

## SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION IN LITHUANIA

### Emergence of social work profession

Social work in Lithuania is a relatively young profession. It was absent in the period of the Lithuanian independence till 1940 as well as during the country's incorporation into the Soviet Union. However, separate functions performed by a social worker could be seen in the work carried out by professionals engaged in other similar areas, such as charity bodies or separate individuals' operations. The professional social work started only with the independence since 1990. This was the period of great economic and social changes when society encountered new social problems and also old but hidden social problems (unemployment, alcoholism, poverty, violence, etc.) became stronger. The abundance and versatility of these problems indicated that it was necessary to reform the ineffective system of social support and to build a social wellbeing system. Interestingly, the barriers to social work as an autonomous profession were not just on organizational level, but also on the level of potential service users. The very first researches in 1995 revealed that in the context of socioeconomic factors the need for social work was huge, but service users did not express a big need for it because their understanding of social work was deteriorated by the image of old social care system, when social work was eliminated as a separate professional activity and people traditionally orientated to informal support of the family, neighbors and material state support. The social work was done by non professionals who did not have special professional education. The quality of this work was impacted by clients' orientation towards material support, work overload and lack of resources.

In the context of socioeconomic changes the importance of a social worker as professional became obvious along with the understanding that this profession requires professional knowledge. The period of becoming of social work profession may be subdivided into few minor stages:

1) 1990-1992: *formal adoption of the term „social work”* – along with the adoption of the first social work experience from foreign countries (a wide range of training sessions and consultations were organized). In 1992 the term „social work” was recognized formally;

2) 1992-2002: *social work professionalization*, which started with the provision of social work education courses at College in Utena, Vilnius university and Vytautas Magnus university. Later other Lithuanian higher schools also started training of social workers. In 1994 social work was included into the Lithuanian register of professions;

The legislative basis of social work developed very fast. The essence of social work, duties of social workers and spheres of social work were discussed in more detail in Law on Social Services adopted in 1996 (later updated in 2006). The infrastructure of social support, both in governmental and non-governmental sectors developed rapidly. People pursuing relevant practical work joined the newly established Lithuanian Association of Social Workers.

3) from 2002 to this day: *professional social work*. Currently the system of social work covers a network of various governmental and non-governmental institutions

engaged in social support provision. Integration into EU structures also enhanced internationalization of social work profession. However being a young profession it is still ongoing the process of identification. The requirements for social workers and assistant social workers are specified in the Law on Social Services (2006).

### **Social work education**

No one of Lithuanian higher school and college had experience in training of this type of specialists. There was a challenge for the system of higher education – to find the optimum model of training qualified social workers who would meet the need of a rapidly changing society to that type of specialists. A rather spontaneous process of drafting the study programmes in social work started. Higher non-university social work studies are regulated by the Social Workers' Training Standard (2008). The drawing up of the analogous regulations for universities started in 2007 and has not finished yet.

In general, Social Workers' professional education may be acquired in Lithuania through:

- 1) receiving the degree of social work bachelor or master at the university;
- 2) finishing social work studies at higher non-university schools (college);
- 3) acquiring professional qualification in social work by further education;
- 4) a professional of another academic field may cover a special training course in social work.

At present social work professionals are trained in 7 universities and 8 colleges in different regions of the country. However, in 2006 Experts from European universities have assessed programs and only 2 programs of Vilnius university (Bachelor and Master) and 3 colleges (Kaunas, Klaipėda and Utena) were given full accreditation. Other study programs were given temporary accreditation. Some remarks as noted by experts are as follows:

- The aims, goals and especially the content of the study program is not enough clear and the choice of the study subjects is not well-considered.
- Not all of the graduates identified themselves as social workers. It seems that this training program is unable to socialize the majority of its students to become professional social workers
- The staff development into the direction of a clear social work profile (on a theoretical and practical level) should become a strategic issue.
- The cooperation with other universities inside and outside Lithuania could be improved,
- etc.

In development of social work education programs international support (EU and USA) is valuable: conferences, seminars, students' and teachers' exchange according to Socrates/Erasmus programs, lectures of visiting teachers, scientific literature, etc. International organizations such as FESET (European association of training centers for socio-educational care work), ECSPRESS (European Consortium of Social Professions with educational and Social Studies), TISSA (the international social work and society academy) have also supported establishment of the social work education network.

Just few days ago Social work department of Vilnius university has got a letter from Brussels about the grant for the project with European partners „European Master of Social work”.

Further the short analysis of the current state of social work education will be presented based on Vilnius university curricula and Experts’ from European universities general evaluation of the state .

The aim of the **Bachelor** Social work study programme (161 credit) is to educate

1. Critically thinking specialists with broad world outlook who would be able to guarantee the functioning and the development of the social support sector of Lithuania,
2. Would have firm basic theoretical knowledge of social work profession and practical skills, which would allow them to successfully initiate and continue a professional career in a labour market,
3. Possibilities to participate in the graduate social work studies.

