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Overview of the 16 assessed social work study programs: tendencies and problems

Social work education as well as social workers are new phenomena in Lithuania. However, it is very promising that since 1990s Lithuania has established social work programs both on BA and MA level in its best universities and colleges thus following the most advanced trend in the European higher education in the social field.

Social work is a profession that deals with the prevention and cure of various social problems the people of the (past)modern societies face. The structural social changes, caused e.g. by the so called globalisation, have become rapid in all European societies. On the level of people's everyday life the unexpected social changes are causing many social problems which people find hard to cope with. Since the issues this profession deals with are complex, social work expertise requires higher education on the university level, and in addition, academic knowledge production and a discipline of its own. Only theoretically and practically well-grounded research can give full support and legitimation for the acts of social workers with people, families, communities and social organisations.

When assessing the social work programmes, the gaze of the activity should not only limit to the higher education programmes as such. In addition to their duties in and for the social work education of the country, the Lithuanian institutions of higher education have an important agency for the future of the whole society: *to contribute to the ongoing project to help to construct both the profession of social work and the national knowledge base for the new academic discipline and field of research called social work.* The functions of the institutions, including the goals of their study programmes and teaching practices, must be screened through this complicated task.

Another type of challenge for the institutions of higher education follows from the current social and cultural needs of the Lithuanian society undergoing a major transition period. The current conditions emphasise the importance of the social interventions made by highly skilled social workers. Thus, the education of social workers has crucial importance for the future developments of the Lithuanian society as a whole. The social work higher education system such as it is today seems to have many potential strengths in order to become a well-profitable social investment for the future, especially if the current investing is done with careful strategic planning followed by sufficient human resources. Therefore, social workers should be provided conditions to grow to professionals with a full academic status who – together with other professionals and politicians whom it may concern - become able to ease and also to prevent the emergence of social problems in future caused by the processes of social transition and globalising economy.

As a conclusion of its observations the expert group pays attention on the following viewpoints

1. The relationship between colleges and universities needs more regulation: the main functions of the both of the training systems must be clearly defined; the functions of both institutions must be more clarified and regulated, currently the regulations for universities seem to be vague, whereas the regulations for colleges are strict. At the moment far too much energy is spent for needless struggles and competition both in the universities and colleges.
2. The national cooperation among universities, and among colleges, as well as between universities and colleges involved in social work education, needs to be developed much more. That could be promoted e.g., by the means of nationally funded particular projects (how to improve practice learning could be one idea for such a project) with the aim that the sense of competition in these institutions transforms more towards a sense and culture of learning from each others' experiences and innovations.
3. In the suggested cooperation the universities should also analyse their own intellectual potentials, strengths and future strategies in order to specify their own profile for the future so that they are different from each other which should reduce competition and aid mutual support based on the strengths of each institution.
4. It is evident that the student-teacher ratio 20:1 is not adequate for a social work education - aiming to produce highly qualified professionals. Since social workers need to become not only knowledgeable in social and behavioural sciences, but at the same time also able to act with people and groups as well as to develop policies taking into account not only the newest scientific facts, important professional values, and the up-to-date professional knowledge based on their personal experience from practice, it requires broad *reflective skills*. Such skills can only be learned in close and personal interaction with teachers (and study colleagues). This requires extensive use of small groups in teaching.
5. In addition, when the BA student numbers are as extensive as they are, the teachers are unable to maintain the quality of students' scientific work optimal, i.e. the quality of their final theses. With the present teacher-student ratio in the social work BA studies the circumstances are such that they might lead exploiting the relatively young social work staff, who as the first generation of social work experts, has much to give for the academic development of the social field. The expert group encourages strongly to look for means to solve the obvious shortage of social work teachers. *The expert group considers the staff resources a crucial issue for the future quality of the practice and research on the social sector of the whole country.*
6. The need to develop PhD programs in social work is emphasised by many Universities. This need is obvious and could be aided by well planned social work courses on PhD level (on modern social work theories, on relevant qualitative research methodology, etc.) which a doctoral student in the social field could include as part of his/her PhD studies in the other fields of science. Again this could be a nationally funded project (with the advice and lecturing of foreign social work experts, if needed). This kind of courses could be offered on the national level based on the cooperation of some universities for all doctoral students of the country in the social field. This kind of organisation could also help to establish a national community of young researchers with strong international orientation in social work research.

7. Since Lithuanian social conditions can be expected to change rapidly in the near future, every social work education program should include a good amount of easily transferable relatively broad competencies e.g. how to acquire and produce new knowledge (skills for information search and research) in the field, it-skills, language skills, skills for international communication, etc.
8. Some institutions, in particular among colleges, tend to be as (re)active as possible in responding all the needs they learn from the communities or employers on the expense of the basic contents that every social work program must have. Therefore, it would be good if the study contents of social work could be more regulated. According to the best understanding of the external assessment group, social work education is professional education having long European (and North-American) traditions. It is usual for a training program of social workers to have the following elements (for MA level, see <http://www.ifsw.org/GM-2002/GM-Gstandards.htm>):
 - values, ethics, methods and theories of social work
 - relevant social and behavioural theory modules,
 - research methods, and realisation of a research project of relevant issues for social work,
 - field practice periods in order to learn to apply professional skills,
 - law and other necessary procedural elements of knowledge for the administrative
 - professional practices in which social workers can use considerable power of a public authority in people's lives (e.g. they can move a child into a foster family against the will of his/her parents or the will of the child).
 - in addition, an important and through-going principle in social workers' education is sufficient professional socialisation both in terms of adopting the academic discourse of social work and the global and humanistic culture of the profession.
9. Referring to what has been said above the expert group does not recommend specialised studies on the BA level of social work studies.
10. The element of practice in social work education must be specified and developed further in all the higher educational institutions. The expert group suggests a well planned national project for *practice learning* in social work that should include development of the concept of practice learning itself in addition to a national training program for the social work students' field supervisors (practice teachers), a pay of their time for teaching, a model how one could organise cooperation of the higher education institution with the field placements so that both partners find it beneficial for themselves. The benefit could mostly be updated and continuous exchange of ideas and knowledge.
11. The expert group was in general concerned of the quality of the part-time study programs, at least it is not equal to the quality of full time studying: the number of students in the programs is extensive and the schools have very different facilities and resources to ensure the learning of these students. Part-time students do not mostly read books or articles in other languages than their own not having enough language skills for to do so. In the near future there will be no more need for such a number of part time studying for social work. The training institutions should get themselves ready for this. The expert group recommends that all the institutions should begin to screen the criteria for part time studying much more carefully. The institutions should also initiate to the national authorities one more project: to *finance a joint textbook production project for universities and colleges in social work.*

More social work books in Lithuanian language would also greatly benefit the development of the discipline, further education, etc.

12. The state should demand that teachers responsible of the supervision of students' BA and MA theses or developmental projects aiming to social innovations, are able to update their competences by establishing e.g. a sabbatical system for their permanent teachers.
13. Teachers and students in the institutions of higher education should be encouraged to build continuous links of exchange with countries and universities who are strong in social work development and research.
14. The labour market on the social field should be prepared to establish a career-ladder for social workers so that more education in the social work field provides higher position in expertise and a better salary.
15. The expert group does see a growing need for further education of social workers in which activity the institutions of higher education should take part to ensure the quality of the programs.
16. The educational and practical functions and division of labour between social workers and social pedagogues must be clarified and regulated, when the regulations lack too much energy is spent for struggling in vain. The same clarification should also take place on the level of these academic disciplines.
17. The European ECTS system should be applied through all the programs