Reflection & Possibilities of Expert Graduation of St. Elizabeth University of Health and Social Sciences Graduates in the Field of Social Work.

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Abstract

St. Elizabeth University of Health and Social Sciences in Bratislava has been preparing students in Social Work for 10 years. We have considered it beneficial and important to provide some reflections on Social Work Graduates in several areas which often resonate in the settings of each University and to which the students do not receive the responses. It is about the quality of provided Education; study organization; content of study program; interest in the possibility of Continuing Education. Based on research performed, this paper provides several directions for the subsequent Education of Social Workers and Graduates and their participation in the Alumni Program.

Keywords: Social Work. Study Graduate. Education. Study program content. Continuing Education.

Introduction

St. Elizabeth University of Health and Social Sciences (VSZaSP) has been presented in Slovakia and abroad as a non-profit organization for 10 years. The Founder is Prof. Vladimír Krčmery, M.D., DrSc., multi. Drhc. From the very beginning, the aim and the idea of the University itself has been to provide Education in the Professions that are inevitably connected with the activities focused on help to people with health problems and adverse life situations; particularity unique in the curriculum is the creation of projects in developing countries around the world. Currently the school is managing 62 projects focused on help to poor people; people in the threat to life; threat to existence itself. Education for Social Workers is naturally included in the University’s mission frame; meaning is influenced by growing economic problems; family crises; providing social services for different client groups; increasing social - pathological effects and problems related to the field of social protection of children, youth and adults. VSZaSP St. Elisabeth in Bratislava was established at this stage of dynamic development of the study program. The first 340 Graduates in Bachelor Study finished in the Academic Year 2005/2006. VSZaSP gained accreditation for Education in Social Work at all levels of University Education and also gained the rights to grant Teaching Grades to Associated Professor and Professor in the Field of Social Work.

Social Work in Theory and Practice

The Foundation of Social Work as a field of study is undeniable. Social Work may be seen as a Science or a practical activity or an application of methods of various Social Sciences via Social Work Practice has been discussed in Academic environments for several years. It is important to realize that the relevance of Social Work also has been affected by the fact that social policy resents a new direction and distribution of responsibilities between the State and the citizen have significantly changed: with emphasis on empowering citizen's responsibility not only for the quality of his/her life, but, also for his/her family. It is very important to select appropriate applied methods of Social Work that should avoid personal and social disintegration of the citizen and should act against long term persistence in a situation of
dependency on help from the others so that the State’s limited resources are not inefficiently depreciated.

Basically, from a beginning of creation of Social Work as a field of study there has been on-going discussion about anchoring the Profession in the practical environment where the Social Work is conducted and also about acceptance of Social Work as a Social-Scientific Specialization. Thus, at this point we highlight the following issues:

- For many years, there has been an on-going but poorly structured, and often particular debate about who is and who is not a Social Worker; who can perform this Profession; which Education and skills are essential for its performance; whether it is an independent scientific discipline and Profession or just a cover for a set of activities and knowledge from other disciplines, i.e. discussion about the nature, definition, character and limits of Social Work.
- In the previous decade, the dynamic growth in the number of Schools and Educational Institutions offering Education in Social Work was followed by fragmentation of the Education programs, contents, performance and quality of compulsory student practice as well as an absence of a comprehensive Institutional, Continuing Education System for Social Workers.
- Current Practice in employment of Social Workers in Public Administration and in Social Housing Facilities uses too wide a definition of Educational qualifications without standard definition of the qualification requirements, scope or sectional Education of Social Sphere Staff. This results in an insufficient competency for employees; backwardly, negatively affects the overall perception of Social Work as a Profession; doesn’t lead to the creation of standardized conditions necessary for its Professional performance.

Results of the VSZPaSP St. Elisabeth Graduates Research in Social Work Field of Study

In accordance with Instructions from the Ministry of Education, Science, Youth and Sports, the University periodically organizes an Education Process Assessment by students; statistically evaluated; where the results are fairly favorable; creating conditions for continuous improvement of the Education quality in the various fields of study.

