

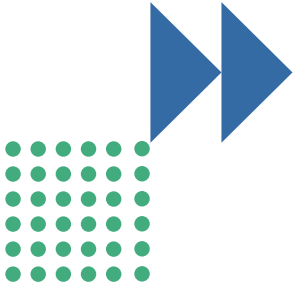


10 Top Tips for Social Work Students in Northern Ireland



Welcome to the world of social work!

Stepping into professional social work as a student is both incredibly rewarding and intensely challenging. The following 10 Top Tips offer insights and suggestions to help you navigate confidently through your studies and placement experiences. Take good care of yourself and appreciate the journey!



1

KNOW YOURSELF

Everyone is unique. Your differences are what make you 'you'. You will find out more about yourself as you go through your course, embrace what you like about yourself and be honest about those aspects that you would like to change. Communicate your needs clearly to others, especially your course team (*see Tip 3 below**). Reflect on your strengths and consider areas for growth. Keep a personal journal as you go along as a reminder of your journey into social work. Trust your instincts, while staying open to learning from those around you. Your course is preparing you to build purposeful and trusting relationships so you can help create positive changes, start with knowing yourself.

2

PRIORITISE & ORGANISE

Organise your course work from the beginning. This is without doubt easier for some than others! You will thank yourself later if you develop simple routines and consistent habits right from the start. Find planning tools and filing systems that work for you, whether digital, electronic or paper based. Make clear decisions about your priorities, both professional and personal, and build these into your organising system. Create a dedicated study space, no matter how small. Know that referencing can be tricky! Use your library well. Your course team can guide you through formal academic referencing requirements, but it's up to you to organise all source information as you access it so you can find it any time you need it. And remember, it's never too late to start. If you are feeling overwhelmed at any stage, start small and ask for help to get back on track.

3

DRAW ON YOUR COURSE TEAM

Your team are there to help you. Throughout your course you will have support from your personal tutors, lecturers, practice teachers and placement supervisors. Let your team know if you have any learning or support needs so they can help remove barriers and improve your course experience. Reach out and ask for help when you aren't sure what is needed, or if you are struggling with any part of your learning experience. Social work training is complex and demanding, and you don't need to 'go it alone'. Ask plenty of questions! Be open to constructive feedback. If you are facing challenges or tensions in your course-

based relationships, speak up. Your college or university also provides vital student learning support and wellbeing services and can refer you to external services where needed.

4

BUILD YOUR WIDER SUPPORT NETWORKS

Find others who will stand alongside you. Lean on trusted friends and family for emotional and practical support. Get to know your peers and find ways to encourage each other. Become an active participant in your Students' Union. Join ethical online forums or social media groups for social work students. Subscribe to social work magazines and journals for the latest updates. Join BASW, your professional association in Northern Ireland, to access [student membership benefits](#), such as the Student Hub and the [Special Interest sub-group for Neurodivergent Student, NQ and ASYE social workers](#). Make good use of professional development days and online courses to connect with other students and experienced social workers. Explore the free [Student Development Programme](#), fully funded by the BASW Charitable Foundation for Social Work. Attend relevant conferences and networking events. Take ownership of your student networking experiences, they will stay with you throughout your social work career!

5

FAMILIARISE YOURSELF WITH SOCIAL WORK STANDARDS

Becoming a social worker is both a privilege and a responsibility. Take time to reflect on your motivation for choosing this path and what will keep you going when it gets tough (and it will!). Self-awareness and professional curiosity is essential. As part of your registration with the Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC), you have already agreed to comply with the NISCC [Standards of Conduct and Practice for Social Work Students](#). These standards will inform your professional practice and are expected to shape your personal conduct. Consider how aligned your personal values and ethics are to these standards. You will be faced with many ethical dilemmas as part of your course, stay open to learning and feedback through these. [The BASW Code of Ethics for Social Work](#) provides additional guidance on practicing ethically as a social worker. Become familiar with the free resources available to you through the [NISCC Learning Zone](#). Be prepared to challenge yourself as you become more self-aware and gain new perspectives as your course progresses.

