference and availability of the academic staff.

Stage 4: Individual interviews with students. These interviews took place via phone or email, depending on the preference and availability of the students.

The interview method in this empirical project was guided by the works of Kvale (2006) and Brinkmann (2007) who approach interview method as an interactive way to capture people's experiences, beliefs and attitudes. All interview data was audio-recorded and safely secured in the researchers' password protected computers. The interviews were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis techniques.

The UK project was reviewed and approved by the School of Education Ethics Committee at Durham University. Throughout the data collection and analysis, attention was paid to ethical representation of data. Care has been taken to protect the anonymity of the research participants, and any information that might reveal the identity of the institutions or individuals has been excluded from this report.

6.3 Interview questions

The lists below provide an overview of the interview questions that were used to engage with the key stakeholder groups. When engaging with the academic developers in this study, the UK team was able to ask questions related to institutional and national policy contexts on social competence development. In contrast, the student participants were more able to reflect on their own educational experiences during their university studies.

Interview schedule 1: Academic developers

1. How would you describe the purposes of higher education?
2. What roles do universities play in society?
3. What comes to your mind when you hear the term social competence? How would you explain this in a higher education setting (and in your discipline in particular)?
4. To what extent do you think it is the responsibility of universities to develop students' social competences? Whose responsibility do you think it is or should be?
5. Would you be able to share some good examples of how you, your department or university has helped to develop students' social competences?
6. What do you consider to be the main limitations to developing social competences through higher education in your institution?



7. Would you be able to provide any examples of national or institutional policy documents that emphasise the importance of social competence development in higher education?

8. What do you think can be done at the national and international level of HE to promote the development of social competences?

Interview schedule 2: Academics

1. How would you describe the purposes of higher education?

2. What roles do universities play in society?

3. What comes to your mind when you hear the term social competence? How would you explain this in a higher education setting (and in your discipline in particular)?

4. To what extent do you think it is the responsibility of universities to develop students' social competences? Whose responsibility do you think it is or should be?

5. Would you be able to share some good examples of how you, your department or university has helped to develop students' social competences?

6. What do you consider to be the main limitations to developing social competences through higher education in your institution?

Interview schedule 3: Students



1. How would you describe the purposes of higher education?
2. What comes to your mind when you hear the term social competence? How would you explain this in a higher education setting (and in your course in particular)?
3. To what extent do you think it is the responsibility of universities to develop students' social competences? Whose responsibility do you think it is or should be?
4. To what extent do you think your university so far has supported you in becoming a socially competent individual?
5. Can you provide me examples of how your university education or setting more broadly has developed your social skills/competences?
6. Who or what has played a major role in this?
7. What would be your recommendations to your University in becoming a more socially minded institution?

7 The place of social competences in qualifications frameworks and Subject benchmarks

In Section 5.5 of this report the national qualifications frameworks and subject benchmark statements that frame Bachelor's degree level programmes in UK Higher Education were introduced. In this section we consider the place of social competence within these frameworks and subject benchmarks and consider the extent to which it is represented within them and its' prominence.

7.1 Qualifications Frameworks

In this section we will consider the place of social competencies within the Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications in the UK.

The FHEQ England, Wales and Northern Ireland states that any student with a qualification at level 6 should be able to:

“... have developed an understanding of a complex body of knowledge, some of it at the current boundaries of an academic discipline. Through this, the holder will have developed analytical techniques and problem-solving skills that can be applied in many types of employment. The holder of such a qualification will be able to evaluate evidence, arguments and assumptions, to reach sound judgements and to communicate them effectively. Holders of a bachelor's degree with honours should have the qualities needed for employment in situations requiring the exercise of personal responsibility, and decision-making in complex and unpredictable circumstances.”
(FHEQ 2008/14)

It goes on to say that holders of a Bachelor's degree with Honours should have:



“ . . . an appreciation of the uncertainty, ambiguity and limits of knowledge.”

In relation to employability it states that holders of level 6 qualifications will have particular key transferable skills that are of value to employers including:

“ . . . the exercise of initiative and personal responsibility decision-making in complex and unpredictable contexts.” (FECQ, 2014).

What we can see from this excerpt of the FHEQ is that social competence is not explicitly mentioned in this framework. However, it is arguably implicitly included in statements about employability and personal responsibility. If social competence relates to the ideas of problem-solving critical appraisal of arguments and understandings of the complexity of knowledge then the level 6 qualifications descriptors as summarised here and included in Appendix A would seem to reflect these aspects of social competence if not explicitly labelling them as such.

In the United Kingdom, employability has become a significant issue for higher education and much of the dominant discourse surrounding higher education in the UK has focused on this aspect of the FHEQ.

An increasingly prescriptive accountability culture in the UK has seen an increase in the number of metric driven League tables that exist and drive both directly and indirectly the behaviour of HEIs. This includes:

- National student survey (NSS)
- Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES)
- Research Excellence Framework (REF)
- Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)
- The Good University Guide
- Global world rankings

A key metric that contributes to several of these league tables is the number of students in employment six months after graduation.

The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) has defined employability as ‘a set of attributes, skills and knowledge that all labour market participants should possess to ensure that they have the capability of being effective in the workplace – to the benefit of themselves, their employer and the wider economy’. This definition is cited in *Future Fit: Preparing Graduates for the World of Work*, a 2009 joint publication from Universities UK and the CBI, illustrating how universities and business can work together to help equip graduates for their future working lives (Universities UK/CBI 2009).

This definition of employability focuses on individuals, industry and the economy and whilst it recognises many skills that might be associated with social competence it does not reflect a sense of personal responsibility for the development of society. It is about economic not societal development

What we can see from the above excerpts from the qualifications framework is that whilst the level 6 descriptors encapsulate a sense of social competence, and as such are aligned to the European qualifications frameworks greater emphasis is placed on the development of individual skills which will be of benefit to employers and the economy rather than society. The qualifications descriptors within the framework are articulated in such a way that employability rather than social responsibility is foregrounded. Thus skills and attributes needed for social competence i.e. understandings of complexity,



decision making and ability to solve complex problems are a key part of the descriptor but they are framed in terms of employability not contributions to global society.

7.2 Subject benchmark Statements

The qualifications framework provides a point of reference against which programmes of study can be designed, developed and assessed. It ensures some level of parity between programmes at an equivalent level and indicates general abilities, attributes and skills that it should be possible to evidence if a student has been awarded a qualification at that level. The QAA, who developed both the frameworks for England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and the one for Scotland which converge to form the National Qualifications Framework maintains that the framework is a point of 'reference not a straightjacket' (QAA, 2014). As such there is some freedom for individual programme providers to emphasise certain parts of the descriptor more than others, although all should still be captured to some extent. We have already said that as well as the qualifications frameworks the QAA developed a series of Subject Benchmark Statements to provide more guidance on how to move from the qualifications frameworks to specific programmes of study. In this section we consider if social competence is embedded within these Subject Benchmark statements.

