

Unveiling the Dynamic Social Work Education Landscape in Albania

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ABSTRACT

Social work has little tradition as an academic or professional path in most post-communist countries. The need for well-trained social workers is grave in all of these societies, with Albania being no exception. The aim of this paper is to review the current plans of study of the major three departments of social work in Albania using as benchmarks the Global Standards of Quality of Social Work Education and the Albanian Credit Framework. For the purposes of this paper a content analysis of the curriculum and the detailed syllabi was employed. This analysis revealed the following themes: (1) the nature of the curriculum in relation to global social work education quality standards (2) possible bottlenecks of the three curricula related to the Albanian Credit Framework and (3) compatibility level among the three curricula in the framework of the Bologna process. Results showed a satisfying level of adaptation of social work curricula with Global Standards of Quality of Social Work Education, with a reasonable division among theoretical courses of different orientations in the core theoretical curriculum. However, field practice hours were much less than the required ones, but the current Albanian Credit Framework created a bottleneck in relation to it, because it sets limits and hampers the universities in adapting and implementing the international best practices of 170-200 field placement days. It is suggested to systematically benchmark all three curricula to the Global Standards of Quality of Social Work Education and to create space for the field practice for professions like social work.

Key words: social work, curriculum, Global Standards of Quality of Social Work Education, Bologna process, Credit Framework

INTRODUCTION

The social work profession is a relatively new profession in Albania and other East European countries as well. The profession managed to retain official endorsement throughout the twentieth century in only a few countries in the region, among them notably the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and Poland. Interestingly, the time taken to ‘rehabilitate’ the social work profession has varied greatly in the region. The majority of the countries introduced a training or a social work degree after the ‘90s and then Masters’ and PhD degrees in the beginning of this century. This is also the case for Albania (UNICEF, 2013).

During the communist years, if used at all, the term ‘social work’ often loosely referred to services whose nature or restrictiveness did not necessarily correspond to the more generally accepted conception of the profession. Thus, for example, in some cases, it was applied to an essentially administrative function involving more especially the determination and provision of social security payments and other material assistance to individuals and families in difficulty. Elsewhere, it was linked mainly to the (physical) health sphere: the so-called ‘medical model of social care’. Generally, to be sure, these perceptions have now evolved considerably, but elements of the legacy can still affect how the actual and potential role of ‘social work’ is viewed (UNICEF, 2013; McDonald, 2010).

Maintaining a profession with a plurality of roles can be challenging. Unsure of exactly where they fit in the profession, many social workers seek a label to attach to themselves. They either are a “micro” worker focused on clinical practice or a “macro” worker focused on community organization, nonprofit management, or social

reform (Reardon, 2015).

Caught in the middle of this struggle has been social work education, saddled with the difficult task of preserving social work's focus on multiple modalities while ensuring that students master certain core competencies needed for professional work. Fifty years ago, Charlotte Towle, writing in *Social Service Review*, described this challenge: “*Gradually, we have come to the point of view that, while the demands of professional education cannot be individualized, the student can and must be individualized throughout the educational process*” (p. 398) (Abramovitz, 1998)

In Albania's emerging democracy, the government began to address growing social problems by creating a legislative framework for new services. It was recognized that the quality of these services was largely dependent on “skilled social workers with a new philosophy.” (Van Hook, 2006). Social work in Albania had practically not happened in the era determined by socialism up to 1992. It was the deep political and economic changes of the post-socialist phase and the support of diverse actors (for example, the Grand Valley University, Michigan) that were instrumental in the foundation in 1992 of the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Tirana (Rutgers University Center for International Social Work, 2008). Currently, there are three public Universities that offer a social work degree, namely:

1. University of Tirana, Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Social Work and Social Policy (hereafter DSWSP)
2. University of Shkodra, Faculty of Educational Sciences, Department of Psychology and Social Work, Social Work (hereafter DPSW) section
3. University of Elbasan, Faculty of Educational Sciences, Department of Social Sciences (hereafter DSS).

Aim of the Study

The aim of this paper is to review the current plans of study of the major three departments of social work in Albania using as benchmarks the international quality educational standards in social work and the Albanian Credit Framework.

