

Review Social Pedagogy: Bachelor and Masters Programmes, October 2015

This introduction details the reports of the Bachelor Social Pedagogy, Kaunas College, Bachelor Social Pedagogy and Ethics, Lithuanian University of Education (LEU), Bachelor Social Pedagogy, Mykolas Romeris University (MRU), and the Masters in Special Needs Education, LEU.

Expert team:

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6. Mr Augustinas Rotomskis, *student representative*.

Social Pedagogy and Special Needs Education in Lithuania

Social Pedagogy and Special Needs Education is a relatively new area of study in Lithuania. While there is an urgent need for these professionals to act as agents in support of more inclusive educational practices and in developing a more holistic approach to the social development of children in Lithuania, the value attributed to these professionals in the field is relatively weak and undervalued by society.

The role of the professionals in this discipline is to support children with special educational needs on the one hand, and to improve the school and teachers' capacity to accommodate to the diverse range of learning needs currently in their classes. The focus of the remit of the Social Pedagogy extends beyond the school to support children's welfare (e.g. daycentres for children) in the wider community, to create a better environment to nurture and support their development and their successful adaptation to their environments. The work of social pedagogues and special needs teachers is therefore, focused on the social functioning of children and their families, schools, communities and institutions. Their role is not just be as an extended arm of the systems or social policy, but it relates to a unique mission to address children's rights with respect to social development and social inclusion, while at the same

time being cognisant of an extensive body of international knowledge and literature which underpins and supports inclusive practices worldwide.

Social pedagogy and special needs education in the programs reviewed

All programmes are based on a holistic idea of social inclusion. In our interviews, the professionals are mainly defined as supporters and advocates of children with a wide range of special/additional needs to include needs arising from social deprivation, education, gender and social and emotional difficulties and disorders. In this manner, social pedagogues and teachers in special education act as change agents, driven by their mission to further and support inclusive educational provision and practices.

The review team interviewed teachers, students, alumni and social partners who collectively were endeavouring to do all in their power to develop and deliver quality programmes of study. Currently, while there is wide recognition of inclusion at the level of policy in Lithuania, there now exists a need to further implement inclusive policies into practice at the macro level - of society and - at the micro level - of schools and classrooms.

Despite the fact that all participants in the review process were convincing in their motivation and commitment, there was a lack of knowledge displayed with respect to ideological theoretical framework underpinning the profession, together with a lack of clarity in relation to how the foundation of the programme was based in the roots of the discipline of social pedagogy. In answering questions about ‘what is social pedagogy ‘ or ‘what does social pedagogy represent’, most respondents referred to the legislation (it is what our professional legislation requires), to the target groups (children and youth), to the location of the professional practice (working in schools and day care centres) and overall, they were rather descriptive (we help them, we empower children,). Some of the respondents referred to the mission of social inclusion and to the contribution to the social development of children. Rarely did anyone answer the question as to which theorists or theories underpin their curriculum and/or their practice. If and when there was a reference to theory, it was mostly limited to systems theory, social constructionist and ecologic theories, which emerge from psychology and sociology. Although these might be of value for the profession, only a minority of respondents referred to (Lithuanian) social pedagogical scientists or developments.

In addressing this issue, review team advises that there is a general overarching need, in Lithuania, to strengthen the discipline of social pedagogy, to re-discover its theoretical roots and to strengthen the professional identity of social pedagogues. Furthermore, there is a need to position this profession in between the domain of social work and pedagogy and psychology, ensuring that it has its own place while at the same time being in the family of the social professions. In addition, there is a need to position the profession more explicitly in relation to the historical perspectives on social pedagogy and in relation to theories about capacity building in schools and communities with respect to children's rights, the rights of people with disabilities, marginalised groups etc.

