

This project is commissioned by the Social Policy Association (SPA) and undertaken by the International Centre for Public and Social Policy (IcPSP) at the University of Nottingham.

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FOREWORD

In carrying out this study the research team set out to engage a wide range of Social Policy educators in discussion about the purposes and core elements of Social Policy education and, in doing so, provide a basis for further discussion and action. I am delighted to present this report which, building on the previous teaching and learning survey, provides a deeper and more nuanced understanding of developments and debates in the discipline. The updated audit of provision shows the further contraction of under-graduate provision in particular, resulting in fewer opportunities for students to study Social Policy with implications also for Social Policy research. This is a challenging time for Social Policy and social sciences more generally. Many colleagues have been, and continue to be, impacted by cuts, restructuring, increased workloads and redundancy. However, the report also highlights a strong shared desire to work collaboratively and collectively to increase the visibility of Social Policy, increase student recruitment, maintain and nourish a collective identity and identify the value of Social Policy teaching in courses in broader social science and other disciplines.

I would like to thank Ruby, Sam and Franco for their dedication to the study and for the collaborative approach they have taken to conducting it and producing such thought provoking work. The report offers insights that are valuable to the SPA and to the Social Policy community. They will help inform the ongoing work of the SPA such as ongoing initiatives focused on marketing and recruitment, including the development of resources for Extended Project Qualifications (EPQs), strengthening international links and working collaboratively with other learned societies through the Academy of Social Sciences to highlight the importance and value of social sciences research and teaching. The findings also highlight avenues for further exploration, including facilitating more involvement of students and building stronger partnerships beyond academia. We look forward to further considering the findings and engaging with colleagues on next steps.

Ann Marie Gray

SPA Chair

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all, we would like to thank the Social Policy Association (SPA) for its continued support for the work of the International Centre for Public and Social Policy (IcPSP) at the University of Nottingham in research and knowledge exchange on Social Policy teaching and learning. This includes partial financial support for the previous study in 2021/22 (Chau et al., 2023) and full sponsorship of the current study (Chau et al., 2026). Additionally, SPA has sponsored two Teaching and Learning Day conferences in 2022 and 2026¹. Its support is crucial to the discussion and advancement of the discipline and Social Policy education.

Our special thanks go to Professor Ann-Marie Gray, Chair of SPA, for sharing our vision in the project and providing valuable guidance throughout the process. Her participation in our pilot study and in almost all dissemination activities has been the strongest reassurance for the potential importance of our work. We are also grateful to Dr Enrico Reuter, the SPA Teaching and Learning Portfolio Lead and Chair of the Project Steering Group, who walked through this journey with us and has provided insightful advice at every stage. Our gratitude also goes to members of the Steering Group: Sade Ajoise, Dr Emily Ball, Dr Francisco Palma Carvajal, Dr Grace Ho and Dr Richard Machin. Their input in the discussion has helped improve our work a great deal.

The biggest thank-you goes to all the participants in our study. We are thankful for their time despite their busy schedule. Many interview sessions exceeded the agreed length of one or one and a half hours. We have learnt a lot from their open, generous and inspiring sharing. Some of their ideas shed new light on the future development of the discipline and its education amid the current challenges faced by many higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK. Their support continued in the latest dissemination activities (e.g., almost half of the participants registered for the online discussion in March 2026) and upcoming events (e.g., 47 people registered for the 2026 SPA Teaching and Learning Day Conference). We believe that their passion for the discipline and dedication to research and education, as well as those of others in the Social Policy community, are the greatest assets for a bright future for Social Policy.

Last but not least, I must say a few words of praise to my fellow research team members. Franco played a crucial role in coordinating the data collection and analysis in the qualitative study. The desk-based audit won't be accomplished without his painstaking investigation. Sam is the rock of this study. His contribution to the data analysis and conceptualisation of the findings is indispensable.

Despite the contributions of the above-mentioned, we take full responsibility for the analysis and interpretations presented in this report and will gladly receive any feedback.

Ruby Chau (on behalf of the research team)

¹ The two Teaching and Learning Day conferences are: 'Race in Social Policy Teaching and Learning', University of Nottingham, 20 May 2022; and 'Social Policy Education: Where are we and where are we heading?', University of Nottingham, 16 April 2026. Both were funded by SPA and co-organised by SPA, IcPSP and *Social Policy and Society (SPS)*.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

This report builds on earlier reviews commissioned by the Social Policy Association (SPA) of Social Policy teaching provision in UK higher education institutions (HEIs), conducted in 2011, 2016, and 2021 (Patrick et al., 2011; Mackinder & Hudson, 2016; Chau et al., 2023). Those reports raised concerns about the future of Social Policy as an academic discipline and its provision of teaching, especially in the context of growing commodification and neoliberal managerialism in the sector. These recurring issues indicate the need for a systematic examination of Social Policy and Social Policy education that concentrates on four focal issues: how Social Policy is defined, the core components of Social Policy education, the challenges to Social Policy education and effective responses to those challenges.

This report contains the findings of two interrelated studies. The first is a qualitative study that explores the views of HEI Social Policy educators on the four abovementioned focal issues. In this study and this report, we follow the 2025 QAA Social Policy Subject Benchmark Panel’s suggestion to refer to Social Policy (capitalised) as a discipline. We then use the term ‘Social Policy education’ to capture the multiple dimensions of Social Policy teaching and learning activities in formal and informal settings, and ‘Social Policy educators’ to draw attention to the dynamic role of those who engage in these activities. From April to November 2025, we interviewed 45 HEI Social Policy educators with diverse backgrounds in online focus groups or individual discussions.

The second study is a desk-based audit of the latest available data on Social Policy programmes in HEIs and student numbers in the UK. This audit, conducted in the last quarter of 2025, provides contextual information for understanding the issues raised by participants in the qualitative study, as well as a longitudinal comparison of data collected in previous studies since 2011.

Additionally, this report includes feedback collected from two open forums: one, based on the preliminary findings of the qualitative study, was conducted at the SPA annual conference in July 2025; the second took place online in March 2026 during the preparation of this final report.

How Social Policy is Defined

Concerning how Social Policy is defined, participants identified several key dimensions, including problem-focused, need-focused, normative principle-focused, outcomes-focused, process-focused and academic dimensions that emphasise distinctive concepts and methods. Concerning the disciplinary boundary, two different views emerged: one emphasises the necessary inclusion of certain, if not all, core elements in the definition; the other emphasises the importance of placing Social Policy in interdisciplinary contexts and allows for a broader scope to account for new topics and circumstances. Borrowing two Maths concepts, these two views are summed up in this report as the HCF (Highest Common Factor) and the LCM (Least Common Multiple) approach, respectively, which are explained in Section 4.5.6.

Core Components of Social Policy Education

Participants' views on the core components of Social Policy education focus on three areas: teaching approaches, subject areas, and expectations on students. Participants stressed the importance of connecting teaching and learning to lived experience and promoting critical thinking as primary teaching approaches (Section 4.3.1.1). The teaching areas cover a wide scope, including the history of the welfare state, social goals, state intervention, social problems/issues, policy-making processes, social systems and structures, theories, research methods, comparative policy studies, and ideologies and values. In addition, students are expected to be more than recipients of knowledge; they are expected to make an impact on society and in their individual lives. Despite these apparent consensual views, participants have different priorities. For example, some emphasised research methods more while others regarded theories or raising awareness as more important.

Challenges to Social Policy Education

Participants raised a number of challenges to Social Policy education. They reported declines in student recruitment driven by factors such as competition from other social sciences and insufficient recognition of the value of social sciences. They described the consequences of resource cuts that threaten departmental survival and increase the risk of redundancy. Many disclosed that even without resource cuts, their working environments are far from satisfactory: large class sizes; limited freedom to choose teaching times and modules due to team-teaching practices and legacy course arrangements; and increasing administrative burdens alongside reductions in administrative support.

Participants reported that student engagement in teaching and learning activities is not as strong as expected, reflecting other pressures, such as students needing to work while studying to maintain their livelihoods; student attitudes are also negatively influenced by neoliberal values. As earlier studies have found, respondents noted that many students are unprepared to study Social Policy because they lack the knowledge to understand it and the life experiences to appreciate its importance. Added to these issues are unclear institutional policies on guiding students' use of AI and increasing expectations on staff to promote student employability.

Suggested Strategies

Participants proposed several ways to tackle these challenges. These include enhancing marketing and networking, strengthening course design, securing greater institutional support for teaching and learning, improving pedagogical approaches, challenging broader social forces that negatively affect Social Policy education, diversifying Social Policy programmes, and seeking support from organisations to handle collective issues such as responsible use of AI, raising recognition for social science disciplines and promoting Social Policy as a distinct field. Underpinning these suggested strategies lies a diverse range of approaches to the current changes. While some suggestions aim to enhance the adaptability of Social Policy to changes in higher education, others favour a more critical approach that challenges existing neoliberal practices and seeks alternatives to promote Social Policy and Social Policy education. These two approaches are referred to as the 'collaborative' and 'contesting' approaches, respectively, in Section 4.5.7 in this report.

Implications of the Findings

First, students and Social Policy education may have a reciprocal relationship: Social Policy education can meet student learning needs, and students can enhance its development by providing feedback to programmes and translating Social Policy knowledge into societal impact in their future careers.

Second, Social Policy education can make important contributions by encouraging a broad, long-term mindset that helps educators and graduates reclaim a role in promoting benefits beyond institutional metrics and in defending core Social Policy values such as social justice.

Third, the quality of life of Social Policy educators deserves attention, especially given the limited evidence that teaching and administrative policies in higher-education institutions adequately account for staff in challenging personal and work-related circumstances.

Fourth, the involvement of international participants in the qualitative study suggests a strong international dimension of Social Policy education that is beyond recruiting more international students to generate revenue for UK HEIs. It will be beneficial to explore how Social Policy education is designed and delivered across different parts of the world and to promote the sharing of good practices and/or collaboration.

Fifth, like most academics working in HEIs, Social Policy educators must negotiate relationships with an increasingly commodified and neoliberal sector. Unlike the others, Social Policy educators have unique skills and knowledge in examining higher education as a social policy and in helping others understand current changes from a critical perspective.

Sixth, Social Policy can be a distinctive discipline as well as one with close relationships to other disciplines, such as Criminology, Social Work, Sociology, and Public Policy. While it is necessary to establish a clear identity for the discipline, it is also important to review how Social Policy relates to these 'sister' disciplines and how to work collaboratively to advance interdisciplinary knowledge while maintaining its uniqueness.

Last but not least, Social Policy educators are a heterogeneous group. Although they share a similar vision of promoting social goals such as social justice and equality, many are driven by their lived experiences as members of minority backgrounds and/or disadvantaged intersectional positions. Their experiences and perspectives are an asset to Social Policy education. Their voices should be better heard in the design and delivery of the Social Policy curriculum.

Ways Forward

On reflection of the findings, we have the following recommendations for the wider Social Policy community and more specific suggestions for SPA.

First, it is necessary to enhance awareness of, and to have a wider debate on, the different approaches to Social Policy and strategies for Social Policy education, and their implications for the development of the discipline.

Second, more conceptual work and research will be needed to enrich the understanding of the complex and dynamic relationships between the actors (including the educators, students, providers), the contexts (including institutional and community settings) and the social forces (such as commodification and neoliberal

managerialism) in Social Policy and Social Policy education. The framework discussed in Section 2.4 in this report can serve as a starting point.

Third, a greater collective effort will be needed to consolidate the core elements of Social Policy education and enhance their visibility and impact in the teaching and learning of Social Policy across different settings, such as joint honour programmes, interdisciplinary academic units, and outside higher education.

Fourth, effort should also be put into exploring how Social Policy is or should relate to ‘sister’ disciplines (such as Criminology, Public Policy and Administration, Social Work and Sociology) and any collaborative opportunities.

Fifth, it is important to recognise that while Social Policy educators are promoters of social goals such as social justice and equality, they may face unjust practices and/or discrimination in their personal and professional lives in general and/or due to their specific intersectional positions. Members of the Social Policy community can do more to support one another, especially in facing the current challenges in HEIs.

Sixth, much of the current debate on Social Policy education focuses on the UK experience, despite the fact that Social Policy is taught in many other countries. More international exchange in Social Policy education will be worthwhile for identifying alternative approaches, good practices, and potential collaborations in developing an international strategy to promote the discipline.

Seventh, despite the multiple studies on Social Policy teaching provision since 2011, students’ voices remain largely unheard. Several participants in the qualitative study have reminded us that any research on Social Policy education won’t be complete without the input from the learners.

Lastly, higher education has been the main, but not necessarily the only or the best, platform for delivering Social Policy education. More effort is needed to explore alternative routes for disseminating Social Policy perspectives, knowledge and skills.

Suggestions for SPA

1. To continue to organise and/or support Social Policy education research, including 1) a study on Social Policy students’ views on their study and the discipline; 2) a study to review the distinctiveness of and overlapping areas between Social Policy and its sister disciplines; 3) a study to explore approaches and practices of Social Policy education in different countries; and 4) the next five-yearly review on Social Policy teaching provision in UK HEIs due in 2031.
2. To continue to organise and/or support knowledge exchange events on Social Policy education, including: 1) Teaching and Learning Day Conferences; 2) Teaching and Learning symposia at the annual SPA conference; 3) events on specific themes under Social Policy education, such as Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) issues, Generative AI (GenAI) and internationalisation of the discipline.
3. To strengthen the liaison and collaboration with learned societies and academic networks of ‘sister’ disciplines in the UK in promoting common goals and interests.
4. To strengthen the liaison and collaboration with relevant learned societies and academic networks outside the UK to promote Social Policy and Social Policy education internationally

5. To strengthen the liaison and collaboration with other sectors, such as NGOs and public institutions, for opportunities to promote Social Policy and Social Policy education.
6. To consolidate SPA's leadership in the Social Policy community both in the UK and internationally to engage more Social Policy researchers, educators, professionals, students and other stakeholders to work together to promote the discipline to a wider audience and advance its academic stance.
7. To set up a working group to explore and pilot innovative measures to promote Social Policy and Social Policy education in the UK and internationally, such as Social Policy Without Borders (regular webinars on Social Policy topics for international audiences); Social Policy Academy (free or paid, online or in person seminars and training sessions for community groups and NGOs in the UK); Social Policy Roadshows in public spaces and education fairs. These initiatives will require sufficient administrative support and staff buy-out time to succeed.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CAH	Common Aggregation Hierarchy
ECR	Early career researcher
EDI	Equality, diversity and inclusion
GenAI	Generative Artificial Intelligence
HCF	Highest Common Factor
HECoS	Higher Education Classification of Subjects
HEI	Higher education institution
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
IcPSP	International Centre for Public and Social Policy
JACS	Joint Academic Classifications of Subjects
KPI	Key performance indicators
LCM	Least Common Multiple
OECD	Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development
P	Participant
PC	Protected characteristics
PGR	Postgraduate Research
PGT	Postgraduate Taught
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
REF	Research Excellence Framework
SPA	Social Policy Association
<i>SPS</i>	<i>Social Policy and Society</i>
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
UG	Undergraduate

PART I INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

This is a report of the fourth study commissioned by SPA on the Social Policy² teaching provision in UK HEIs. The findings of the previous studies are presented in Patrick et al. (2011), Mackinder & Hudson (2016), and Chau et al. (2023). These studies, as a collection, provide a longitudinal periodic review of the development of the discipline in higher education³, which is currently the main platform for its teaching and research in the UK.

All previous studies include a desk-based audit of secondary data, such as Social Policy programme information and student numbers, and an online survey to capture the opinions of Social Policy educators. The 2011 study also involved a small qualitative study. The similar research designs of these previous studies enable the generation of comparable data for observing development trends and issues faced by the discipline over the years.

Following the recommendation in the 2023 report, the SPA commissioned this fourth study in 2024. Unlike previous studies, this is primarily a qualitative study that aims to provide a deeper understanding of Social Policy educators' views on the discipline, their teaching, the challenges they face at work, and their coping strategies. To capture more diverse perspectives, the study is designed to include a wider range of respondents across different career stages and geographic locations, including those who have self-identified protected characteristics, as shown in the Participants' profiles in Table 4.1.

During this study, the UK's higher education sector experienced a profound financial crisis, leading to widespread course closures, job losses, and the sale of university assets (BBC News, 2025). Many participants refer to these changes in the focus groups and interviews. To provide a timely update on the state of Social Policy teaching provision, the research team conducted a desk-based audit of programme information for the 2026/2027 academic year, using a method similar to that used in previous studies. Therefore, this report resembles the previous ones in that it has two main sections: a report on the desk-based audit and an account of the empirical study's findings.

The term 'co-defining' in the title of the project was inspired by the findings of the 2016 and 2023 studies which show that Social Policy teaching, after a decade of programme restructuring and rebranding, is increasingly delivered in different setups, such as joint honour programmes, programmes relating to a specific policy area (such as health care) but not under the Social Policy banner and Social Policy being 'embedded' in the teaching of other disciplines (such as Sociology and Criminology). Research participants also reported taking more cross-disciplinary teaching, for example, in public policy and administration (Chau et al, 2023). These changes, to some

² We follow the 2025 QAA Social Policy Subject Benchmark Statement Consultation Paper to use 'Social Policy' (capitalised) to refer to the discipline and 'social policy' (in lower case) to refer to policy, practice, and activities.

³ There has been a debate on whether Social Policy is a subject or a discipline, which was also found in this study (See Section 4.3.1.4 in the report). For the sake of consistency, we follow the 2025 QAA document mentioned above to refer to Social Policy as a discipline in this report.

extent, create more opportunities but also greater ambiguity regarding the nature and boundaries of Social Policy education (see Section 4.3.2.6). This study comes as a timely opportunity for the Social Policy community to reflect collectively on the impact of these changes, not just on individual members or institutions, but on the discipline as a whole, and whether it is necessary to restate or redefine its discipline in its current form.

In the study, we use the term Social Policy 'education' instead of 'teaching', which was used in the previous studies. While we do not intend to get involved in the long-term debate over what an education is or should be, we find that the term (as defined by UNESCO, n.d.) aligns better with a broader process of transmitting and acquiring Social Policy knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes that we want to capture. This encompasses teaching and learning in formal educational institutions (such as schools and universities) as well as in informal settings, such as communities and self-directed studies. This view was well echoed by some research participants. While talking about the issue of employability in a focus group, *P17* affirmed that 'education exists for its own sake' and their primary aim was not that students get a job but 'receive an education', although the two do not necessarily contradict each other. This dialogue reassures our choice of the term Social Policy education. Therefore, we refer to participants in this study as Social Policy educators rather than teachers.

1.2 Aims of the study

Against this background, this study was set out to achieve the following:

- i. To engage Social Policy educators from diverse backgrounds to co-define Social Policy as a discipline
- ii. To engage Social Policy educators to co-define the purposes and core elements of Social Policy education
- iii. To provide the groundwork for and to arouse further discussion in the Social Policy community on the remit and the essence of Social Policy and Social Policy education
- iv. To promote a collective disciplinary identity of the Social Policy community through their engagement in the project and the follow-up discussion

With the desk-based audit added, it also aims:

- v. To provide comparable data on the latest changes in Social Policy programmes and student numbers to observe changes in the past five years
- vi. To provide contextual information for the understanding and interpretation of the data collected in the qualitative study.

1.3 Research Questions

Corresponding to the research aims, the research questions of the qualitative study are:

- i. How do Social Policy educators define Social Policy?
- ii. How do they define the core elements in Social Policy education?

- iii. What are Social Policy educators' expectations on the outcomes of the education they provide?
- iv. Are Social Policy educators satisfied with their work, and what are the barriers hindering them from achieving their aims?
- v. What contributes to these barriers, and how can Social Policy educators individually and/or collectively overcome these barriers?

The research questions for the desk-based audits are:

- vi. What are the main changes in the Social Policy teaching provision in UK HEIs in the past five years?
- vii. What are the implications of these changes to Social Policy Education?

1.4 Structure of the Report

The report is organised in six parts. Following this introduction, Part II outlines the key concepts that underpin the research and proposes a framework for Social Policy education research. Parts III and IV describe the methodology and present the findings of the desk-based audit and the qualitative study, respectively. Part V analyses the implications of those findings and acknowledges the study's limitations. Part VI is the conclusion. Although each part has a different focus, they are highly connected. Signposting is used in the report to refer to any relevant viewpoints or observations across the text.

PART II KEY CONCEPTS

2.1 Introduction

This part begins by discussing two dimensions of Social Policy and Social Policy education, followed by a framework for Social Policy education research inspired by the discussion and findings from the two studies. It ends with a conclusion.

2.2 Two Dimensions of Social Policy

Many Social Policy writers have explored the nature of 'social policy,' highlighting two key dimensions (e.g. Alcock, 2016; Lewis, 2000; Spicker, 2008). First, social policy can be understood as planned actions taken by politicians and policymakers to introduce new policy measures (such as cash transfers or services) or to modify existing measures to promote individual welfare and societal well-being (Walker, 2018). These organised actions can take place within various organisations, such as national governments, public institutions, and international organisations. In this report, we refer to such actions as 'social policy practices'. Examples include social security policy and health care policy (Sinclair, 2016). Second, Social Policy also refers to the academic study of Social Policy practices (Alcock, 2016). The term 'Social Policy Studies' is employed in this report to refer to this field. This aligns with the descriptions in the 2025 QAA Social Policy Subject Benchmark Statement Consultation Paper that 'Social Policy is used to refer to both a discipline and specific practices and activities' (p. 3). In the document, 'Social Policy' (capitalised) and 'social policy' (in lower case) are used to refer to the former and the latter, respectively.

2.2.1 Social Policy Practices

When considering the importance of Social Policy practices, it is useful to highlight the nature and functions of the welfare state (Baldock, 2011; Donnison, 1979; Greve, 2020). The welfare state's functioning has long been understood as closely connected to the implementation of social policies (Barr, 2020; Alcock, 2016; Lewis, 2000). For example, policies on education, health care, and social housing are widely recognised as the pillars of the welfare state (Olsen, 2024).

According to Bryson (1992), the term 'welfare state' denotes a nation that has put in place institutional provisions to secure its citizens' basic economic and social needs at a minimum standard. This conception implies that the welfare state can mitigate market forces by meeting fundamental needs and thereby diminishing reliance on market goods (Alcock, 2016; Walker, 2018). By the same logic, Social Policy practice plays a crucial

role in lessening market influence over the organisation of human welfare and in contesting pro-market ideologies such as neoliberalism.

2.2.2 Social Policy Studies

There is no consensus on the scope of Social Policy studies, and policy analysts offer differing views on its core elements (e.g. Lewis, 2000; Spicker, 2008; Alcock, 2016; Farnsworth, 2023). Nonetheless, when Social Policy is treated as an academic discipline that examines how policy responses shape or moderate the effects of market forces, a set of research tasks follows logically. These include identifying the policy instruments deployed by governments and public bodies; describing the nonmarket goods and services those instruments produce; and evaluating how those non-market outputs affect—and are affected by—market dynamics. Carrying out these tasks can have significant social consequences, since the resulting analyses may be used to justify actions that either reinforce or contest market arrangements and the ideologies that support them.

2.3 Two Dimensions of Social Policy Education

Corresponding to the two dimensions of Social Policy, Social Policy education can also be considered along two dimensions. One dimension emphasises the role of Social Policy education in supporting Social Policy studies. The other concerns the social policy field (i.e. higher education) that shapes the development of Social Policy education.

2.3.1 Social Policy Education and Social Policy Studies

Despite the diverse views on the core elements of Social Policy education, as suggested by the study's findings, few will doubt its primary aim: to equip students with the knowledge, skills and values to study social policies from different perspectives and to apply their learning to design, analyse and deliver social policies. Social Policy students are likely to have a deeper understanding of a wide range of policies, such as housing, health care, and social security, across different national and cultural contexts. They are also better positioned to assess the outcomes of these policies and the social forces that enable or hinder their achievement of social goals, such as social justice and social equality.