Subject Benchmark Statements have been developed for 100 subject areas and disciplines and when designing programmes they serve as a key benchmarking document against which learning outcomes for the specific programme of study are developed. In this section we review 5 sets of Subject Benchmark Statements to determine the place of social competence within them. We have chosen Subject Benchmark Statements reflecting the different broad disciplinary categories; social science, humanities and science. In so doing we hope to get a holistic sense of how social competence is incorporated, if at all, into these disciplinary areas.

7.2.1 Social Science

Two sets of Benchmark Statements have been selected that broadly fall under the disciplinary category of Social Science - Education Studies and Business Management. Examination of these two sets of Benchmark Statements indicates that whilst the National Qualifications Framework may not give social competence a prominent place in its level 6 descriptor we can see a stronger emphasis placed on it within the subject benchmarks. Education Studies shows the strongest alignment to ideas of Social competence emphasising issues of Social Justice and Global Education and citizenship:

5.1 A necessary feature of a bachelor's degree with honours in education studies is an intellectually rigorous study of educational processes, and the cultural, political and historical contexts within which they are embedded. While individual modules within degree programmes may have a focus upon particular age groups, or learning and teaching, or particular contexts and education systems, they provide students with opportunities to engage in critical reflection and debate. Students have the opportunity to engage with a number of different perspectives and to evaluate aims and values, means and ends, and the validity of the education issues in question.

7.4 On graduating with an honours degree in education studies, students should demonstrate a critical understanding of:

- the underlying values, theories and concepts relevant to education
- the diversity of learners and the complexities of the education process



- the complexity of the interaction between learning and local and global contexts, and the extent to which participants (including learners and teachers) can influence the learning process
- the societal and organisational structures and purposes of educational systems, and the possible implications for learners and the learning process. (Subject Benchmark Statements for Education QAA, 2015).

Here we see a much more explicit consideration of social competence and in relation to Education Studies, it is clear that the developers of the Subject Benchmark Statements placed a significant amount of attention on social competence and related ideas. In looking at the subject Benchmark Statements for Business and Management we can still see echoes of social competence but it does not have the same prominence that it does for Education:

2.1 The purpose of business and management programmes is threefold:

- increasing understanding of organisations, their management, the economy and the business environment
- preparation for and development of a career in business and management
- enhancement of a wide range of skills and attributes which equip graduates to become effective global citizens.

2.5 While general degree programmes cover these three purposes, the actual balance will vary among individual higher education providers and programmes, and may also reflect the requirements for recognition by professional bodies. The particular balance being delivered should be explicable and demonstrable in terms of the specified learning outcomes of particular programmes.

Here we see that global citizenship, which might be aligned to social competence in some sense is considered to be a primary function of a degree programme in Business and Management - however, the subject benchmark statements do not then give specific attention to the idea of global citizenship outside of the area of business and the economy. One might argue that as Business and Management programmes do require students to consider ethical business practices they capture elements of Social Competence but the benchmark statements themselves do not place as strong and direct an emphasis on it in comparison to those for Education studies.

7.2.2 Humanities

In turning to the humanities, and History and Philosophy in particular, we can see that social competence is reflected to some extent in the Subject Benchmark Statements particularly as it relates to ways of thinking about issues and ideas.

In the case of History we can see an emphasis on the use of History to make sense of the past and decisions about the future:

The ability to understand how people have existed, acted and thought in the always different context of the past. History often involves encountering and sensing the past's otherness and learning to understand unfamiliar structures, cultures and belief systems. These forms of understanding also shed important light on the influence which the past has on the present.

... appreciation of the range of problems involved in the interpretation of complex, ambiguous, conflicting and often incomplete material; comprehension of the limitations of knowledge and the



dangers of simplistic explanations, providing an enhanced ability to critically analyse broader historical claims in public life. (Subject Benchmark Statements History QAA, 2014).

This emphasis on the use of historical knowledge and understanding as a lens through which to understand the present resonates to some extent with the emphasis placed on reasoning and understanding in the benchmark statements for Philosophy. Here we see an emphasis on a way of thinking and making sense of arguments and the application of this to a range of situations and problems. This consideration of reasoned argument and problem solving are potential hallmarks of a socially competent individual and to this end social competence is reflected in the benchmark statements for this discipline. However, the subject benchmark statements for Philosophy also make it clear that the specific nature of individual philosophy programmes make it hard to specify how exactly each of these skills might be assessed and developed in an individual unit of study.

4.7 Although some skills are specific to particular areas of study, others are pervasive through the subject. It is therefore inappropriate for each philosophy degree programme, let alone each module, to demonstrate how each skill is separately acquired. Graduates are expected to have acquired the intellectual abilities and attributes listed, most of which are readily transferable to other contexts.

General philosophical skills

- Articulacy in identifying underlying issues in a wide variety of debates.
- Precision of thought and expression in the analysis and formulation of complex and controversial problems.
- Sensitivity in interpretation of texts drawn from a variety of ages and/or traditions.
- Clarity and rigour in the critical assessment of arguments presented in such texts.
- The ability to use and criticise specialised philosophical terminology.
- The ability to abstract and analyse arguments, and to identify flaws in them, such as false premises and invalid reasoning.
- The ability to construct rationally persuasive arguments for or against specific philosophical claims.
- The ability to move between generalisation and appropriately detailed discussion, inventing or discovering examples to support or challenge a position, and distinguishing relevant and irrelevant considerations.
- The ability to consider unfamiliar ideas and ways of thinking, and to examine critically pre-suppositions and methods within the discipline itself.

Engaging in philosophical debate

- The ability to conduct arguments about matters of the highest moment without recourse to insult or susceptibility to take offence.
- Willingness to evaluate opposing arguments, to formulate and consider the best arguments for different views and to identify the weakest elements of the most persuasive view.
- Honesty in recognising the force of the conclusions warranted by a careful assessment of pertinent arguments.

Breadth of view. The ability to:

- cross traditional subject boundaries, examining the limitations and virtues of other disciplines and practices, and recognising philosophical doctrines in unfamiliar places
- apply philosophical skills and techniques to issues arising outside the academy, including practical reasoning. (QAA Benchmark Statements for Philosophy 2015).

7.2.3 Science



In consideration of the Subject Benchmark Statements for Science appear to put very little emphasis on the development of social competence making only passing reference to skills and attributes that might be associated with it.

In chemistry for example there is some consideration of ethical practices and the need not to do harm which could be argued to link to the development of Social competence:

4.0 subject knowledge and Understanding

4.2 develop knowledge and understanding of ethics, societal responsibilities, environmental impact and sustainability, in the context of chemistry (subject benchmark Statements for chemistry QAA, 2014).

