

## Concerns and Experiences of Hong Kong Social Workers in England and Wales:

### Registration and Job Seeking

Sui-Ting Kong\*  
Hei Chow

#### Background

Social work workforce in England had experienced a persistent shortage and it further depleted post-COVID19 pandemic (Foster, 2023; [The Guardian, 2023](#)). During the pandemic, it was well recognised how social workers across the nations experienced burnout, sickness and stress during the pandemic ([Kong et al., 2022](#)), it is now we see the long-lasting effect of the pandemic on the workforce. Connected to improving the working conditions, pay and support for social workers, it is crucial to train, recruit and retain talents so that social workers do not need to work with 'dangerous workload' that harms both their wellbeing and service outcomes.

In addition to the traditional qualifying courses and fast-tracked programmes, some local authorities have been exploring overseas recruitment. Department of Health and Social Care also provided extra funding (£15m) to support local authorities to recruit social workers from overseas ([Community Care, 2023](#)). The current practice of overseas recruitment often involves local authorities recruiting directly from overseas sites, through recruitment agencies, but little consideration has been given to social worker migrants who have moved to the UK and intend to re-enter the workforce.

Hong Kong social workers moving to the UK

The social and political unrests in the 2019 Hong Kong have attracted international attention. The Hong Kong government's crackdown on civil society and people's freedoms demanded international responses. One of which is the British Nationals (Overseas) (BN(O)) visa route, opened on 31 January 2021, that first allowed Hong Kong citizens who were born before 1997 and their spouses and dependents to migrate to the UK and later included those who was born after 1997, whose parents are BN(O) holders, to apply independently. By 31 March 2023, the UK government has already granted 172,500 Hongkongers the right to live in the UK ([Home Office, 2023](#)). With an expectation that 300,000 Hongkongers will move to the UK in the first five years of the implementation of the BN(O) visa route, and about 0.37% of the general population in Hong Kong is social workers, there is a rough estimate of more than 1000 social workers qualified in Hong Kong may migrate to the UK through the BN(O) route.

In the training need survey (Kong, 2022) conducted with Hong Kong social workers who have moved/ are planning to move to the UK, we have collected 324 responses. **98%** (318) of the respondents completed a social work professional qualification in Hong Kong, with more than **89%** of the respondents having had a bachelor or a master's degree in Hong Kong. For those who were planning to migrate to the UK, **96%** of them would like to re-enter the social work workforce within 5 years. These social workers rated 'not understanding the legal and service frameworks in the UK' and 'language barriers, such as accents and slangs' as the greatest barriers in considering joining the workforce; meanwhile, the most required training is in the areas of 'social policy', 'professional

capability framework', 'law' and 'children/adult safeguarding'. With appropriate support and training, Hong Kong social workers who are planning to and have already moved to the UK could bring experience, knowledge and cultural diversity to the UK social work workforce.

Our project

In this context, we set up the Transnational Social Work project which is a collaboration between Durham University and the British Association of Social Workers (BASW), also co-funded by these two institutions (through Durham Research Impact Fund), to:

- contribute to the development and evaluation of a national curriculum that supports overseas qualified social workers (led by BASW), including those from Hong Kong, to practise in the UK.
- develop a CPD training package for transnational learning, based on a case study of violence and abuse experienced by young people from Hong Kong to enhance UK social workers' understanding of needs of Hongkonger migrants and good practice in responding to these needs.

Hong Kong Social Workers Action Group (HKSWAG) is formed under the same project to support the collation and revision of the project outputs. The group members were recruited from the [“HKSW Reunion in UK”](#) Facebook group which is founded by Hei Chow, the senior community organizer of UK Welcomes Refugees and also researcher of this project.

### Data collection and analysis

This document is based on the testimonies of the HKSWAG and the 60 cases collected from the 'HKSW Reunion in UK' Facebook

group with explicit consent.

HKSWAG - Three meetings have been arranged with the HKSWAG to discuss challenges experienced in registration, job-seeking and on-job adaptation. The meeting was attended by Hong Kong social workers from a range of backgrounds, including those who are already practising in the UK, planning or undergoing the registration process and those who are considering/weighing up career options.

