Digital literacy and use of computing on the Social Work Degree

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Digital literacy skills are key to how we engage in today's digital world. Defined as 'the confident and critical use of ICT for work, leisure, learning and communication' (JISC, 2012), digital literacy is essential in social work as in other professional practices because it enables practitioners to take advantage of the affordances of digital technologies to deliver a better service and secure better outcomes for service users and carers.

The importance of skills such as the ability to search for and locate information for service users; to effectively share information with colleagues; or to keep oneself up to date with evidence-based practice is reflected in the Social Work degree curriculum. This requires students to have developed a range of digital literacy skills including Information and Communication Technology (ICT) skills and Information literacy (IL) appropriate for practice.

Studying on the OU Social work degree students will benefit from the experience of *technology-enhanced learning* as part of the OU mode of delivery. This encourages students to extend their existing digital literacy skills as part of the study process to:

1. Use a range of OU systems and services
2. Communicate with their tutor and fellow students online
3. Explore multimedia case study material and interactive activities relating to module theories and concepts

Further integrated module activities within the Social Work programme will require students to:

4. Develop additional digital and information literacy skills to the level required of social work graduates.

The guidance below includes the preparation and set up students require for the programme.

1 Using OU online systems and services

OU students use a range of online and digital tools on a regular basis for study-related tasks. These enable students to work more efficiently, often providing time-saving benefits, and also give access to a wealth of information and expertise – key benefits to distance learners. For instance, students will submit assignments and receive comments from their tutor online. They will have instant access to digital resources via the OU Library and via their module and qualification websites so they can search quickly for the information they want. Additional integrated tools will enable students to store resources to access online, including for three years after graduation.

2 Communicating with tutors and fellow students online

In addition to regular face-to-face workshops with their tutor group, students are required to participate in regular online discussions and activities where they will continue to explore module themes and practise online communication skills important to social work. As their communication skills develop throughout the programme, students will have opportunities for creating and sharing resources and for engaging with perspectives from a range of agencies, disciplines, across the different countries in the UK. For these activities students will need regular internet access.

3 Exploring multimedia case study material

Case study material will be provided using a variety of media. This will provide learning activities drawing on a selection of resources, including audio, video, contextual documents and input from professionals in the form of audio or text commentary and feedback. Students may be directed to use these multimedia case studies and simulations in regular study periods throughout a module, or in a block of intensive learning.

4   Developing additional digital and information literacy skills

Social work graduates are expected to have developed digital literacy skills covering a range of applications relevant to social work practice, as required by the care councils.

Students will develop their skills on an on-going basis during the programme. In K113 students will develop skills focusing on OU tools and software needed for study. Thereafter K216 students will turn their attention to skills needed for the workplace, being encouraged to *apply* their skills effectively and creatively, and reflect on their use in their own social work practice. Creative examples might, for instance, include creating life stories using PowerPoint when working with disabled young people. Students will also consider ethical issues such as confidentiality when sharing information electronically. K315 students will be asked to reflect on their 'technology-enhanced practice' by critically evaluating their experience of and the effectiveness of digital technologies in the delivery of services.

By the end of the degree students will also be able to draw on their digital literacy skills to manage independent learning, being well equipped to carry out online searches for social work related articles and resources, and use tools to manage and share resources such as bibliographic references and practice-based evidence.

Assessment

Students' digital and information literacy skills will be assessed via: interactive computer marked assignments (iCMAs), tutor marked assignments (TMAs), and end of module assignments (EMAs). The skills may be assessed as components within assignments, either explicitly, for example, by submitting a formatted report or a PowerPoint presentation, or implicitly, for example, by providing references in an assignment which indicate evidence of having searched for and identified articles outside the module materials. The assessment guidance for each module will provide details.

Students will arrive on the Social Work degree programme with differing skills levels. Whatever their skills level, all students must complete the assessed skills components on each module as these are a requirement of the degree and are needed in order to demonstrate competence in those skills.

Checking familiarity

To check and develop their skills knowledge, students can use the formative (practice) assignments (iCMAs) as diagnostic or self-assessment activities. Each iCMA consists of a series of quiz questions providing an engaging way to quickly check level of familiarity and to practice as many times as desired. In advance of the summative iCMAs for which marks are awarded, students can therefore identify and work on their own skills development needs. Even students who are confident in their ICT skills at the start of the programme will find useful extra tips and knowledge within the ICT activities.

Demonstrating the required ICT skills level at the end of each module

K113 and K216 end of module assessments include an assessed digital literacy component. In order to pass these modules students are required to achieve a minimum average score (threshold) of forty per cent on the ICT task. In the event that a student does not achieve the thresholds, the student will need to re-sit the ICT component in order to demonstrate that they have achieved the necessary skills level for that module.

