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COMPETENCES OF SOCIAL WORKERS IN THE CONTEXT OF REGIONAL CHALLENGES

(results of an empirical research)

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Abstract
The report presents the results of an empirical study oriented towards assessing the training of specialists with higher education in social work. The emphasis is placed on the ranking of the main areas of competence reflected through regional needs and future users of social services. The results obtained prove the need to train interdisciplinary professionals who can explore local, global and intercultural issues, understand and evaluate different perspectives and perspectives, interact successfully and respectfully with others, and take responsible action in terms of sustainability and collective well-being.

Keywords: competence; social workers, higher education, local needs.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between the quality training of modern social workers and their competencies is extremely complex and has been significantly studied in recent decades. However, there is still a perception in academic research that the social worker is moving on precarious terrain, and in this sense social work can be classified as a research profession, with the interweaving of research and actual practice characterized by significant interdisciplinarity [1].

The interdisciplinary nature of both the practical intervention and the theoretical training of specialists require not just a set of skills and abilities, but adequate behavior in the context of local and global challenges. Despite the widespread debate about the internationalization of social work, there is a significant research deficit in terms of how global competence standards adapt to specific local conditions. From this point of view, further questions also arise about the relationship between local and global characteristics of social needs and competences of professionals. Lena Dominelli and Vasilios Ioakimidis examine in detail the challenges arising from globalization and their relationship with the training of social workers and defend the view that the concerns of imposing knowledge and views from all over the world without taking into account the cultural and specific context of social work are unfounded [2].

At the same time, other authors [3,4] emphasize that it is local needs and national cultural specificities that should be leading in defining the competence profile. This conceptual tension between universal standards and local realities remains insufficiently explored in the Bulgarian context, which motivates this study.

The main purpose of the report is to study the opinion of specialists from social organizations about the quality and adequacy of the knowledge that students receive. In addition to the goal, the research orientation is also in search of correspondence between the training of future specialists and regional challenges.

The specific research questions that guide the study are: (1) Which target groups will be prioritized regionally in the next decade?

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(2) Which of the 9 main areas of competence [5] are assessed as the most important by employers in the context of local needs? (3) Is there a discrepancy between the theoretical and practical training of students according to the employers' assessments?

EXPOSITION

In scientific literature, the question of the interaction between the local significance of social work and global approaches in the daily practice of social workers continues to be debatable. Regardless of the fact, debates on the international dimensions of social work can be trace back in time and are sufficiently supported by research [3] it is more than evident that the interweaving of the local and global nature of social interventions influences academic research, theoretical approaches and requires the set of skills and competences in the training of social work professionals.

In Cox and Pawar [4]; Graßhoff et al. [6]; Healy [7]; Kammer-Rutten et al. [8]; Midgley [9] clearly defends the thesis that social relations, global processes and trends, existing organizations and policies transcend national borders and serve as a kind of link between individual countries. There are also many scientific arguments that the specific approaches applied in social work need to be refracted through the prism of national culture, local needs and the established structures for providing social support.

In this study, we do not downplay these debates, much less make arguments in support of the local or global social context of social work development. On the contrary, the depth of research searches and arguments show that the international perspective of social work allows the application of an unconventional methodology in the collection of empirical data for the study of global trends such as: migration, poverty, support for refugees, protection of children's rights, work with persons victims of violence, discrimination, etc., and from there forms a specific set of competences, which are applied in the training of future specialists.

In a more concrete aspect, this research is based on the understanding that the modern social worker must possess the necessary competences to be able to cope with both familiar processes and problems, as well as emerging ones. This is because the competence model proposed by the OECD [10] defines the need to develop global competence. The definition of global competence in itself coincides exclusively with the objectives of social work, and hence with the profile of social interventions, namely: "globally competent individuals can explore local, global and intercultural issues, understand and evaluate different perspectives and perspectives, interact successfully and respectfully with others, and take responsible action with regard to sustainability and collective well-being" [10]. In our opinion, social work is a socially oriented activity and part of a complex theoretical and professional network of services and institutions, and is called, through a scientific and systematic approach, to deal with the problems of individuals, groups and communities, to influence the quality of life and social well-being.

Based on available research and academic discussions, the report examines the correspondence between the training of professionals with higher education and regional needs and user profile.