'HKSW Reunion in UK' Facebook group - In this Facebook group, there are 400 social workers from Hong Kong, among which about 80 of them have registered with Social Work England (SWE), 8 of them registered with Social Care in Wales, and among these registered social workers 40 of them got a social work job in the UK. Since the majority of the cases that we have been in touch with are linked to their experience with SWE, we will specify if any findings are generated from other regulators, such as Social Care in Wales.

Thematic analysis has been applied to pull out key challenges and concerns expressed by Hong Kong social workers. We consider these learnings are useful also for all social work regulators in the UK, hence 'regulator(s)' will be used in all recommendations.

### I. Registration

Social workers from Hong Kong, like many migrants, tend to focus on settling their families before they consider their career in the new country. By the time they settle the children in the UK school system and find themselves a stable accommodation, many of them might have left their practice for more than a year before they have the capacity to consider registering with UK

social work regulators. This career gap<sup>1</sup> often means additional hours required for Updating Skills and Knowledge (USK) if Hong Kong social workers want to register in the UK. By the regulation of Social Work England ([SWE, 2023](#)), it would also mean 30-60 days of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) learning, depending on the time when the qualification is obtained, with no more than half of it being private study. The rest of the USK days will then need to be either 'formal study' or supervised practice.

### 1.1. Difficulties in finding 'formal study'

The idea of CPD can be totally alien to overseas qualified social workers. In Hong Kong, for example, CPD is not a necessary requirement for renewal of registration although post-qualification/registration study is common. While CPD in the UK can be as informal as any kind of self-learning or online courses accredited by social work professional associations, such as the BASW, there has not been sufficient clarity on what might be considered as 'formal study'.

In the latest version of the 'guidance for applicants who qualified overseas' ([SWE website](#) accessed on 16 Oct 2023), it is indicated that 'formal study' would need to be provided by a university. However, there is still very little information about how 'formal study' is defined and assessed, in terms of 'course content and quality assurance processes and governance', to be of a 'sufficient standard'. Return to Social Work courses provided by the Association of Local Authorities is the only non-qualifying option listed on the SWE website that can be counted as formal

study. It is unclear how overseas qualified social workers could get into these courses, especially little information has been offered on the website of the ALAs ([here](#)).

Without sufficient information and transparency in defining non-qualifying 'formal study', only more expensive qualifying courses are left as 'safe options' for overseas qualified social workers who are required to complete formal study. This is particularly costly for overseas qualified social workers who have not yet settled in the UK for three years<sup>2</sup>. They, including Hong Kong social workers on BN(O) visa, might still be subject to the 3-year restriction before they become eligible for any social work apprenticeship programmes (for employers to claim the apprenticeship levy) or the social work bursaries due to their residency status.

**Recommendation #1:** Clear definition and assessment criteria of what qualifies as 'formal study' to be published by the regulator(s). This will on the one hand alleviate the stress and burden of migrant social workers when navigating the new social work training landscape and work systems, and on the other hand support universities, professional bodies and associated authorities to develop and identify gaps in CPD or formal courses suitable for overseas qualified social workers who want to re-join the workforce.

### 1.2. Professional Referees and the timeframe for references

Most of the Hong Kong social workers had resigned from their jobs before they came to the UK, and reaching out to referees from the previous workplace/education

which is not listed on the website of SWE (by 16 Oct 2023).

<sup>2</sup> In the three years' period, these residents would need to be in the UK for at least 186 days per year.

---

<sup>1</sup> A case known to us was employed part-time in the year prior to the application for registration with SW, and they were asked to offer evidence that the work amounted to 60 days of practice

institution might be difficult for two reasons:

- (i) The exodus of Hongkongers post-2019 also means a lot of co-workers from the previous workplace would have moved out of Hong Kong as part of this cohort of Hongkonger diaspora. Seeking reference from ex-supervisors would mean getting a reference from someone who has likely left the service organization, hence not having an institutional email account for sending the required reference. This leaves contacting human resource of the previous service agency the only way to obtain a reference coming from the previous workplace.
- (ii) To seek a reference from ex-fieldwork supervisors might prove to be difficult for social workers who graduated many years ago. Many of the fieldwork supervisors would have already moved to another institution or another country, rendering it difficult to locate where they might be. Questions might be raised also about their relevance given the length of time since they assessed the practice of the applicant.