There is only a limited number of studies examining the social work curriculum in developing countries, such as Albania. The curricula of social work education in Albania is relatively new, and influenced from different schools of social work. Hence, it should be designed to provide students with the knowledge, skills, and values necessary for professional practice in the field of social work.

Important Definitions

The following definition was approved by the International Federation of Social Workers (hereafter IFSW) General Meeting and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (hereafter IASSW) General Assembly in July 2014 and it is the Global Definition of the Social Work Profession:

“Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.”

The above definition may be amplified at national and/or regional levels”.

The definition according to the law Nr. 163/2014 “For the Order of the Social Worker” in Albania is: *“Social Work is the professional activity based on practice and an academic discipline that promotes social change, development, social cohesion and social justice, and also empowerment and liberation of people. The social worker is a regulated profession that is exercised in the field of social work, in micro, mezzo and macro level,*

at the service of individuals, families, groups and communities, in institutions of central and local level, in the public and private system”.

METHODS

For the purposes of this report a content analysis of the curriculum and the different detailed syllabi was employed. This analysis revealed the following themes: (1) the nature of the curriculum in relation to global social work education quality standards (2) compatibility level among the three curricula in the framework of the Bologna process and the (3) role of the Albanian Credit Framework in reaching these goals

This analysis followed these stages:

Initial document review: the researcher conducted a preliminary examination of the curriculum materials – plans of study and syllabi - to explore whether they were likely to address the topics, based on the recommendations from the Global Standards of the Quality of Social Work Education. Hence, when a plan of study had little or no correspondence with the aim of the study, it was rejected without further analysis, e.g. the master on “Communication for Social and Behavioral Change”. If the outlook was more positive, the researcher went on to a content analysis of the syllabi.

Comprehensive document analysis phase: throughout this phase the researcher analyzed the main documents for the review of the remaining study program, the plans of study and the syllabi of the courses, based on pre-selected criteria, describe below. This phase concluded with the main findings related to the objectives of the study.

The inclusion criteria for the review of the plans of study were:

- Correspondence of the objectives of the study program with the recommendations derived from the Global Standards of Quality of Social Work Education for social work study programmes.
- Inclusion of courses relevant to the core theoretical and field practice courses based on the same standards.

The inclusion criteria for the review of the syllabi were:

- Correspondence of the title, description and learning outcomes of the course with the recommended core courses of the same standards.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Although there has been so far only limited scholarly studies to illuminate the labour market for social work, it is still possible to indicate some of the directions that developments are likely to take. NGOs cover more ground than do state services: NGOs offers a broad spectrum ranging from health, education, the legal system to families and childcare and disabilities, while state agencies focus their work on child protection, psycho-social services in schools and people with mental disabilities. A recent stakeholder analysis also confirmed the earlier findings in relation to the social work labour market.

The future challenges for social work in Albania are constituted by the expansion of the reform of public welfare to other areas of social work like education, health or the legal system. The reform of public welfare is to ensure that the social protection of the disadvantaged by society is guaranteed, which also means to improve the efficiency of the care system and the quality of social work. Further challenges are the self-organisation of social work by trade unions, the development of standards in practical work as well as more research that takes up explicit positions in certain fields of social work, for instance that of child protection (Tahsini, 2013).

Albania has initiated the Bologna process in 2003 and is still running it. The Bologna process is a unified programme that includes: (a) Comparable and transferable degrees in all European countries; (b) A study

system based on two levels - University degree (not less than 3 years) and Master degree (not less than one year); (c) The implementation of the ECTS system; (d) Quality assurance at an institutional, national and European level and (e) The development of students' and professors' mobility as well as the enhancement of collaboration between the universities at a national, regional and European level (EC, n.d.).

In 2004 the General Assemblies of IASSW and IFSW developed the “Global standards for the education and training of the social work profession”. Nine different standards were approved related to all different aspects of the social work profession, such as its school mission, programme objectives and outcomes, programme curricula including field education, the core curricula, professional staff, social work students, governance and resources, cultural and ethnic diversity and values and ethical codes of conduct in social work (IASSW, 2004). This paper focuses only on the social work curricula analysis, respectively on the 3rd and 4th standard of the programme curricula and the core curricula.