In mathematical studies it is equally absent:

3.22 applied mathematics have skills relating particularly to formulating real-world problems in mathematical terms, solving the resulting equations analytically or numerically, and giving contextual interpretations of the solutions

3.24 adaptability, in particular displaying readiness to address new problems from new areas, the ability to transfer knowledge from one context to another, to assess problems logically and to approach them analytically knowledge of ethical issues, where appropriate, including the need for sensitivity in handling data of a personal nature. (Subject Benchmark Statements Mathematics. QAA, 2015).

7.3 Conclusions

It is evident from this section that the place and prominence of social competence within the qualifications frameworks and subject benchmark statements which frame programmes of study in the UK is varied. The most notable evidence of its incorporation into programmes of study comes from the Subject Benchmark Statements associated to programmes of study in the Social Sciences but even this is varied.

8. Evaluation of Social competence by internal and external systems

8.1 External Evaluation of social competence

As outlined in Section 5.5 all degree programmes in the UK must be aligned to the relevant national qualifications framework for their country and incorporate the relevant subject benchmark statements associated with the discipline of study into the learning outcomes of those programmes. We have already considered the place of Social competence within these frameworks and subject benchmark statements in Section 7 and now turn to the mechanisms and processes that have been put in place to monitor and evaluate the extent to which higher education institutions are compliant. We will consider both external and internal mechanisms and procedures that are used to determine the extent to which social competence is integrated into programme learning outcomes and assessment practices in individual institutions.

8.1.1 The Revised Quality Code and Qualifications Frameworks

In Section 5.3.2 we briefly introduced the revised UK Quality Code for Higher Education (QAA 2018). The Quality Code sets out the mandatory expectations, core practices and common practice (excluding England)



relating to the ongoing quality assurance of Higher Education provision in the UK. The Quality Code does not exclusively focus on qualifications and assessment but they form part of all three of its core elements. We have extracted those that seem particularly pertinent to our consideration of the evaluation of Social competence below:

Expectations:

. . . the academic standards of courses meet the requirements of the relevant national qualifications framework.

The value of qualifications awarded to students at the point of qualifications and over time is in line with sector-recognised standards

Core Practices

The provider ensures that the threshold standards for its qualifications are consistent with the relevant national qualifications frameworks.

The provider ensures that students who are awarded qualifications have the opportunity to achieve standards beyond the threshold level that are reasonably comparable with those achieved in other UK providers.

Where a provider works in partnership with other organisations, it has in place effective arrangements to ensure that the standards of its awards are credible and secure irrespective of where or how courses are delivered or who delivers them.

The provider uses external expertise, assessment and classification processes that are reliable, fair and transparent.

Common Practices :

The provider reviews its core practices for standards regularly and uses the outcomes to drive improvement and enhancement.

These expectations, core practices and common practices underpin the external evaluation of all Higher Education provision and as such are central to the external, and indeed internal evaluation of social competence. In the sections that follow consideration is given to how the Quality Code (2018) is enacted at a national and local level. We consider the system of external audits and internal quality assurance processes that ensure alignment between the national Qualifications Frameworks, the Subject Benchmark Statements and degree programmes. In addition we consider the issue of assessment practices at programme level and the relationship to learning outcomes.

8.2 External Evaluation

Whilst the Office for Students and the relevant bodies in the devolved regions have general responsibility for UK higher education, the Quality Assurance Agency for England, Wales and Northern Ireland and the Scottish Quality Assurance Agency are responsible for conducting regular audits of UK HEIs to ensure that the programmes they offer and awards that they are making are in accordance with the Framework for Higher Education qualifications. It is the responsibility of the QAA and the QAA Scotland to conduct regular quality audits of UK HEIs to ensure that standards of awards and all the associated processes and



procedures are maintained and in accordance with the Framework for Higher Education quality and the code of quality for Higher Education. The specific form these audits take varies between UK regions. Audits are typically conducted by a small panel who will review a range of documentation and data, talk to key representatives from across the institution (including students), observe teaching and evaluate available resources. They then produce an evaluation report which is publicly available on the QAA website. These reports give a detailed analysis of the extent to which educational provision is in alignment with the quality code and relevant qualifications frameworks and will make recommendations to the institution in relation to areas for improvement or highlight any specific aspects of good practice. (QAA, 2018).

Thus the incorporation of social competences into learning outcomes and assessments for individual degree programmes is captured as part of the audit in its remit to evaluate the alignment with the qualifications frameworks and its consideration of whether the institution is meeting the mandatory expectations and core practices in relation to qualifications frameworks and standards embedded within the quality code.

8.3 Internal Processes for Evaluating Social Competences

We have already indicated that HEIs have a considerable level of autonomy when it comes to their own governance. The Office for Students and associated agencies in the devolved regions and the QAA on behalf of the government(s) provide the relevant regulatory and quality assurance frameworks that must be adhered to but the precise nature of the policies, processes, and procedures they adopt is determined by the individual institutions themselves.

Whilst individual institutions will have their own specific procedures for curriculum design and development they generally incorporate variations on some common processes and procedures.

In the UK degree level programmes are typically comprised of a series of modules or short courses that are taken in combination to fulfil the requirements of the degree programme. Each of the modules, which are either core or optional, have a set of learning outcomes which in turn are aligned to the learning outcomes of the degree programme itself. All new degree programmes must be linked to the national qualifications frameworks and aligned to the relevant subject benchmark statements. In addition at the design stage course teams are typically required to provide programme specifications that set out the learning outcomes for the programme of study and how each individual module that makes up the overall programme maps on to the programme level learning outcomes. This aspect of the design process will ensure that any aspects of social competence encapsulated within the subject Benchmark statement for the disciplinary area are incorporated into the programme and module learning outcomes.

All new programmes of study in the UK need to go through an internal validation process where the programme specifications, regulations and all associated documentation including programme and module descriptions, are scrutinised by a panel of representatives from central University services such as the Academic Office, or international office, peers from other departments and Deans of faculty. A key role of the validation panel is to scrutinise the programme documentation to ensure that it is aligned to all relevant frameworks and standards. Frequently as part of this process the panel will request commentary on the proposed new programme from an external subject specialist - this is typically someone from a comparator institution offering similar programmes of study.

Once a programme is validated it is subject to ongoing internal quality assurance processes that are designed to ensure that standards are being adhered to and learning outcomes met. Each programme will have a board of examiners made up of the teaching team for the programme and at least one external examiner from a different institution. The role of the board is to monitor the assessment processes



associated with the progression and award of qualifications associated with the programme of study. As such the board will scrutinise all marks awarded for individual pieces of assessment and consider final degree classifications. The role of the external examiner in these boards is to determine that all assessments within the programme have been conducted fairly and in accordance with the programme regulations and policies. The external examiner will have access to all student work going through a particular board and the associated marks, or grades, and will be free to sample from any of the work passing through the board. They will be required under the terms of their engagement to look at a minimum sample but the composition of that sample is typically left up to them although it should reflect all of the modules passing through the specific board.