In both cases, either obtaining a reference from the human resource or previous fieldwork supervisors, it will take more than the 14-day timeframe<sup>3</sup> set by SWE.

**Recommendation #2:** Social work regulators shall allow flexibility for the applicants to indicate a reasonable timeframe for the references to be submitted if they have a strong rationale,

<sup>3</sup> This timeframe has been adjusted due to recent backlog in processing applications. According to the experiences of Hong Kong social workers, the current timeframe has been extended to 28 days.

<sup>4</sup> There was a case, Social Care in Wales requested the applicant for placement notes and

including the need to contact human resources or locate the former workplace supervisors who have moved to another service agency or country.

### 1.3. Providing placement details

There are a lot of ambiguities around information and evidence needed for proving the compatibility of their qualifying course compared to those offered in the UK. Many challenges arise from providing details of and from the placements which could have taken place many years ago especially for senior and experienced social workers.

*Difficulties in contacting all the ex-fieldwork supervisors* - the registration process requires the provision of contacts of fieldwork supervisors. However, significant number of applicants graduated many years (10-20years) ago and found it challenging to re-connect with the ex-fieldwork supervisors.

*Being requested to hand in placement work* - Some applicants were being requested to provide evidence to prove compatibility of their qualification to the professional capability framework. Instead of general mapping of the curriculum to the professional capability framework, the level of evidence sometimes can mean placement notes/documentations<sup>4</sup> which were likely to be destroyed post-placement in Hong Kong or it could well be written in Chinese which is not accessible to the UK regulators.

### *Unlisted request<sup>5</sup> for statutory placement*

documentation.

<sup>5</sup> There was a request made by Social Work England, in a case known to us, that they would require one of the placements to be statutory, although it is not a requirement listed on the website.

*in the qualifying course* - What is considered as statutory work in the UK can be very different from the statutory work in Hong Kong although there are well established legal frameworks for Hong Kong social workers to deal with child protection, domestic abuse, adult abuse, compulsory hospitalisation and substance misuse. Clarification of what counts as statutory work is the crucial first step for translating similar practices in other contexts into the UK capability frameworks, while bearing in mind social work practices can have drastically different focuses depending on the countries/states/cities' policies.

1.4. Work titles of Hong Kong social workers being miscategorised

The work titles that Hong Kong social workers held in the past employments can sometimes be understood by the regulators when assessing their applications. For example, 'Assistant Social Work Officer' (ASWO) and 'Social Service Managers' are senior social work roles in Hong Kong, but both were at times miscategorised as non-social work roles. Instead of asking for clarification (e.g. job descriptions), SWE referred these applicants to other pathways, as if these applicants have not practised as a social worker in the past year/5 years, which will require a significant amount of updating skills and knowledge before they can proceed further in their registration. Similar situations happened to people holding other work titles such as 'Youth Officers' and 'Service Supervisor'.

**Recommendation #3:** The regulator(s), when assessing applications from overseas qualified social workers, shall be aware of the differences in terminology and educational practices. If there are doubts, clarification from the applicants shall be

sought.

1.5. Adaptation: difficulties in finding placement and supervision

If an applicant is initially assessed as having shortfalls in their demonstration of professional capabilities, they would be referred to the 'adaptation' pathway which requires them to undertake supervised practice supported by a senior social worker registered in the UK. Similar to CPD, migrant social workers from Hong Kong experienced difficulties in finding supervised practice and to judge if it meets the regulator's standards.

Although referred applicants shall be allowed to take the competence test in lieu of undertaking 'adaptation', the decision letter never made this option explicitly available to applicants unless they formally submitted a request for the change of pathway.