Evaluation of the Education in particular contexts by Graduates is relatively rare. In our findings, we did not note any relevant research results of Public or Private Universities, which would, at least, partially reflect the opinions of Social Work Graduates. Individual Universities find interesting those researches which monitor versatility of the Graduates and their satisfaction with the studied program.

In the Academic Year 2010/2011, we performed research via an electronically sent Questionnaire to 1,837 respondents. The research was focused on the following key areas:

- Motivation for Social Work Study
- Utilization of Knowledge and Skills in Professional Practice,
- Reflection on the Study Program Content in Social Work and the Quality of Educators,

Graduates of the 1st and the 2nd Levels of University Education in the field of Social Work had participated in the research. We supposed that the most of the respondents would be women, which confirmed in Figure 1.
A similar composition of students is also present at other Public Universities. In fact, the statistics for Social Work student gender differentiation is recorded for a variety of reasons which we do not consider necessary to discuss at this point; women especially demonstrate interest to in Social Work.

When we followed the interest - the Graduates’ motivation to study Social Work - the results surprised us with their spectrum of responses and also with quite high percentage oriented on obtaining the knowledge; interest in working with people; interest in the new field of study; etc., Respondents could mention more possibilities of their answers; we present results in Figure 2 in percentages See below.

**Figure 1. Gender of the Respondents.** Women 84.88%  Men 15.12%

**Figure 2. Reason to Study Social Work**
Compared to previous years, the situation has changed, especially for motivation which was conditional for keeping the job; 13.6% responses or 2.1% depending on conditions from an employer when an employee must start studying. As a positive result can be considered a relatively low per cent of effort to get aimed to receive the social accreditation via University degree (7.9%), we could say this tendency is not so strongly preferred, despite being often discussed in the public community.

Evaluation of Education quality provided is quite complicated; during study the students have the opportunity to comment on the Education quality provided; results being evaluated yearly. In general, we could establish the Graduate’s satisfaction with the Education (satisfaction expresses study organization itself; quality of teachers in the Educational process; as well as the level of knowledge and skills gained for further practical application). To these findings we formulated the question:

"Express your satisfaction with finishing the study in the field of Social Work."

The results are presented below in Figure 3.

- 61.2% Satisfied
- 20.8% Neither satisfied nor unsatisfied
- 3.6% Unsatisfied
- 0.4% Very unsatisfied
- 14.5% Very satisfied

Figure 3. Expression of Satisfaction After Finishing the Studies in Social Work

We were also interested in the answers of respondents about their use of knowledge in Professional Practice. We found positive the fact that the Social Work Study Program compiled at VSZaSP achieved a very high per cent rate combined with the use of the acquired knowledge in huge scale (23.3%); “partly used” (58.2%). Partial use may be associated with the fact that candidates who study Social Work, especially in external form e.g. employees of Ministry of Interior, Health and other government entities, and may not be in contact with clients who have social problems. The results are presented in the following figure 4.
Figure 4. Use of Knowledge Gained During Study in Professional Practice.

Relating to the study program content in the field of Social Work, we asked the question which was related to a preference for one of the modules (set of study subjects). Respondents rated on a prefer-scale from 1 to 5. The question was:

*Which of modules do you consider the most important in Social Work Education?*

- Methods of Social Work (Methods of SW, Street work, Social Advising, and Supervision, etc.)
- Social Skills Training
- Social Policy (applied Soc. Policy, securing, employment policy)
- Applied disciplines (SW with seniors, addictives, handicapped persons, etc.)
- Theory of SW (TSW, introduction, basis of SW)
- Law disciplines
- Co-operating Science Disciplines (Psychology, Pedagogy, Sociology, Philosophy)
- Student Practice
- Final work and research procedure

Figure 5. Preference of Some Modules of Study Content in the Field of Social Work.
Based on these results we state that Graduates find important to gain knowledge in the field of Social Work methods, in social skills training, social policy and in applied Social Work disciplines. Less preferred is a theory in field of Social Work, which may be associated with the severity of transmission of Social Work theoretical concepts in the application practice using the appropriate methods of Social Work. Less frequent responses were items related to social-science disciplines.