In their teaching, Social Policy educators inspire students to assess and influence future policy development, including higher education, a social policy field in its own right. As faculty members at their institutions, they can shape higher education by participating in the design and implementation of institutional measures and/or by advocating for change inside or outside their workplace. In their research and professional engagement, they can also examine and/or challenge the social forces that shape a wide range of social policies.

However, whether and to what extent Social Policy educators and students can exercise their agency to influence social policies, including those in higher education, is subject to multiple institutional and structural constraints, which are discussed in the following sections.

2.3.2 Social Policy Education and Social Policy Practices

Evidently, HEIs play a significant role in Social Policy education in the UK and many other countries. They not only provide a platform for Social Policy teaching and learning, but they are also responsible for defining the institutional structure and operational measures in which Social Policy education is delivered. For example, HEIs are responsible for recruiting teaching staff, setting fee levels, determining criteria for staff performance evaluation, influencing curriculum development, deciding on the ownership and distribution of teaching materials, and so on.

Like other social policies, higher education can produce a range of nonmarket goods that favour the social goals of social policies. For example, merit goods are when students are subsidised to enrol in Social Policy programmes; public goods are when institutions publish free online lectures accessible to the general public; and global public goods are when teaching materials are made freely available to an international audience (Chau, 2023; and Section 4.3.1.3 in this report). On the other hand, higher education can become a market good by charging tuition at market rates or by increasing reliance on market mechanisms that commodify its educational programmes. Higher education can also operate in a hybrid mode, delivering both nonmarket goods to serve social expectations, as public educational institutions do, and commodified services to fulfil consumer demand simultaneously. As found in the desk-based audit (Section 3.3.1), there is a growing gap of up to 200% between the international and home student fees in most Social Policy programmes in UK HEIs. This contributes to mixed expectations among both institutions and students regarding Social Policy education.

Two commonly discussed broader social forces in higher education studies are commodification and neoliberal managerialism. Commodification refers to the spread of market relations across social life; its practical effects include substituting market mechanisms for other institutions (such as the state or family) to meet needs (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Gray et al., 2023). Neoliberal managerialism refers to the adoption of private-sector, market-oriented governance practices in public and non-profit organisations, prioritising efficiency, competition, and measurable outcomes (Deem et al., 2008; Jarvis, 2014; Makki & El-Kassar, 2021).

There have been increasing concerns about how commodification and neoliberal managerialism affect Social Policy education in countries such as the UK. In response, studies have examined the effects of these social forces on Social Policy education (Patrick et al., 2011; Chau et al., 2023). On commodification, Patrick et al. (2011) highlight the introduction of higher tuition fees, which make degree programmes more like market goods, and discuss the implications for Social Policy education. They argue that rising fees could influence students' decisions to study Social Policy and increase programmes' vulnerability to shifts in demand. Chau et al. (2023) raise concerns that ongoing tuition increases could lead to redundancies and greater instability in Social Policy programmes, since their futures may depend on students' willingness and ability to pay, as well as on graduates' expected earnings.

Regarding neoliberal managerialism, Chau et al. (2023) raise concerns about the negative consequences of accountability frameworks, such as the Teaching Excellence Framework, for Social Policy education. Respondents in that study argued that such mechanisms can devolve into box-ticking exercises that increase staff workload without necessarily recognising or rewarding genuine educational contributions. This can significantly reduce

the resources (for example, time) available to educators, shape how they engage in teaching activities, and constrain how they contribute to Social Policy education.

2.4 Social Policy Education Research

The discussion of the above issues provides insights into the scope of Social Policy education research, with the focus on three domains – termed ‘system domain’, ‘social forces domain’ and ‘actors domain’ in this report. The system domain concerns the multiple relationships among Social Policy, Social Policy education, and higher education. The social forces domain refers to those forces in society that shape those relationships. Examples of social forces include commodification and neoliberal managerialism. The actors' domain concerns how key actors, such as Social Policy educators and students, respond to Social Policy, Social Policy education, HEIs and social forces; how these elements shape their lives; and how these two groups relate to one another (Figure 1).

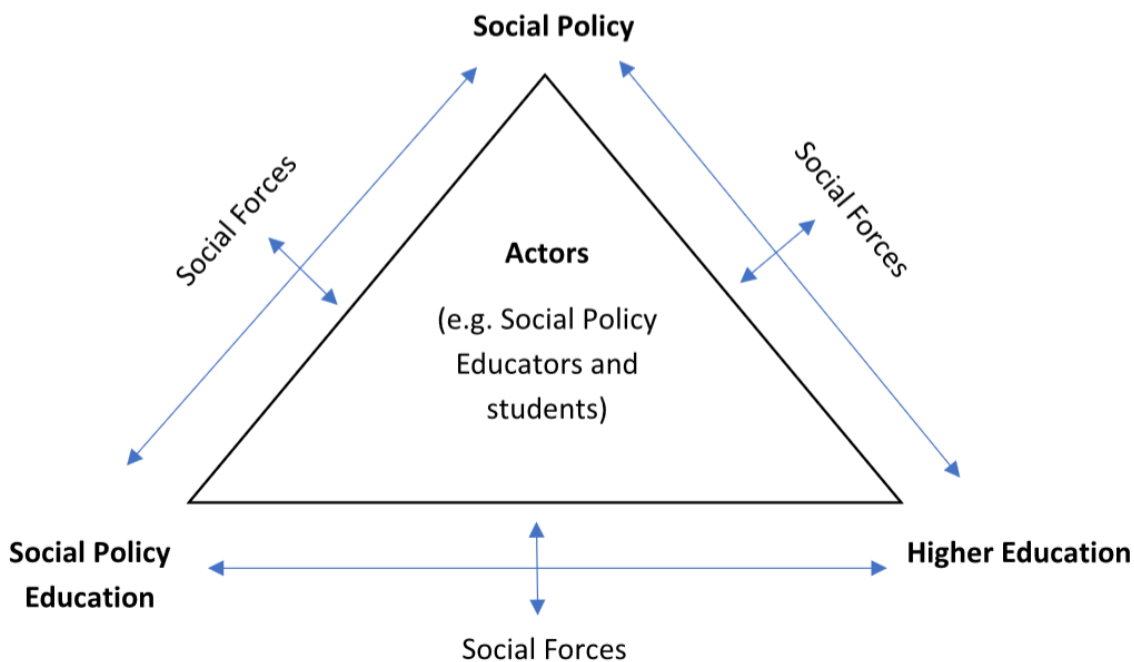


Figure 0.1 Domains of the Social Policy Education Research

Considering the three domains of Social Policy education research discussed above, Social Policy educators have the potential to make a substantial contribution to the study of both Social Policy as a discipline and Social Policy education. As staff in higher education, they have profound knowledge of Social Policy, social policy practices, and the ways broader social forces shape both. They also possess the expertise in researching these domains and their changes over time. Because they work directly with students, they are in a position to illuminate students' relationships with Social Policy education and their responses to external social forces. For these reasons, a qualitative study that engages them is crucial to enhancing our understanding of the four focal issues mentioned above.

2.5 Conclusion

Social Policy education plays a crucial role in enhancing the understanding of social policy practices, advancing the discipline, challenging existing social forces that affect social policies and the Social Policy discipline, and nurturing future social policy researchers, policymakers and practitioners. However, research on Social Policy education has not been high on the research agenda of the Social Policy community. We are glad to see the increasing number of publications in the field, which include the three reports above mentioned, Craig et al's (2019) report on 'race' in social policy teaching and learning and papers in the special issue edited by Cole et al (2022) in *Social Policy and Society* under a similar theme, and Irving's (2023) recent edited collection on the international, comparative and global perspectives of teaching Social Policy. There is also growing interest in the discussion, as evidenced by the enthusiastic engagement of many research participants in both the interview discussions and the follow-up dissemination events. While we are touched by their devotion to the discipline and its education, we believe there is still a long way to go before Social Policy educators' skills, knowledge, and insights are fully utilised to inform and influence the future development of Social Policy education and the wider higher education policy and practice. We sincerely hope the above proposed framework can provide a starting point for the conceptualisation of Social Policy education, encourage more systematic assessment of its development and offer insights to Social Policy educators on strategies in responding to current and future challenges in higher education and beyond.

Part III FINDINGS OF THE DESK-BASED AUDIT

3.1 Introduction and Context

Since 2011, the SPA has periodically conducted reviews of Social Policy teaching provision in UK HEIs. This is the fourth in the series, building on the previous exercises (Chau *et al.*, 2023; Mackinder & Hudson, 2016; Patrick *et al.*, 2011), it aims to capture the current state of Social Policy teaching and to map changes in the undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate taught (PGT) Social Policy degree programmes offered by UK HEIs since 2011. This audit forms part of the broader research project *Co-Defining Social Policy and Social Policy Education: Our Discipline Our Say*, commissioned and funded by SPA from 2025-2026.

This audit adopts a similar desk-based approach to the previous three, comprising an audit of Social Policy teaching provision and a discussion of issues concerning student numbers. It begins by identifying and analysing Social Policy programmes available in the UK for 2026/27 entry, with a particular focus on module titles and career options. These findings are then incorporated into a longitudinal analysis, drawing on the previous 2011, 2016, and 2021 audits, to examine changes in Social Policy teaching provision over the past 15 years. Finally, the analysis of student numbers examines enrolment trends at the UG and PGT levels, utilising data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA).

There are six sections in this part. Following this introduction are the research design, the results of the programme audit, changes in student data, the limitations of the audit and a conclusion.

3.2 Research Design

3.2.1 The Audit of Social Policy Teaching Provision

We align with the authors of the preceding three reports in concluding that, for compiling a comparative inventory of Social Policy degree programmes offered at UG and PGT levels across UK HEIs, the most effective methodology entails designating as Social Policy any programme bearing 'Social Policy' in its title. Although this approach inevitably excludes degree programmes that substantively align with Social Policy despite lacking the nomenclature - as observed in the previous reports - it proves less prone to arbitrariness than rendering subjective assessments for each programme incorporating Social Policy elements. Furthermore, it reflects the contemporary salience of the term 'Social Policy' among prospective and current students, thereby underscoring the subject's independent validity within UK HEIs today.

This audit generally follows the template established by the 2021 study (Chau *et al.*, 2023), which documented HEIs, programme titles, standard A level entry requirements, home and international student fees, and the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) as English language requirements for international

students, although tariff points of the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) could not be included as most HEIs offering UG Social Policy degree programmes for 2026/27 entry no longer provide them. To understand each degree programme's emphasis and core disciplinary *foci*, it also captured module titles - both core and optional - before visualising them as word clouds. The terms in module titles reveal the breadth of Social Policy teaching at UG level in relation to: 1) closely related social science subjects such as Criminology, Economics, Politics, and Sociology; 2) key concepts such as (social) justice, the welfare state, and equality; 3) policy fields like education, health, housing, and social security; 4) contemporary issues such as pollution, sustainable development and climate change; and 5) research-oriented approaches such as research methods and international/global comparisons.

Besides comparing the word clouds for core and optional modules - which reveal the core elements and lesser priorities in Social Policy curricula - we generated another word cloud from the career options listed on HEI websites. This analysis sheds light on the vocational relevance of UG Social Policy degree programmes as perceived by HEIs. Comparing it with the module title word clouds is useful in showing the alignment (or divergence) between pedagogical emphases and the career pathways to prospective students.

One potential caveat of analysing word clouds deriving from module titles is that they might not fully capture the breadth of topics covered within modules. While acknowledging this shortcoming, we contend that this approach remains appropriate, as module titles inherently reflect the primary pedagogical focus and thematic emphasis intended by the course providers or module convenors, providing prospective students with the first impression of the curriculum and serving as an initial indicator of course content.

It is worth noting that this audit innovates the word cloud analysis of module titles compared to the 2021 one. Unlike the previous 2021 audit's word cloud, which included only phrases occurring at least twice, our version, generated using wordclouds.com, also incorporates single-occurrence phrases, keeping not-so-common terms visible despite their smaller size.

The data collection process began in October 2025. It involved searching HEI websites for UG and PGT degree programmes that explicitly include 'Social Policy' in their titles. We started by entering 'Social Policy' as keywords in the UCAS course search engine⁴, applying 'undergraduate' and 'postgraduate' filters for the 2026-2027 academic year. This initial search was supplemented by direct visits to individual HEI websites to verify programme details and identify additional relevant courses that might not have appeared in the UCAS results. While UCAS provides comprehensive coverage of UK UG degree programmes, given its central role in admissions, its listings of PGT programmes are less exhaustive. We therefore supplemented UCAS searches with direct visits to HEI websites, assisted by University League Tables, to ensure thorough data collection across both levels of study. Despite our exhaustive scrutiny of HEI websites for programme details, module titles, and career options, as mentioned above, we acknowledge that there may still be formidable obstacles to locating course information.

⁴ <https://digital.ucas.com/coursedisplay/results/courses>

The coding of data from this audit - along with those from the previous three audits - is summarised in Tables 3.1 and 3.2. Findings for the 2026/27 entry, including longitudinal comparisons with those in the earlier audits, will be presented in Part 3 of this report.

REGION	NUMBER	HEIs (NAMES IN A SHORT FORM)
East Midlands	3	Lincoln, Loughborough, Nottingham
East of England	1	Anglia Ruskin
London	6	Birkbeck, London Metropolitan, London Southbank, LSE, Middlesex, UCL
North East	2	Durham, Teesside
North West	7	Greater Manchester ⁵ , Lancashire ⁶ , Liverpool, Liverpool Hope, Liverpool John Moores, Manchester Metropolitan, Salford
South East	6	Brighton, Canterbury Christ Church ⁷ , Kent, Open University, Oxford, Southampton
South West	4	Bath, Bournemouth, Bristol, Plymouth Marjon ⁸
West Midlands	4	Aston, Birmingham, Warwick, Wolverhampton
Yorkshire and the Humber	5	Hull, Leeds, Leeds Beckett, Sheffield, York
Northern Ireland	2	Queen's University Belfast, Ulster
Scotland	5	Edinburgh, Glasgow, Stirling, Strathclyde, the West of Scotland
Wales	5	Bangor, Cardiff, Cardiff Metropolitan, Swansea, Coleg Llandrillo Cymru

Table 0.1 Regional Distribution of HEIs with Social Policy Programmes (Entry 26/27)

⁵ This HEI was known as the University of Bolton between 2005 and 2024.

⁶ Originally known as the University of Central Lancashire, this HEI received approval from the Office for Students to change its name to the University of Lancashire in December 2024.

⁷The 2021 audit categorised this University as being located in London, when in fact it is in the South East.

⁸ Formerly known as University College Plymouth St Mark & St John, it is presently known as Plymouth Marjon University as they received full university status in 2013.

TYPE	NUMBER	HEIS (NAMES IN A SHORT FORM)
Russell Group	17	Birmingham, Bristol, Cardiff, Durham, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Leeds, Liverpool, LSE, Nottingham, Oxford, Queen’s University Belfast, Sheffield, Southampton, UCL, Warwick, York
Post-1992	20	Anglia Ruskin, Bournemouth, Greater Manchester, Brighton, Canterbury Christ Church, Cardiff Metropolitan, Lancashire, Leeds Beckett, Lincoln, Liverpool Hope, Liverpool John Moores, London Metropolitan, London South Bank, Manchester Metropolitan, Middlesex, Plymouth Marjon, Swansea, Teesside, West of Scotland, Wolverhampton
Pre-1992 not in the Russell Group	12	Aston, Bangor, Bath, Birkbeck, Hull, Kent, Loughborough, Open University, Salford, Stirling, Strathclyde, Ulster
Non-University HEI	1	Coleg Llandrillo Cymru

Table 0.2 Type of HEIs with Social Policy Programmes (Entry 26/27)

3.2.2 The Analysis of Student Numbers

Like previous audits, we also collected data from HESA to analyse student numbers and demographics in degree programmes classified as Social Policy. Due to the limited data availability, the comparison is up to 2023/24. As explained in the 2021 audit, these data were derived from two distinct methods over time. The first - Joint Academic Classifications of Subjects 3.0 (JACS 3.0) - covered all degree programmes coded under L4 with four-digit sub-subject codes (Chau et al., 2023, Table 2.3, p. 20), which were utilised in the 2011 and 2016 audits to analyse student numbers. From 2019/20 onwards, however, HESA adopted the second method - the Higher Education Classification of Subjects (HECoS) - to replace JACS 3.0 for collecting such data; this was subsequently utilised in the 2021 audit to classify Social Policy programmes. As covered in the previous audit, although HESA developed the Common Aggregation Hierarchy (CAH) to enable longitudinal and comparative analyses using data from both methods, it acknowledged potential inconsistencies, given that JACS 3.0’s broader scope than HECoS.

While acknowledging the inherent differences in scope between JACS 3.0 and HECoS, these datasets are, to our knowledge, the only ones available for tracing the stability or change in student enrolment in Social Policy degree programmes provided by HEIs, offering valuable insights despite their methodological distinctions. We thus remain committed to providing a longitudinal analysis of student enrolment trends in UK Social Policy degree programmes by integrating data from both methods. The analysis in Section 3.4 of this report - which details

trends in student numbers and demographics over time - should therefore be viewed as a careful approximation rather than a precise measure of enrolment, especially when comparing periods before and after 2019/20.

3.3 Programme Audit

3.3.1 Single Honours Degrees

In this round of audit, we found 8 HEIs offering single-honours Social Policy degree programmes in the UK for the 26/27 academic year entry (see Table 3.3). Notably, the single-honours Social Policy programmes at the Universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow are four-year integrated Master's degrees and, as in the 2021 audit, are therefore categorised as UG Social Policy programmes rather than PGT. While all these programmes for 2026/27 entry were also recorded in the 2021 audit, the University of York has retitled their 'BA Social Policy' offered in 2021 to 'BA Social and Public Policy', which are similar to the programmes of the University of Bristol (BSc International Social and Public Policy), LSE (BSc International Social and Public Policy), and the University of Glasgow (MA Social and Public Policy). Furthermore, this HEI has offered a retitled single-honours degree programme, 'BA Social and Public Policy (Ethics and Justice)', incorporating elements of ethics and justice.

The number of HEIs offering single-honours Social Policy degree programmes decreased from 16, as recorded in the previous 2021 audit. The HEIs that closed their single-honours Social Policy programmes are Bangor University, Cardiff Metropolitan University, University of Kent, Leeds Beckett University, University of Leeds, University of Lincoln, University of Salford and Swansea University.

In the previous report (Chau et al., 2023), several respondents argued that Social Policy should be recognised as a distinct discipline and taught as a subject in its own right. They emphasised the need for it to reassert its place within university offerings. Building on this, there is growing concern about the contraction of Social Policy provision in higher education. One clear indicator of disciplinary status is the availability of single-honours Social Policy degrees; the decline in the number of such undergraduate programmes reinforces these worries. Further discussion of the five dimensions in examining the distinctiveness of Social Policy can be found in Section 4.4.6.

	Institution	Name of Programme	Home fee (per year)	International fee (per year)	SER (A LEVEL)	IELTS
1	University of Bath	BSc Social Policy	TBC	TBC	AAB	7
2	University of Birmingham	BA Social Policy	9,535 per year	25,320 per year	ABB	6.5
3	University of Bristol	BSc Social Policy	9,535 per year	25,500 per year	AAB	6.5
		BSc International Social and Public Policy	9,535 per year	25,500 per year	AAB	6.5
4	University of Edinburgh	MA Social Policy with Quantitative Methods	1820 (Scotland); 9,535 (rest of the UK)	29,600 per year	A*A*A- AAA	6.5
5	University of Glasgow	MA Social & Public Policy	1820 (Scotland); 9,535 (rest of the UK)	27,720 per year	AAB-BBB	6.5
		MA Social & Public Policy with Quantitative Methods	1820 (Scotland); 9,535 (rest of the UK)	27,720 per year	AAB - BBB	
6	LSE	BSc International Social and Public Policy	9,535 per year	28,900 per year	AAB	7
7	Ulster University	BSc Social Policy	TBC	TBC	BCC	6
8	University of York	BA Social and Public Policy	9,535 per year	26,900 per year	BBB	6.5
		BA Social and Public Policy (Ethics and Justice)	9,535 per year	26,900 per year	BBB	6.5

Table 0.3 UG Single Honours 'Social Policy' Degree Programmes (Entry 26/27)

Institution	2016 (£)	2021 (£)	Increase by % (2016-2021)	2026 (£)	Increase by % (2021-26)
University of Bath	14700	18900	+28.57	Not available	Not applicable
University of Birmingham	13860	19320	+39.39	25320	+31.06
University of Bristol	15600	20100	+28.85	25500	+26.87
University of Edinburgh	16700	22000	+31.74	29600	+34.55
University of Glasgow	12250	19350	+57.96	27720	+43.26
LSE	17712	22430	+26.64	28900	+28.85
Ulster University	12890	14910	+15.67	Not available	Not applicable
University of York	12250	19350	+57.96	26900	+39.02

Table 0.4 International Fees for UG Single Honours Programmes by Institutions, 2016, 2021, and 2026

Tables 3.3 and 3.4 present important information about international fees for undergraduate single-honours programmes. Table 3.2 shows a substantial rise in international fees—on average by at least 30%—with some universities charging no less than £26,000 per year between 2021 and 2026. Table 3.3 shows that, by 2026, tuition fees for international students are almost three times those for domestic students.

The persistent gap between fees for home and international students has been a long-standing concern in studies of Social Policy teaching provision in the UK (Patrick et al., 2011; Mackinder & Hudson, 2016; Chau et al., 2023). Because higher international fees can help subsidise institutional costs, universities have a strong financial incentive to recruit international students. This can, in turn, encourage the internationalisation of curricula, potentially enriching Social Policy teaching: course content and perspectives may broaden; students from diverse cultural backgrounds can link learning to lived experience; classroom interactions can become more varied and engaging; and both teachers and learners gain greater exposure to different worldviews.

However, when internationalisation is driven primarily by financial motives, harmful effects can result. A key problem is the disproportionate focus on recruiting wealthier international students, which risks excluding less affluent applicants and weakening equity and diversity within Social Policy programmes. Furthermore, while these students are paying the full fee, or even more, to subsidise institutional costs, it is justifiable for them to perceive their studies as a private investment in their future careers and, therefore, to view education as a market good and themselves as consumers rather than students. Such expectations may differ from those of Social Policy educators regarding students, as discussed in Section 4.3.1.3.

3.3.2 Joint Honours Degrees

The joint honours Social Policy degree programmes in this audit were identified as those with titles including Social Policy ‘and ‘or ‘with’ another subject (see Table 3.5). This excludes the University of Edinburgh and the University of Glasgow, both of which integrate quantitative methods into their single-honours degree programmes rather than offering joint-honours combinations. Furthermore, as covered in the previous section, their MA programmes are integrated UG Master’s degrees and are therefore categorised as UG Social Policy programmes rather than PGT (Section 3.3.1).

Current data indicate only 16 HEIs offer joint-honours Social Policy degree programmes for 2026/27 entry, down from 25 HEIs recorded in the 2021 audit. The HEIs that have closed down such degree programmes include Bangor University, Birkbeck (University of London), Canterbury Christ Church University, University of Kent, University of Lincoln, Liverpool Hope University, University of Sheffield and University of Stirling. However, it is worth noting that the University of Glasgow, which closed its joint honours Social Policy degree programmes, as recorded in the 2021 audit, has reintroduced them alongside 23 other subject combinations.

The most common joint-honours Social Policy degree programmes were combinations with Sociology (14 programmes), Criminology (including ‘Crime’ and ‘Criminal Justice’) (11 programmes), Politics/International Relations (9 programmes), and Economics (4 programmes), underscoring the social science interdisciplinary nature often associated with Social Policy. It is worth noting that HEIs in Scotland - the Universities of Edinburgh, Glasgow and Strathclyde - offer a broader range of joint-honours Social Policy programmes. In addition to the usual pairings with social science subjects, they also offer combinations with subjects outside social science, such as music, language/linguistics, regional studies, and television studies (see Table 3.2 and Box 3.1).

This information shows that Social Policy can be taught within broader social science programmes or in partnership with non-social science disciplines. Example One in Box 3.1 outlines a joint-honours degree that combines music with social and public policy. In that programme, students can study both policy and music subjects each year, giving them sustained opportunities to pursue both areas throughout their degree.