The proposed approach within the framework of the report can serve as a basis for the implementation of national and international studies that will more clearly outline the necessary competences of future specialists.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is based on the following phases:

First phase – literature review, comparative analysis and preparation of the tools. Within this phase, various sources of information, theoretical relationships and models such as the needs model [11] and the competence model in social work [5] were reviewed. Given the geographical scope of

the study, a preliminary comparison of disciplines studied in all Bulgarian universities by students majoring in Social Activities was also carried out. The information from these sources served as a basis for the development of a questionnaire to establish the correspondence between the training of specialists with higher education and future social needs in regional terms. The questionnaire was piloted with three social experts who were not involved in the main study to check the clarity and relevance of the questions.

The programming of the questionnaire and the collection of data was carried out through the Microsoft forms platform. The questionnaire contains 9 questions, grouped into the following blocks: regional profile of future social needs and consumers, assessment of the training of specialists with higher education (including separate scales for theoretical and practical training) and demographic information. A five-point scale of the Lickert type was used to assess the degree of agreement with the statements.

The second phase covered the implementation of the survey among social service providers in Gabrovo District. The planned sample aimed to coincide with the general population and covered 41 regional providers, while in fact 30 social organizations took part in the study. (73%). As an additional requirement for social institutions, the restriction was made for only one employee to participate in the survey in order to limit the possibility of predominance of representatives of a particular institution. According to the participating organizations, the survey covers all types of services defined in the Social Services Act and intended for different target groups [12] and includes representatives of NGOs, private organizations and municipal structures.

Within the framework of the survey, 80% of the respondents occupy the position of "manager", 10% - social worker and 10% - expert in social activities, as 47% of the surveyed specialists have over 20 years of experience in the social sphere and 23% declare experience of 10 to 20 years. All participants in the study have higher education in the field of social work and similar professional fields. The presented profile of the respondents, combining a high share of managers with extensive professional experience, is reason to assert that the data are reliable and allow to draw specific conclusions. The study is characterized by a limitation as it does not include the opinion of other stakeholders – students, teachers and service users, which would enrich the analysis.

RESULTS

For the purposes of the survey and within the framework of the questionnaire, the opinion of employers was sought based on the curriculum according to which future social workers are trained in only one university in Bulgaria. Within the first phase of the study, a comparison was made with the curricula of all Bulgarian universities, with the leading criteria for comparison being the international standards for higher education in social work, which recommend a framework of core competencies in the following 9 areas: 1) ethical and professional identity; 2) critical thinking and analysis of policies, 3) intervention at the level of individual, family, group and community; (4) assessment of needs and results; (5) commitment to diversity; 6) advocacy for human rights; 7) interdisciplinary and teamwork; (8) use of technology and data, and (9) administration and management [5].

In the context of the regional scope of the survey, an answer was sought to the question of what target groups will be a priority in the field of social work in the next 10 years and what specialists will be needed in the context of the projected social needs? The results show that the largest number of responses accumulate in the groups: people with disabilities (90% of social organizations expressed agreement and very high consent) and elderly (83.4%), and according to the experts, there are sufficiently developed services for children, young people and families in the region (Fig. 1).