6

USE DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY



WISELY

Become tech savvy (as far as is possible!). The development of digital technology isn't slowing down any time soon. As a student, allow yourself time to develop your skills and understanding of existing and emerging technologies. 'Practising in a Digital World' is one of the Strategic Priorities in the [Department of Health 'Learning and Improvement Strategy for Social Workers and Social Care Workers \(2019-2027\)'](#). This acknowledges both the opportunities and risks associated with the use of advancing technologies in social work. Generative AI is increasingly used in social work practice and it is essential you maintain a critical and ethically responsible approach to your use of this and any digital technology. BASW's '[Generative AI and Social Work: Initial Guidance for Practice and Ethics](#)' offers further guidance related to these ethical considerations. And do remember to balance your online screen time and use of technologies with offline learning and activities. There are many benefits of creating tech-free 'zones' in your day, including promoting healthier relationships, better sleep, improved concentration, and even creativity. All great bonuses for student social workers!

7

BROADEN YOUR LEARNING EXPERIENCES

Learning is continuous and can be found in unexpected places. Relevant extracurricular experience is encouraged by training providers and welcomed by employers as evidence of commitment and essential skills. Community involvement, volunteering, campaigning, learning new subjects all help build skills, experience and confidence. Join clubs or groups that align with your interests to expand your horizons. Explore diverse perspectives, become more self-aware and improve your cultural awareness by reading widely, participating in webinars, listening to podcasts, staying informed on current affairs and keeping up to date with the political environment. Social work is about building human connections and relationships in a complex and nuanced world. Keep a journal to document your experiences and insights, you never know when those reflections might be just what you need!



8

WELCOME YOUR PRACTICE LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES (PLO)

Be open to real-world experiential learning. Workbased practice learning opportunities (PLO) can be 'the best of times and the worst of times'! They can be an emotional rollercoaster, but they will deepen your understanding and skills on so many levels. Prepare carefully for each setting you arrive in, especially if you feel stretched beyond your usual comfort zone. Dig deep and remember your previous work roles and life experiences have already given you a wealth of transferable knowledge and skills. Respect and value everyone you meet. Use supervision thoughtfully, talk to your practice teacher and tutor about your hopes and concerns. Stay patient and flexible as you adjust to working alongside new colleagues in different environments and with unfamiliar systems. Practice learning experiences can be one of the most memorable aspects of your training programme and can help inform your future social work career choices. Use them well!

9

PLAN YOUR EXTENDED BREAKS

Breaks that don't get planned often get lost by the wayside. Social workers and social work students can be their own worst enemies at looking after themselves! Even with best intentions, if you haven't consciously decided how to use your satisfied. Social work training is intense with limited breaks during the course. Prevent burnout by using your days off, weekends and times between coursework, deadlines and PLO dates to intentionally take time out. During that time, say 'no' to nonessential activities that drain you and say 'yes' to the people, places and healthy pastimes that energise you. Use your holidays and time with family or friends to relax and engage in a mixture of physical, playful and genuinely restful activities. That might include taking part in sports, music, art, dance, hiking, retreats, mind-body practices such as yoga, pilates or tai chi, or mindfulness and meditation programmes. Experiment and find what works for you. Use your breaks to unwind and fully rest, reflect, recharge and reset. Build in the daily self-care habits noted below, but don't overlook the bigger breaks needed to keep healthy balance and perspective.

'down time', you might quickly find the time has been filled with a 'busyness' or a 'nothingness' that can leave you feeling less than

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ESTABLISH DAILY SELF-CARE HABITS

Finally, be kind to yourself every single day. The student social work experience is a marathon, not a sprint. Stay patient with yourself and others as you progress through your course. Introduce small daily habits that help reduce stress and prevent overwhelm. Schedule regular self-care activities. Take micro-breaks throughout each day and give conscious attention to your breath, physical movements, and mental calmness. Use these moments to consciously release any build-up of tension. Make healthy choices for snacks and drinks. Rest when you need to and ensure you get enough sleep. Keep yourself motivated by remembering why you have taken on this complex and demanding challenge. Celebrate small victories along the way. Imagine how you will feel when you are on the other side of your training and ready to take on new challenges as a professionally qualified social worker. And lastly, remember to have fun!



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