	HEI	Name of Joint Honour Programme	Home fee (per year)	International fee (per year)	SER (A LEVEL)	IELTS
1	University of Bath	BSc Sociology and Social Policy	TBC	TBC	AAB	7
		BSc Sociology and Social Policy (with professional placement)	TBC	TBC	AAB	7
2		BA Politics and Social Policy	9,535 per year	24,000 per year	AAB	6.5

	University of Birmingham	BA Sociology and Social Policy	9,535 per year	25,320 per year	ABB	6.5
		BA Social Policy and Criminology	9,535 per year	25,320 per year	ABB	6.5
3	University of Bristol	BSc Social Policy and Sociology	9,535 per year	25,500 per year	AAB	6.5
		BSc Social Policy and Politics	9,535 per year	25,500 per year	AAB	6.5
		BSc Social Policy with Criminology	9,535 per year	25,500 per year	AAB	6.5
4	Cardiff Metropolitan University	BSc Sociology and Social Policy	9,535 per year	16,000 per year	CCC	6
5	Cardiff University	BSc Criminology and Social Policy	9,535 per year	24,700 per year	ABB-BBC	6.5
		BSc Sociology and Social Policy	9,535 per year	24,700 per year	BBB-BCC	6.5
6	University of Edinburgh	MA French and Social Policy	1820 (Scotland); 9,535 (rest of the UK)	29,600 per year	A*AA-AAB	6.5
		MA Social Policy and Economics	1820 (Scotland); 9,535 (rest of the UK)	29,600 per year	A*A*A-AAA	6.5
		MA Social Policy and Politics	1820 (Scotland); 9,535 (rest of the UK)	29,600 per year	A*A*A-AAA	6.5
		MA Social Policy and Sociology	1820 (Scotland); 9,535 (rest of the UK)	29,600 per year	A*A*A-AAA	6.5
		MA Social Policy and Law	1820 (Scotland); 9,535 (rest of the UK)	29,600 per year	A*A*A-AAA	6.5

		LLB Law and Social Policy	1820 (Scotland); 9,535 (rest of the UK)	29,600 per year	A*A*A-A*AA	6.5
		MA Social Anthropology and Social Policy	1820 (Scotland); 9,535 (rest of the UK)	29,600 per year	AAA-AAB	6.5
		MA Scandinavian Studies and Social Policy	1820 (Scotland); 9,535 (rest of the UK)	29,600 per year	ABB	6.5
		MA Russian Studies and Social Policy	1820 (Scotland); 9,535 (rest of the UK)	29,600 per year	ABB	6.5
		MA German and Social Policy	1820 (Scotland); 9,535 (rest of the UK)	29,600 per year	ABB	6.5
7	University of Glasgow	MA Business Economics / Social & Public Policy	1820 (Scotland); 9,535 (rest of the UK)	27,720 per year	AAB-BBB	6.5
		MA Classics / Social & Public Policy	1820 (Scotland); 9,535 (rest of the UK)	27,720 per year	AAB-BBB	6.5
		MA Classics / Social & Public Policy	1820 (Scotland); 9,535 (rest of the UK)	27,720 per year	AAB-BBB	6.5
		MA Digital Media & Information Studies / Social & Public Policy	1820 (Scotland); 9,535 (rest of the UK)	27,720 per year	AAB-BBB	6.5
		MA Film & Television Studies / Social & Public Policy	1820 (Scotland); 9,535 (rest of the UK)	27,720 per year	AAB-BBB	6.5
		MA Gaelic / Social & Public Policy	1820 (Scotland); 9,535 (rest of the UK)	27,720 per year	AAB-BBB	6.5
		MA Geography / Social & Public Policy	1820 (Scotland); 9,535 (rest of the UK)	27,720 per year	AAB-BBB	6.5

	MA Greek / Social & Public Policy	1820 (Scotland); 9,535 (rest of the UK)	27,720 per year	AAB-BBB	6.5
	MA History of Art / Social & Public Policy	1820 (Scotland); 9,535 (rest of the UK)	27,720 per year	AAB-BBB	6.5
	International Relations / Social & Public Policy	1820 (Scotland); 9,535 (rest of the UK)	27,720 per year	AAB-BBB	6.5
	MA Music / Social & Public Policy	1820 (Scotland); 9,535 (rest of the UK)	27,720 per year	AAB-BBB	6.5
	MA Politics / Social & Public Policy	1820 (Scotland); 9,535 (rest of the UK)	27,720 per year	AAB-BBB	6.5
	MA Sociology / Social & Public Policy	1820 (Scotland); 9,535 (rest of the UK)	27,720 per year	AAB-BBB	6.5
	MA Latin / Social & Public Policy	1820 (Scotland); 9,535 (rest of the UK)	27,720 per year	AAB-BBB	6.5
	MA Central & East European Studies / Social & Public Policy	1820 (Scotland); 9,535 (rest of the UK)	27,720 per year	AAB-BBB	6.5
	MA Social and Public Policy / English Language & Linguistics	1820 (Scotland); 9,535 (rest of the UK)	27,720 per year	AAB-BBB	6.5
	MA Social and Public Policy / English Literature	1820 (Scotland); 9,535 (rest of the UK)	27,720 per year	AAB-BBB	6.5
	MA Spanish / Social and Public Policy	1820 (Scotland); 9,535 (rest of the UK)	27,720 per year	AAB-BBB	6.5
	MA Social and Public Policy / Theatre Studies	1820 (Scotland); 9,535 (rest of the UK)	27,720 per year	AAB-BBB	6.5

		MA Portuguese / Social & Public Policy	1820 (Scotland); 9,535 (rest of the UK)	27,720 per year	AAB-BBB	6.5
		Celtic Civilisation / Social & Public Policy	1820 (Scotland); 9,535 (rest of the UK)	27,720 per year	AAB-BBB	6.5
		Scots Law / Social & Public Policy	1820 (Scotland); 9,535 (rest of the UK)		AAA	
		Theology and Religious Studies / Social and Public Policy	1820 (Scotland); 9,535 (rest of the UK)	27,720 per year	AAB-BBB	6.5
8	University of Leeds	BSc Social Policy, Sociology & Crime	TBC	26,500 per year	ABB	6.5
9	University of Liverpool	BA Sociology with Social Policy	9,535 per year	27,000 per year	BBB	6.5
		BA Criminology with Social Policy	9,535 per year	27,000 per year	BBB	6.5
10	LSE	BSc International Social and Public Policy with Politics	9,535 per year	28,900 per year	AAB	7
		BSc International Social and Public Policy with Economics	9,535 per year	30,700 per year	AAB	7
11	Queen's University Belfast	BA Criminology and Social Policy	4,985 (Ireland / Northern Ireland); 9,535 (rest of the UK)	22,400 per year	ABB	6.5
		BA Social Policy and Sociology	4,985 (Ireland / Northern Ireland); 9,535 (rest of the UK)	22,400 per year	BBB	6.5
12		BA Law & Social Policy	TBC	22,750 per year	ABB-BBB	6.5

University of Strathclyde	BA Psychology & Social Policy	TBC	22,750 per year	ABB-BBB	6.5
	BA History & Social Policy	TBC	22,750 per year	ABB-BBB	6.5
	BA Education & Social Policy	TBC	22,750 per year	ABB-BBB	6.5
	BA Social Policy & Economics	TBC	22,750 per year	ABB-BBB	6.5
	BA English & Social Policy	TBC	22,750 per year	ABB-BBB	6.5
	BA Social Policy & Spanish	TBC	22,750 per year	ABB-BBB	6.5
	BA Politics and International Relations & Social Policy	TBC	22,750 per year	ABB-BBB	6.5
	BA French & Social Policy	TBC	22,750 per year	ABB-BBB	6.5
	BA Social Policy & Human Resource Management	TBC	22,750 per year	ABB-BBB	6.5
	BA Journalism, Media, and Communication & Social Policy	TBC	22,750 per year	ABB-BBB	6.5
	BA English and Creative Writing & Social Policy	TBC	22,750 per year	ABB-BBB	6.5
13 Swansea University	BSc Criminology and Social Policy	9,535 per year	20,050 per year	ABB-BBC	6
	BA Politics and Social Policy	9,535 per year	20,150 per year	BBB-BCC	6
	BSc Sociology and Social Policy	9,535 per year	20,050 per year	BBB-BBC	6

14	Ulster University	BSc Social Policy with Sociology	TBC	TBC	BCC	6
		BSc Social Policy with Criminology	TBC	TBC	BCC	6
15	University of Wolverhampton	BA Sociology and Social Policy	TBC	TBC	CCC / BCD	6
		BA Criminology and Social Policy	TBC	TBC	CCC / BCD	6
		BA Politics and Social Policy	TBC	TBC	CCC / BCD	6
16	University of York	BA Criminal Justice and Social Policy	9,535 per year	26,900 per year	BBB	6.5

Table 0.5 UG Joint Honours ‘Social Policy’ Programmes (Entry 26/27)

<u>Year 1</u> Choose three different subjects	Music	Social and Public Policy	Sociology (for example)
<u>Year 2</u> Continue with two of your first-year subjects and choose another subject.	Music	Social and Public Policy	Economic & Social History (for example)
<u>Year 3</u> Specialisation in two chosen subjects.	Music	Social and Public Policy	
<u>Year 4</u> Continue with specialisation in two chosen subjects.	Music	Social and Public Policy	
<u>Honours degree destination</u>	MA Joint Honours in Music, and Social and Public Policy		

Box 3.1: Example One - Glasgow’s MA Joint Honours Degree Pathway in Music, and Social and Public Policy

HEI	Single Honours				Joint Honours			
	2011	2016	2021	2026	2011	2016	2021	2026
Anglia Ruskin University			X					
Aston University								X
Bangor University		+		X				X
University of Bath								
Birbeck, University of London								X
University of Birmingham								
University of Bolton						+	X	
Bournemouth University						X		
University of Brighton							X	
University of Bristol								
Canterbury Christ Church University							+	X
Cardiff Metropolitan University			+	X			+	
Cardiff University								
University of (Central) Lancashire							X	
Coleg Llandrillo Cymru							X	
Durham University						X		
University of Edinburgh		+						
University of Glasgow							X	
University of Hull						X		
University of Kent				X				X
University of Leeds				X				

Leeds Beckett University				X				
University of Lincoln				X				X
University of Liverpool								
Liverpool Hope University		+	X					X
London Metropolitan University							X	
LSE								
London South Bank University		X				X		
Loughborough University							X	
Manchester Metropolitan University						+	X	
Middlesex University						+	X	
University of Nottingham		X						X
Open University						X		
Plymouth Marjon University							X	
Queen's University Belfast								
University of Salford				X				
University of Sheffield								X
University of Southampton							X	
University of Stirling		X						
University of Strathclyde						+		
Swansea University				X				
Ulster University								
University of Warwick						+	X	
University of West of Scotland						X		



Figure 0.3 UG Social Policy module Titles (core and optional) Word Cloud

Core and optional word clouds display a wide range of policy areas that Social Policy students are encouraged to explore, including ‘crime’, ‘race’, ‘migration’, ‘security’, ‘welfare’, ‘poverty’, ‘housing’, ‘care’ and ‘education’ (see Figure 3.3). They also highlight the skills students are expected to develop—such as qualitative and quantitative research and data handling—so they can apply their knowledge in practical settings.

The career word cloud identifies job sectors where graduates can apply these skills, including ‘policing’, ‘teaching’, the ‘voluntary sector’, ‘local councils’, ‘housing’, ‘probation’, ‘research’, and ‘government’ (see Figure 3.4). These career terms align closely with the areas emphasised in the core and optional word clouds.

Although the number of HEIs offering UG single honours Social Policy programmes remained generally stable between 2011 and 2021, there has recently been a sharp 50 per cent decrease in 2026 (Figure 3.5).

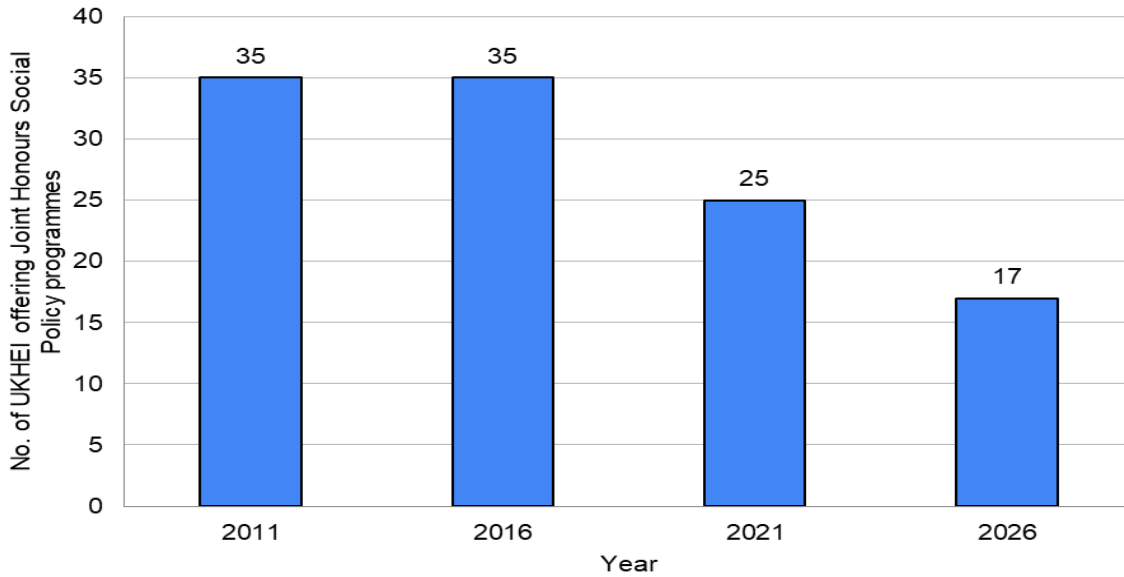


Figure 0.6 Changing Number of UG Joint Honours Social Policy Programmes (2011-2026)

Slightly different from the trend of UG single honours programmes, the number of joint honours Social Policy programmes remained generally stable only between 2011 and 2016, after which it declined gradually – from 35 to 25 between 2016 and 2021, and most recently to 17 in 2026 – representing an overall decrease of approximately 50 per cent (Figure 3.6).

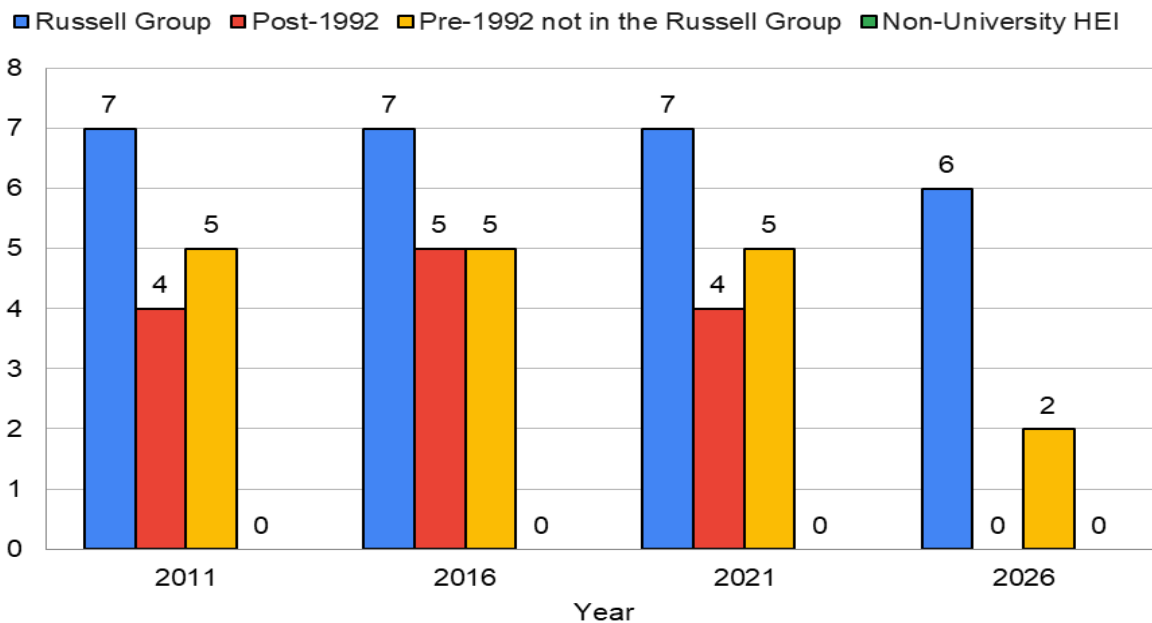


Figure 0.7 Changing Number of UG Single Honours Social Policy Programmes by HEI category (2011-2026)

Russell Group universities consistently offered single-honours Social Policy programmes across UK HEI categories, although one programme recently closed at the University of Leeds. Other pre-1992 universities showed a similar pattern but with a steeper decline, falling from five programmes in 2021 to two in 2026. No post-1992 universities offer a single-honours Social Policy programme for 2026 entry (Figure 3.7)

The shrinking diversity of HEIs offering Social Policy programmes may disadvantage some student groups. Patrick et al. (2011, p. 39) raised a similar concern: a respondent observed that Social Policy was increasingly taught mainly at Russell Group universities, which may be less accessible to groups such as ethnic minorities and mature students. The following is the view of this respondent:

‘They (the SPA) need to look at “who are the people we’re training?” Who’s getting in, who’s getting postgraduate studies, who’s doing PhDs, who’s the students who are not training anymore, and what does not mean for the future? How diverse are the students? Which universities are still offering Social Policy? Because if it’s only being offered at Bristol, Bath, Leeds, University of Sheffield, their student bodies are white and I think that’s a problem’ (Patrick et al, 2011, p. 39).

This observation also coincides with the findings in the 2021/22 survey that the top concern of respondents from post-1992 universities and pre-1992 universities outside the Russell Group was poor recruitment of UG students, followed by commercialisation of higher education and budget cut/financial constraints (Chau et al, 2023, Fig 4.6, p.64).

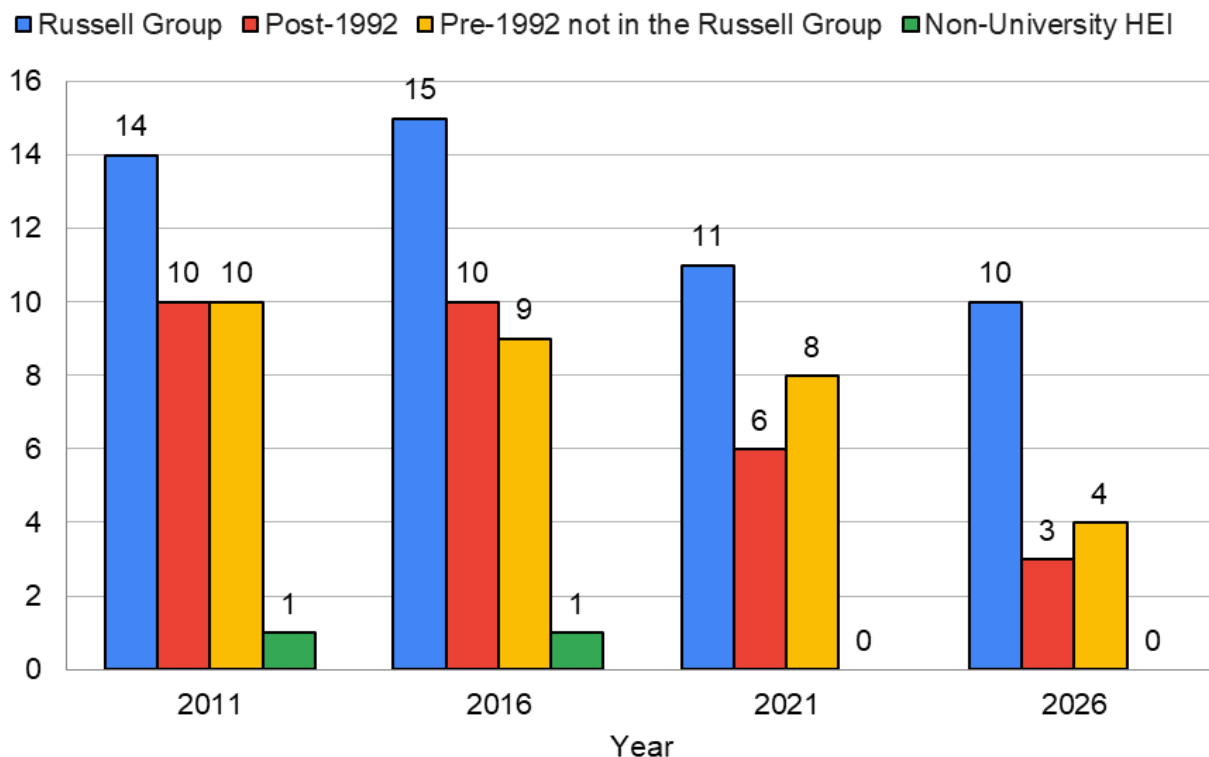


Figure 0.8 Changing Number of UG Joint Honours Social Policy Programmes by HEI category (2011-2026)

While Russell Group universities continued to offer the most UG joint-honours Social Policy programmes, their numbers declined noticeably from 15 to 10 between 2016 and 2026 – a one-third drop. Post-1992 universities and pre-1992 universities outside the Russell Group experienced similar downward trends, though the latter showed a sharper decline (Figure 3.8).

Among all regions, Wales notably peaked in the number of UG single-honours Social Policy programmes in 2021, before dropping to zero by 2026. The North East does not offer any UG single honours Social Policy programme. Provision in the South East, South West and Scotland has been stable throughout the period (Figure 3.9).