In this way any validation of social competences as part of the learning outcomes for a specific programme of study is done internally through individualised validation processes. Of course such processes are then subject to scrutiny through the external audit procedures outlined in section 8.2.

8.4 Assessment of Social competences

Thus far we have talked about the place of social competence within qualifications frameworks and subsequent learning outcomes of particular programmes of study. We have considered the validation of programmes of study incorporating social competence and the internal quality assurance mechanisms that might govern this. Again it is worth reiterating that the extent to which social competences are part of the learning outcomes for a particular programme of study is directly associated with the prominence, or lack thereof, of social competence within our national qualifications frameworks and benchmark statements. In this section we consider the issue of the assessment of social competences.

As independent autonomous institutions HEIs in the UK are free to determine their own assessment mechanisms, processes and procedures. These are all subject to varying levels of internal and external scrutiny (see sections 8.1-3) but are specific to the individual institution and often the specific programme of study. This makes it difficult to say how social competencies might be assessed as this will be programme and institution specific. However, it is worth noting at this stage that it is generally accepted that all learning outcomes associated with a specific programme of study must be summatively assessed during the course of the programme of study. Other skills and competencies not specifically stated in the programme learning outcomes might be formatively assessed during the same time period.

The implications of this for social competence are that where social competence is embedded within the learning outcomes of a particular programme of study it must be summatively assessed during the programme of study. However, in those programmes where social competence is not specifically articulated in some way in the learning outcomes of the programme it may be captured through elements of formative assessment or even developed as a result of the approaches to curriculum adopted but it will not be captured by any formal assessment processes that contribute to the final award of the qualification being sought.

9. Case studies

This section provides details about the individual case study institutions. For ethical reasons the institutions themselves have not been named in the report but instead are referred to as University A-D. They will however, be described in full with information being provided about their size, scope and direction.



9.1 University A

University A is a post-1992 or Modern University located in England. It has 16 academic departments organised into four faculties. It has a student population of 26,675 (2016/17) of which 21,445 are categorised as doing undergraduate or first cycle courses and 5,230 as doing postgraduate second and third cycle courses. It has 3000 staff and 211,000 alumni. It does not have a medical or dentistry school but through a partnership agreement with another medical school it offers the first two years of a medical degree. University A offers courses which include a professional qualification in addition to the academic award. University A occupies two campuses in the UK - the main campus and then a smaller satellite campus in London. It also has a footprint in Europe through its partnerships with European HEIs. University A is ranked in the top 500 world universities according to the Times Higher Education World Rankings (THE, 2019).

In its vision statement it emphasises the transformational nature of education and research and the importance of innovation and creativity. It claims that its vision, with this emphasis on transformation, impacts upon society, culture and the economy. University A places a strong emphasis on collaborative working and partnerships and as such has an extensive network of external partners both within and outside of the UK. These partnerships take several different forms, including industry partnerships offering placements to students, academic partnerships with other academic institutions in the UK and beyond, and partnerships with cultural centres such as Performing Arts centres. These partnerships support both teaching and research activity and represent a central part of University A's vision and mission as a place of transformation.

As part of this case study, the project interviewed two academic developers, three academics teaching on programmes related to Nursing, Business and Education. The project also interviewed a representative from the University's students' union.

The Nursing department delivers over ten undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in the fields of Midwifery, Nursing Studies, Nursing Leadership, and Non-surgical Aesthetic Practice.

The Business department is one of the largest of its kind in the UK, and it provides a wide range of undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes in the field of Accounting, Business, Marketing, Financial Management, Entrepreneurship, Human Resource Management, International Management, Logistics and Coaching among other possible specializations.

The Education Department (combined with social sciences) delivers over 20 undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in the fields of Childhood and Early Years, Primary and Secondary, Education, Special Education, Education, Guidance and Counselling, Public Health and Social Work.

Academic development is centralized and located in a dedicated administrative department. In addition to the development of learning and teaching policies and best practices, they include oversight over the University's quality assurance processes.

9.2 University B

University B is a post-1992 or Modern University located in Scotland. It is not organised in individual departments but consists of 6 schools covering the main areas of science, health and social care, engineering, computing, the arts and business. It has a student population of 12,915 of which 10,525 are categorised as undergraduate, first cycle and 2,390 as postgraduate second and third cycle. Like the other



case study universities University B offers a wide range of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes including doctoral programmes and professional qualifications.

In its vision statement University B positions itself as an enterprising and innovative institution and through this as an institution that supports and changes society, culture and the economy in the communities it works with. It focuses on raising standards of success and through innovation, enterprise and ambition, shaping the future of society.

Like University A, University B emphasises the importance of the external partnerships it has established with industry, the public sector and charitable organisations. Through its engagement with these varied organisations it seeks, through its research and teaching to shape communities around the world. By offering individualised learning experiences that foster success, creativity and innovation.

As part of this case study, the project interviewed one academic developer, two academics on Business programmes, and it included an external interview with a private sector stakeholder (involved in the programme). The project also interviewed one student representative.

The Business Department is one of the largest in Scotland and it delivers a wide range of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in the field of Accounting, Financial Services, Law, Management, Marketing, Hospitality and Event Management.

Academic development is located in a dedicated service department, which includes over 15 members of staff and delivers academic development programmes, coordinates university-wide teaching development programmes and conducts research in teaching enhancement.

9.3 University C

University C is a research Intensive Russell Group institution located in England. It has 29 Academic departments arranged in three faculties; Science, Arts and Humanities and Social Sciences and Health. It has a student population of 18,485 (academic year 16/17) of which 13,665 are studying on undergraduate, first cycle, courses and 4,720 on postgraduate second and third cycle courses. Whilst it has a Business School, it does not have a Medical School or School of Dentistry but does offer professional programmes in Social work and Education. It is ranked within the global top 100 Universities and has an international research reputation.

University C describes itself as a place of challenge and enquiry where motivated individuals can thrive. It values leading edge research that informs teaching and sees both as contributing to its reputation on an international stage. It emphasises the importance of continued contributions to society and the economy as part of its vision and mission and sees that it does this through its research and teaching activities. Building on an international reputation it offers students opportunities for development that extend beyond the classroom and emphasises the full 'student experience'.

As part of this project interviews with 2 Academic developers, 3 Academics involved in the delivery of programmes in the Business School, Chemistry and English (literature) and 2 students.

Academic Development in University C is co-located in two departments. Academic development that results in recognised qualifications is provided via staff associated with a research centre within the Education Department. All other academic development activity is provided via the Centre for Academic Development which brings together aspects of academic development for staff and students with learning technologists and researcher development.



9.4 University D

University D, a 'plate-glass' university, is a collegiate (having 9 colleges), research-intensive university which is located in the NW of England. It consists of 4 faculties, arts & social sciences, health and medicine, Science and technology and management. It has a student population of 13,615 (2016/17), of which 9,690 are undergraduates and 3,925 postgraduates. Like the other case study universities University D offers a wide range of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes including doctoral programmes and professional qualifications.