More specifically, these standards are:

Standard 3. Standards with regard to programme curricula including field education: The programme curricula should be consistent with objectives, expected outcomes and mission statement and continuously reviewed and updated; it should have a clear organization of theory and practice and help students develop critical thinking; the latter should be well organized in relation to its duration and complexity of tasks, coordination with field supervisors, an instructors manual for them and partnerships with agencies.

4. Standards with regard to core curricula: The core curricula should aspire to an identification of and selection for inclusion in the programme curricula, as determined by local, national and/or regional/international needs and priorities. However, there is a certain core curricula in which all students should be exposed to:

- Domain of the social work profession

Sufficient knowledge of human development, understanding how socio – structural inadequacies and social injustice impacts human development, understanding social work origins and development nationally and internationally, knowledge of social welfare policies and their processes¹

- Domain of the social work professional

The development of the critically self-reflective practitioner within a holistic framework, who are able to conceptualize social work wisdom, to deal with the complexities, subtleties, multi-dimensional, ethical, legal and dialogical aspects of power and appraise ethical codes.

- Methods of social work practice

Sufficient practice skills for different areas of social work and application of social work values and ethical principles. Knowledge and skills for social work research, supervised fieldwork education.

- Paradigm of the social work profession

The epistemological paradigms should inform the curricula on the recognition of dignity of human beings, interconnectedness that exists within and across all systems at micro, mezzo and macro levels, importance of advocacy to achieve changes, capacity building for individuals, families, groups, organizations and communities, respect to diversity and human beings.

Curriculum Analysis - Nature and Bottlenecks in Benchmarking with the Global Standards of Quality of Social Work Education

In order to have a thorough understanding of the current curricula and suggest the relevant needed changes the

¹ Planning, evaluation etc

Department of Social Work and Social Policy at the Tirana University was used as a benchmark because it is the most consolidated department within the Albanian context.

Theoretical part

In relation to the *social work profession related curricula (Standard 4)* where each student should be exposed to it was found that: human behavior and the social environment, introduction to social work and social problems are three core courses found in the Department of Social Work and Social Policy in Tirana and partially at the other two departments. Human Development is a course at the Elbasan Department, but in Shkodra Department there is only one similar course of Developmental Psychology but it has only psychological theories and information and lacks the social focus, besides the fact that it goes up to adolescence and not to the later life development (above 18 years). In line with this, core courses for the social work profession are the social welfare relevant courses, such as Introduction to Social Policy and Social Policy Institutions (DSWSP Tirana) or Social Policies (DPSW Shkodra and DSS, Elbasan).

The DSWSP at the Tirana University reflects the majority of the *social work professional* relevant courses to prepare a self-reflective practitioner, within a holistic framework whom recognizes the aspects of power and appraises ethical codes. Relevant courses can be considered: Social problems and Social Work, Human rights (elective course), Individual and Group Processes 1,2 (similar to Social Psychology), Ethics in Social Work Practice and Gender and Social Work. At the DSS in Elbasan Social Problems, Social Psychology, Ethics and Gender roles are part of the curriculum, but not Human rights. At the DPSW in Shkodra only Social Problems and Social Psychology are offered, but not Ethics, Gender and Social Work and Human rights.

Practice skills for different areas of social work and application of social work values are part of the courses (Standard 3 and 4): Methods and Skills in Social Work Practice (in all three departments), Interviewing and Counseling in Social Work (in all three departments). The social work research knowledge and skills are acquired through 3 different courses at the DSWSP: Research methods 1 (mainly Statistics), and Research methods 2 and 3 (Quantitative and Qualitative Methodologies). In relation to the students assessment overall the courses had a reasonable distribution of the assessment, which mainly was divided in: tests and exams, course projects or assignments and class participation.

A series of courses are related to this standard like: Social Work Practice with Children, Social Work Practice with Families, Social Work Practice with Individuals, Social Work Practice with Groups and Communities and partially Social Work Administration.