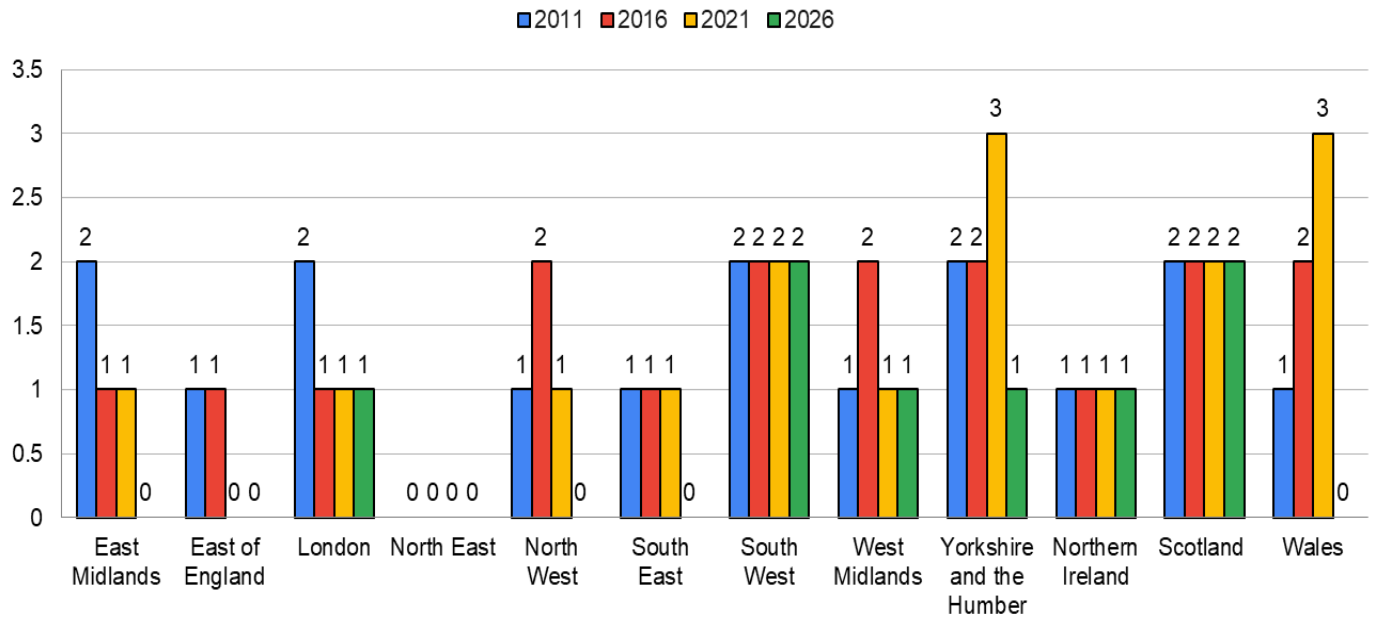


Figure 0.9 Changing Number of UG Single Honours Social Policy Programmes by Region/Country (2011-2026)

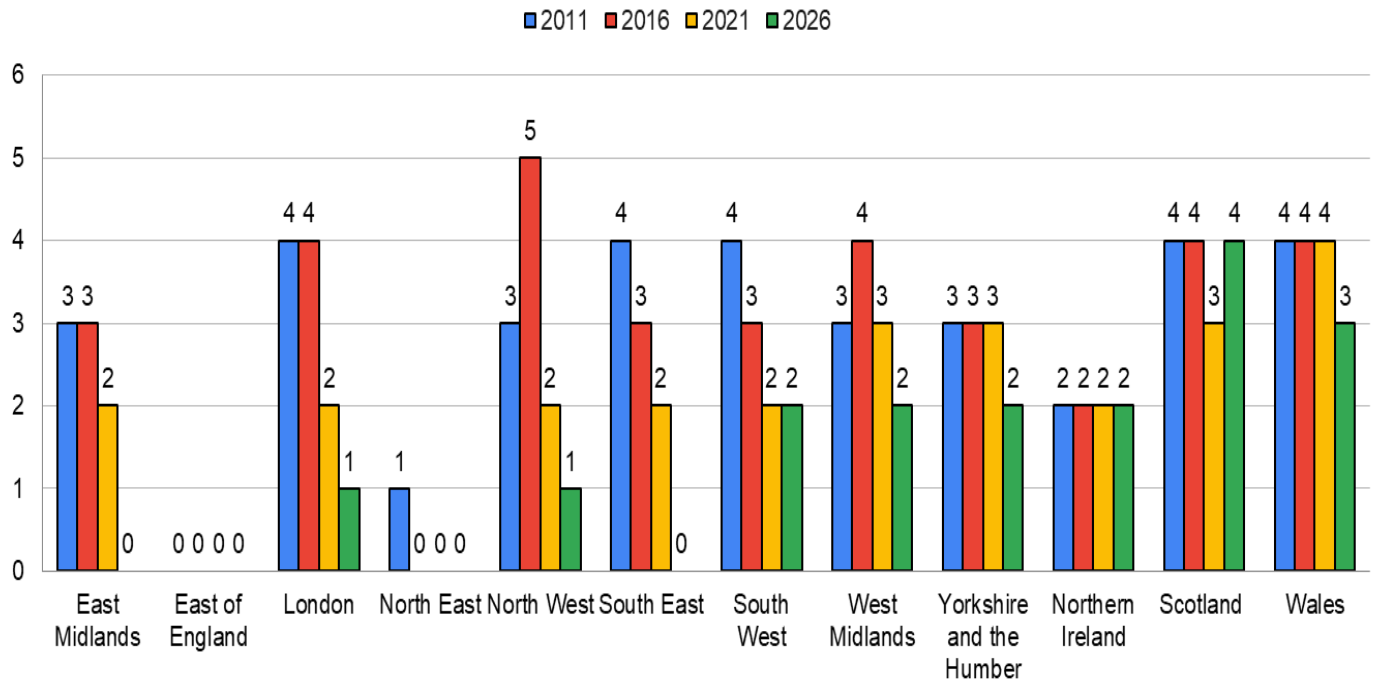


Figure 0.10 Changing Number of UG Joint Honours Social Policy Programmes by Region/country (2011-2026)

Although the North East had Durham University offering a UG joint-honours Social Policy programme as early as 2011, this momentum was not sustained. It is important to note that no HEIs in the East of England offered any such programmes. The provision in Northern Ireland has been stable through the period (Figure 3.10).

3.3.5 Postgraduate Taught Degree Programmes

We identified 18 HEIs offering PGT Social Policy degree programmes for the 2026/27 academic year (Table 3.7). Although this represents a decrease from the 22 HEIs recorded in the 2021 audit, it is noteworthy that Liverpool John Moores University, Loughborough University, the University of Southampton, and the University of the West of Scotland have discontinued their PGT Social Policy programmes.

Regarding the number of PGT Social Policy programmes offered by HEIs, the University of Strathclyde expanded its offerings from 2 to 4. Previously limited to the ‘MSc in Social Policy’ and ‘MSc Social Policy’, the suite now also includes joint PGT degree programmes such as ‘MSc Criminology & Social Policy’ and ‘MSc Health & Social Policy’.

The University of York reduced its offerings from 6 to 3, with the previously available ‘MRes Social Policy’, ‘MA Global Social Policy’, and ‘MA Comparative and International Social Policy’ no longer on offer. While ‘MA Social Policy’ remains, it has been rebranded as ‘MA Social and Public Policy’, akin to the LSE’s longstanding ‘MSc International Social and Public Policy’. The University of Nottingham has undergone similar rebranding, from ‘MA International Social Policy’ to ‘MA Global Social and Public Policy’.

	Institution	Name of PGT programme	Home fee (per year)	International fee (per year)	Entry requirement	IELTS
1	Anglia Ruskin University	MSc International Social Welfare and Social Policy	11,700	20,500	2:2	6.5
2	Bangor University	MA Social Policy	TBC	TBC	2:2	6
3	University of Bath	MRes Social Policy	TBC	24,450	2:1	6.5
		MRes European Social Policy	TBC	24,450	2:1	6.5
4	University of Birmingham	MA Social Policy	11,250	28,080	2:1 in a relevant subject	6.5
5	Cardiff University	MSc Social and Public Policy	11,450	25,950	2:2 in a relevant subject area	6.5
6	University of Kent	MA Social Policy	TBC	19,300	2:2 or above	6.5
7	University of Lancashire	MA Social Policy	TBC	TBC	2:2 in Social Policy or a related discipline	6
8	University of Leeds	MA Social and Public Policy	12,250	28,250	2:1 in a social science or a related subject	6.5
9	Liverpool Hope University	MA Social Policy	8,150	16,500	2:2	6
10	London School of Economics	MSc International Social and Public Policy (with five specialist pathway and LSE-Fudan Double Master's degree options)	19,650	30,750	2:1 in a relevant social science	7
11	University of Nottingham	MA Global Social and Public Policy	13,400	33,000	2:1 or 2:2	6.5
		MA Social Science Research (Criminology, Sociology, Social Policy, Social Work)	11,800	25,750	2:1	7

12	University of Oxford	MSc Comparative Social Policy	24,800	38,430	First or strong 2:1	7.5
		MPhil Comparative Social Policy (21 months)	22,600 (per annum)	35,090 (per annum)	First or strong 2:1	7.5
13	Plymouth Marjon University	MA Social Policy	8,500	14,600	Related degree	
14	University of Strathclyde	MSc Social Policy	10,100	23,550	First / 2:1 in Social Policy or a related discipline	6.5
		MSc Social Policy (Research Methods)	10,100	23,550	First / 2:1 in Social Policy or a related discipline	6.5
		MSc Criminology & Social Policy	10,100	23,550	First / 2:1 in a social science discipline	6.5
		MSc Health & Social Policy	10,100	23,550	First / 2:1 in health or Social Policy or a related discipline	6.5
15	Teesside University	MSc Social Research Methods (Social Policy)	TBC	TBC	2:2	
16	Ulster University	MSc Social Policy	TBC	18,310	second class	6
17	University College London	MSc Social Policy (Research Methods)	16,800	35,400	2:1 in a Social Science subject	7.5
		MSc Social Policy (Evidence Synthesis)	16,800	35,400	2:1 in a Social Science subject	7.5
18	University of York	MA Social and Public Policy	12,000	26,900	2:2	6.5
		MPA Social and Public Policy (2 years part-time)	10,680		2:2	6.5

		MPA Comparative Applied Social and Public Policy, Evaluation and Research (21 months full-time)	27250 (+70% of this price for the second year)	2:2	6.5
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Table 0.7 PGT ‘Social Policy’ Programmes (Entry 26/27)

Figure 3.7 also shows a large gap between the home fee and the international fee. Such a gap can have the same negative effects on the PGT Social Policy programme as the UG Social Policy programme. The HEIs charging the highest fees are the University of Oxford, UCL and the University of Nottingham.

3.3.6 Postgraduate-Taught Modules and Career Options

This section analyses word clouds generated from module titles and career listings for PGT Social Policy programmes. Figure 3.11 shows terms from core module titles on HEI websites, and Figure 3.12 shows terms from optional module titles. We compare these two sets of titles and also present a combined word cloud of core and optional titles (Figure 3.13), which we compare with the career pathways shown on HEI websites (Figure 3.14).

Both the core (Figure 3.11) and optional (Figure 3.12) module titles word clouds highlight terms such as research, methods, policy, social, and international. Because the PGT study is much shorter than the UG study, PGT students are expected to acquire sufficient research-methods training within a limited timeframe to analyse policy issues. Given that many PGT students are international (Section 3.4.2), it is unsurprising that programmes emphasise the international dimension—an observation confirmed by the qualitative study's findings (Section 4.5.4). A key difference between the two word clouds concerns programme requirements: the core module titles place particular emphasis on the dissertation.

Figure 3.13 highlights the knowledge areas and skills postgraduate students are expected to acquire. Key terms include ‘research’ (‘qualitative’ and ‘quantitative’), ‘comparative’, ‘data’, ‘databases’, ‘poverty’, ‘migration’, ‘inequality’, ‘development’, and ‘theory’. The prominence of ‘internationalisation’ may suggest that students are expected to engage with these topics not only at the national but also at the international level.

Figure 3.14 illustrates where and how graduates are likely to apply what they have learnt. First, the word cloud shows a range of employment sectors—‘government’, ‘community’, ‘business’, ‘charities’, ‘NGOs’, ‘Oxfam’, ‘OECD’, ‘Commonwealth’ and ‘UNICEF’—indicating diverse career destinations. Second, it highlights the roles graduates may take on, such as analysts, researchers, consultants, managers, advisers, and advocates. Third, it identifies specific fields of work, including ‘housing’, ‘health’, ‘welfare’, ‘banking’, and ‘education’. Finally, the presence of ‘PhD’ indicates that some graduates are expected to continue their studies.



Figure 0.13 PGT Social Policy Module Titles (core and optional) Word Cloud

Between 2021 and 2026, the number of HEIs offering PGT Social Policy programmes decreased from 22 to 18, two fewer than in 2016 (Figure 3.15). However, Russell Group universities continue to take the largest share (Figure 3.16).

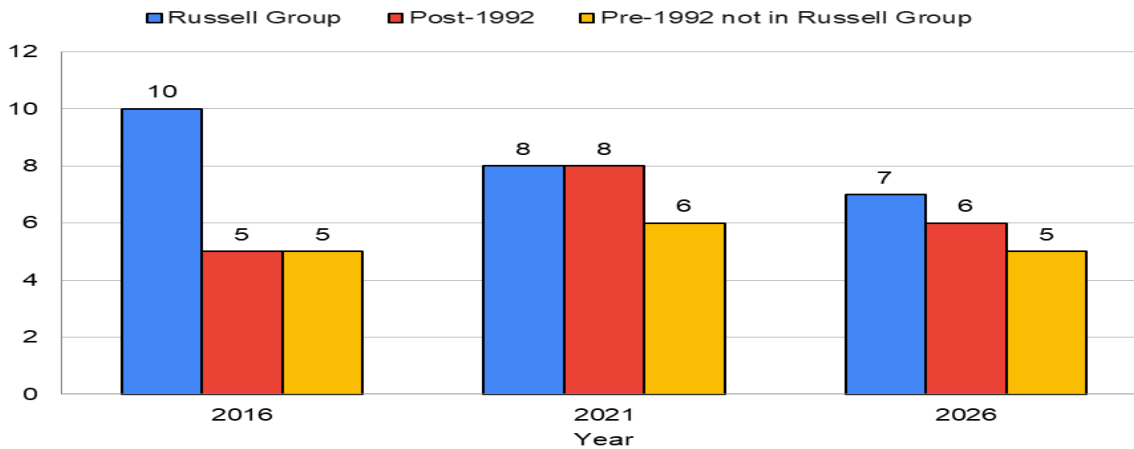


Figure 0.16 Changing Number of PGT Social Policy Programmes by HEI categories (2016-2026)

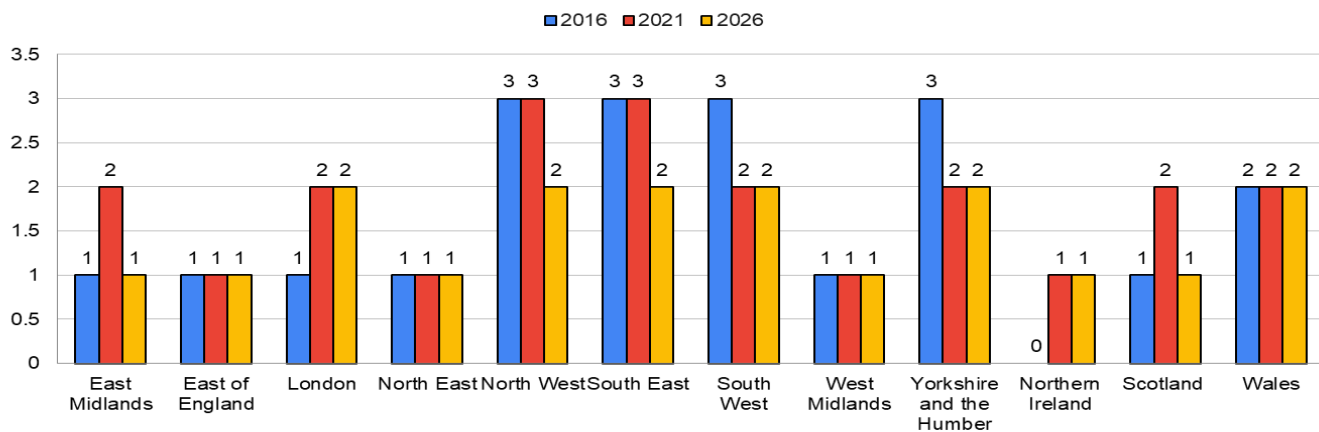


Figure 0.17 Changing Number of PGT Social Policy Programmes by Region/Country (2016-2026)

Unlike UG Social Policy programmes, the number of HEIs offering PGT Social Policy programmes is relatively balanced across UK regions. While no UG Social Policy programmes have been available at any HEIs in the North East since 2016, Teesside University in that region continues to offer PGT Social Policy programmes.

3.4 Findings Concerning Student Numbers

3.4.1 Changes in Student Numbers (UG and PGT)

Table 3.8 shows the changes in student numbers from 2014 to 2023. There has been a gradual decline in the UG numbers since 2019/20. This coincides with the decline in the number of UG single- and joint-Honours

programmes, as shown in Figures 3.7 and 3.8 above. The PGT numbers grew to 4180 in 2020/21 and remained stable until 2023/24. However, due to the lack of data for the last two years, it is difficult to tell whether this trend continues, especially amid the recent financial crisis in the higher education sector. These changes are also presented in Figure 3.18, which shows growth at both the UG and PGT levels in 2019/20, followed by a continuous decline in UG numbers and an increase in PGT numbers.

	2014/15*	2015/16*	2016/17*	2017/18*	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21*	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24*
UG	2680	2715	2645	2705	3285	3725	2975	2370	2175	1830
PGT	2385	2580	3005	2825	3015	3275	4180	4165	4375	4150

Table 0.8 Student Entrance Numbers According to JACS 3.0 ‘Principal Subject’ Data and CAH Level 3

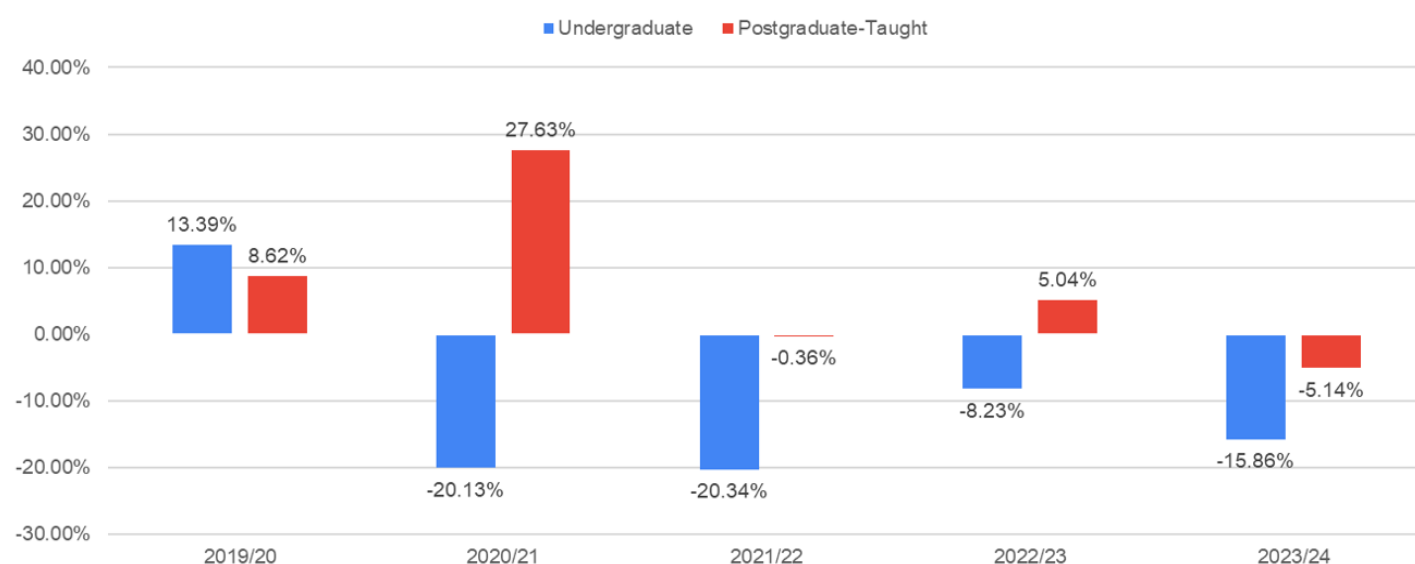


Figure 0.18 Percentage Change in Student Entrance Numbers 2014/15 - 2023/24

When the home student numbers are split by region/country, it is clear that England has experienced a sharp decline in the number of new UG home students from 2019 to 2023, while Scotland's numbers have been less volatile (Figure 3.19). This corresponds with the stable provision in Scotland as shown in Figures 3.9 and 3.10 above.

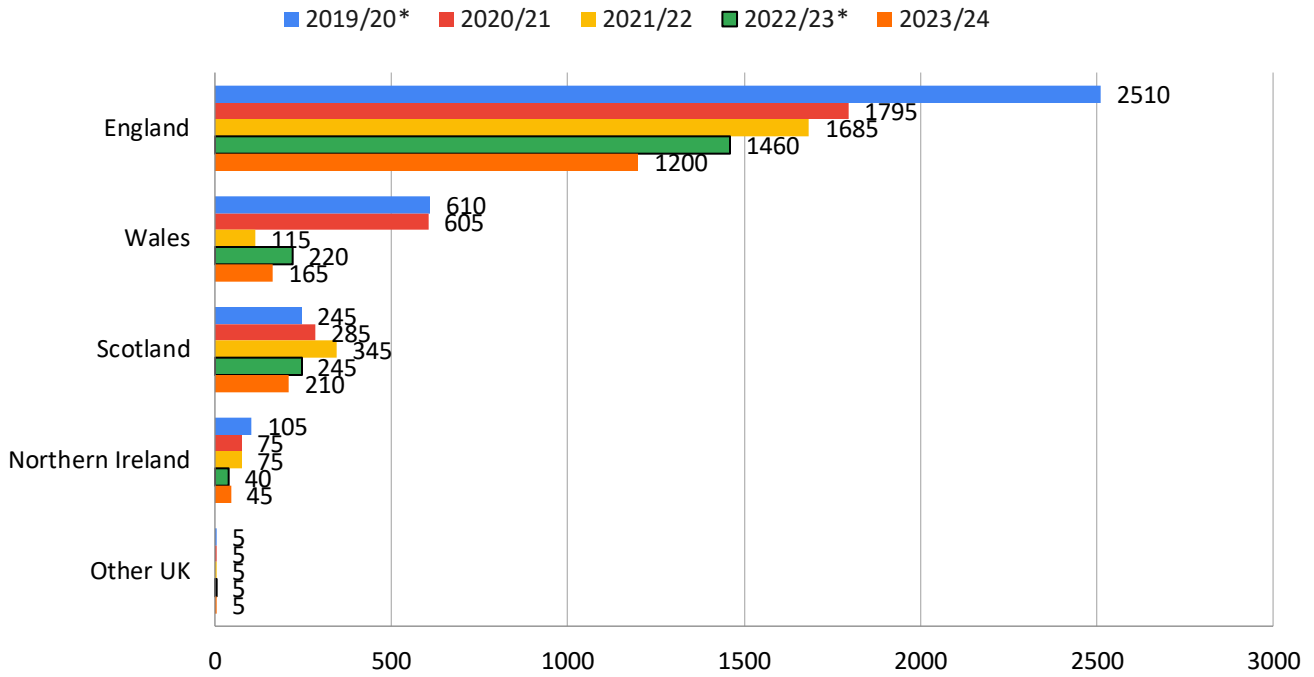


Figure 0.19 The Trend of New Home Students Enrolled in UG Social Policy Programmes by Region/Country (2019-2024)

On the PGT side, there is a similar pattern in all four regions/countries. Student numbers peaked in 2020 but were set back to varying degrees in subsequent years.

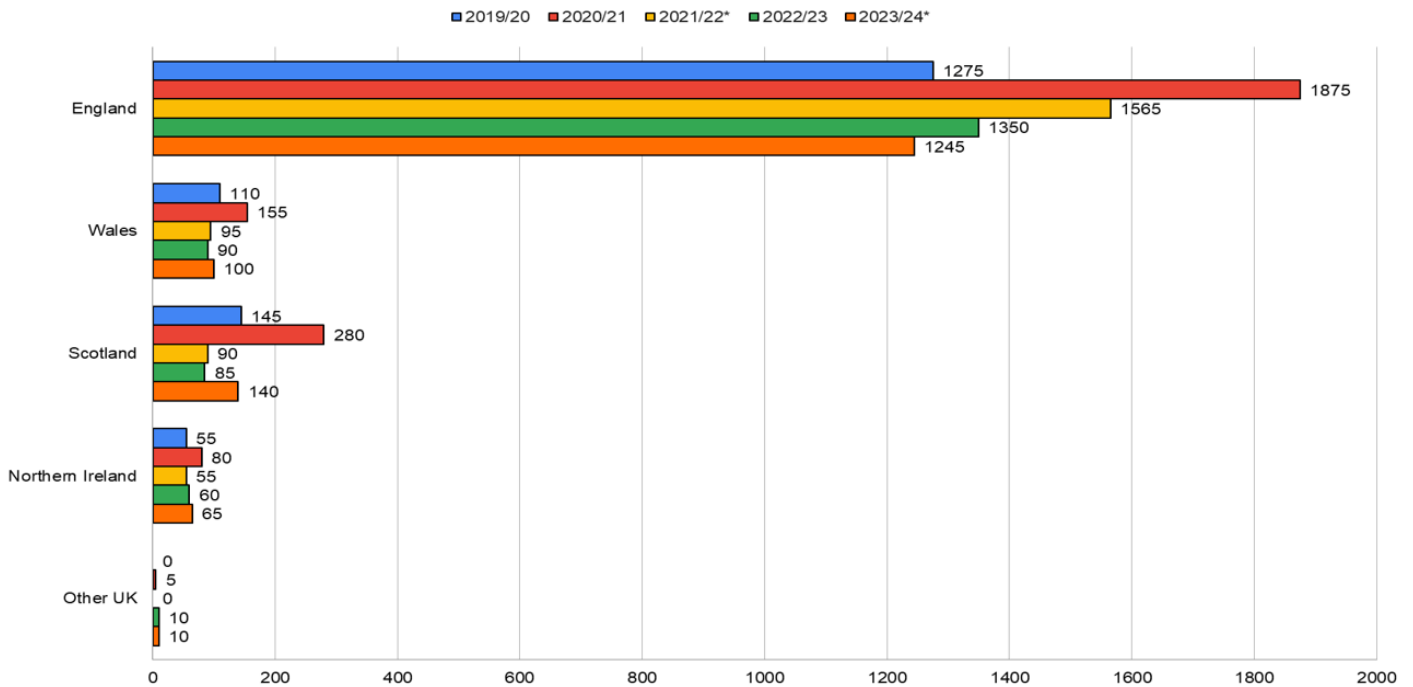


Figure 0.20 The Trend of New Home Students Enrolled in PGT Social Policy Programme (2019-2024)

3.4.2 Changes in Students' Demographics (UG and PGT)

Figure 3.19 shows changes in the countries of origin of Social Policy students. While home students continue to make up the majority of the UG student body, the number of EU students has declined sharply since Brexit in 2020, while the number of non-EU international students has increased steadily.