It has a vision to become a university that is globally significant and a leader in higher education, providing high quality research and teaching, and a university that engages locally and internationally.

Its future objectives include the priorities of research that changes practice and thinking, teaching that transforms people's lives and society and a desire to engage actively with students, businesses and our communities.

An Educational Development team provides programmes that support staff in subjects such as teaching development programmes and qualifications, curriculum design advice, sharing practice events and teaching development workshops

10. Results of research

In the following sections the thematic results of the 4 case studies will be presented. Details of each institution is provided but results have been organised in terms of themes and exemplars from each institution provided where relevant. Please note for ethical reasons interviewees and institutions have not been identified in this report. It is also worth noting from the outset that the nature of the UK qualifications framework has made it difficult to find explicit concrete examples of where social competence is directly incorporated and assessed as part of clearly identifiable programmes of study. This is in contrast to some of the other country reports for this project where more explicit examples can be found.

In this section the results of the research are presented in terms of the themes to emerge from the interviews with key stakeholders relating to perceptions about the role and place of social competences within Higher Education. The thematic analysis of these interviews has highlighted several issues to be considered .

Following consideration of the interview data we present some examples of programmes of study where social competences might be embedded even if not formally assessed to indicate where they seem to be located in terms of the UK higher Education sector. It has been difficult to identify cases of specific good practice as they are evident in different forms as will become evident. What we have is a sense of where social competencies might be distilled into courses or subsumed under the auspices of other competencies or attributes.

10.1 The place of Social competences within UK Higher Education - Stakeholder Perspectives

10.1.1 Academic developers perspective on social competence development in HE.



The academic developers from all case study institutions argued that their universities do not have direct institutional policies on the development or assessment of social competence development. However, they also explained that such discourses are integrated into various other strategic documents, module outlines, mission statements and graduate outcomes. In other words, they considered the discourse of social competence development to be a subtle and more implicit rather than an explicit discourse.

Furthermore, the academic developers viewed the purposes of higher education to be clearly related to developing socially minded and socially competent individuals. The examples below illustrate their understanding of higher education, and the ways in which universities are also subject to societal change:

The purpose of higher education] is about education in a wider sense [...] so that people become more questioning and more critical, and actually probably more active in their lives for the benefit of society, and I do think education is a benefit to society. (University B, Academic Developer).

The purposes of higher education vary according to the institution, and there is a strong role for social and cultural capital development, and there are economic and skills based aims (University A, Academic Developer 1)

The purpose of higher education is changing. I think it has become a market commodity, it's almost a currency now [...] like it is something that will help you get whatever it is you want to be. [...] However, I also think that higher education is a social right and passage, and I know some children, for example my children, get lot out of it, living alone and negotiating without having their parents there, so I think higher education offers that as well (University A, Academic Developer 2)

I think Higher Education is about developing people, it's about making things better and equipping people to be able to do this. It's about helping students develop critical thinking skills and the ability to look at situations and improve them. Not sure everyone agrees with me though because I think nowadays it is also about getting a job at the end of it. (University C Academic Developer 1).

Higher Education has lots of roles and purposes and people don't always agree about what they are. I think it's about learning and development first and foremost. It's about helping people to learn new things and to develop themselves in a wide array of competencies and skills. It's about learning, it's about discovery and finding out who you are ... this might be a romantic view and I know others don't agree with me but for me that is what it is. (University D).

In line with their understanding of higher education, the concept of social competence was explained in relation to two key aspects: developing socially skillful individuals but also people who would contribute to and positively shape society more broadly:

Social competence works at different level. It works in their intermediate context that they should treat each other with respect, treat the staff with respect but it works in a wider sense that in a society they are in a privileged position whether they realise it or not [...] and I think it's an obligation of people who are in a privileged position to give something back to society. You can't just use that privilege and education for your own self...for your own advantage...it has to be something that gives back to all of society. (University B, Academic Developer)



Social competence relates to social capital to large extent...we tend to think of social competence in terms of confidence and embedding self-confidence as a goal of many programmes and this is something that is often written to module programmes as learning outcomes.. (University A, Academic Developer 1)

For me social competence is about skills that allow people to negotiate their way through society effectively without causing offence or harm, and at the top end of these skills is to contribute positively to society. And yes, I think university should be enabling students to do that. I think more universities do have vision statements or aims or graduate outcomes that talk about the development students as people and how they would contribute to society, and abilities to work with other people, to work collaboratively and to be respectful of diverse communities. (University A, Academic Developer 2).

For me Social competence is about contributing to society to the world we live in. It is about making a difference not just standing back but getting involved and making change. I think at xxx it starts with the work the students do in volunteering and community action but it is more because they take that with them when they leave. Some of our students have a very particular life experience and it is not until they come here that they learn to give back through participation in some of these schemes. (University C, Academic Developer 1).

If higher Education is about development then social competence has to be part of that. I think for me social competence is about well, ... making a difference about getting them (the students) to think about other people and how they can help and make a difference in the world. (University D).

10.1.2 Students' perspective on social competence development in HE

The students we talked to typically agreed that Higher education had a number of core purposes that were not just about learning and the courses they were studying but that were about their development and a more holistic preparation for the future. Whilst getting a job was part of this preparation it was not articulated to be the primary purpose of Higher education, this is in contrast to some published (e.g. see Naidoo and Williams 2015) work suggesting that employability is a core purpose of Higher education in the UK.

I feel the purposes are - to further your knowledge in a specific area, to develop as a person, to understand where you fit in society, to network with other people with similar interests and strengths. (University B, student)

My personal view is that the purpose of higher education is to equip the students and young people in general with skills to be able to cope with ever changing world; basically the norm now is to have a degree [...] everyone is expected to have a degree. (University A, Vice president of education, students' union)

Higher Education is about a lot of things ... it's about getting a job, it's about developing yourself and learning. But it's about more ... you learn to look after yourself, to live away from home. You learn about yourself and what you can do. (University C student)

University is a place to learn to explore ideas and to think about who you are and what you want to be. It's about more than the subject you study ... it's about making friends meeting lots of different people



and trying new things. I think yes it's about hopefully getting some skills that will help me get a job but that is only part of it. (University c Student)

I think Higher Education is about the future about exploring stuff - yes what you study but it is about helping you prepare for life and whatever that brings. It's a place to learn but also a place to grow up. (Student).

In relation to the definition of social competence there was some variation as to what the students we talked to thought it was. For some it linked to a set of attributes or skills that would help them negotiate the world more effectively in terms of how they worked with people and managed their own time and behaviour. For others it was more nuanced than this involving both skills to help them negotiate the world - often framed in terms of working with people - but it was also about contributing to society in a broader sense.

