

The International Peer Review of Team for Social Work Study Programmes in Lithuania
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Overview of the 7 assessed social work study programmes: tendencies and problems

Social work education was started in Lithuania less than 20 years ago. It is very promising that since 1990s Lithuania has established social work programmes both on BA and MA level in its best universities and colleges. Thus it is following the most advanced trends in the European higher education in the social field. Presently there are also considerations to open up national doctoral training programmes in social work. There is evident need for such programs.

The visits of the experts were supported by well-structured and detailed self-evaluation reports. We were informed during our visits that there is ongoing reform of the general frames of BA and MA studies within the next months. The administrators and the staffs of the colleges and universities seemed to be aware of the forthcoming changes due to this general restructuring of the study format.

Social work is a profession that deals with the prevention and cure of various social problems people are facing in our societies. 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 social issues that social work profession has to deal with are complex, social work expertise requires higher education on the university level, and in addition, academic knowledge production and discipline of its own. Only theoretically and practically well-grounded research can give reliable support and legitimation as well as efficiency for the practices of social workers with people, families, communities and social organisations.

When assessing the social work programmes, 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 the Lithuanian institutions of higher education have an important for the future of the whole society:

to contribute to the ongoing process to help

1) to maintain high quality in the professional activities in social work, and

2) to build up a well-integrated national and international knowledge base for the discipline and field of research called social work.

Our expert group has screened the functions of the institutions, including the goals of their study programmes and teaching practices, 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 that also results from the present economic recession. 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 development of the whole Lithuanian society. The higher education institutions for social work, such as they are today, seem 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 and academically skilled human resources. Therefore, social workers should be provided conditions to growth to a profession with full academic status. Together with other professionals and politicians the social workers will be able to ease and also to prevent the emergence of social problems in future caused e.g. by the processes of social transition and globalising economy.

In the end of 2006 our evaluation team was involved in assessing sixteen social work programs in Lithuania including the seven programs that have been assessed again in March 2010. This second time position has been very helpful; it offers possibilities for comparisons not only between the institutions at present but in each institution from a comparative viewpoint in relation to its recent past and development. Generally speaking we have seen very positive changes in particular in the organisation of the social work study programmes, in the contents of the study programmes, in social work textbooks and study materials in the national language, in teacher's competences and publication activities - particularly striking for us was the youngest generation: they were mostly active, highly motivated and able to express themselves fluently in English.

Gradual development toward doctoral studies is a delightful new dimension that will ensure strengthening knowledge creation concerning social work and social services, and the development of social work discipline and research based on the increasing social work expertise in Lithuania. It will also have the potential to add contributions in international social work developments in the future – and thus, it helps to make social work more interesting career for ambitious and talented young people. The other side of the coin is that doctoral studies are beneficial for the academic and professional status of social work both in the society and among the professions.

As a conclusion of its observations in March 2010 the expert group pays attention on the following viewpoints

1. Throughout our discussions with staff and alumni (and to some extent also with employers) it turned out that missing competence requirements for college-educated and university-educated staff in various professional social work posts do not exist. This state of affairs causes tensions and uncertainty among competent – both BA and MA trained - social workers. Almost every interviewed college student wanted to continue his/her studies at the university level believing e.g. that MA degree will give better chances for employment in labour market. The present situation of professional social work competences needs more regulation: the main functions of the both of the training systems must be clearly defined including different professional competencies for different professional tasks. 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.
2. National cooperation among universities, and among colleges, as well as between universities and colleges involved in social work education, needs to be developed. That could be promoted e.g., by the means of a particular project (e.g. how to improve integration

between practice learning and academic learning could be one idea for such a project) with the aim that the sense of competition in these institutions transforms more towards a culture of learning from each others' experiences and innovations.

3. Universities (and colleges) should 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. This should reduce competition and aid mutual support based on the strengths of each institution.
4. International exchanges of academics and academic knowledge and know-how should be promoted by all possible means. A study period abroad is most recommendable (e.g. a sabbatical year for academic teachers in permanent positions). *Further development of staff resources is a crucial issue for the future quality of the professional practice and academic research of the social sector.*
5. The need to develop national PhD programmes in social work is emphasised by many Universities. This need is obvious and as the first step, it could be aided by well-planned social work courses on PhD level (on modern social work theories, on relevant qualitative research methodology, etc.) a doctoral student in the social field could include as part of his/her PhD studies in the other fields of science. This can be a national project (in co-operation with foreign social work experts) or a joint EU funded project. In addition, it should take advantage of the already existing Baltic and Nordic-Baltic graduate school (funded by NordForsk). PhD 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 supports to develop further the national community of young researchers with strong international orientation in social work research.
6. Since European social conditions can be expected to change constantly in the future, every social work education program should include a good amount of transferable, relatively broad competencies like how to acquire and produce new knowledge (critical and analytic skills for information search and reading of former research results), IT-skills, language skills, skills for international communication, basic knowledge of human rights, etc.
7. The element of practice in social work education and research must be developed further in all the higher educational institutions. The expert group suggests a well planned national project for *practice learning* and *practice research* 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. In the case of research a strategically thoughtful co-operation with employers could help to identify new needs for research and knowledge production, and furthermore, a better application of research-based knowledge in professional practice.
8. 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 throughout Europe - and to extend them also in other parts of the world.

9. 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 programmes.
10. Access on international scientific data bases must be available in all institutions of higher education in social work including all colleges.
11. In the end, our expert group recognises need to improve critical-analytical view in social work study and research including:
 - Critical and ethical use of data sources in particular by the students.
 - Critical, human rights point of view of the existing social work practices; e.g. do they really serve the needs of the people not having voice for themselves?
 - Critical view of researchers to themselves; e.g. do they reflect and discuss the real life outcomes and social consequences of their knowledge production, etc.?