**Recommendation #4:** When overseas qualified social workers are initially assessed as showing shortfalls in the demonstration of professional capabilities, both 'competence test' and 'adaptation' pathways shall be made clearly available in the decision letter.

## II. Job Seeking

2.1. Certificate of No Criminal Conviction (CNCC)

CNCC is equivalent to the DBS checks in the UK but issued by the Hong Kong Police Force (HKPF). It is often requested by the employers prior to appointment to ensure new migrant social workers from Hong Kong have no undeclared criminal convictions or restrictions to work with vulnerable people before they moved to the UK. However, HKPF currently accepts only CNCC applications based on the reasons of obtaining a visa, visiting,

studying and adoption of children from another country ([DLUHC, 2022](#)). While BN(O) visa application does not require CNCC, and HKPF in principle does not accept application of CNCC for administrative reasons, the request for CNCC from BN(O) holding social workers has been met with challenges.

According to the *Letter on Certificates of No Criminal Conviction* (DLUHC, 2022), adult social care can obtain alternative evidence according to the '[Safer Recruitment Guide](#)' (Skills for Care, n.d.). Based on the cases we have been in touch with, some alternative good practices have emerged:

- (i) A few cases were approved by the HKPF when the applicants submitted their CNCC application with a letter from the council/NHS employer(s) of the applicants (with 'gov.uk' in the letter head)
- (ii) Alternative evidence/actions in lieu of providing CNCC
  - A statutory declaration made in front of a solicitor.
  - Apply for CNCC from the HKPF and document efforts of obtaining the records. When rejected, the applicant can provide the employers a letter of rejection as evidence for a lack of a functioning system for such disclosure (refer to DLUHC, 2022).
  - Employers write to the social work regulatory body in Hong Kong, which is the [Hong Kong Social Workers Registration Board](#), (HKS WRB) for disclosing any previous restrictions on work and service (refer to DLUHC, 2022). The social work registration law of HKS WRB requires disclosure of criminal record:  
[https://www.elegislation.gov.hk/hk/cap505?xid=ID\\_1438403288540\\_003](https://www.elegislation.gov.hk/hk/cap505?xid=ID_1438403288540_003)

### 2.2. Understanding service landscape and terminologies

Interviews with registered and practicing social workers from Hong Kong revealed that many successfully settled social workers experienced difficulties in finding general information about working with local authorities, a comprehensive introduction to the different fields of practice in the UK and opportunities for progression and promotion. Many terminologies employed in the UK can be new to overseas qualified social workers, such as Practice Educator (PE), Approved Mental Health Professionals (AMHP) and Best Interests Assessor (BIA), and some support for navigating the service landscape and terminologies can motivate these social workers to consider a career in social work in the UK.

**Recommendation #5:** A comprehensive introduction to social service landscape in the UK (and in different nations) as well as a glossary of terminologies would help fill the information gap experienced by overseas qualified social workers when navigating the social work job market.

### 2.3. Recognition of professional experience outside the UK

There are no official mechanisms to recognise the professional experience that overseas qualified social workers have accumulated before they move to the UK. Hong Kong social workers involved in our project expressed frustration about how often they were treated as newly qualified social workers in job interviews or in their job offers. Proper recognition of their previous experience, alongside sufficient support for their transition and integration into the UK workforce, would motivate more overseas qualified social workers to join the workforce. Duc Tran, the co-chair

of the BASW Diaspora SW Special Interest Group, shared the experience of 'supporting overseas qualified social workers and estimated that overseas qualified social workers could take a full caseload within 12 months or sooner, provided that they are given appropriate training and support upon arrival' (personal correspondence, 4 Oct 2023).

**Recommendation #6:** Social work regulators might consider setting out professional progression benchmarks that allow recognition of experience and levels of competency that overseas qualified social workers could demonstrate after they successfully integrate into the workforce, hence offering opportunities for official recognition of their knowledge and experience gained in other social and cultural contexts.