Adaptability, development, awareness. I suppose in the context of the course (business and the biosciences), it would be negotiating and organizing with other people with a common purpose and moving forward in a successful manner to create a social enterprise/event/ (University B, student)

I guess it's being able to deal with the general part of life, you know we talk about academic studies heavily, what it is, but we don't talk about dealing with stress, dealing with time management, being able to present to a room of people, or being able to lead a team of people, or even being able to work effectively as part of a team. And I think social competence really comes to that sort of bracket of – it is not black and white, it is very much a rainbow of colour of how we have to equip people to be able to deal with the wider world. (University A, Vice president of education, Students' Union).

Oh, I think it's about perhaps learning to be a person ... and learning to work with other people. It's hard to define it's how you treat people and how you work with them. (University C, student).

I think social competence is about the kinds of skills you need for life and dealing with things. I am not sure we get taught it directly but I think we learn to cope with life as students - living on our own etc. and this is a kind of social competence. It's also how you deal with people though I think. (University C, student)

Students also had a range of views about whether Higher Education was the place to develop social competencies. There was a sense that they felt social competencies were developed in a multitude of ways and frequently they did not see their degree programme as the primary means by which such competences were developed. They frequently pointed to the extra curricula activities that they participated in as a more salient place for social competence development, although at least one student did suggest that Universities should perhaps offer courses in social competence development.

I think learning to work with others as an adult, in a slightly less structured setting. However, there are occasions where you have to be more responsible, or be a driving force, when other people are (for example) less socially competent. University courses helped with this, but also extra-curricular activities, taking on roles and leading committees etc.. (University B, student)

I would encourage universities to integrate tasks like this into courses, and encourage more participation and involvement in extra-curricular activities – I feel both are useful for developing into a socially aware adult, and their impact on skills development is immense. (University B, student)



A lot of people get their social competence from their family or friends, but actually higher education should equip people with an ability to learn that (University A, Vice president of education, students' union)

We have over 127 student societies [...] and what that means for us is that we have a lot of student leaders out there who are willing to rally people together under common banner, sometimes that's political, sometimes it's social, sometimes it's the mixture (University A, Vice president of education, students' union)

I think you develop your social competence in lots of ways and it is an ongoing thing. For me, I think most of what I have learned about working with people and getting on with things has come from the volunteering work I have done. When I am volunteering I work with lots of different people from all sorts of backgrounds that are different to my own and this has taught me a lot about working with people and how to, you know, negotiate this. (University C student)

It's hard to say how you develop social competence I think you just kind of learn it as you go along. Maybe we should get taught about it more because not everyone is good with people or can manage to cope with different situations. So maybe we should get some support with it at University but I think if you asked me to do a course I would be reluctant because I think I would think 'I can do that already'. (University C, student C)

The quote above and this final one below suggests that students anticipate some inherent difficulties with trying to teach social competencies explicitly.

If we had all the money in the world we would be able to do stuff, all kind, students could have a great time, build their communities all across campus (University A, Vice president of education, students' union)

10.1.3 Academics perspective on social competence development in HE

The academics we interviewed typically agreed that Higher education in the UK has a number of key functions. However, for the majority the primary function of Higher Education related to the idea of Higher Education as a place of transformation and development and preparation for the future. Similarly, to recent academic research (e.g. see Jankowski & Provezis 2012; Marginson 2013; Olssen & Peters, 2005) academics interviewed could see the Neo-liberal influences of marketisation, consumerism and accountability. However, the majority still believed Higher Education was more than a commodity. It represented for them a place of enquiry and preparation for the future in the broadest sense. Whilst they agreed that it is natural for students to want jobs it is not the sole purpose of higher education nor did they believe it should be.

University is a public good. Full stop. And that's with multiple capitals. I have been in higher education for 12-13 years [...] there is a lot going on in the universities around short termisms, managing cuts, student pressures in terms of them becoming customers, a lot of poor management. I think the main purpose of higher education is transformation. It's transformation in terms of student transformation and that's the easy one because you see that one, and then the research that you are doing and I am doing, and activities around it, and how can that have a transformative effect on society. (University B, Academic, Business)



It's got to be about preparing people for future, in terms of workplace, for society, for unknown. It got to be about knowledge, but preparing people to use that, being able to use that knowledge for themselves, for the community. [...] and perhaps it comes from the nursing sector, but there is also something about preparing people for professional life and I guess that's a quite a bit part of our programs (University A, Academic, Nursing)

I think very broadly it's about developing critical thinking, so that people can have their own opinions and not be vulnerable to fundamentalism basically, and make their own minds up, and make informed decisions rather than be swiped by the tabloid press or the media. [...] I think there is also a role of the universities in developing professions, so the legal profession, accountancy and dentists and doctors and things. (University A, Academic, Business)

I think it's many things. What I see in many of the post 92 universities, is the shift what it is for, they tended to be very vocational and clear that you went there for professional trade. What is it for in general, it is about broadening horizons and creating opportunities. [...] It is about employability, it's about giving yourself options [...], it's about learning to be independent and to develop social skills (University A, Academic, Education)

I think that is a question with many answers there is my answer that might now be seen as old fashioned - that Higher Education is a place for learning, a place to grow and a place to grow-up. It is about discovering new things and learning about ideas and how to make sense of them. But I fear that increasingly it is being viewed simply as a place to get some skills that are needed to get a job. It is about employability and lots of the other reasons for engaging in higher Education are disappearing. (University C).

I think Higher Education is about being changed in some way about transformation and learning new things. It's about understanding society and about being part of that society engaging with new people and new ideas and exploring them. (University D)

Higher education serves a public good it is about the discovery of new knowledge and the creation of ideas. (University C).

When asked to define Social competence the academics we spoke too found this more difficult. Like the students and the academic developers they found the term harder to define and their responses reflected a range of views about what it was and how it might be explained. Some of the variation we observed linked to the disciplinary backgrounds of the academics. There was a tendency to think about the relational aspects of social competence and about the interpersonal skills that might be associated with it. The academics did not have a strong sense of definition or place within higher education while they sensed that social competence is more than just social skills, it includes the value context and the purposes of higher education.