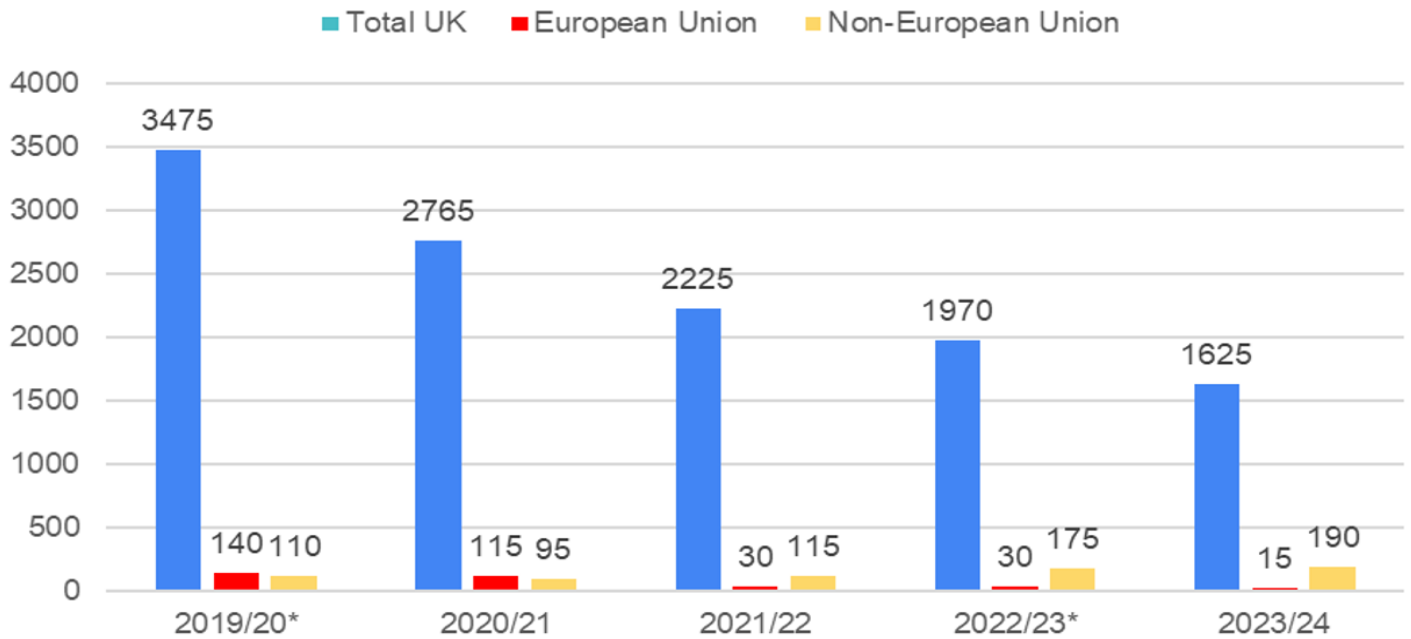


Figure 0.21 UG Student Entrance Numbers, By Origin, 2019/20 - 2023/24

The story on the PGT side differs. Although the number of EU students has been stable since 2021, non-EU students began to outnumber home students that same year (Figure 3.22).

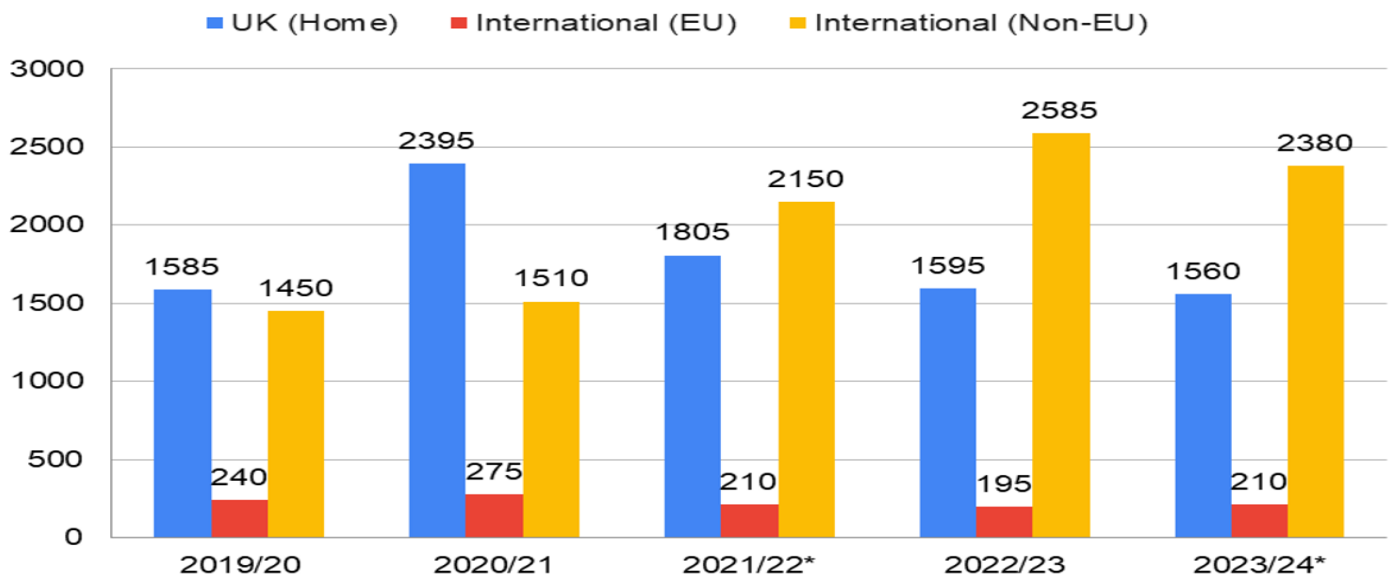


Figure 0.22 PGT Student Entrance Numbers, By Origin, 2019/20 - 2023/24

Figures 3.23 and 3.24 show that female students have been the majority in Social Policy programmes, although a large proportion of male students are at the PGT level. At both levels, the proportion of female students exceeds the national average of 57 per cent in 2023/24 (HESA, 2025).

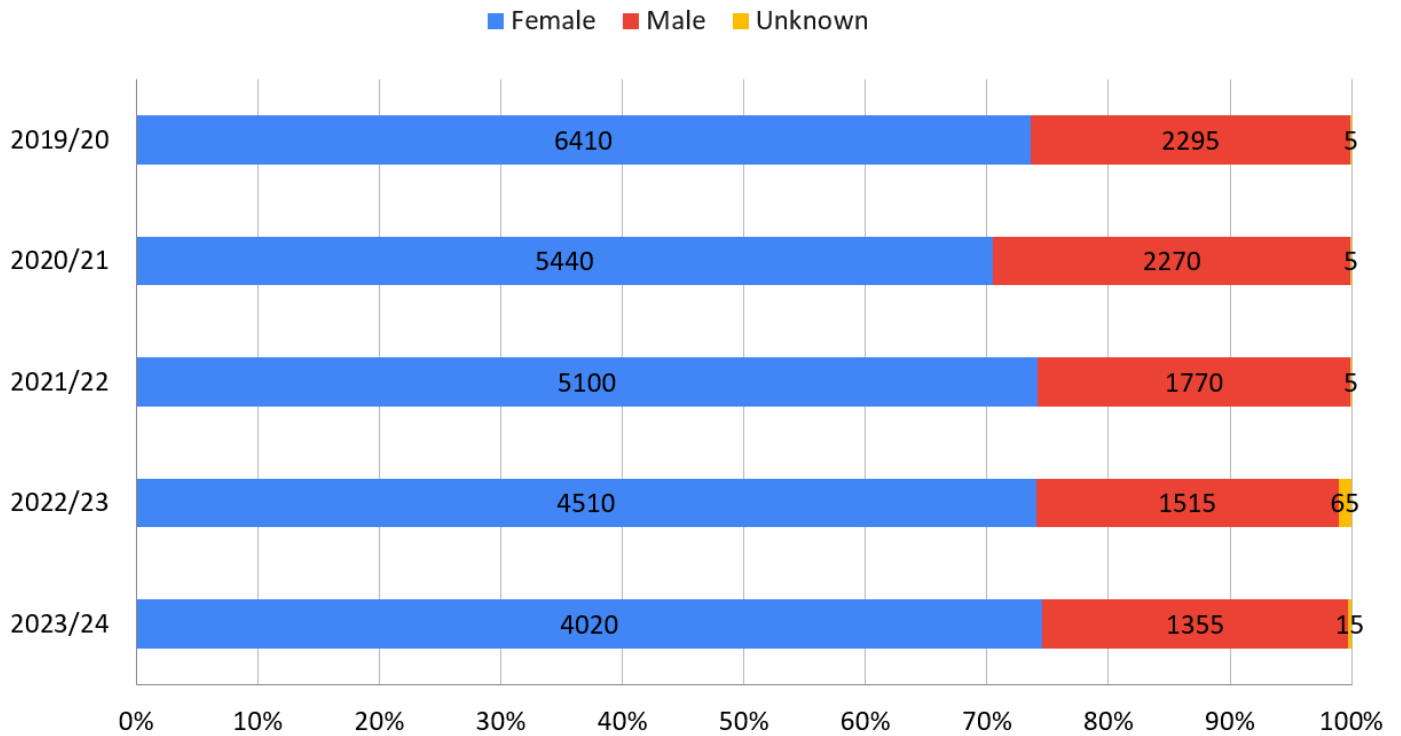


Figure 0.23 UG Students Gender Ratio, 2014/15 - 2023/24

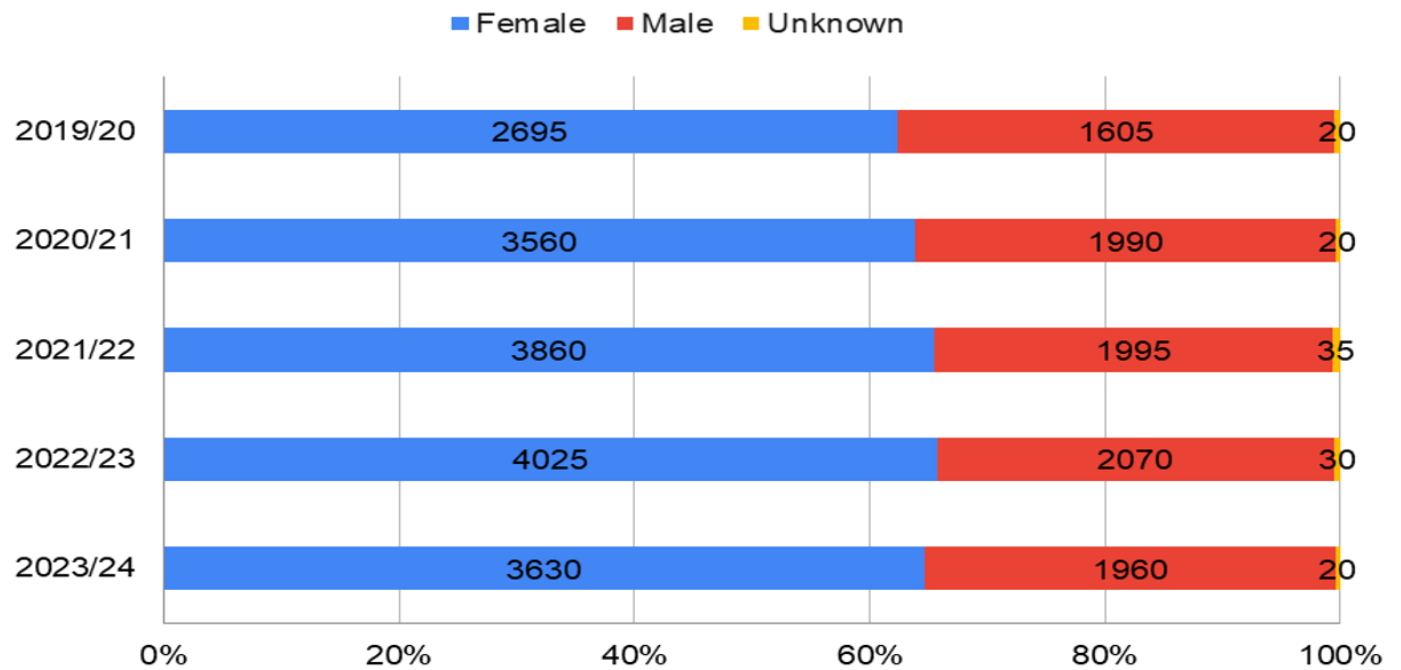


Figure 0.24 PGT Social Policy Students Gender Ratio, 2014/15 - 2023/24

Figure 3.25 shows that the number of UG Social Policy students under 21 has been increasing since 2019. This may explain why work-related experiences and employability have become increasingly important in UG programmes, as most students may have little or no formal work experience before entering university.

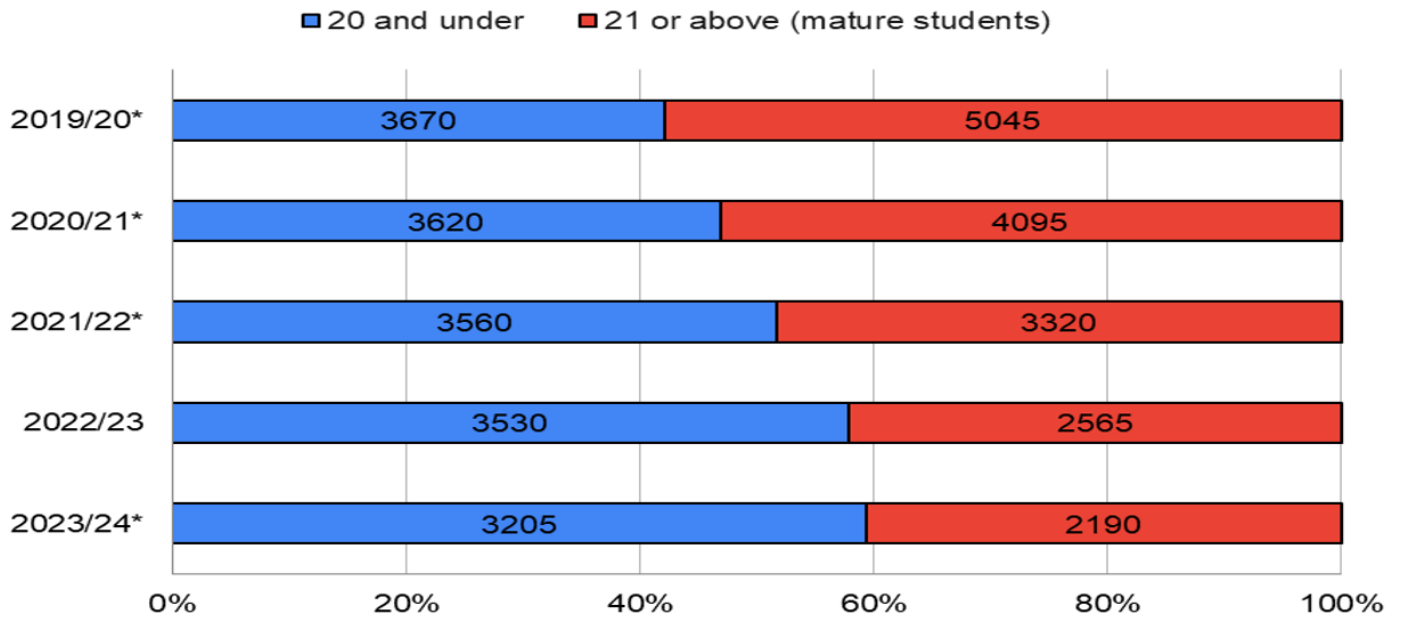


Figure 0.25 UG Social Policy Students Age Ratio (2014-2024)

On the PGT side, students across different age groups are more evenly distributed, with a gradual expansion in the 25-29 age group. However, almost 40 per cent of students were under 24 each year. This suggests they may not have much time to gain work experience after graduating from their first degree.

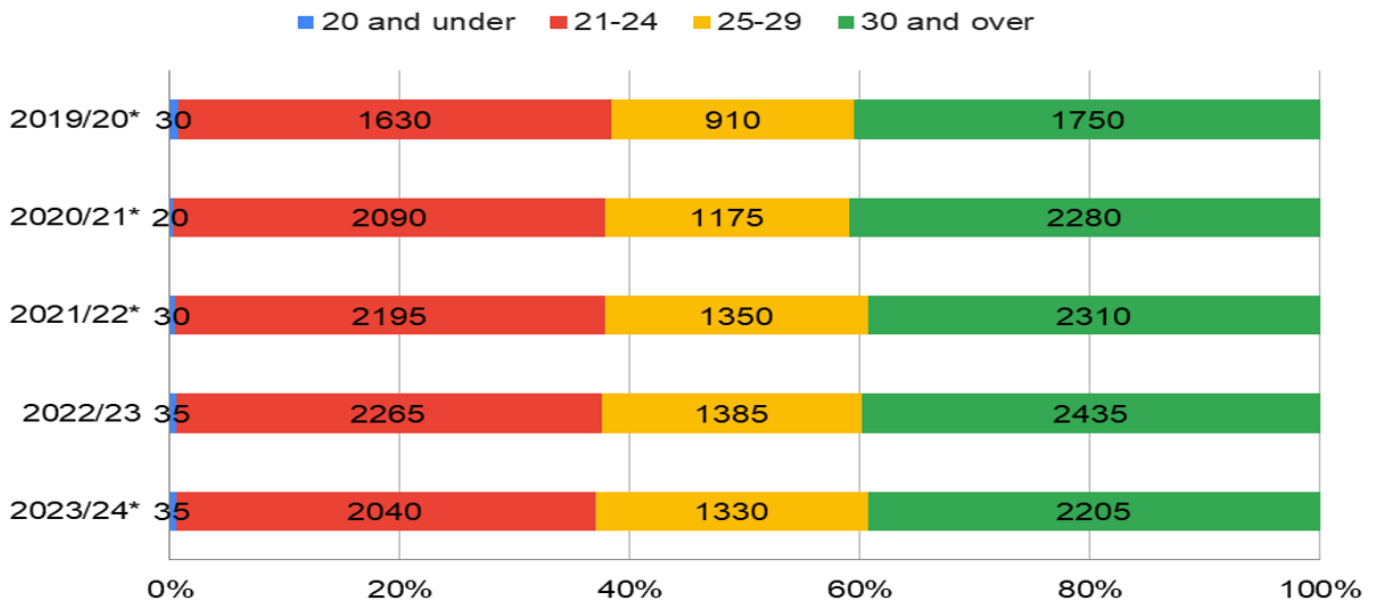


Figure 0.26 PGT Social Policy Student Age Ratio

From 2021 to 2023, over 20 per cent of UG Social Policy students were reported to have one or more known disability (Figure 3.29), which exceeds the national average of 16 – 18 per cent (HESA, 2025). This may suggest that Social Policy programmes are more inclusive or better able to reach this group of students. It also serves as a strong reminder of the importance of accessibility for disabled students, one of the five contemporary themes in the QAA Social Policy benchmark consultation paper (QAA, 2025), as it would affect at least one in five students.

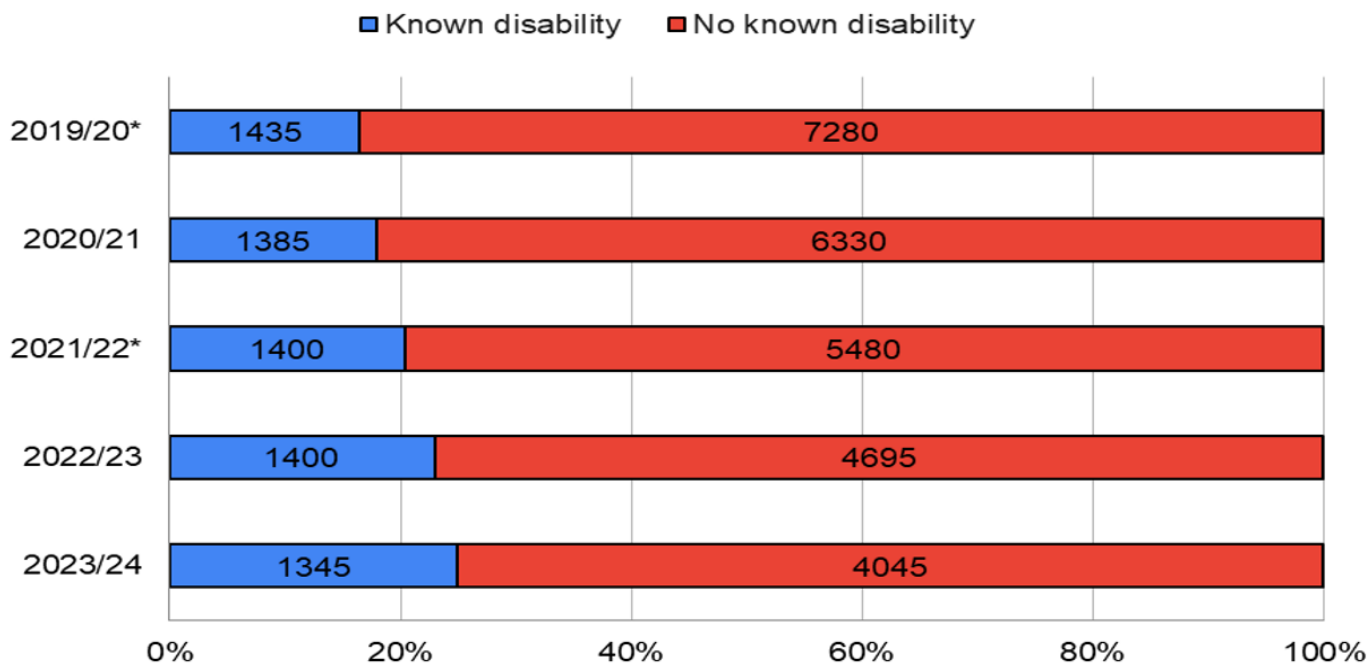


Figure 0.27 UG Social Policy Student Disability Ratio (2014-2024)

3.5 Limitations

Despite our best efforts to complete this desk-based audit within the project timeframe and given limited staff capacity, the audit has limitations.

The first limitation stems from data availability issues. Although HESA offers a rich dataset, not all the data required for the audit are available, especially on the PGT side. This has limited the ability to provide a more comprehensive comparison between the UG and PGT figures and to track changes in PGT provision over time. Additionally, inconsistencies have been found in some data, for example, in the stated total and the sums of the numbers in the categories and figures in the student demographics. To mitigate this problem, we used statistics directly available from HESA whenever possible, as long as they fell under the same topic, or applied a standard approach to the calculation and presentation of the figures, and provided an explanatory note wherever possible. Moreover, the lack of data on student numbers after 23/24 creates a time lag in understanding the latest developments in Social Policy programmes, which may have been seriously undermined by the recent financial crisis, as some participants in the qualitative study pointed out.

