

Overview of the 4 assessed social work study programmes: tendencies and problems

The International Peer Review of Team for Social Work Study Programmes in Lithuania

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Social work education is today well established in Lithuanian universities and colleges with both Ba and Ma programmes. The programmes in their design are following both European and international standards of social work education and aim in meeting the needs of Lithuanian society in the social field of expertise and social work practice. Doctoral training is also getting increased efforts in order to meet the needs of qualified academic staff in the education of social work. The visits of the expert group to the three universities with the four assessed programmes were excellently organized and all the stakeholder groups were sincerely discussing the gains and developmental needs in the field of social work and its education. The well-structured and carefully detailed self-evaluation reports were very informative. A great devotion to run and develop the assessed programmes was expressed acknowledging also critical issues.

The social work programmes are still, regardless their already some 25 years long history, holding a certain newcomer position within the strong and well established traditional academic environments of social, behavioral and health sciences, even though there has been and are going on many structural changes in the universities and higher education. This junior position is somewhat problematic when it concerns establishing an academic major and discipline necessary for a respective research area in order to meet the ideals of research based teaching and professional practice in social work. The research area of social work seems still to be rather weak as there are no professor chairs in social work in the visited universities and the continuation of social work education through all the three (bachelor, master and doctoral) levels of academic education seems to be halting. This problem is reflected both in teaching, learning outcomes and retention of both academic and professional workforce and staff in social work.

The teachers are devoted and holding excellent qualifications, but in the field of social work they are still too few and in the assessed universities holding at highest only assisting professor's

position. Many of the courses for the assessed social work programmes are taught by teachers in other disciplines. As such the teaching organized by a multi-disciplinary staff may be good when true interdisciplinary aims are hosted, in practice it may be successful only when the major of social work would be well established as a research and expertise area. The academic leadership and development of the social work research area and education cannot truly be realised without disciplinary identity and a full professors in social work.

The learning outcomes were carefully designed through the different levels of the studies following the ideas of deepening and broad enough knowledge base. Some critical concerns may be raised one being the integration of practical and professional studies into the academic studies and the other the research area of social work. Excellent work in organizing practice studies is done in all the three universities, but there is not really any programme for integrating practice, teaching, research and the professional and service development into a pedagogical view of making this unity to contribute to collaborative knowledge formation and knowledge production of social work, for establishing the research area of social work. As also interest on international social work research and its latest developments seems to be meager, especially among students on different levels, there is a risk that learning outcomes are not as good as one would expect. This was especially seen in the design and quality of final Ma and Ba theses of the students. The expert team learned that the way of preparing and writing the theses is instead of e.g. seminar type of studies following the classic individual way of academic studies that may not really work well in reference to the multiple aims of the social work degrees. This is concerning, as all the degree levels are of importance for designing and running researcher education and also for the recruitment PhD and even for Post Doctoral researchers in the field of social work. There is a double demand on competencies in social work to be both professionally and academically valid on all the degree levels and the need of academically qualified social work staff is increasing not only in the academic field but also in the practice field.

May be a national project on developing the social work research area would be needed for gaining the multiple challenges of social work education. The research emphases that is not distancing from practice is important in an era of drastic societal change towards an information and communication society. This change takes place not only in technologies but especially in people's everyday life and challenges social work in its abilities to reflect the change in an informed way, looking for new ways and approaches in being able to support and help people, families and communities to cope.

Collaborative strategies in developing practice teaching and the practice-learning communities in the field to become more deeply integrated as a part of academic social work studies are needed. The students, supervisors or mentors and the teachers and the whole curriculum would gain in creating a joined and research based and pedagogically grounded process of establishing an arena for collaborative professional practice learning, research and knowledge formation. This wish can be interpreted as an ideal to develop a joint learning and researching community as a bridge between practice and academia. This is, again, partly an issue of curriculum design, teaching and study processes and reflects even the international activities and international developments in this field of social work education. This is where academic leadership is needed in developing social work education and practice in Lithuania.

There was also many concerns expressed on the intake and funding systems of academic studies and especially studies in social work. A system relying heavily on private funding, either forcing students to work for earning their living while studying or drawing the money from their families may turn except into an unjust and unequal system also for biased interests among students trying to get a study place in the so called money making branches. This kind of an unsteady development of student flows and motivations is easily weakening the whole educational system.

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