ECDL certificate

By graduating on the Social Work degree, students will have demonstrated that they have **met the care council requirements,** including ECDL equivalent skills where these are required in specific nations. Students are not issued with the ECDL certificate itself. If students wish to gain the certificate as an **additional qualification**, they can enrol at an assessment centre (such as a Further Education college) and, with some test practice to check what is required they should find it fairly straightforward to achieve the qualification.

Preparations and set up

Before the student can engage with the OU online systems and services, there is an important induction period during which the student needs to set up their computer or other digital learning devices with the necessary internet access and any software required for the programme. In addition they will need to orientate and familiarise themselves with the basic skills to be able to make use of

these. This period is therefore an opportunity to draw on guidance provided by the University and follow up any issues with the OU Computing Helpdesk and other support services.

Computer requirements

Details of the general computer specifications for the programme can be found on the Study at the OU website. Details are provided within the Study Materials section for each module. More specific details are provided here below.

- As well as a PC with Windows operating system, students will need access to Microsoft Office (including Microsoft Word, Excel and PowerPoint).

Social work settings almost always require the use of Windows-based computers (rather than Apple Macs) and Microsoft Office applications. Many digital literacy activities within the Social Work Programme are therefore based on the Windows operating system and on Microsoft Word, Excel and PowerPoint. Students should ensure that they have access to the above software for the duration of the programme, and we strongly recommend that they are run on a Microsoft Windows-based computer.

The computer specification is deliberately kept as low as possible to allow use of older computers. You may want to use a combination of devices, for example, a laptop (with keyboard) and a tablet (for web-based activities). There are three issues to consider:

- compatibility with OU assignment handling systems, including with the tutor's computer

Students are strongly recommended to have **Microsoft Word**, not Microsoft **Works**. Although these names sound similar, they operate differently within the assignment system and may cause compatibility problems for tutors and students.

- software required to cover the ICT skills

To ensure they cover the ICT requirements, students will need to have access to the required software at the specified times in the modules. The ICT exercises are written with the specified software in mind. If students do not have access to this software, they will need to take responsibility for working around the gaps in guidance and support. To avoid the potential challenges this poses we strongly recommend that students follow the computer specification (given above) as closely as possible.

If a computer is more recent and up to date than the computer specification, and contains newer versions of the software specified, this will not cause difficulties.

- accessing multimedia case studies

Some of the case study activities will include longer video sequences accessed online. If difficulties are encountered, DVDs are available as an alternative format. To use DVDs students must have access to a computer or on a TV with DVD player.

Installing software

Students can access the online resources available through the module website and communicate with their tutor group using a normal web browser.

Software provided to students (downloaded from the OU website) is quality tested and widely used and installation should be straightforward. Occasionally settings within the student's computer need to be adjusted to allow the software to run effectively. Support is available from the OU Computing Helpdesk to talk through the steps to take if any difficulties are experienced.

Establishing compatibility

It is important to check early on in each module that the tutors and students are using compatible software so that tutor feedback on assignments can be read. On occasions, if settings are incorrect or inappropriate software is used, a student may be unaware that there is feedback available in the marked assignment script. Since this is one of the most valuable learning opportunities in the module, it is essential to ensure this exchange of information is set up correctly. A trial exercise is therefore scheduled at the start of each module for students and tutors to exchange a dummy assignment and iron out any issues with the OU Computing Helpdesk.

Arranging access to a computer

Students will need to have access to a computer and the internet at home for a range of different study-related tasks. They will need regular access during the week to check their email, online tutor group forum and module website. This is the way they will keep in touch with the Open University news updates. In the lead-up to an assignment cut-off date they will need more sustained access over a longer period to write the assignment and complete the digital and information literacy skills work and assessed task. Students should also have access to a printer. Costs of internet access and printing are the responsibility of the student.

To complete the interactive computer marked assignments and submit their TMAs students will need internet access. For information literacy activities students will need internet access to online resources via the OU Library.

Students may find it useful during the first weeks on the module to monitor how long they spend on the computer on these different tasks to help plan when and where they need access. On modules which make use of case study material on CD-ROMs students are likely to need access for longer periods – from one to several hours, depending on the nature of the activity. The module texts will indicate with an icon what activity type it is and the amount of time to allow.

ICT skills preparation

While students are awaiting the programme start they may wish to take advantage of the time available to develop their ICT skills. Preparation work could include:

- reviewing computing skills within the Skills for OU Study website www.open.ac.uk/skillsforstudy
- identifying training opportunities available in the student's workplace

Recommended reading:

- Gregor, C. (2006) *Practical computer skills for social work*, Exeter, Learning Matters.
- Hill, A. and Shaw, I. (2011) *Social work & ICT*, London, Sage.

References

JISC (2012) "Digital literacy", [online], JISC InfoNet