The second concerns the different formats of programme information across the institutional websites. Extracting comparable data from multiple websites is a demanding task. We did our best to ensure the accuracy of the information in the programme audit, but it is difficult to ensure that there is no oversight or misinterpretation, especially since we do not have an insider's view of most programmes.

As mentioned above, we follow the practice of previous studies and exclude all programmes that do not include Social Policy in their titles. There could be major omissions of programmes that are highly relevant to the study. However, we were unable to find alternative exclusion criteria that could provide a clear-cut scope of the audit.

3.6 Conclusion

As we conclude this section, it is important to highlight key changes and consider implications for the future of Social Policy education. Several notable shifts have occurred—particularly over the past five years. The number of single-honours Social Policy degrees has fallen substantially, tuition fees for international students have risen by more than 30 per cent, and the range of HEIs offering Social Policy has contracted.

The changes in the number of programmes and students vary by region/country and by type of HEI. In 2026, six out of the 12 regions/countries in our categorisation no longer have any Social Policy Single honours programmes, and four had no undergraduate Social Policy programmes at all (Figures 3.9 and 3.10). These include more deprived regions such as the East and North East of England. While these regions require better social policy practices to promote their economic and social development, there is nowhere for their young people to study Social Policy at the UG level unless they can afford to travel to other parts of the country. The lack of Social Policy teaching provision also means that there is a shortage of staff capacity to conduct social policy research locally. Although all types of HEIs have a reduced number of UG Social Policy programmes in 2026, post-1992 universities experience a much sharper fall from four to zero in Single Honours programmes and from six to three Joint Honours programmes (Figures 3.7 and 3.8). Research has shown that post-1992 universities are better attended by local students from lower-income areas (Campbell et al, 2019). The decline in the number of UG Social Policy programmes also suggests there are fewer opportunities for students from lower-income backgrounds to study Social Policy. As some research participants in the qualitative study noted, staff and students' lived experiences are invaluable in Social Policy education (Section 4.3.1.1). The exclusion of these students is not only a loss to these individuals but also a missed opportunity for Social Policy studies to learn from a wide range of lived experiences, which can be highly relevant to the discipline's research and teaching goals.

Although enrolment of non-UK UG students in Social Policy remained broadly stable between 2019 and 2024, home UG numbers declined steadily from 3,475 to 1,625—a drop of roughly 51% over five years. New EU (non-UK) student enrolment fell sharply in 2021. That year also marked a turning point in PGT programmes, when non-UK students began to outnumber home students (Figure 3.22). As mentioned in Section 2.2.2 above, Social Policy education can serve as a merit good when students are subsidised in their studies. Its primary aims are to meet students' educational needs and benefit wider society. The increasing number of international students who pay full fees is more likely to treat their studies as a private investment to advance their career

prospects. This can pose challenges for Social Policy educators, as they must meet the expectations of both types of students and deliver a service that addresses social needs and market demands. These two can be conflicting, especially for many Social Policy educators, whose core values are social justice and equality.

The data above show that the proportion of students under 21 in UG Social Policy programmes has been increasing, as has the number of Social Policy UG students with at least one known disability. The changing composition of the Social Policy student body contributes to a more diverse learning environment and, at the same time, to more varied student needs, especially regarding employability and accessibility.

PART IV FINDINGS OF QUALITATIVE STUDY

4.1 Introduction

This chapter has three main sections. The first section presents the research design. The second reports the findings from the focus groups and interviews. The last is a conclusion.

4.2 Research Design

As highlighted in Part I, this qualitative study aims to explore four focal issues. Participants were mainly recruited through the SPA's membership and network. The main inclusion criterion is that they have taught Social Policy at a higher education level in the UK or internationally. We aim to include participants at different career stages and with diverse personal characteristics. Despite efforts to make the inclusion criterion as explicit as possible, one PGR participant who had not yet delivered any teaching was keen to share their opinion and was therefore included. They remind the research team of the ongoing omission of student views in this and previous studies. Interested participants were invited to attend a focus group or individual interview at a time convenient to them. The research adhered to ethical principles of voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymity. Focus groups and interviews were recorded, transcribed, and anonymised with pseudonyms. An information sheet was provided before focus groups and interviews, and consent was obtained at the outset. All personal and research data were stored and handled in accordance with the Data Management Plan, which was required in the ethical application. Ethical approval was obtained from the Research Ethics and Integrity Committee of the School of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Nottingham prior to the data collection.

Each of the 15 focus groups and 9 interviews lasted from 60 to 90 minutes. They involved 45 participants and were conducted from April to November 2025 (Table 4.1). These include two pilot focus groups with members of the SPA Executive Committee. Their opinions helped shape the final interview guidelines (Appendix 1).

	Distribution	Total
Gender	Female (23), Male (21), Non-binary (1)	45
Region/country	England (18), Scotland (8), Northern Ireland (3), Wales (3), Outside UK – Asia (8), Outside UK – Europe (4), Not known (1)	45
Protected Characteristics (PCs)	Impairments (7), LGBTQA+ (6), Minoritised ethnicity (5), Neurodivergent (4), Other protected characteristics (2), Prefer not to say (3)	19 (some had more than one PC)
Employment status	Full-time permanent (29), Full-time fixed term (10), Part-time permanent (2), Part-time fixed term (1), Retired (2), Prefer not to say (1)	45
Career Stage	Mid-career (22), Late-career (10), PGR/ECR (10), Retired (2), Prefer not to say (1)	45

Table 0.1 Participants’ profiles

We used NVivo to conduct two rounds of thematic analysis on the data collected at different stages. A series of themes was generated from the key phrases under each interview topic. The preliminary results were disseminated on various occasions, including two presentations: one on the theoretical framework and one on the preliminary findings, at the July 2025 SPA annual conference; and one presentation at the online open forum conducted in March 2026 during the writing of this report. The feedback from the audience provides invaluable insights into the understanding and interpretation of the data, as well as the development of the recommendations. Additionally, the study coincided with the development and consultation period of the QAA Social Policy Benchmark consultation paper in 2025. Based on the available data in September 2025, we produced and submitted to the SPA Executive Committee a document highlighting participants’ supplementary views to the QAA consultation paper, from which we developed a response to the QAA consultation.

Due to the limited sample size and recruitment methods, the study does not assert theoretical saturation; thus, it is illustrative rather than comprehensive. However, interpreting participants’ meanings and actions from their perspectives remains valuable. This approach provides deeper insights into processes, motivation, and beliefs compared to quantitative research (Foster, 2017). Moderate generalisations can be made from the data, reflecting personal experiences that help organise social interactions.

4.3 Focus Groups and Interviews Findings

This section starts by discussing the findings concerning the core elements of Social Policy education, this is followed by presenting participants’ views on how Social Policy is defined, the challenges to Social Policy education, and strategies for tackling these challenges.

4.3.1 Core Elements of Social Policy Education

The findings concerning the core elements of Social Policy education are mainly drawn from participants' discussions on two interview questions: 1) Name three things that any Social Policy courses/programmes must have and why? 2) What are the three most important takeaways for Social Policy students when completing their. Participants' views can be organised under three themes: teaching approaches, teaching areas, and expectations for students.

4.3.1.1 Teaching approaches

Teaching approaches refer to the methods respondents used for guiding students in tasks such as acquiring, generating, and interpreting Social Policy knowledge. These methods also shape students' learning approaches. The interview findings indicate that several participants favoured two specific teaching approaches.

- *Lived experience*

Participants saw lived experience not only as a source of examples to illustrate the impacts of social policies but also as an integral part of Social Policy education. *P2* stressed that students should be encouraged to connect their learning to their day-to-day experiences. *P13* went further, suggesting that lecturers should both motivate students to bring their lived experience into the classroom and share their own.

The focus groups and interviews explored the advantages of connecting: it can help students understand how policies affect lives in concrete ways and build confidence in analysing shared issues and themes. *P19*, who taught students who had experienced gender-based violence, shared that teaching helped those students situate their individual experiences within a broader framework. *P5* put it:

'I'd like themgot a good sense of exactly..... the relation between the kind of theory, the practice, or the ideal version and the messy real world that we are actually in... so that they can use the fact that they have studied the subject as a way of bringing deeper understanding to whether it is that they they're doing'.

To further enrich connecting, some participants were in favour of participatory research grounded in lived experience. As *P7* emphasised,

'Lived experience is so crucial that we need to look at participatory research methods as well as qualitative and quantitative approaches'.

Placements and internships were seen as important ways to connect real-life experience with classroom study; some programmes taught by participants require students to undertake research during placements. Several participants asked students to create scenarios about the world they will graduate into to explore future policy issues affecting their generation. These scenario exercises are expected to help students contribute to Social

Policy scholarship by examining what participants described as potential ‘new giants of the welfare state’, highly relevant to their cohort.

- *Critical thinking*

Participants stressed that students should be encouraged to examine critically the ideas they encounter. In explaining what criticality means, *P5* stressed that students should recognise that reality is rarely a simple binary of opposing forces:

‘There are kinds of right-wing people who are anti-welfare spending, and there are left-wing people who are in favour of it, but the world is so much more complicated than that.’

P11 emphasised that students should see the world through a political lens:

‘I firmly believe that... Social Policy graduates should be entering the world of work with an enhanced kind of political awareness of what’s going on around the world.’

Several strategies for enhancing critical thinking were discussed in the focus groups and interviews: encouraging students to study key institutions (for example, welfare states) from different perspectives; asking critical questions about how social problems and policy solutions are presented; analysing whether policy processes reflect conflict and contestation; cultivating empathy for different voices; investigating how power influences policy and policymaking; and conducting critical analysis in essay work.

To create a favourable environment for developing critical thinking, *P2*, *P8* and *P9* suggested decolonising the curriculum by challenging Eurocentric and Anglocentric perspectives on Social Policy. This can be seen, to some extent, as a response to ideas such as the ‘whiteness of Social Policy’ and the ‘dead white men of Social Policy’ raised in a study on Social Policy education (Craig et al., 2019, p. 15)

4.3.1.2 Teaching Areas

Participants highlighted various teaching areas as an important part of Social Policy education. The areas are divided into 12 categories as follows:

- *History*

This includes the history of the welfare state, the history of Social Policy, traditional British Social Policy, the social administration tradition, and the origins of current social policies.

- *Welfare state and welfare regimes*

Participants mentioned the five giants of the welfare state, the mixed economy of welfare, welfare regimes, and how different welfare regimes are linked to different ways of responding to needs.

- *Social goals*

These concerns promote harmonious relationships between human and non-human beings, defend animal welfare, enhance sustainability, uphold social justice, achieve equality, explore new giants in the welfare state, and support environmental justice.

- *Politics*

Participants refer to these as data politics, contestation concerning how to define problems and seek solutions, and how Social Policy is relevant to the political context.

- *State intervention*

This includes the roles of the state, individual responsibility, and the community or voluntary sector.

- *Problems/Issues*

The main ones mentioned by participants include inequality, EDI issues, poverty, unequal distribution of power, environmental issues, and climate change. In addition, participants emphasised that issues and problems are fluid and ever-changing. Hence, it is important to keep teaching up to date with current developments, avoid dismissing the possibility that students may hold different views on the relative importance of issues, and ensure that Social Policy education is always forward-looking.

- *Policy-making process*

Participants saw the policy-making process as another important teaching area. This, according to *P5*, is mainly about 'How policy happens: who and what decisions get made, where and at which levels, and all that kind of stuff.' *P4* explained why the teaching policy-making process is important in Social Policy education:

'....if you're trying to make a difference, you need to understand the systems in which you might try to influence either as an analyst or as a civil servant'.

- *Social systems/Structure*

Some participants view Social Policy as fundamentally about social systems and social structure. Hence, they explored a number of issues in the teaching and learning activities, including how systems can produce inequalities, the identification of social needs, and the links between certain forms of social policies and society.

- *Theories*

Participants emphasised the importance of theories in Social Policy education. They cited examples such as social constructionism, feminist theory, and theories of precarity and social hierarchy. They also highlighted the need for students to learn theories. As *P13* noted, 'Social Policy is a kind of mid-level theory, and it facilitates students' understanding of how they live in a capitalist society'. *P6* added that theory gives students 'a shape for thinking,' and stressed, 'If you start with practice and have no theoretical basis, then essentially you have to include everything.'

- *Research methods*

Research methods were seen by participants as another important component of Social Policy education. As *P4* put it, 'I really want students leaving a Social Policy programme to understand the importance of robust and appropriate research methods'.

Participants reported using a wide range of methods, including fieldwork observation, historical analysis, case studies, big data analysis, and systematic literature review. In one programme described by *P4*, students are required to take as many credits in research methods as in core Social Policy courses. The focus groups and interviews highlighted several ways in which research methods support learning in Social Policy. First, methods connect theory to empirical evidence. Second, using mixed methods to study the same social problems helps students appreciate multiple perspectives. Third, exposure to diverse methods helps students develop flexible techniques for selecting and applying appropriate methods across varied contexts and with different stakeholder groups.

- *Comparative policy studies*

This study found that comparative policy studies are widely regarded as a central component of the curriculum. The interview findings provide insights into the reasons behind the growing importance of teaching comparative policy studies. Firstly, growing awareness of globalisation arouses interest in exploring countries' diverse policy responses to similar problems. Secondly, the rising number of international students makes cross-national perspectives more relevant to classroom audiences (Figure 3.22). To keep teaching connected to students' lives, many respondents organise teaching and learning activities around comparisons of welfare arrangements. Thirdly, an increasing number of Social Policy educators are originally from other countries. One of the contributions is to teach comparative policy studies, drawing on their expertise and lived experience.

Participants highlighted the contents of comparative studies teaching. As *P7* put it, comparative studies should address questions such as 'How do we deal differently with those social needs and why might that be the case?' Quite a few participants reported using Esping-Andersen's (1990) welfare regime classification as a pedagogical tool. They explained its usefulness:

‘...they (welfare regimes) are changing all the time, and obviously there have been, you know, challenges to the standard welfare regime classification.....But the basic idea, I think, is quite helpful for people to get a handle on different kinds of ways of dealing with social needs.’

In addition, *P33, P38 and P39* highlighted the importance of studying welfare regimes outside the OECD’s scope, such as Confucian welfare regimes.

- *Ideologies/Values*

Participants generally agreed that teaching ideologies and values is an important area of teaching. Because Social Policy is widely regarded as inherently value-laden, they found it necessary to raise students’ awareness of the role of ideologies and values in shaping lives and social policies. Examples are social justice and neoliberalism. While participants emphasised promoting social justice as an important goal, they also drew students’ attention—explicitly or implicitly—to the influence of neoliberalism (especially its negative effects). *P2* stressed ‘Social Policy has always been about social justice’, as social justice provides the foundation for developing actions for making things better. *P13* explained why the teaching focuses on neoliberalism:

‘We have had a neoliberal consensus for so long, even under New Labour... it’s so embedded in students’ lifelong experience when they come to university....’.

By discussing neo-liberalism in the teaching, it is expected that students’ awareness about the concrete influence of neo-liberalism will be raised. *P20*, who taught in a non-UK region at the time of the interview, shared this point. Since the place where *P20* is currently teaching is heavily influenced by neo-liberalism and the residual welfare model, they expect that teaching neo-liberalism in class can influence students’ perception of it. *P21* emphasised the need to challenge neoliberalism: ‘Social Policy is actually fighting against neoliberalism.’ This suggestion reflects some participants’ views that teaching ideologies could prepare students to make changes in society and thus regard it as an important part of the courses they taught.

4.3.1.3 Expectations for Students

Several participants expressed the view that Social Policy is an applied discipline. Consequently, they expected students to be more than recipients of knowledge; rather, students should serve as ‘agents of change’, critiquing policies and issues and exerting various forms of impact.

- *Promoting changes*

Participants expressed the following views:

‘I’d like them to be kind of confident about....talking about the sheer range of issues and themes and concepts which are connected to this world.’ (*P5*)

'I would want them (students) to be able to apply a Social Policy analytical lens, I suppose, to areas that they are going to go on to work on. So to be able to look at things from the perspective of ... the declared policy intent, the real policy intent, it wasn't declared...the consequences, the unintended consequences, if there were ... differences between the ideas that were put forward in a policy and the implementation of that policy.' (P7)

'...what I want them (students) to take away is that they've got a voice and that they can make changes happen.' (P8)

Therefore, they emphasised bringing about changes, exploring ways to achieve it, and raising students' awareness of how these changes relate to their lives are essential in their teaching.

- *Changes for better lives*

Regarding changes that social policies can bring about, participants were particularly keen to draw students' attention to the positive outcomes. P17 elaborated on the concept of public good in social policies as 'the goodness of policy and what policy does for the public, for the people it is supposed to serve.' Another desirable change is collective improvements in human well-being. P14 believed collective improvements in human well-being could be achieved through social policies and illustrated this view as:

'It is something where we think the collective is better than individuals at supporting people, helping people, protecting people against adversity.'

Other important changes mentioned in the study are achieving equality, upholding social justice and defending animal welfare.

- *Supporting students*

Participants described several ways to enhance students' ability and willingness to make an impact. The first is to provide students with opportunities to nurture a passion for making social change. P2 stressed that it is important for students to have 'the thinking that they can change things'. P3 shared this: 'giving students a sense of passion that they can change the world and that social problems are not immutable.'

The second is to show that abstract welfare models can have concrete effects on people's lives. To illustrate, P10 gave an example of how a medical model of disability can shape the services people receive. This demonstrates that studying welfare models involves not only understanding their construction but also examining their real-world impacts, and that such investigation can encourage students to debate the merits and drawbacks of existing models.

The third is to emphasise the importance of respecting and understanding how other people think. *P8* highlighted this: ‘...looking at issues through different lenses and having some more kind of empathy or sympathy for other voices’.

The fourth is to equip students with practical skills for making an impact, such as presenting, raising critical questions, mobilising social movements, using policy transfer and policy mobilities to formulate proposals, working with organisations to undertake collective action, and engaging with the policy-making process.

The fifth is to stress that encouraging students to make an impact includes helping them improve their own lives and secure individual benefits. In this vein, they emphasised the role of Social Policy education in improving employability. The interview findings show that two aims are closely related in the eyes of respondents: teaching transferable skills that help graduates enter the workforce and encouraging Social Policy graduates to act as important agents who extend the influence of social-policy knowledge across different fields by making a difference.

In relation to these three aims, *P24* stressed this:

‘...one of the things that they (students) expect to get is employability and employability-related skills...they want to make sure that their degree makes a difference when the time comes for them to search for a job....That’s definitely what some of them expect...I mean, we can criticise this, but some others I think are expecting us to recognise them as adults.’

This view is supported by *P1*. When asked what the key components of Social Policy education were, they stressed this: ‘...one thing that stands out for me would be the employability aspects’.

P2 highlighted that, through engaging in their jobs, Social Policy graduates could make use of the opportunities to make an impact:

‘It doesn’t matter whether you’re working as a frontline worker in a housing charity, as a researcher in government, or in advice work—whatever you’re doing, you have the tools, knowledge, and enthusiasm to make a difference’.

4.3.1.4 Implications

The discussion of the core elements of Social Policy education has several insights for Social Policy.

Firstly, the core elements of Social Policy education indicate its broad scope. As shown above, it addresses solutions to a wide range of social problems, concerns not only human well-being but also the welfare of non-human beings (such as the environment and animals), examines policies in different countries, and encourages students to connect their studies to diverse, ever-changing lived experiences. This broad scope means Social Policy education can be offered and taught across various programme types, including, but not limited to, single

honours, joint honours and master's programmes. However, not all programme types can provide the space and time to cover all the identified elements. Therefore, how far, and what the ideal content and structure of Social Policy programmes should be, will always be open to debate. Moreover, HEIs are not necessarily the only suitable sites for delivering all Social Policy education; some elements might be better provided by/or offered at other types of institutions, such as NGO, professional bodies and local communities.

Secondly, given its broad scope, Social Policy education can appeal to a wide range of students. During focus groups and interviews, participants reported that the students they taught were far from homogeneous; instead, they came from diverse backgrounds and had varying needs and preferences in how they learned Social Policy. Several examples are drawn from the interview findings.

– *A-level students*

A number of students begin studying Social Policy at HEIs immediately after completing their A-level studies. While some are keen to learn about Social Policy as an academic subject, many have little understanding of it as an academic discipline when they start their studies.

‘...students don't know what they are signing up for. They hear the title and think, oh, that sounds good, but they don't really know what the course is like.’ (P21)

There is a shared view that an important reason for this is that Social Policy is not offered as an A-level subject. This finding confirms the discoveries of the previous studies. In the study by Mackinder and Hudson (2016), a respondent highlighted that a lack of understanding, rather than a lack of interest, undermined the appeal of Social Policy degree programmes to prospective students. To prepare students to pursue their studies, participants in this study found it necessary to spend considerable time sparking their interest and providing a basic introduction to Social Policy.

‘....we definitely have to spend quite a lot of time kind of opening students' eyes about what Social Policy is in the first year’. (P2)

– *Postgraduate students*

Like many A-level entrants, it is not uncommon for postgraduate students to lack prior knowledge of Social Policy. Therefore, there is a need to give PGT students a basic introduction to Social Policy at the start of their studies.

‘A lot of our postgraduate students have never done an undergraduate course in Social Policy. So they're coming from all different backgrounds, so that we spend a lot of time in that (providing the background information about Social Policy).’ (P4)

This view was shared by P7:

‘You....introduce people to Social Policy at a postgraduate level who didn’t do it at undergraduate level, in the same way youintroduce them at undergraduate level because they didn’t do it at school.’

However, most PGT programmes are for one year only, so it is not easy to give PGT students a well-rounded understanding of Social Policy. *P12* highlighted this challenge:

‘For my master’s students, it’s quite difficult for them to grasp the concept. Undergraduate students obviously get four years of Social Policy and are a lot more knowledgeable.’

– *Mature students*

Some participants shared their experience of teaching mature students. Some mature students are long-term users of various policy measures, and their experience may not necessarily be positive. *P8* highlighted this point:

‘They (mature students) tend to be mature. They tend to have come to Social Policy possibly as a realisation that they’ve been a victim of failed policies.’

This observation suggests that Social Policy learning can help students validate their experiences. In turn, mature students can be valuable assets in teaching and learning, since their experience as users of policy measures can enrich discussions of policy and social issues. However, it is important to note that mature students, due to limited time resources and prior educational attainment, may find it difficult to pursue Social Policy education. The studies by Patrick et al. (2011) show that barriers to mature students’ study will increase as HEIs that provide Social Policy education become less diverse. This is echoed by the increasing proportion of younger students in the desk-based audit (see Figures 3.25 and 3.26).

– Students from ethnic minority groups

Participants noted that a substantial number of students come from ethnic minority groups. They shared their experience of teaching these groups of students and the advantages of Social Policy education in meeting their needs. *P25* highlighted this:

‘...students from different minority backgrounds.... really want to understand...why there is certain treatment of refugees and migrant families? Why did the immigration policies get to this point? Why don’t they get social rights....I think they (students)..... want to understand how that happened, as well as wanting some solutions.’

In relation to this view, *P10* highlighted the benefits of Social Policy education to ethnic minority groups – Social Policy helps these students to be more aware about whether ‘their voices are being heard and that are sort of accounted for about the policy making process’.

– *International students*

International students comprise a significant proportion of classes, especially in PGT programmes (Figure 3.22). Many participants were teaching in classes primarily composed of international students. *P4* reported that his class consisted of 55 international students and 25 home students. International students can enrich Social Policy teaching by bringing lived experiences from other countries into the classroom and by encouraging Social Policy educators to internationalise their syllabus and teaching methods. However, teaching international students presents challenges. One is the language barrier: *P35* observed that many international students had difficulties in using English for learning and assessments. Another is limited knowledge of social policies in the UK or their countries of origin, which makes it harder to apply Social Policy concepts in analysis. These barriers also contribute to the poor integration between home and international students, undermining the potential for cultural and knowledge exchange.