Labour market and student market

The complexity of daily lives, poverty, diversity and exclusion call for more investment in support of a broader policy of social development of children. It is not just about 'learning to learn' but as well about 'learning to cope' with life. While all of our analyses from the many interviews conducted point to the need for 'social agencies' in schools and communities there is evidence of decreasing student enrolment numbers coupled with and a difficult and complex market position. The team concluded that what was lacking was a convincing strategy to attract more students onto the programme and to open up the market through using innovative approaches such as blended online learning approaches which would particularly support the majority of students who work as well as study. While there exists a well-established network of support from the stakeholders, the review team advises, that together with the highly committed social partners, the committed policy makers and the Ministry, the professional status of the programme, underpinned by a strong theoretical framework ideology, is further developed to reflect and enhance inclusive policies and practices at all levels and empower students in their identity as social pedagogues.

The curriculum

Review team saw a wide range of modules which were of good quality and standard. The assignment work that was made available for our examination was also of a high standard. The problem lies not in the quality of the wide ranging expert teachers engaged with the programmes, it relates more to the lack of an overarching rationale or framework

underpinning the programmes. As far as review team could ascertain, legislation, specialisms and societal demands dominate and direct provision. While the curricula reflects and mirror these demands, there is frequent neglect of structuring the programme according to the mission, rationale and theoretical framework and philosophy underpinning and directing the discipline. Review team found evidence of some curriculum overload which resulted in reducing time for students to engage in developing generic professional competences such as critical reflection and analysis. Rationalisation of the programmes is advised, e.g. by creating majors for the core competences and minors for additional knowledge, skills and electives thus allowing more time for students to develop and profile themselves for the labour market and to further their personal development.

Teaching staff

It was heartening to engage with so many highly motivated and committed staff across all the programmes. In turn, students expressed high levels of satisfaction with the personal and professional support they received and with the overall respect shown to them. While studying social pedagogy and special needs education necessities being in a supportive and challenging community, there were differences observed in the level of co-operation among the teaching staff. One of the contributing factors, in our opinion, was the number of staff members involved across many programmes and modules. In addressing this problem, review team advises more collaboration and rationalisation among staff in addressing the core knowledge, skills and competencies so as to provide a more cohesive and integrated learning programme experience for students.

Another factor pointed to the need to build capacity in the system due to the increasing age profile of the current staff members. It is advised that further investment in the new generation of social pedagogues is highly recommendable, e.g. by engaging more doctoral students. It was noted that some universities are already making headway in this direction.

Facilities

All buildings, technological support and libraries are accessible and serve to provide excellent support to all programmes. In addition, the staff providing these supports is flexible and committed to helping the students achieve their potential. All programmes we reviewed

were also moving more in the direction of using a more blended learning approach, in providing more opportunities for distance learning and more support to learning through the use of the Moodle platform.

Study progress and program management

All aspects in relation to student progress and management are in compliance with regulation and reflect a high standard. Review team reviewed a wide range of submitted assessments, criteria for assessments, monitoring systems and actions to address any needed improvements. The small groups of students enrolled in social pedagogy and special needs education programme, allows for more personal and supportive contact between staff and students

Final reflection

As a team we worked well together throughout the evaluation process and we effectively used both our individual and collective strengths to provide a comprehensive and critical review of the specified programmes. At times, perhaps, review team was sometimes critical with respect to the amount of time requested in advance in preparation for the programme review. For all members of the team, it was in many ways, a great pleasure and adventure to encounter the Lithuanian world reflected in those professions and programmes. Review team hopes that our efforts will serve to contribute to the further improvement and empowerment of all those professionals who stand for social inclusion, for supporting children, young people and adults in their social development and in developing the necessary skills and competencies to cope with the demands of their daily lives.

Review Team would like to extend our sincere thanks to the college and universities for welcoming and hosting us and for being so open in discussing and reviewing their programmes with the team. Review team wishes you well as you continue to further enhance and develop educational programmes in support of quality professional development for your students across many disciplines

On behalf of the expert team,

Prof. Dr. Hans van Ewijk(Chair)