### Concluding remarks

The case study of Hong Kong social workers in the UK expands our imagination about our approach to recruitment, retention and recognition of social workers and ways to enhance the UK social work workforce. Considering recruitment of overseas qualified social workers who are planning or have already moved to the UK presents a new opportunity for alleviating the shortage of social workers in the UK. This opportunity can be realised only if we act in a timely manner to consider ways to smooth the registration process for overseas qualified social workers and to support these potential workforces to translate their experiences and expertise in the UK social work professional contexts.

### References

Association of Local Authorities (2021), The Return to Social Work programme. Available at: [The Return to Social Work](#)

[programme.](#)

Community Care (2023). Councils able to recruit overseas social workers through £15m fund. Available at: [Councils able to recruit overseas social workers through £15m fund - Community Care.](#)

Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities (2022), For information: Certificates of No Criminal Conviction (CNCCs). Available at: [For information: Certificates of No Criminal Conviction \(CNCCs\)](#)

Foster, D. (2023). Adult Social Care in England: An Overview of Key Issues and Policy Related to Adult Social Care Workforce in England. Available at: [Adult social care workforce in England - House of Commons Library \(parliament.uk\).](#)

"HKSW Reunion in UK" Facebook group. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/hkreuatuk>

Hong Kong Social Workers Registration Board, Available at: [Hong Kong Social Workers Registration Board](#)

Home Office (2023), National statistics How many people come to the UK each year (including visitors)? Available at: [National statistics How many people come to the UK each year \(including visitors\)?](#)

Kong, S.T., Noone, C. & Shears, J. (2022). Social Workers' Sensual Bodies during COVID-19: The Suspended, Displaced and Reconstituted Body in Social Work Practice. Available at: [The British Journal of Social Work 52\(5\): 2834-2853.](#)

Kong, S.T. (2022). Hong Kong Social Workers in the UK: Training Needs Survey. Available at: <https://durhamuniversity-my.sharepoint.com/:b/g/person/plmb5>

[3.durham.ac.uk/Eag5UcuOOP5GmW-x9yk5SpQBz-HzelhWgrWZxoZvu2MKnA?e=A55f6r](https://3.durham.ac.uk/Eag5UcuOOP5GmW-x9yk5SpQBz-HzelhWgrWZxoZvu2MKnA?e=A55f6r)

Social Work England (2023). Updating skills and knowledge form for overseas applicants. Available at: [Updating skills and knowledge form for overseas applicants.](#)

Skills for Care (n.d.) Safer recruitment Gathering and assessing criminal record information for UK and non-UK nationals, including displaced people. Available at: [Safer recruitment Gathering and assessing criminal record information for UK and non-UK nationals, including displaced people](#)

The Guardians (2023). Social Workers in England Quitting in Record Numbers. Available at: [Social workers in England quitting in record numbers | Social care | The Guardian](#)

### © All rights reserved

Published: 18 October 2023 by the Department of Sociology, Durham University, UK

Copyright: \*Sui-Ting Kong, Department of Sociology, Durham University, UK; Email: [sui.t.kong@durham.ac.uk](mailto:sui.t.kong@durham.ac.uk)

Hei Chow, UK Welcomes Refugees; Email: [hei@ukwelcomesrefugees.org](mailto:hei@ukwelcomesrefugees.org)

### Department of Sociology, Durham University

32 Old Elvet, Durham. DH1 3HN, UK

Website:

<https://www.durham.ac.uk/departments/academic/sociology/>

### UK Welcomes Refugees

Website:

<https://ukwelcomesrefugees.org/>

Material in this document may be freely reproduced and circulated for the purposes of teaching and learning. However, no part of this publication should be included in another publication or reproduced for sale without prior permission of the authors.

### Acknowledgement

We would like to thank all the Hong Kong social workers who contributed to the Transnational Social Work project and participated in the focus groups and interviews. Without them, we would have missed another opportunity to learn and to be more inclusive and culturally diverse as a society. We also thank Duc Tran, the co-chair of the BASW Diaspora Social Work SIG, who offered valuable views on how to provide on-job support for overseas qualified social workers.