

What is Social Policy?

Social Policy is a highly inter-disciplinary subject that combines elements from sociology, politics, international studies, social history, philosophy, psychology and cultural studies.

The study of Social Policy is thus both philosophical and grounded. The diverse range of subject areas that make up social policy, make it an ideal course of study for anyone with a broad interest in the social sciences but who is not settled on a definite course or career. The subject is also very appropriate for those who enjoy, or want to know more about current affairs and for those who may be concerned to make a contribution towards improving society, both locally and internationally. Social policy is also useful for those who would like to use their studies as a broad ranging means of contributing to their own personal development.

The study of social policy has two broad dimensions:

- The study of the differing views and opinions around how and in what way social issues and questions can be understood.
- Examining the differing views around whether we should respond to those issues, and if so, in what ways could and should we respond.

In relation to the first dimension, some of the questions and issues social policy students examine are of a quite general and exploratory nature. For example:

- What is the nature of the relationship between citizens and the state?
- How might social issues such as inequality, discrimination and crime, be understood?
- What are some of the key social issues raised by dynamics such as globalisation and environmental change?

Social policy issues

Other social issues and questions are more specific, and those which lie at the heart of social policy often focus upon what is commonly referred to as peoples' well-being. Social policy has taken a focus upon exploring issues associated with education, penal policy, the environment, health, income, housing, transport, leisure and personal social services. Of course within these broad areas, there are a wide range of specific and often very topical issues, which you will find frequently referred to in the press, on television and on the radio e.g. electronic tagging of offenders, student fees, women's experiences of health services, provision for refugees, housing provision for young people, anti-social behaviour orders and curfews.



Social policy students explore issues using academic resources which are specific to social policy, together with an inter-disciplinary approach, that is, students also use elements of disciplines such as sociology, politics, criminology, social history, psychology, cultural studies, philosophy and international studies.

These perspectives are also used in the study of the second dimension of social policy, i.e. examining differing views around possible responses to social issues, exploring, for example, different political, sociological, philosophical and ethical points of view. Just as there are differences in opinion about how and in what ways social issues and questions can be understood, there are also differences in opinion around if and how we should respond. For this second dimension of the degree, the focus is upon exploring questions such as:



- How can society organise and structure say education or medical care to meet the widely differing needs of citizens?
- How can the effectiveness of policies and institutions relating to the criminal justice system or schools be properly assessed?

Social issues and questions are frequently engaged with and responded to by key social institutions and agencies, both independently and collaboratively. The study of social policy involves examining the actions (or inaction) of a range of organisations and agencies such as: The World Health Organisation, European institutions, central government, Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly, local government, voluntary organisations and charities, businesses, local communities, organised interest groups and families. The activities of agencies which often have an indirect role and influence, such as the media, are also important.



Studying social policy not only involves examining different ways in which such organisations and agencies do respond to social issues and questions, but also exploring possible alternatives. In practical terms, this means, for example, looking at the sort of choices that are available to people like politicians, voluntary bodies, private institutions, professionals and indeed the public. These can be choices such as: how are, and how could resources be spent? Who is, and who could be involved in planning and developing services? As a student of social policy, you will learn about how such choices are negotiated and made. You will also explore questions such as what are the consequences of such choices for different people and groups of people, and in the light of those outcomes, questions such as should those choices have been different? In the future you may well be making such difficult assessments and choices in your own work, and studying social policy will provide you with resources to think and make your own choices in a rigorous and well informed way.