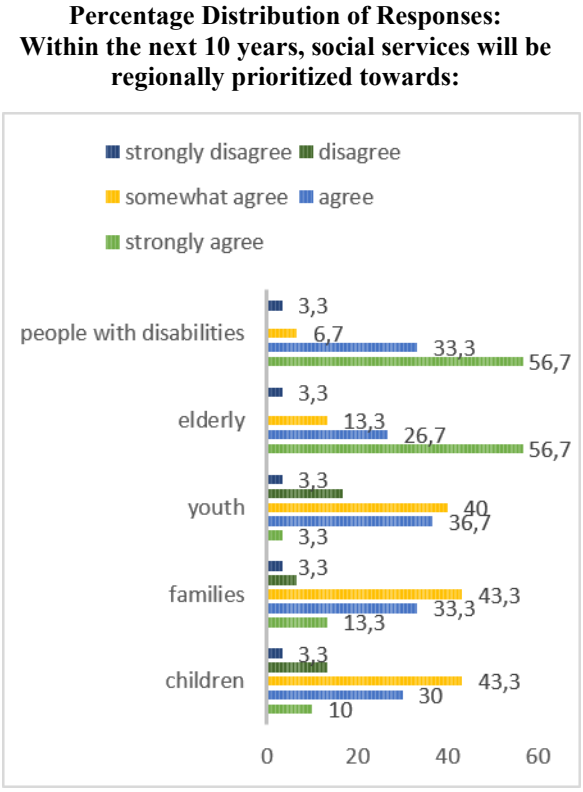


Fig. 1. *Forecast for future users of social services*

In the context of the identified future needs of the survey, it was found that in the provision of social services in the future more medical specialists (63.3%), support specialists (50%), and social workers (40%) will be needed. These data show the importance of the research question posed, namely the adequacy of the training of specialists with higher education in social work.

Within the framework of the study, the respondents' assessment of the overall training of the specialists and the theoretical knowledge they have, and the level of practical training were sought. The results obtained show that 77% of the surveyed participants are satisfied and very satisfied with the overall training of specialists with higher education in social work, 80% are satisfied and very satisfied with the theoretical knowledge of those working in such a position and 50% are satisfied with the practical skills when applying for work. This significant discrepancy between the high score for theoretical training (80%) and the significantly lower score for practical training (50%) outlines a significant problem in training that requires targeted interventions. The relatively low percentage of assessment of students' practical training shows the need to orient the training to specific case studies. This coincides with the understanding of compactness, which is built through two forms of reflection:

- reflection in action, guaranteeing the ability to rethink the problem and approach at work;
- reflection after the action by analyzing the results of the intervention.

Within the framework of the study and in view of the main areas of competence formulated by the Accreditation Council for Social Work [5], a kind of ranking of the areas of competence is realized, but in the context of local needs.

The results obtained show the following picture:

Interdisciplinary and teamwork finds full agreement of 73% of the specialists surveyed. The reasons for this high approval are supported by the following arguments provided by the experts involved:

- The inclusion of disciplines in the field of direct social work with different users is key to professional training and affects the quality of social intervention, as interdisciplinary knowledge can lead to an understanding of the essence of the problem. At the same time, in order to implement adequate support, skills in using teamwork are also needed.

The results of the survey show that "ethical and professional identity", "commitment to diversity" and advocacy for human rights" are rated secondary, as 63% of professionals fully agree that these competences are important in the practical work of social workers. As arguments, they point to the fact that the increase in users among the elderly and people with disabilities entails many ethical issues and requires advocacy for human rights.

Analysis and critical thinking of policies are indicated as very important by 61% of the surveyed specialists. According to the respondents, "social workers are the only

specialists who should have extensive knowledge of the legal framework and need to know the framework and priorities of the current social policy in the country. In this way, a wider horizon of direct social work could be achieved, and social practice could be enriched.

Intervention at individual, family, group and community level and assessment of needs and outcomes were outlined as important areas for achieving quality of social services by 59% of survey participants. Half of the survey participants (50%) believe that the use of technology and the management and administration of services are important for professional intervention. According to experts, the introduction of technology in social work is an inevitable process that would also affect the bureaucratic burden and administration of social organizations. These competencies are ranked last with the argument that these processes usually concern a small number of service professionals and can be acquired within the professional path after graduation.

DISCUSSION

Due to the regional scope of the study and the small number of participants, it is not possible to perform a statistical analysis to establish the statistical relationship between the studied variables. Despite the existing limitations, the study provoked a discussion in the context of the formulated conclusions:

1. The interdisciplinary training of specialists with higher education in "Social Work" is key to professional practice, as knowledge about the person and society can be formed within the framework of academic training.

2.The successful implementation of team interaction, communication with different professionals in compliance with ethical and professional standards of work are also necessary to ensure successful social advocacy and respect for diversity.

3. Special competences related to knowledge of social legislation and policies, assessment of needs and professional work with individuals, groups and communities" are rather skills that can be formed as a result of practice.

CONCLUSION

The need for quality training of specialists with higher education is key to the development of the profession of "social work" and significant for the effectiveness of social interventions. Within the framework of the report, through the analysis of empirical information, it was found that interdisciplinary training in an academic environment and team interaction were identified as leading by the respondents. At the same time, the entry of technology and the administration of services are rather competencies that can be formed after graduation.

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