

THE DEVELOPMENT OF TRANSVERSAL COMPETENCES, A REQUIREMENT OF THE ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT⁵

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Abstract:The role of academic environment consists mainly of responding positively to the changes on the labour market by providing it with specialists who can successfully face the requirements. Due to its complexity, the field of social work is in need of personnel with multiple professional, specific and transversal competences.

Thus, training specialists in the field of social work services is a complex process, which involves constant changes in the curricula according to the requirements of the economic environment. The dialogue between academic and economic environment as well as the feedback of graduate students have signalled certain dysfunctions in the contents of courses, teaching methods, etc. The necessity of developing competences such as conflict management, interpersonal communication, and creativity has also been pointed out.

The article is actually a project whose aim is to adjust the academic educational offer to the requirements of labour market, namely to implement modern teaching methods that would develop transversal competences.

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Introduction

The evaluation of Romanian higher education reveals *"a system whose ties to the environment are insufficiently explored and analysed; a system with its own logic and coherent unfolding but which is too little involved in society, rather disconnected from it"* (ARACIS, 2010,p. 15). Quality evaluation in higher education can be made by relating it to the institution's own objectives (*fitness for purpose*) or by relating it to universal, pre-set standards.

Romanian higher education is much criticised mostly for its rigidity or poor adjustment to the chaotic social evolution of past few years and rather poor quality of the educational act.

Arguments for the necessity of adjusting the curriculum to the requirements of the economic environment

The students' low level of professional insertion especially in their field of study has been a warning for the academic environment. Thus, scholars have constantly tried to improve the quality of educational act which would result in better trained students, able to meet the requirements of a constantly changing labour market. Therefore, the academic environment has encouraged the dialogue with the economic environment which has offered numerous suggestions for the improvement of dysfunctions but has also encouraged functional practices in universities.

The need of adjusting the curriculum to the requirements of the economic environment is justified by certain dysfunctions signalled by employers and even graduates. We mention here only some of them:

- the development of study programmes (especially Master programmes) is not preceded by an analysis of the need or requirement for such programmes on the labour market; Master students graduate fields of study no longer required by the labour market.
- emphasis on theoretical development rather than on the acquisition of competences;
- insufficient knowledge in their field of study.

The Master Programme in Social Work Services organized by Aurel Vlaicu University- short description (Hatos, 2014)

Aurel Vlaicu University of Arad meets the need for the training of social workers since 1999 when the study programme Didactical Theology-Social Work started functioning within the Faculty of Theology. Currently, in “Aurel Vlaicu” University we have a Bachelor study programme (Social Work) and a Master programme (Social Work Services). The Master programme in the field of social work is called *Social Work Services* and covers a wide field of activity, namely services. Therefore, the competences aimed by the disciplines focus on knowing specific intervention areas, understanding how these services work and receiving counselling in accessing community resources.

The Master programme *Social Work Services* is an institutional structure for training in the field of social work designed for students who want to be specialists in this field. The Master programme Social Work was created as a result of the students' need for professional development. Its purpose is to cover the requirements of the labour market in Arad county and beyond.

The syllabus is adjusted to the topic of the master programme and unfolds for a period of 4 semesters. A condition for graduating the programme is the acquisition of 120 credits.

Some of the competences covered by the curriculum of this master programme aim to:

- elaborate professional projects for the development of health and social work services
- Consultancy in accessing community resources for people and groups at risk of social exclusion and consultancy in developing entrepreneurship services in health and social work services
- Assuming a role in counselling, intervention or other methods used in social work services
- Comparative analysis of social and health policies in Romania and EU so as to adjust good practices to national peculiarities
- Analysis and use of communication and professional relationships with beneficiaries of social work services

The graduates of the Master programme Social Work Services will have the opportunity to enrol in one or more of the following domains, acknowledged by the Classification of Occupations in Romania: Social Worker higher level: Code: 244601, Researcher in social work: Code: 263510, Counsellor for addictions: Code: 263502, Career Orientation counsellor: Code: 241208, Specialists in social work and counselling: Code: 2635

Apart from these, the graduates of the master programme can benefit from employment on positions not mentioned in the COR, such as:

coordinator of social department in social work institutions, manager of social work agency, chief of social service, supervisor etc. SocioPlus Project - *Training, documentation and access services for students in Undergraduate and Master Studies in Sociology and Social Work* is a project conducted by Aurel Vlaicu University in partnership with the University of Oradea. Its purpose is to increase the relevance of the study programme Social Work, Bachelor and Master studies for the labour market, based on an analysis of needs. Another goal is the development of SocioPlus network between relevant actors (universities, business environment, public authorities, social partners). Universities try to improve their ability to support the development of educational management.