Social Policy education may attract more than these five types of students. Social Policy educators must teach programmes designed to appeal to a mixed audience in the same class, and when their institutions offer limited support and resources. *P3* described the difficulties in teaching a mixed audience:

‘(Mixed audience) makes a big difference to how you teach. It has the inevitable effect that we are not teaching the kind of optimal version of a degree in terms of its development because what we have to do is to keep repeating ourselves for the benefit of people who weren’t here for the other module where we did that other thing, which is really relevant to this one....you can’t assume that this room full of people already knows what you’re talking about’.

Additionally, the broad scope of Social Policy education also attracts educators from diverse academic backgrounds. As shown in the findings, many participants were keen to develop modules based on their expertise, including research interests developed through their PhDs, although they may not be able to do so due to the programme design. This may further expand the scope of Social Policy education.

Last but not least, the broad scope of Social Policy overlaps with other disciplines, raising questions about how to define its boundaries. Discussions of this issue often lead to debates over whether Social Policy is a distinct discipline; participants express differing views.

Some argued that Social Policy is not a discipline. They stressed that it borrows analytical tools, concepts, and theories from other fields, and therefore, ‘Social Policy focuses on subject matter rather than the discipline’. To illustrate, *P5* discussed social justice—commonly regarded as a core part of Social Policy education:

‘Social Policy doesn’t own social justice as a subject area, and in fact, when Social Policy really thinks well about social justice... it’s inevitably going to borrow from other disciplines.’

In contrast, other participants insisted that Social Policy is a discipline. For example, *P2* stressed that Social Policy is a discipline with some unique features. *P2* elaborated this point as follows:

‘So it (Social Policy) does draw on sociology and even psychology and economics and so on. But I think it is that applied nature of Social Policy that is part of its uniqueness. So we’re not just theorising about problems or even theories about solutions, but we’re kind of looking at problems from cause to solution and all the various bits in between, and I can’t think of any other subject that does that....’

This view that the applied nature of Social Policy makes it distinguishable from other social science disciplines was supported by other participants. *P3* highlights this:

‘....we teach Social Policy because we’re interested in what happens in the real world....it is that applied aspect that makes Social Policy kind of unique within social sciences....’

P26 shared this:

‘...It’s (Social Policy) a very permeable discipline in the sense that it can draw from other disciplines as well, but at the same time find a unique point that actually can make it different.’

Another possibility about the relationship between Social Policy and other disciplines suggested by *P2* is that Social Policy can be seen as an overarching discipline:

‘I would think, why wouldn’t we argue to be the overarching discipline, and we inform so much of what ought to inform so much of what social workers do.’

They pointed out that some health and social care policy courses are grouped under Social Policy programmes.

Another argument for regarding Social Policy as overarching is that, unlike some other disciplines (such as public policy), it examines a wide range of actors. *P35* has this view:

‘...public policies are a subdimension of Social Policy because we study different actors, and we study private actors, civil society actors, family as an actor; of course, in conservative ideology, the family is a key actor.’

Seeing the study of diverse actors as a key feature of Social Policy—and viewing this feature as a foundation for developing Social Policy as an overarching discipline—is reinforced by participants who argued that Social Policy education should attach the ideas of the mixed economy of welfare. In line with this logic, some participants suggested that the future Social Policy development framework should emphasise a greater role for the private sector, alongside other sectors.

4.3.2 Defining Social Policy

Participants were invited to define Social Policy. They were asked to name the key aspects of Social Policy. The most common suggestions are: problem-focused, need-focused, value-focused, outcome-focused and process/instrument-focused.

4.3.2.1 Problem-focused

It is not unusual for participants to stress that Social Policy has the mission of addressing problems/adversities/challenges and seeking solutions. Below are some examples of what they said:

‘You know, it (social policy) is something where we think that the collective is better than the individual—to support people, to help people, to protect people against adversity.’ (P14)

‘I think what is the definition of Social Policy—it’s changing all the time. The first thing I’ll ask a student is: what is a social problem? Because Social Policy is to address a social problem.’ (P36)

‘The focus (of social policy) is on social problems, however defined, and on what collective actions might be taken to address them.’ (P37)

It is important to note that the problems social policy, in participants’ eyes, can address may extend beyond national boundaries. For example, P15 made this point: ‘It is about finding ways to address social challenges and social problems locally, nationally, and globally.’

Regarding the types of social problems that social policy can address, participants particularly highlighted poverty, social inequality, and marginalisation:

‘For me, social policy is like something embedded. When we go back to the Beveridge report and look at the five giant evils, but even more when we look at social justice and people’s well-being, where there is everybody with a decent standard of living, with no poverty.’ (P33)

‘...it (social policy) was all about welfare for poor people. And you know, the welfare state—trying to make sure everyone had the bare minimum.’ (P4)

4.3.2.2 Need-focused

Some participants observed that social policy is an organised response to needs. Moreover, by addressing needs, social policy can enhance well-being. For example, P31 highlighted: ‘(Social policy) concerns the ways in which societies across the world meet human needs, particularly in relation to securing social security.’ P20 noted: ‘(Social Policy) is about social systems meeting social needs and promoting human well-being.’ P7 emphasised: ‘...It (Social Policy) has to do with human well-being and social needs, and how these can be promoted and fulfilled.’

Some participants, such as P35, were interested in understanding how social policy systematically addresses people’s needs:

“I would say that this emphasis on needs has three layers. First, what is a need? Second, who is in charge of the mixed economy of welfare? And third, what are the consequences of this for social justice across different social groups?”

4.3.2.3 Value-focused

There is a view among participants that Social Policy is more than a study about material transactions; it also involves changes in values. *P22* highlighted:

‘...Social Policy is a normative discipline. It reflects what governments and people want, particularly in terms of redistributing resources in different ways.’

In discussing the values associated with social policy, participants highlighted principles such as equality and social justice. For example, *P8* shared: ‘(Social Policy refers to) the ways in which societies can organise themselves to care for people, provide support, and promote justice.’

4.3.2.4 Outcome-focused

Some participants stressed that social policy focuses on generating concrete outcomes. *P24* shared: ‘(Social Policy concerns) the role of the state in affecting individual lives and communities through policy action.’ *P44* emphasised: ‘(Social policy is) about who gets what in society, and why and how.’

In the eyes of several participants, these outcomes are related to different forms of well-being. *P34* noted: ‘In trying to define Social Policy, I would say it is the study of human well-being... the study and enactment of human well-being.’ *P18* stressed: ‘I think it (Social Policy) focuses on social well-being, particularly the well-being of citizens.’

4.3.2.5 Process-focused/instrument-focused

Some participants focused on the ‘how’ dimension of Social Policy, with particular attention to the study of policy vehicles, such as government, the welfare state, public services, and grassroots actors, that develop and implement social policies, as well as to the policy process itself. As they noted:

‘(Social Policy studies) public effort and process to fulfil needs or address social problems. It may arise directly from government initiatives, or from efforts aggregated at the grassroots level.’ (*P23*)

‘(Social Policy concerns) policies enacted by government... any deliberate action taken by government agencies at different levels to address issues related to individual and collective welfare, and to correct or intervene in existing social disadvantages and inequalities.’ (*P29*)

‘...my definition of Social Policy largely stems from its role and its focus on public services and the welfare state.’ (*P12*)

‘Social policy (is)... an area of practice that concerns how to design and implement specific welfare state programmes.’ (P40)

‘I think Social Policy should place the state, citizens, and businesses at the centre of analysis. Social Policy is the result of compromise and interaction among these three sectors.’ (P45)

It is important to note that, as Social Policy is primarily concerned with processes, it does not necessarily guarantee positive outcomes. Some participants expressed this view. P17 stressed: ‘Social Policy is about everything that affects society...’ P19 observed: ‘...social policies can be used to reorganise society, not necessarily in the interests of particular social groups or individuals.’

4.3.2.6 Implications

The key components of Social Policy education align closely with the dimensions of Social Policy identified by participants, suggesting that Social Policy education plays an important role in conveying the discipline’s scope and substance. That communicative, or ‘billboard’ function is particularly important to consider during programme restructures. Chau et al. (2023) report examples where Social Policy teaching was absorbed into courses that no longer carried the ‘Social Policy’ label or where whole departments were reduced to a single module. Such changes deserve attention because they not only limit academics’ opportunities to teach Social Policy but also reduce the discipline’s visibility. By contrast, expanding single-honours Social Policy degree programmes would raise the profile of both the field and its teaching.

4.3.3 Challenges to Social Policy Education

Concerning the challenges to Social Policy education, participants were asked to respond to several questions, including these: ‘Are you teaching what you want to in your Social Policy teaching?’ ‘Are there any gaps between your ideal and reality, and what are they?’ ‘What contributes to these gaps?’ ‘What makes it challenging to teach what and how you want to?’ The participants’ responses to these questions, along with answers to supplementary questions, reveal several difficulties in providing Social Policy education. These are discussed below.

4.3.3.1 Recruitment of Students

Many participants agreed that sustaining high student recruitment—especially among international students—has become challenging. P29 highlighted this: ‘...international students are not coming as much anymore to the UK than they used to....’ P4 reported that Social Policy enrollments at their institution fell by more than half over three years. Several others shared that the recruitment for their master’s programmes has decreased by over 50%. These declines were attributed to factors outside faculty control, including changes in government visa policies, host-country attitudes toward international students, and economic conditions abroad. The pressures also reveal a broader vulnerability: many HEIs rely heavily on international students for cost-subsidisation. In addition, participants described challenges in recruiting domestic students. P29 highlighted that the decline in

UK domestic recruitment is linked to demographic shifts, and *P36*, who taught in Asia, noted a similar problem driven by a prolonged low fertility rate, which has reduced the pool of secondary-school graduates.

4.3.3.2 Competition

As Social Policy shares the boundaries and the pool of potential students with other disciplines, there is always competition between Social Policy and those disciplines for recruitment. *P24* expressed this concern:

‘What are the benefits of studying Social Policy compared to other social science subjects? I don’t think there is a clear selling point for Social Policy...I think the boundaries between degree programmes are not here anymore...If I were a candidate, I would never understand what I should choose. I don’t know sociology over politics because they all look the same...’

Some participants view Social Policy as a smaller subject within the social science department, which makes it difficult for them to influence how different disciplines collaborate in recruiting students.

4.3.3.3 Insufficient Recognition of the Values of Social Sciences

Financial pressures on Social Policy education arise not only from recruitment shortfalls but also from chronic underfunding of the social sciences. Participants questioned whether the government and HEIs adequately recognise the value of these fields, observing that attention and resources are often concentrated on STEM subjects. As a result, participants commonly felt that social science disciplines are unfairly neglected and called for corrective action. *P2* put it:

‘I think social sciences have a value to the contemporary world that’s not sufficiently recognised...government should be investing more in the social sciences; that is good for society. It is good for the economy, and it is good for well-being and equality.’

4.3.3.4 Negative Consequences of a Cut in Resources

Participants expressed concerns about the negative consequences of resource cuts. One consequence is a threat to departmental survival: some participants reported that their Social Policy departments face redundancies and the risk of closure. *P3 and P4* highlighted that cuts also create substantial difficulties in daily operations, such as increased marking workloads and difficulty developing new modules despite identified needs.

4.3.3.5 Insufficient Financial Support for Students

A lack of sufficient financial support for students, together with rising tuition fees, pushes many into poverty and forces them to take on paid work, leaving them with less time for study. The details of these issues have been discussed in the focus groups and interviews:

‘...I have to say that the money and living conditions for students from certain backgrounds have become much harder... so the pressure on the kind of teaching they receive is becoming bigger and bigger. I am having to ensure that everyone has a computer....we are observing the impact of increasing levels of poverty and inequality among our students...’ (P25)

P3 shared a related view:

‘...the underfunding of higher education means that students are constantly financially strapped....all of our students are doing paid work and that makes the teaching of Social Policy, as with other subjects, more difficult, because they just don’t have the time to commit to the subject....we would love to do more hours of teaching. They probably would want us to do fewer hours of teaching.’

4.3.3.6 Insensitiveness to the Needs of Mature Students

As mentioned in Section 3.1.1.4, mature students are important assets in Social Policy education. However, participants indicated that there is no guarantee that mature students who wish to study Social Policy will be able to do so. It depends on whether HEIs have mature-student-friendly recruitment policies.

4.3.3.7 Poor Student Engagement

There are concerns that students do not engage sufficiently with Social Policy studies. P22 said: ‘Students do not engage as much as I would like’. P29 highlighted this:

‘...there is a gap between the level of passion and interest in Social Policy that the teacher myself might have, and that the average student might have’.

Causes of this limited engagement were discussed during focus groups and interviews. First of all, as covered earlier, financial pressures force many students to work long hours in paid jobs while studying, reducing the time and energy available for coursework. Moreover, a proportion lack essential skills for Social Policy—particularly in language and numeracy. As discussed above, many students begin their courses without a basic understanding of the discipline, making it challenging for them to keep up with the learning expectations. Inadequate learning resources, such as unreliable access to computers, can further undermine both interest in and capacity for study.

In addition to these causes, it is also important to consider the influence of capitalist values on students. Participants argued that the commodification of higher education and broader market pressures had shifted priorities toward obtaining a degree as a credential rather than engaging with course content. As P9 explained:

‘...capitalism that’s been shoehorned into education has created this system where students feel like they need to get value for money out of their education. For them, value for money is what a job is.’

P21 made a similar point:

‘It’s important to get a degree. The actual content of the degree is of very little importance to a lot of students. So yeah, that’s all they want is a piece of paper’.

Because studying Social Policy does not necessarily lead to high-paying jobs, participants worried that prospective students might be deterred from applying and current students might be less willing to invest time in coursework. *P9* felt that high tuition fees exacerbate these problems:

‘So I think all of that is because we’ve started charging students nine and a half thousand a year for a degree. And I think if we didn’t charge them anything, I think we’d probably have a better quality student.’

4.3.3.8 Conflict in Roles

As mentioned, participants may play multiple roles in Social Policy education. They can be responsible for formulating and implementing institutional policies as well as for their students. Some participants reported witnessing students’ anxiety in managing the attendance requirements and work and care commitments.

P17 resisted the expectation that Social Policy educators should prioritise boosting students’ employability, explaining:

‘I do not consider the primary role of education to be providing employability skills or employment. Education exists for its own sake; we do not find jobs for our students. I am an educator, and I want to give them critical skills and the ability to analyse society. My primary aim is not that they get a job, but that they receive an education.’

4.3.3.9 Neo-liberal Managerialism

Participants highlighted the negative effects of neo-liberal managerialism. *P19* characterised their workplace as ‘extremely hierarchical and vertically organised’. *P18* reported difficulty collaborating with colleagues in roles such as accounting and senior management because these groups do not share the same ideas about how higher education should be delivered. Although participants generally agreed that they enjoyed a high degree of autonomy in developing teaching methods and academic freedom, *P19* also noted that colleagues in some countries were not permitted to strike. Several respondents reported an increasing administrative burden alongside reductions in administrative support. As *P9* explained,

‘We used to have many administrative staff who handled important bureaucratic tasks; now we have to do them ourselves. I went to a conference a couple of weeks ago and had to fill in a risk assessment to attend.’

Participants also argued that staff performance assessment is too narrowly defined and fails to recognise many contributions to education and society. Illustrating this point, *Participant 9* said,

‘The neoliberalisation of higher education is killing us: publish in four-star journals and bring in substantial funding, or don’t expect any research time.’

Participants also criticised HEIs for prioritising revenue and efficiency over the quantity and quality of student recruitment. As *P12* put it, ‘All universities want to get more money, don’t they?’ *P14* observed that HEIs were so eager to secure income that they did not sufficiently assess whether recruited students were well-suited to the programmes: ‘University is taking the money and they are dependent on the money...I’m not sure whether they are checking (the quality of recruited students) enough...’

4.3.3.10 Working Environments

Participants reported that, even without further cuts to resources, their working environments are not necessarily supportive. One major concern is career development. Many said heavy teaching loads leave little or no time for research and networking. These loads are reflected in large class sizes: some participants were required to teach classes of 300 students, and tutorial groups of 60 students. Furthermore, participants were commonly expected to accept, rather than determine, lecture lengths and teaching schedules.

Participants also expressed concern about limited career development opportunities. *P20* noted that no teaching staff at their institution are rewarded or encouraged to focus on teaching, as assessments are based mainly on research. *P34* revealed that there is no clear career path for Social Policy researchers at their institution. These conditions make it difficult for participants to concentrate on research.

The working environment is further undermined by team teaching, legacy courses, and the predominance of face-to-face delivery. Team teaching to participants is a mixed blessing: while generally welcomed, it can make it difficult to develop a course around one’s own expertise. Several participants similarly expressed that they are required to teach legacy courses and have limited autonomy to adapt them to reflect their research specialisations. As *P10* put it, ‘I think we’ve all got to be not just specialists but generalists at the same time’. Although face-to-face teaching is generally valued, some staff find it difficult because frequent travel undermines their work–life balance, for example, when they need to care for family members. Several participants disclosed having disabilities and/or health issues. Finally, *P9* highlighted that because the teaching staff is not in the office at the same time, they become overly isolated and are less able to take collective action to address these difficulties.

4.3.3.11 Use of GenAI

Participants expressed concern about the challenges posed by the growing use of GenAI in Social Policy education. Several noted that students may rely more on AI-generated information than on guidance from instructors: *P14* observed,

‘We are bringing loads of Chinese students who are very good at ChatGPT. But I’m not entirely sure they’re actually learning what we’re trying to teach them.’

P10 added, 'It's becoming increasingly difficult, you know, to identify when a student has purely written something with AI.' Others warned that AI can undermine the discipline's emphasis on critical evaluation: 'Social Policy teaches students to judge what information can be trusted and what cannot, but AI disrupts this.' Participants also raised equity concerns, pointing out that unequal access to AI and computing resources may contribute to disparities in educational outcomes.

At the same time, some participants (for example, *P2*, *P7* and *P29*) expressed cautious optimism about the evolving relationship between people and AI while stressing that institutions must take the issue seriously. As *P7* asked,

'How do we deal with AI? What is its role, and what are the pros and cons? We should avoid viewing it only positively or only negatively and instead consider how to use it fully without letting it take over.'

P29 noted, 'I am in no way a fan of AI, but it is here, and future employers will expect students to use it in a meaningful way,' and *P33* reported using AI in her own research.

The ongoing debate over these issues indicates that higher education institutions lack clear policies to guide staff and students in the responsible use of AI.

4.3.4 Strategies for Tackling the Challenges

In the focus groups and interviews, participants shared strategies for tackling the challenges facing Social Policy education. They demonstrate participants' eagerness to improve Social Policy education through differing pathways.

4.3.4.1 Proactive Marketing and Networking

As mentioned in the previous parts, participants expressed concern that many potential and current students have insufficient understanding of Social Policy. This not only affects recruitment but also students' readiness to study Social Policy. To address this issue, participants have made these suggestions:

- Reaching out to career guidance teachers, UG candidates, and high schools to explain what Social Policy is
- Informing young people how Social Policy study is related to employability
- Inviting Social Policy graduates who have occupied important positions in government and other organisations to speak on behalf of the discipline

4.3.4.2 Changing Course Designs

Participants have made suggestions on strengthening the design of Social Policy programmes in various aspects:

- *Adding practical elements to the courses*

Suggestions include providing internships and placements, organising visits to Parliament or other policy-related organisations, arranging dialogues with local councillors, arranging work opportunities for students in research centres, and linking their studies to NGOs that serve grassroots communities. Additionally, some suggested developing a clear pathway showing how Social Policy qualifications can lead to different careers, and emphasising the teaching of skills applicable to students' future careers. *Listening to the views of students*

As discussed in the previous parts, Social Policy education places importance on students' views of their lives and social policies. In exploring ways to enhance Social Policy education, *P7* stressed this view during the interview:

'Obviously, the students are the consumers or the users, or the clients, or whatever you want to call them. So your point (To involve students in thinking about the future of the discipline and the teaching of it).... is actually incredibly important.'

Some participants suggested transforming the curriculum in line with graduates' views and continuously adding new modules based on students' views on social policies and the issues they are interested in.

- *Decolonising curriculum*

As discussed in the previous parts, decolonising Social Policy education is seen as a means of creating favourable conditions for nurturing critical thinking. To achieve this, *P8* and *P33* suggested inviting educators from around the world to co-develop the curriculum.

4.3.4.3 Improving Teaching and Learning

A number of suggestions have been raised on improving teaching and learning. These include sharing teaching materials and data among teaching staff, arranging different staff to teach the same module so that students can have the chance to experience different lecturing styles, allowing time for first year students to develop a reasonable understanding of Social Policy at the beginning of teaching, improving students' writing skills by providing writing retreat, providing new assessment methods such as podcast assessment, developing innovative forms of assignments such as creating broadcast content and preparing policy briefs.

4.3.4.4 Challenging Broader Social Factors

Several participants raised concerns about how broader social forces affect Social Policy education. Many worried that the field is increasingly treated primarily as a pathway to employment, rather than as an academic discipline with intrinsic value. As noted in the earlier part of this report (Section 1.1), *P17* questioned whether the intrinsic value of education receives adequate attention within HEIs. This was further elaborated:

‘Obviously, the market is rational because these are the subjects that bring money and bring students. But my question is: is that what education is? Is it about bringing money in and students, or making the students employable, or should there be other criteria that we put into universities in terms of the social sciences? And it’s not just universities; there are government policies that are actually encouraging that as well, so that’s where I see it. That’s the problem.’

Several participants extended the critique by questioning why certain jobs, such as care work, are valued less than others and by highlighting unfair resource allocation within HEIs. Social Policy programmes often receive less support for employability enhancement than vocational programmes. Some worried that if Social Policy programmes are held to the same employability targets, teaching staff will be expected to meet them without the required resources.

Academic freedom was another recurring concern. Participants stressed the need to protect staff autonomy in course and lecture design, particularly in countries where governments are intolerant of criticism, noting that some governments may be unsupportive because Social Policy graduates tend to be more critical towards government policy.

In view of these issues, *P10* called for challenging the technocratic, business-oriented approach in HEIs, proposing measures such as ‘decolonising the CV of Social Policy’ and moving away from a purely managerial mindset.

4.3.4.5 Exploring the Potential of Social Policy Education

Participants recommended expanding the reach of Social Policy education. They endorsed prior proposals to develop Social Policy as an A-level subject and to create joint curricula spanning multiple countries. Other proposals included short courses in Social Policy for leaders across different organisations and modules focused on pressing global topics, such as sustainability and Social Policy responses to environmental challenges.

4.3.4.6 Seeking Support from Beyond HEIs

Quite a number of participants recommended building partnerships with organisations outside academia to tackle shared concerns. Examples include promoting the responsible use of AI, raising the profile and values of the social sciences, and advocating for Social Policy as a distinct and important discipline.

4.5 An Overview of the Qualitative Findings and Their Implications

The implications of the qualitative findings are multifold, including the relationships between students and Social Policy education, potential contributions of Social Policy, quality of life of Social Policy educators, strategies for promoting the international dimensions of Social Policy education, influence of commodification and neo-

liberal managerialism and considerations concerning ways for exploring whether Social Policy can be a distinctive discipline, and diverse views among Social Policy educators on reforming Social Policy education.

4.5.1 The Relationships between Students and Social Policy Education

From the focus groups and interviews, participants indicated that students and Social Policy education can form a reciprocal relationship. As presented in Section 4.3.1, participants mentioned that Social Policy education can benefit students in many ways, such as helping them connect theoretical concepts to everyday experience, inspiring a commitment to social change, highlighting the importance of collective action for promoting welfare, enabling critical examination of ideologies such as neoliberalism in daily life, preparing graduates for a wide range of careers, and encouraging them to make their voices heard on policies that affect them.

In return, participants expected students to contribute to both the development of Social Policy education and to Social Policy itself (Section 4.3.1.3). While studying, students can share their lived experiences with peers and teaching staff, enriching curriculum content and pedagogical approaches. Students can also participate in course-review processes—through teaching feedback, graduate surveys, and other forms of engagement—demonstrating the value of a bottom-up approach to improving education. After graduation, those working across diverse fields may apply skills learned in Social Policy programmes to effect changes. Graduates who have established themselves professionally are well placed to promote and advance Social Policy education.