One word that comes to my mind, and that is relationships, I would say that it is building meaningful relationships and I think that's the core of everything, social consciousness and the awareness of the world around us, awareness that we have actions and we might do one thing that can have good or bad consequences (University B, Academic, Business)

It must be about social skills, the way you relate to people, how you act, the way you think about, and how your thinking influences your behaviour, the interpersonal self. But this very much takes me into the professional role because of the programmes I teach on and the professional qualifications. So social



competence for nurses [...] is much linked to professional competences. [...] So I don't think we purposefully address but it is within the professional competence, skills and knowledge in mental health nursing that we look to address (University A, Academic, Nursing)

It is nothing something that I label or have come across as a label, it is not very well recognised in my normal context. What I would understand is an ability to interact with other people and to conduct yourself in a way that is effective and compatible and allows things to get things done more easily than it would otherwise get done. So it's the interrelational aspect I think (University A, Academic, Business)

[In Business] it is a mixture of things: employability skills, soft skills and enterprise skills [...] if it is social, then it's anything you do with someone else. It could be leadership skills or it could be teamwork, problem solving, decision making. (University A, Academic, Business)

Social enterprise is doing enterprise for the common good. We don't introduce it explicitly but we are really encouraging students to think about social enterprising, so that giving something back to the society. So we call it cooperate social responsibility historically in business, so it's the fact you are doing something that isn't just for the personal gain. [...] We have a number of students who are very interested in that. (University A, Academic, Business)

I would immediately think of social skills [...] ideas of being able to interact with people around you the ways in which everyone would find acceptable (University A, Academic, Education)

Competence implies being able to get by, being able to get by is an idea of social competence. Social skills is kind of about being socially adapt. (University A, Academic, Education)

Social competence to me is about the interpersonal - it's how you interact with the people around you and negotiate the relationships that you experience. It's a way of acting of being that influences how you behave and make sense of situations and events. (University C)

Social competence is about the way you relate to people and the world. It's how you act and react in given situations and the way you deal with things. I think it's a set of social skills that help you make your way into the world and help you deal with life challenges. (University C).

I think social competence might be linked to ethics and ethical behaviour it's about understanding the rules of behaviour and the 'right' way to do things. In my context we might think of it as how we engage with and understand ethical business practices for example. Increasingly in business we are talking about ethical practice and ethical entrepreneurs who see that business is about more than making money - I think this is linked to what I might think of as social competence in some way, because to engage in ethical practice you need to be able to think about other people and circumstances. (University C).

I think social competence, although not sure I would have called it that before, is a set of skills and abilities that relate to the way we work with people and manage ourselves. It's about knowing how to act, or to behave and how to respond to different situations. It might be linked to things like interpersonal relationships and resilience and how we communicate for example. It's a way of dealing with the world. (University D).

I am not sure it's not a term I would use but I guess it links to communication and team working - how you get along with people and manage those situations. (University D).



10.1.4 Whose responsibility is it?

The quotes from the students presented in section 10.1.2 suggest that students don't see higher Education as being principally responsible for developing their social competencies. They do see it as having a role to play but they see it as a complex issue that is not straightforward. The academics we spoke to were again equally uncertain, they agreed that Higher Education had a part to play but the precise nature of the part it should play was unclear. If their definitions linked to their disciplines and professional skills or business there was a sense that the academic course as well as the wider University experience would contribute to the development of social competence. However, outside of professional courses or business related programmes they did not have a clear sense of how they could be taught or assessed in any meaningful way.

Very obvious one that I highly value is simulation. It works so well, but the problem is that is so resource intensive. We usually use lecturers to play a patient, so it is very resource intensive, and each module has 4 hours of that but it is shared by all the student cohort. It really works but student never ever want to do it. Afterwards they all say that they learn so much from it. (University A, Academic, Nursing).

I think you have got to be interactive and involved, and lecturers aren't great of it, but they can develop it, but what aren't are the e-lectures and this has been so pushed by our organisation. (University A, Academic, Nursing)

I think in the business context, the ways in which we would integrate into our programme, would be in terms of leadership and management and teamwork. We have a leadership and employability framework, and that includes like initiative and drive. (University A, Academic, Business)

I think we could do better, in the initial teacher education programmes they have this part of developing key professional skills (University A, Academic, Education)

One of the things I have done recently is a trial, creating spaces for play to have these social interactions between groups who don't normally meet. So the university has been very good at giving me money to buy toys. It's for all students. [...] So the plan for the project was to fill some spaces/corners/neutral spaces with toys and to let people just play and then to offer some facilitated play session with Lego™ and things like that (University A, Academic, Education)

It is hard how do you really teach someone to deal with people in an economics course or a maths course? I can see how you might do it in social work - you kind of need to it is part of the professional practice but in other subjects I am not sure how it would work. (University D).

I don't know that you can teach it - it's a way of behaving so you can maybe model it but what would we teach and how would we assess it? (University C)

I think they might learn it at university but not sure we teach it if that makes sense? I think they learn how to deal with people through the extra curricula stuff they do, volunteering and that kind of thing or by being part of the sports teams or the societies and maybe this is where it should be learned. I think you can encourage students to behave appropriately and to develop good communication skills, by doing presentations etc. but not sure how well you can teach social competence. (University C).



We have a very extensive extra curricula programme here and I think this supports the development of social competence in students. Probably more than the academic course does. (University C).

In our business studies programme we have a module that encourages students to work with local charities to develop a business plan and help the charities develop. In order to do this they need to understand the role of the charity and who is likely to contribute to it. So I think on this module they maybe do develop social competencies but not sure how we actually assess this explicitly. (University C).

10.1.5 Conclusions

The interview data presented in the preceding sections suggests that whilst there may be agreement amongst academic developer's, student and academics about the broader purposes of Higher Education as a public good and place of enquiry and learning. There also seems to be a lack of clarity and understanding of the idea of social competence and its place within higher Education. It is evident that it is viewed as some kind of skill set that might be associated with interpersonal relationships and the ability to deal with the world, but its precise definition is unclear. However, they also placed these skills within the wider value context of higher education and the future of students as socially responsible citizens and professionals. Consequently, there is no clear sense of where it fits within the higher education policy and governance landscape. Students characterise it as something that they learn separately to their academic courses in many ways and academics outside of the business domain don't tend to conceptualise social competencies as being related to the discipline. Instead they tend to see it relating to social and communication skills or as part of a broader set of professional competencies. This complex picture of where social competence fits within the UK Higher Education landscape and the difficulties that academics, particularly seem to have in framing it as something that can be measured perhaps reflects the complexity of social competence itself. Watson (2014) considers some of these issues in relation to the development of social conscience.

The difficulties experienced by those we interviewed in pointing to specific examples of programmes where social competencies are taught and explicitly assessed may reflect the difficulties of trying to operationalise something that is simultaneously viewed as a value and a skill set. When talking about the purposes of Higher Education social competence is framed as a value or attitude that is desirable in graduates. When considering its place in academic courses it is distilled into a set of skills or competencies to be assessed and this may be where the difficulty lies. How does one assess a student's propensity for social mindedness or social justice? This issue perhaps reflects an inherent problem with a learning outcomes-based approach to education (Goodwin et al, 2018). Goodwin et al notes that learning outcomes for programmes are typically written in terms of cognitive and affective knowledge, skills and competences. Whilst those associated with the cognitive domain may be assessed and graded, using traditional methods of assessment, Goodwin et al argue that those associated with the affective domain are very difficult if not impossible to assess within current higher education assessment frameworks. Indeed, Goodwin et al (2018) go so far as to suggest that they should be removed from programme level learning outcomes because of their problematic nature.