This fact, on the other hand, points on the need to orientate the teachers into the finding opportunities to bring different disciplines to Social Work and the possibilities of mutual enrichment of these disciplines together.

Linked with social practice, as well as with the Social Work students we are often warned of need for further Education of Social Work Graduates. At this point it should be noted that the Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Family in Slovakia has not created a system of continual Education for Social Workers yet, this need is not anchored in any legislation, notice or concepts. The problem is that the increasing expertise for performing activities in the field of Social Work does not create a premise for wage increase or career promotion.

However, the respondents’ interest for Education is evident. Respondents could assign several responses (Figure 6).

50,1 % Further Education in Accredited Study Programs
46,6 % Conferences and seminars
29,6 % Rigorous act
29,5 % Postgraduate Study
16,4 % Prepared attested Education

![Figure 6. Respondents Interest in Expert Graduation.](image)

Respondents would most prefer Continuing Education in Accredited Study Programs. The challenge to ensure Alumni1 programs for Graduates is their interest at Conferences and

1) In Slovakia, the term Alumni Club is more connected with schools in the United States. There is still a very low level of knowledge about the nature of alumni and it’s relations and the Graduates. This activity is one way, but it brings the benefit for both stakeholders: teachers and Graduates. It seems as this idea has nothing to do with reality of Slovak Graduates. Some representatives of Slovak Universities have notified the need to maintain contact with their own Graduates, a number of such initiatives has developed but with less success. The inspiration for Slovak Universities may not be only the Alumni - clubs at American Universities have the longest
Seminars. However, attested Education for Social Workers is not supported by any legal standards or legislation. In this type of Education, Graduates obviously see such a confirmation of better expert competence with a higher weight than the finishing of a study program. The concept of attested Education at St. Elizabeth University of Health and Social Sciences is in process.

Quite the same response per cent rate was interested in the Post Graduate Studies and rigorous procedures. Approximately 1/3 of Graduates are considering further study, which may be in compliance with the over all trend to make Post Graduate Study available for a wide group interested in a third level of University study.

Graduates declare to have a positive relation to their school even after graduation. This establishes a positive condition for potential cooperation of Graduates in Alumni Clubs and in the area of Continuing Education. It is necessary to utilize this potential and create a space for organizing Education events within lifelong study programs. The aim in this area should be to increase public awareness, especially for our University Graduates about the "Alumni" promotion together with Club activities as well as the benefits associated with the membership in this Club. Under the Alumni activities, mainly we plan:
- **Improving mutual awareness,**
- **Sending e-newsletters,**
- **Cooperation in Lifelong Education,**
- **Common Organization of Professional and Social Events,**
- **Other Activities Resulting from the Mutual Needs.**

**Conclusion**

In our paper, we present research that pointed out several facts that have never been evaluated. We found that the majority of Graduates are satisfied with the Education at the VSZaSP St. Elizabeth in Bratislava; Graduates highlight the importance of some study subjects; and what is pleasing is that they are interested in further Professional development.

We have to realize that it is a question of existential heading and practical back-up of the Profession in current Slovak Society; in its development; it is not just a question of purely academic, often discrediting the level and quality of the practical application of knowledge and skills of Graduates in Social Work Practice.

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2) Attestation is a verification of achieved competences defined by Professional standards for relevant category of specialized staff in field of Social Work that was achieved by continual Education, self-Education or providing specialized activities. Attestation can be done only by expert staff in the field of Social Work, who achieved a University degree at least a second degree and have at least 1 year of experience.
The prospect of positive change in the empowerment of Social Workers and the Profession itself, is the Professionalization of Social Work in terms of fulfilling the declared interest of the Slovak Government itself in the Manifesto:

Create conditions to ensure the Professionalization of Social Work.

Forthcoming legislative action should meet the expectations of Social Workers in terms of their Professional position and status.

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