It is worth stressing three points here. Firstly, a positive reciprocal relationship between students and Social Policy education is not guaranteed. The findings show that this reciprocity can be undermined by factors such as insufficient student engagement and a learning environment that fails to support this relationship (Section 4.3.3). Secondly, students are not homogeneous (Section 4.3.1.4). Different student groups may form different kinds of relationships with Social Policy education and hold different expectations of those relationships. For example, by paying high tuition fees, self-funded international students may regard their studies as a personal investment and their education as a market good, and therefore focus on the value for money in enhancing their career prospects. Thirdly, reciprocity can be strengthened through targeted efforts. Two suggestions were made here. One is to support students to conduct research on Social Policy education so they can identify ways to improve their relationship with it and consider their role in making those improvements. Another is to consult current students and graduates about initiatives that could advance Social Policy education, for example, revising benchmark statements or exploring the development of Social Policy as an A-level subject (Section 4.3.4.5).

4.5.2 Potential Contributions of Social Policy Education

The findings provide insight into how we should value Social Policy education, indicating the need for a broader, more holistic assessment of its potential contributions. While meeting students' learning needs remains a central objective, the interviews show that Social Policy education offers much more.

As shown in Sections 4.3.1 and 4.3.2, the teaching approaches and areas highlighted by participants closely mirror the core dimensions of Social Policy they identified. For this reason, Social Policy education can serve as

a visible platform for the discipline, raising its profile and clarifying its scope if it is designed and delivered in ways Social Policy educators favour.

Beyond visibility, Social Policy education helps cultivate a shared identity among those who teach and study it. Several participants emphasised integrating learning and teaching: connecting theory with lived experience, aligning students' and lecturers' perspectives as users of Social Policy, and linking problem analysis to potential actions. These connections are useful in fostering a collective identity rooted in a commitment to practical outcomes and the application of knowledge to improve society, strengthening bonds among students, graduates, and practitioners.

Social Policy education can also encourage a broad, long-term mindset. Participants described teaching that could expand conceptions of Social Policy to encompass a wide array of concerns—including welfare for human and non-human beings, social equality, and social justice (Section 4.3.1).

Adopting a broad, long-term perspective on Social Policy education will benefit both educators and students. As discussed above, commodification and neoliberal managerialism narrow educational goals, pushing toward commodified teaching focused on employability, narrowly defined research outputs and performance indicators. Emphasising broad, long-term aims helps educators reclaim their role in promoting benefits beyond institutional metrics and defending core Social Policy values such as social justice. This stance challenges commodification and neoliberal managerialism, reinforcing recognition of practitioners' societal roles. Moreover, it can encourage students to pursue wide-ranging, lasting impacts during and after their studies, further developing their potential to effect societal changes.

4.5.3 Quality of Life

Similar to previous related studies (Patrick et al, 2011; Chau et al., 2023), this study finds that participants' quality of life warrants attention. Participants were facing redundancy threats, an increasingly unmanageable teaching load, growing administrative duties, and insufficient institutional support (Section 4.3.3), which posed a challenge to maintaining a satisfactory work–life balance. Several participants reported health problems and difficulties in balancing family caring roles or both (Section 4.3.3.10). There is little evidence that current changes to teaching and administrative policies and practices, such as emphasising team-teaching and arranging on-site and online teaching, can adequately address these issues.

As noted above, Social Policy education emphasises connection: students are encouraged to relate their own lives and those of others to analyses of existing social policies. Accordingly, efforts to improve the governance of Social Policy education should consider the needs and personal circumstances of the staff who deliver it.

4.5.4 International Dimensions of Social Policy Education

A significant number of participants were interested in the international dimensions of Social Policy education. Some actively explored strategies to better meet international students' needs and preferences, involved in the

decolonisation of the curriculum, and invited international scholars to contribute to their teaching (Section 4.3.4.2). However, there was a general perception that the UK is still the primary site for delivering Social Policy education. *P35*, who was originally from a foreign country with limited Social Policy teaching provision, shared an ambition to develop a Social Policy curriculum in their home country, drawing on their British teaching experience.

In the preliminary findings dissemination sessions, participants proposed an alternative approach: to recognise and engage with Social Policy education delivered outside the UK, and to examine how provision in different places can reinforce one another. Suggestions include comparing Social Policy curricula across countries and exploring the potential for developing a transnational curriculum.

4.5.5 Influence of Commodification and Neo-liberal Managerialism

Previous studies show that commodification and neoliberal managerialism pervasively shape both Social Policy and Social Policy education (Walker, 2018; Chau et al., 2023), and our findings confirm this. Participants reported a tension in practice: they encouraged students to challenge the commodification of social relationships, yet they also described how commodification and neoliberal managerialism affect Social Policy education, students' learning experiences, and their own teaching (Section 4.3.3.9). These influences include teaching larger numbers of international students, students' focus on obtaining formal qualifications rather than engaging with the intrinsic scholarly and civic values of Social Policy, and the need for staff to continually demonstrate their worth through performance metrics while administrative and infrastructural support is reduced. Together, these findings suggest that Social Policy education is an arena in which Social Policy educators must negotiate their multiple relationships with commodification and neoliberal managerialism.

4.5.6 Social Policy as a Distinct Discipline

As with previous related studies (Patrick et al., 2011; Mackinder & Hudson, 2016; Chau et al., 2023), this study identifies concerns about whether Social Policy is a distinct discipline and how it can be defined.

Some participants described Social Policy as a dynamic, forward-looking field prone to change. *P5* stressed that Social Policy is fluid and dynamic. *P8* argued that we should not only look backwards into the history of the discipline but also look forward to its development. *P10* emphasised that 'what's right for the UK right now might not necessarily be what's right for the UK in 100 years from now'.

Following this logic, it could be claimed that whether Social Policy should be regarded as a distinct discipline depends on the views of influential stakeholders at any given time, and such views may change over time. This perspective also underpins the argument that, as long as Social Policy is recognised by existing establishments, it can be considered a distinct discipline in practice. Examples of these are Social Policy programmes provided by HEIs and important assessment exercises (for example, the REF). This perspective to a certain extent mirrors the view of a respondent in a previous study (Patrick et al, 2011, p. 43):

‘I’ve seen this going on for many, many years. You know, ‘what about Social Policy?’ A kind of agonising about Social Policy, but we still have reserved our position. We are still seen by the research councils and the funding councils as a distinctive thing alongside all the other mainstream Social Sciences’.

When asked to define Social Policy, participants identified certain key components (Section 4.3.2), and their views were similar. Their suggestions indeed helped the construction of a ‘co-definition’ of the discipline. However, in setting the boundary of the discipline, two different approaches emerged. Borrowing two Mathematics concepts, we summarised them as the ‘Highest Common Factor (HCF) approach’ and the ‘Least Common Multiple (LCM) approach’.

- The HCF approach emphasises that Social Policy must be defined by the inclusion of all core components that the Social Policy community broadly agree on, such as promoting social justice and equality, problem-focused and other issues raised by the participants in our study (Section 4.3.2). This implies that Social Policy education won’t be completed if any of these components are missing from the teaching and learning activities.
- The LCM approach aims to bring together the full range of components discussed among the Social Policy community. Under this approach, Social Policy encompasses activities across one or more of these components, providing a broader basis for identifying it as a discipline. Social Policy education under this approach can be delivered in a wider range of settings (such as joint degree programmes, programmes under other disciplines and/or outside HEIs) and be highly interdisciplinary.

In line with the HCF approach, several participants argued that clarifying these boundaries is important for demonstrating how Social Policy differs from sister disciplines such as Sociology and Political Science, and for enhancing its visibility. For example, some participants argue that Social Policy can distinguish itself from the others by its applied nature that aims to solve real-life problems (Section 4.3.2).

Supplementing the LCM approach, some participants regarded Social Policy as an overarching or integrative discipline rather than a narrowly defined field. Under this view, other disciplines could be framed as components or partners within a broader Social Policy curriculum. This approach could support joint, interdisciplinary, or transdisciplinary programmes under an applied social science umbrella labelled ‘Social Policy.’

To sum up the views above, five dimensions appear to be crucial to the definition of Social Policy and Social Policy education:

- Visibility: the degree of public recognition of Social Policy
- Institutional recognition: recognition from existing establishments (for example, institutional plans to retain or expand programmes, or outcomes of exercises such as the REF)
- Internal consensus: the extent to which the Social Policy community agree on the discipline’s key components
- External heterogeneity: the ways in which Social Policy can be distinguished from related fields

- External homogeneity: the degree to which Social Policy’s boundaries overlap with other disciplines

These five dimensions help us compare the four potential options in the provision of Social Policy education in HEIs.

Option One: Teaching Social Policy as part of other discipline programmes. This option gives Social Policy educators more opportunities to teach, but participants and prior studies (Chau et al., 2023) worried that it does little to establish Social Policy as a distinctive discipline, as it may reduce the discipline’s visibility and institutional recognition and increase external homogeneity.

Option Two: Offering single-honours Social Policy programmes. These programmes deliver higher visibility and stronger institutional recognition. However, participants (for example, P5 and P9) worried about the sustainability of such programmes when most are struggling with recruitment. This concern is supported by our audit findings, which show a significant recent decline in the number of single-honours Social Policy programmes (Section 3.3.1).

Option Three: Offering joint-degree programmes with other disciplines. Whether this option satisfies considerations of visibility, institutional recognition, internal consensus, and external heterogeneity depends on the programme title, the proportion of Social Policy content in the programme, and whether the programme’s aims reflect the essence of Social Policy.

Option Four: Delivering joint-degree programmes under a Social Policy umbrella that emphasise applied elements while retaining closer ties to partner disciplines. This option is likely to deliver high visibility and institutional recognition while stressing external homogeneity and internal consensus.

Further research is needed to assess these options and to explore additional alternatives that best address the majority of the five dimensions. Continuing debate about the relative desirability of these options is valuable because it highlights the criteria we should use when deciding whether—and how—to make Social Policy a distinctive discipline and to set its boundary.

4.5.7 Responding to Current Challenges

Social Policy educators can play an active role in shaping the discipline, despite the multiple challenges mentioned in the study. Their agency emerged in the discussion, which revealed a wide range of perspectives on important Social Policy education issues. These include whether and how to enhance students’ employability, how to respond to the use of GenAI, and whether Social Policy should be regarded as a distinctive discipline.

Moreover, participants have different views on how to reform Social Policy education, and these differences are, to a certain extent, related to their views on how to respond to the two social forces (commodification and neo-liberal managerialism). These views can be summed up into two main approaches: the collaborative and contesting. The collaborative approach seeks to further develop Social Policy education within a framework

shaped by the two social forces. The contesting approach seeks to contest those forces while further developing Social Policy education. The research findings and insights from consultations on the preliminary findings helped us identify examples of suggested actions that align with these approaches.

Examples of suggested actions supporting the collaborative approach include:

- integrating Social Policy courses into other social-science programmes
- more proactive marketing and networking
- rebranding Social Policy programmes to enhance recruitment
- launching targeted marketing campaigns (for example, aimed at secondary-school teachers)
- developing Social Policy as an A-level subject
- Sharing teaching materials
- Finding ways to improve students' writing skills
- Diversifying assessment methods, such as using broadcast media in assignments

Examples of suggested actions supporting the contesting approach include:

- conducting critical research on higher education using social-policy analytical tools,
- collaborating with other social-science disciplines to resist the marginalisation of the social sciences,
- campaigning for a fairer and more redistributive higher-education system aligned with Social Policy values
- protecting Social Policy teaching within joint programmes
- embedding Social Policy values and perspectives in the curriculum
- identifying alternative platforms for Social Policy education (for example, short courses for NGOs and taster courses in schools)
- Challenging the technocratic, business-oriented approach in higher education

The diverse views among participants on Social Policy education issues and the relative desirability of the two reform approaches highlight the need to cultivate unity in diversity. It is important to ensure that Social Policy educators have sufficient opportunities and support to express diverse perspectives—especially given concerns that staff are becoming more isolated as home working has become more common. Creating platforms for collective discussion and coordinated actions can potentially address shared problems even when opinions differ. However, whether this potential can be fulfilled is subject to debate. More details of this point are discussed in the Conclusion.

4.6 Limitations of the Qualitative Study

Despite our best efforts to achieve as much as possible within the timeframe and staff capacity, it is important to acknowledge this report's weaknesses. Firstly, although participants had diverse backgrounds and experiences, the sample size is relatively small. Most participants were recruited through SPA's networks. More diverse views may be collected by reaching out to potential participants who are less active in the Social Policy community or have weaker affiliations with SPA.

Secondly, as in previous studies, this report focuses on educators' views rather than students'. The PGR participant, who was enthusiastic about taking part in the study despite having no teaching experience yet, serves as a reminder of the need to include the views of current Social Policy students, who are also prospective Social Policy researchers, educators, policymakers, policy implementers and other future stakeholders.

Thirdly, the data are so rich that it is difficult to explore all dimensions in greater depth. We only had a limited capacity to depict some key messages from the thematic analysis. We hope to conduct further analyses, such as narrative analysis to explore the deeper meaning behind these messages and comparative analysis to identify similarities and differences in participants' views across diverse personal and professional characteristics.

Last but not least, while we were surprised by the diverse experiences shared by Social Policy educators from different countries, we were unable to recruit additional international Social Policy educators due to time and resource constraints. We are certain that more inspiring ideas and good practices will be identified through further investigation into Social Policy education at the international level. Sharing these ideas and practices can potentially provide new insights into the development of Social Policy and Social Policy education in the UK and beyond.

PART V CONCLUSION

5.1 Introduction

In this final part, we will revisit the achievements of the two studies in relation to their aims, followed by insights for the wider Social Policy community and suggestions for the SPA.

5.2 What has been Achieved in the Research

In the introduction (Section 1.3), we set up the following aims for the qualitative study:

- i. To engage Social Policy educators from diverse backgrounds to co-define Social Policy as a discipline
- ii. To engage Social Policy educators to co-define the purposes and core elements of Social Policy education
- iii. To provide the groundwork for and to arouse further discussion in the Social Policy community on the remit and the essence of Social Policy and Social Policy education
- iv. To promote a collective disciplinary identity of the Social Policy community through their engagement in the project and the follow-up discussion

And the additional aims for the desk-based audit:

- v. To provide comparable data on the latest changes in Social Policy programmes and student numbers to observe changes in the past five years
- vi. To provide contextual information for the understanding and interpretation of the data collected in the qualitative study.

We engaged 45 participants from diverse personal and professional backgrounds in the qualitative study. After warming them up with several questions about teaching in the focus groups or interviews, we asked them to define Social Policy. Many found the question challenging and took a few moments to gather their thoughts, as it is not something they often think about. As discussed above in the report, they identified a list of core elements (such as social goals and applied nature) that are quite similar, signalling that the Social Policy community shared a strong consensus on what Social Policy is about and how it differs from other disciplines.

Several participants asserted that Social Policy education has intrinsic value that goes far beyond equipping students for future employment. We collected a long list of core elements of Social Policy education from the participants, which covers a wide range of knowledge, skills, and values. Despite the apparent consensus on the definition of Social Policy and its education, two views emerged regarding the boundary. We summarised them as the HCF and LCM approaches (Section 4.5.6). The HCF approach is taken by participants who insist that Social Policy must have a collection of core features, or else it won't be complete. The LCM approach represents the

views that Social Policy encompasses activities across one or more of its key features and can be part of a wide range of interdisciplinary research and teaching programmes.

Many participants share the challenges they face at work, most of which stem from the increasing commodification of higher education and the prevalence of neo-liberal managerialism in the sector. They highlighted several strategies to respond to these challenges (section 4.3.4). Some are more successful than others in securing student numbers and sustaining teaching programmes. However, some participants cast doubt on these strategies because they may reinforce neo-liberal values and practices, which are in contrast with the social values that underpin Social Policy. We summarise their diverse views in two approaches: the collaborative and contesting. The former tends to develop adaptive measures (such as rebranding and programme restructuring) to keep up with the changes in higher education. The latter suggested a more critical approach to questioning current practices and seeking alternatives outside HEIs for delivering Social Policy education (Section 4.5.7).

As highlighted in previous and current studies, Social Policy education is not a priority on the Social Policy research agenda, despite its importance in sustaining Social Policy educators' livelihoods and nurturing new generations of Social Policy researchers, educators, policymakers, policy implementers and other stakeholders. We are glad to see that, after various research and knowledge exchange projects, this area of work is gathering momentum. We are grateful to all those who took part in the study and its related activities. We hope that more dialogue within the Social Policy community will help its members develop a stronger disciplinary identity, which will be crucial for the discipline's future advancement.

We are also glad to decide to take on the desk-based audit, although it is not in the original research plan and therefore is not resourced. The audit findings, to some extent, corroborate the observations and concerns of some participants in the current study and in the previous one (Chau et al., 2023). These include a significant decrease in the number of UG Social Policy programmes and providers, a sharp increase in tuition fees, and heavy reliance on international students for revenue. However, the impact of these changes varies in regions and types of HEIs. As shown in the findings, some regions, including more deprived areas, experience the extinction of UG Social Policy programmes. Post-1992 universities struggle to keep up with the Russell groups in sustaining their Social Policy programmes. All these have implications for Social Policy education in many respects, including students' expectations, capacity to serve deprived regions, and curriculum design.

In the face of the ever-changing landscape of Social Policy and Social Policy education, a conceptual framework is essential to capture the dynamic, multidimensional nature of Social Policy education. Therefore, in Figure 2.1, we propose to examine the reciprocal relationship among the three domains of Social Policy education – Social Policy, Social Policy education, and Higher education - which are all subject to the influence of social forces, such as commodification, neo-liberalism, and technological advancement. Social Policy educators and students, despite structural constraints, are the actors who can decide whether and how to exercise their agency to influence the domains and their interactions in different ways. For example, Social Policy educators can take a collaborative approach to adapt their programmes to align with institutional changes, or they can use their

unique Social Policy research skills to critically examine the neoliberal practices in higher education, which is also a social policy field. Similarly, they can strengthen the practical elements of their programmes to enhance students' employability, or equip them with critical skills to challenge unjust labour market systems that disadvantage young social science graduates.

5.3 Insights for the Wider Social Policy Community

On reflection of the findings, we have identified some insights for the wider Social Policy community.

First, it is necessary to enhance awareness of, and to have a wider debate on, the different approaches to Social Policy and strategies for Social Policy education, and their implications for the development of the discipline. As argued in this and the previous report (Chau et al., 2023), Social Policy education has not received the attention it deserves both within and outside the Social Policy community.

Second, more conceptual work and research will be needed to enrich the understanding of the complex and dynamic relationships between the actors (including the educators, students, providers), the contexts (including institutional and community settings) and the social forces (such as commodification and neoliberal managerialism) in Social Policy and Social Policy education. The framework proposed in this report is nowhere near perfect, but we sincerely hope it can serve as a starting point to stimulate a lively debate.

Third, a greater collective effort will be needed to consolidate the core elements of Social Policy education and enhance their visibility and impact in the teaching and learning of Social Policy across different settings, such as joint honour programmes, interdisciplinary academic units, and outside higher education. The HCF and LCM approaches discussed in this report may offer ideas for carrying out this task (Section 4.5.6).

Fourth, effort should also be put into exploring how Social Policy is or should relate to 'sister' disciplines (such as Sociology, Criminology, Public Policy and Administration) and any collaborative opportunities. In this report, we developed five dimensions to examine the distinctiveness of Social Policy and Social Policy education, namely visibility, institutional recognition, internal consensus, external heterogeneity and external homogeneity (Section 4.5.6).

Fifth, while Social Policy educators are promoters of social goals such as social justice and equality, it is important to recognise that they may face unjust practices and/or discrimination in their personal and professional lives in general and/or due to their specific intersectional positions. Members of the Social Policy community can do more to support one another, especially those being socially disadvantaged. Therefore, within the framework illustrated in Figure 2.1, we emphasise that the relationships among all domains are influenced by prevailing social forces. Like many others, Social Policy educators have to negotiate or reconcile with these social forces at both the individual and collective levels.

Sixth, much of the current debate on Social Policy education focuses on the UK experience, despite the fact that Social Policy is taught in many other countries. More international exchange in Social Policy education will

be worthwhile for identifying alternative approaches, good practices, and potential collaborations in developing an international strategy to promote the discipline. In the study, we have found some inspiring ideas from the experiences of our international participants. They shed new light on Social Policy education in the UK and beyond by introducing alternative approaches and areas of focus.

Seventh, despite the multiple studies on Social Policy teaching provision since 2011, students' voices remain largely unheard. Several participants in the qualitative study have reminded us that any research on Social Policy education won't be complete without the input from the learners, who will be the Social Policy researchers, educators, policy-makers and other stakeholders in the future.

Lastly, higher education has been the main, but not necessarily the only or the best, platform for delivering Social Policy education, especially as it is increasingly commodified and neoliberalised. More effort is needed to explore alternative routes for Social Policy teaching and learning, for example, in collaboration with NGOs and communities.

5.4 Suggestions for the SPA

Based on the findings, we propose several suggestions for the SPA. However, we must stress that we did not mean that these suggestions are for members of the SPA Executive Committee only. Their materialisation is based on the support and engagement of the wider Social Policy community that the SPA represents. These suggestions are:

1. To continue to organise and/or support Social Policy education research, including 1) a study on Social Policy students' views on their study and the discipline; 2) a study to review the distinctiveness of and overlapping areas between Social Policy and its sister disciplines; 3) a study to explore approaches and practices of Social Policy education in different countries; and 4) the next five-yearly review on Social Policy teaching provision in UK HEIs due in 2031.
2. To continue to organise and/or support knowledge exchange events on Social Policy education, including: 1) Teaching and Learning Day Conferences; 2) Teaching and Learning symposia at the annual SPA conference; 3) events on specific themes under Social Policy education, such as EDI issues, Generative AI and internationalisation of the discipline.
3. To strengthen the liaison and collaboration with learned societies and academic networks of 'sister' disciplines in the UK in promoting common goals and interests.
4. To strengthen the liaison and collaboration with relevant learned societies and academic networks outside the UK to promote Social Policy and Social Policy education internationally
5. To strengthen the liaison and collaboration with other sectors, such as NGOs and public institutions, for opportunities to promote Social Policy and Social Policy education.
6. To consolidate SPA's leadership in the Social Policy community both in the UK and internationally to engage more Social Policy researchers, educators and students to work together to promote the discipline to a wider audience and advance its academic stance.

7. To set up a working group to explore and pilot innovative measures to promote Social Policy and Social Policy education in the UK and internationally, such as Social Policy Without Borders (regular webinars on Social Policy topics for international audiences); Social Policy Academy (free or paid, online or in person seminars and training sessions for community groups and NGOs in the UK); Social Policy Roadshows in public spaces and education fairs. These initiatives will require sufficient administrative support and staff buy-out time to succeed.

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Appendix 1 Focus Group/Interview Guidelines (Final Version)

Questions

1. Please tell us your name and what social policy teaching you are doing in the current academic year or in the past. You don't have to mention your institution or job position if you don't want to.
2. Name three things that any Social Policy courses/programmes must have and why?

Prompt: Which theories/approaches? EDI? Environmental issues? Decolonisation? Any other latest issues?

3. What are the three most important takeaways for Social Policy students when completing their studies? Why?

Prompt: employment skills? Critical thinking? Policy skills?

4. Are you teaching what and how you want to in your Social Policy teaching? Are there any gaps between your ideal and reality, and what are they?

5. What contributes to these gaps? What makes it challenging to teach what and how you want to?

Prompt: structural problems in higher education, institutional issues, programme structure, students' expectations, teaching resources or skills, time issues, health issues?

6. How do you cope with these challenges? What can the wider Social Policy community and the higher education sector do to promote a better environment for Social Policy teaching?

Prompt: changes in HE, support from SPA

7. If you can only use three keywords/phrases to define Social Policy, what would they be and why?

Prompt: What makes Social Policy different from other subjects or disciplines? Subject/discipline?