10.2 Exemplars and good practice

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter of the report it has been difficult to pinpoint very concrete and definitive examples of good practice because often what we find is individual modules which might reinforce social competencies but don't explicitly assess them, or a sense that they are developed through



the students extracurricular activities. However, there are two areas where we can identify a stronger sense that social competencies have been embedded into academic programmes and might be assessed in some way.

10.2.1 The case of Business Studies

In our consideration of exemplars and good practice one place where social competence does appear to have, at least in some sense, been embedded within academic programmes is in the domain of business studies. Several of the academics we interviewed taught on business studies programmes and were able to point to examples of where at least coal entrepreneurship or ethical business practices were incorporated into the curriculum. The precise form these took varied but often involved partnerships with charities or other 'ethical organisations' as a means to develop ethical business practices and some sense of social responsibility.

In one institution (University B) a partnership with a prestigious bank had been established where students had the opportunity to serve on the boards of local charities and voluntary sector organisations that took into account ethical business ideas. In talking about setting this up one academic said

I was very lucky, very fortunate that I had a dean who liked the idea and he was an innovator [...] here is some money, off you go and he gave me some time to do it (University B, Academic, Business).

Opportunities such as this are rare and often available to a small number of selected students, and they represent only a small proportion of a business studies degree programme. They are predicated on the idea of project based and experimental learning and team work and reflect the principles of citizen service. As such they are not designed to assess social competence but potentially intersect with some of the same skill set.

Other examples from business include a module where students volunteer to work with local charities to help them develop their business plans and strategies often these modules are not formally assessed and are an added extra that students can do to widen their experience. In one University there were plans to make this a formally assessed module but it had not happened yet and so the assessment criteria and precisely what would be assessed had not been determined.

10.2.2 Professional Programmes

A second area where some aspects of social competence might be developed and formally assessed are professional programmes such as nursing, medicine, social work or teaching. All of these programmes are associated with both academic study and the development of a set of professional standards. The professional standards are typically determined by the professional bodies that govern the respective professions and are not linked to the benchmark statements or national qualifications frameworks. Whilst they will be assessed and evaluated, they frequently do not contribute directly to the award of the degree. It is possible for example to be awarded a postgraduate certificate in education that meets the academic requirements of a teacher training degree but not be awarded Qualified Teacher Status. This would mean that the holder of such a qualification would not be permitted to teach in any state school in the United Kingdom.



The professional standards typically associated with such programmes of study often reflect codes of conduct and ways of behaving that might be associated with those elements of social competence that are linked to inter and intra-personal relationships and communication. They reflect accepted ways of practicing and encompass practical skills and professional behaviours.

The assessment criteria for these professional competencies are typically set by the professional organisations and whilst universities have some responsibility for supporting their development they are validated and assessed by external creditors and organisations.

10.3 Conclusions - putting the picture together

In trying to bring this chapter to some kind of conclusion, the UK picture in relation to the place, assessment and validation of social competences in Higher Education is a complex one. Whilst it has been difficult to identify specific areas of good practice this perhaps masks a much more complex picture of a higher education landscape that is still located on a belief that Higher Education is a social good and a place for learners to develop holistically the skills and competencies they will need to survive an uncertain future.

Stakeholders find social competence to be an elusive concept that is hard to define and yet it is embodied in their beliefs about what higher education is for and why it matters. They agree that social competencies relate to abilities to deal with the world and make sense of the relationships and interactions they have within it. They see higher Education as a place for social change and whilst they are unsure if it is a place where social competence can explicitly be taught it is certainly somewhere they can be developed. The UK operates a low fidelity model of higher education (Land & Gordon, 2013; Saunders, 2009) where individual HEI's are given considerable autonomy to manage themselves and develop their own programmes of study. This model involves a high level of trust Stensaker and Harvey (2011) and whilst the increasing accountability culture imposes external checks and balances on the institutions in the form of quality audits, the external examination system and other reporting mechanisms the interpretation of national qualifications frameworks and subject benchmarks are a matter for the individual institutions themselves.

In the UK recently the idea of 'learning gain' as a measure of what a student has accomplished whilst at university has been introduced. It is defined as:

[...] how to measure the improvements in knowledge, skills, work-readiness and personal development made by students during their time spent in higher education' (OfS, 2019)

Learning gained is viewed as more than simply learning outcomes as it reflects the learning journey of the students and is measured not simply in terms of the end-point assessment but as a measure of how far the student has come (Evans et al, 2018). In considering learning gain there is a sense that what ultimately needs to be measured is more than simply accumulated knowledge but a measure of personal growth (Evans et al, 2018). To this end learning gain may offer an interesting and productive way to explore the extent to which higher education develops student's social competences but as yet specific measures have not been identified that would do this.

In the UK therefore we might argue that ideas about the value of higher education as a place for social good and as a preparation for the future inculcate the idea of social competence as it relates to social justice and responsibility. However, this 'value' position is not easily translatable into a set of well-defined and clearly measurable attributes and skills. There is some attempt to assess those relating to



communication and teamwork but the complexity of the concept and its lack of clear definition in the qualifications frameworks and subject-benchmarks have made it difficult to integrate into formalised assessment processes.

10.4 Recommendations

1. Greater consideration needs to be given to what is meant by social competence in the UK context as there seems to be no clear agreement as to what it is. The case studies have also emphasised the importance of having conversations on the concept of social competence, and we suggest that any meaningful approach to defining social competence requires bottom up approach where all key stakeholders are able to feed into the framework.
2. The national qualifications frameworks for both England, Wales and Northern Ireland and Scotland need to be revised to incorporate a clearer articulation of the social competence dimension of the European Qualifications Frameworks for Higher Education. This would ensure that social competence is embedded more explicitly in the national qualifications frameworks giving them more prominence and moving away from a conflation of social competence and employability.
3. Given the importance of the subject-benchmark statements as key documents that underpin the development of programmes of study as they have a direct influence on the learning outcomes of programmes of study then as these are revised consideration might be given to the place of social competence within them. There also needs to be a greater clarity between the competence development and the development of transferable skills when defining the learning outcomes of different programmes.
4. Consideration needs to be given to how social competence is translated from a construct that is defined and articulated by the primary stakeholders as being associated with a way of thinking, acting and behaving into something that can be assessed using traditional methods of assessment. Or, whether we need to explore new forms of assessment that can capture the development of this complex set of competencies.
5. Consideration needs to be given to how we might capture and evaluate social competencies in non-formal academic settings such as the extra curricula activities of students.
6. A clearer articulation of the intersectionality of professional competencies and social competencies would allow a clearer sense of where social competency fits within the UK context.
7. Consideration needs to be given to potential risks that can emerge when attempting to explicitly define and assess social competence development in higher education. In particular, it is important to avoid treating competence development as skills development, and distinctions between the two need to be clearly considered in any policy or practice development.



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