Field practice part (Standard 3)

The curricula had a mix of theories and field education; however when it comes to field practice international best practice models suggest that a social worker should have at least 170 up to 200 field placement days and this was not the case in all the three schools. At the Social Work Department in Tirana the total practice hours were 400 (including practicum) or 80 days²; practice started at the second year. The Elbasan Department of Social Sciences had a total of 450 hours/90 days. Department of Psychology and Social Work in Shkodra has the least practice hours, namely 120 hours/24 days, and all of them were at the 3rd year of studies. Field practice was one of the most frequently mentioned needs from the current service providers in all the fields of social work practice: health and mental health, justice, education and social services. From a field point of view, the practice in social work faces challenges due to the lack of an obligation or motivation by the relevant institutions to accept and supervise students.

Compatibility between the three Bachelor degrees

One of the basic principles of the Bologna process is the easier recognition of qualification and period of study. According to this it is recommended that the same degrees should have an approximate of 70% compatibility

² One day of field practice is 5 hours for students.

in higher education institutions. A comparison of all curricula of social work in Albania results in an almost 70% compatibility of the DSWSP in Tirana and DSS in Elbasan (60%), but it is much lower with the DPSW in Shkodra (approximately 47%).

DSWSP and DSS (Tirana and Elbasan). The DSWSP in Tirana has 40 courses. The DSS in Elbasan has 31 similar or same courses with the one in Tirana, not taking into consideration here if they are elective or obligatory. This gives a total of 77% compatibility. However, when it comes to the theoretical part without taking into account the practice and practicum, foreign language as well as the thesis in Tirana there is a total of 32 courses out of which 22 are in common with the DSS in Elbasan, reaching a compatibility of 68.75%. In relation to these two curricula the suggestion would be to unify the elective and obligatory courses. If this aspect would be taken into account the compatibility would be reduced to less than 70%

DSWSP and DPSW (Tirana and Shkodra). Out of the 40 courses that the DSWSP offers 26 are the same at the DPSW in Shkodra, which gives a 65% compatibility. Once again the elective/obligatory aspect is not taken into account. As above when all practices and practicum are not considered, neither thesis nor foreign language 21 out of 32 courses are similar or 65% again. However, the issue here remains the same. Many of the courses are similar not the same and some of them lack the social work approach (e.g. Developmental psychology is not the same as Human behavior in a social environment and Mental health is not the same as Problems and Policies in Mental Health). Besides that, the same issue of elective and obligatory courses that can limit and reduce the level of compatibility is existent here also.

The role of the Albanian Credit Framework

This section looks into the role of the Albanian Credit Framework in shaping the social work study programs and adapting them according to the Global Standard of Quality of Social Work Education. Regarding the theoretical part, there wasn't any bottleneck coming from the Framework, as given by the legal requirements. The main identified challenge was connected to the field practice.

The international standards for field practice require it to be 25-30% of the hours in the study plan. The DSWSP operate during the maximum allowed hours for field practice within the Albanian Credit Framework (18 ECTS including foreign language). In order to reach the international standards it should add 4-6 ECTS, but this is not possible because of the framework and the legal directions. For the DSS (Elbasan) and DPSW (Shkodra): Elbasan already has the maximum allowed credits for field practice, but Shkodra has very little, which means that both departments should invest in changing these hours and respective ECTS.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the analysis conducted to the curricula and syllabi of the schools of social work in Albania it is concluded that all three social work curricula have a satisfying level of adaptation to the international social work education quality standards and complied with the national Albanian Credit Framework at both Bachelor and Master level. The curricula reflected the main courses of social work profession, the professional, its methods and fields of practice, yet there were some core courses missing in school of Elbasan and Shkodra, such as Ethics, Social Work in Health/Mental Health, Social Work in Penal Justice, Human Behavior in the Social Environment etc.

The comparison among the three schools of social work in Albania resulted in satisfying compatibility between the DSWSP in Tirana and DSS in Elbasan, but this ration declines to 47% between DSWSP in Tirana and DPSW in Shkodra. If the latter undertakes a curricula review it should take into consideration the results of this analysis and consider all compatibility, Albanian Credit Framework and Global Standards of Quality of Social Work Education.

The Albanian Credit Framework that creates a bottleneck in relation to the field practice, as it sets limit for it and hampers the universities in adapting and implementing the international best practices of 170-200 field placement days. Special dispositions should be included in this framework for professions that need many field practice hours, like social work, psychology and others.

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