The objectives of SW Bachelor studies are:

- to provide basic knowledge on social and humanitarian sciences, which would guarantee the ability of the graduate to systematically understand and critically evaluate processes which take place in the society, causes of the social problems and possible ways of their solution on the level of the person, community and the society.
- To give knowledge about the social, economic system of the modern state, its’ institutional structure, their functioning and impact on the direct social work, and along with this to teach students flexibly and creatively apply this knowledge in the social work practice.
- To form practical work skills with a client and its’ system, which would guarantee the methodical provision of help, systematic organization of social services.
- To teach methods of social work which would allow to work effectively with the person, group, family or community and to solve emerging problems.
- To provide values and ethical principles of social work, observation of which would guarantee the respect of rights and dignity of every client, as the fully valuable member of the society.
- To provide knowledge on the methods of social research and to form practical research skills, which are necessary for identifying causes of the problems and foreseeing the most effective ways of their solution.
- To form the ability to think analytically and critically, to fluently express ones’ thoughts verbally and in a written form, combining and applying the received knowledge in the specific work activities.

The disadvantages of the Bachelor study program (according to the external evaluation):

- 1) The program does not have enough teaching of professional social work ethics, nor knowledge of human diversities, Human Rights and multicultural issues.
- 2) The study programs should strengthen the practice teaching/learning component as part of the program.

- 3) The students' professional identification in social work and their socialisation process as becoming social workers should be improved.

The main aim of the **Master's** study program of Social Work (80 credits) is 1. To offer modern II level social work education on the basis of multidisciplinary approach, combining deeper knowledge of various SW aspects with their practical application in the Lithuanian society, and 2. To develop abilities to investigate social problems, shape social policy and analyze effects of social policy measures, 3. Run social institutions, 4. Organize social work in the community, 5. Working with various age groups and in various social institutions.

The objectives are:

- To provide all students, irrespective of their specialization, with new knowledge on: administration of social services, principles and techniques of management, interaction among the clients and social workers, constructive management of interpersonal conflicts and conflicts between the person and the environment, persons' empowerment to create ones' own and social welfare, analysis and alternative decisions of social policy, peculiarities of social work in ethnic groups and multicultural communities, impact of Euro integration on the aims and priorities of social work.
- To provide additional theoretical knowledge on:
  - *Social management*: political philosophy, human rights, developmental studies, public administration;
  - *Social policy*: political philosophy, human social development, social programs of political parties, social theories of deviance;
  - *Social work with children and youth*: youth sociology, youth policy, child psychiatry and psychotherapy, informal methods of education, social theories of deviance;
  - *Community social work*: socio cultural work in the community, technologies of social innovations, help at crisis situation, developmental studies;
  - *Clinical social work*: clinical and crisis psychology, psychiatric rehabilitation, dependences, help at crisis situation.
- In order to empower students to apply acquired knowledge in practice, - to develop following skills: an ability to reflect ones' own practice in social work field, to identify social problems and choose appropriate ways of intervention, to formulate aims and objectives of the solution of social problems, to integrate various theories and methods, to implement practical research activities.
- To develop empirical research skills and ability to use various methods of data collection (observation, questionnaire, interview, analysis of documents, etc.), to develop quantitative and qualitative methods of research, skills of data analysis, presentation, evaluation and interpretation of research results (using various theoretical paradigms), communication skills, critical evaluation of the sources of information, scientific thinking.

○ To foster students' commitment to ethical principles and values of social work, critical thinking, self-reflection, need for the life-long learning and ability.

The disadvantages of the master program are (according to external experts):

- 1) The implementation of the social work practice component, both its contents and organization, is in need of further developing towards well systematized *practice teaching and learning*.
- 2) The program needs more future input towards *practice research* in social work that is an orientation in research aiming to improve the connection of the needs for knowledge in practice in the social field and the social scientific 'tools' and ideas for innovative social research and developments.
- 3) The students' professional identification in social work and their socialisation process as becoming social workers should be improved.

### **Main challenges for social work education in Lithuania:**

1. The relationship between colleges and universities needs more regulation: the main functions of both training systems must be clearly defined; too much energy is pent 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 needs to be developed much more. In the cooperation universities should also specify their own profile for the future, so that they are different from each other should reduce competition and aid mutual support based on strengths of each institution.

3. Student-teacher ratio 20:1 is not adequate for social work education – social workers need to become not only knowledgeable in social and behavioral sciences, but at the same time also able to have 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.

4. When BA students' 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 final thesis. Therefore it is necessary to solve the shortage of social work teachers.

5. The need to develop PhD programs in social work. doctoral studies (since 2004 Lithuanian students in the frame of international project prepare dissertations in Lapland university, Finland, others choose related social fields (sociology, educology).

6. Some educational institutions tend to be over-reactive to the needs they learn from the communities or employers on the expense of the basic contents that every social work program should have. It would be good if the study contents could be more regulated.

7. The element of practice in social work education should be developed further, including national training program for the social work students' field supervisors, a pay of their teaching, a model of cooperation of the higher education institution with the field placement.

8. The educational institutions should initiate a joint textbook production project for universities and colleges in social work.

9. The labor 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.

In summary, the current conditions emphasize 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. 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.

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