The disciplines studied within the Master programme Social Work Services at Aurel Vlaicu University of Arad focus on the development of competences required by specialists in social work from private or public services, according to European Qualification Framework. Their diversity and complexity assign an interdisciplinary character to the programme. The courses are similar to courses studied in other universities.

Pedagogic techniques, competences and knowledge required by employers

Employers consider as priority the development of general competences related to professional counselling and use of communication in professional relationships during the Master programme *Social Work Services*.

Besides these competences, employers rank with high scores also the following competences:

- Identifying specific needs of the target group, monitoring cases and assessment of how situation has improved
- Identifying, analysing (explaining) and solving problems and conflicts in organizations and communities
- Analysing social communication. Analysis and assessment of strategies and personal, group and mass communication processes, organizational communication.

A report from the project notes that most employers underline the importance of having teamwork abilities, of managing work time properly and acting in stressful situations. They also consider important the students' non-refundable project writing and implementation skills, which are competences targeted in the programme *Social Work Services* through one course, namely *Development of projects in social work services*.

Generally speaking, employers had the same observations and remarks regarding the graduates of the Bachelor and Master programme: assigning more hours for internship, more rigorous organization of internship stages for a better knowledge of the students' field of activity, development of transversal competences as consequence of involvement in activities conducted by the institution.

Adjusting the curriculum by using modern teaching methods

A fundamental and priority objective of higher education is the training and development of competences in the field of innovation and entrepreneurship to meet the requirements of constantly changing work places. In social work, namely in social work services, transversal competences along with specific competences play a defining role in one's career. They are defined as acquisitions in terms of values and attitudes which don't exceed the limits of a certain field/study programme and are expressed by the following descriptors: autonomy and responsibility, social interaction, professional and personal development. The development of these competences involves using modern and interactive methods and a multidisciplinary approach of contents/disciplines.

Transversal competences for the occupational standard aim:

- Objective and argumentative approach both theoretical and practical of certain problem situations seeking for an efficient solution, respecting values and principles specific to social work
- Applying techniques of efficient work in multidisciplinary teams developed around hierarchical positions at intra- and inter-organizational level.
- Objective self-assessment of professional training needs and the identification of resources and ways of personal and professional development aiming the insertion and adjustment to the demands of labour market

The dialogue with employers conducted during the Socio-Plus project revealed the need for developing useful tools for a proper adaptation of master graduates on the labour market. Therefore cognitive, affective resources need revaluing and this goal can be achieved only by using modern methods and interactive strategies. More than undergraduates studies, Master programmes need to train graduates with real competences in the field of social work services. Specific competences are supplemented with transversal competences which have been strongly debated upon during discussions with employers. They have signalled poor preparation of master students in this respect,

especially in communication, work management in social work institutions, teamwork, etc.

Data obtained after analysing the employers' and graduates' answers as well as after comparing the study programme *Social Work Services* with other similar national and international programmes are relevant information in our attempt to improve the study programme of Aurel Vlaicu University, Arad.

All suggestions and recommendations are listed below:

- creating premises for a serious involvement of Master students in field/office activities etc.;
- Rigorous monitoring of students' internship;
- Assigning more hours for internship and introduction of new internship stages;
- Introduction of topics related to *refugees and multi-ethnic communities, people with disabilities* in the discipline **European policies for security and social work**
- *Adjusting the contents of the discipline Development of projects in social work services with emphasis on project work*
- Providing career counseling services and creating a database which grants employers access to information on the students' involvement in extracurricular and voluntary activities etc.
- Using teaching methods that develop competences in teamwork, communication, relationships with peers and other institutions, abilities in giving new solutions, working under pressure, proper time management skills etc.
- More seminars for the course *Development of projects in social work services*.

We will focus only on the development of transversal competences and in particular the ones ranked as absolutely necessary by employers. They consider these competences mandatory for the students' efficiency and also a prerequisite for performance in social work services. Transversal competences – are acquisitions in terms of values and attitudes that transcend a particular field/study programme and are expressed by the following descriptors: autonomy and responsibility, social interaction, personal and professional development.

Transversal competences are expressed by:

- **Attitudinal competences** are general values, motivations and effects that should accompany students in their future interventions, namely in their future profession. For the Master students of the programme Social Work Service these competences refer to the development of values such as respect

for beneficiaries, assuming humanistic values specific for this field of activity, respect for docimologic regulations etc.;

- **Strategic competences** are externalized in learning skills and critical thinking;
- **Social competences** are required for the settlement of a harmonious relationship with peers or clients, for good collaboration and leadership etc.;
- **Communication competences**: written and oral communication, presentation of new ideas and solutions.

Employers in the field of social work (public or private services) consider some of these competences extremely valuable. The most appreciated skills are:

- Time management skills;
- Teamwork skills;
- Stress management skills; tense situations and conflict management skills;
- Skills in communication and relationship with beneficiaries, peers, etc.

The importance given by employers to various transversal competences, which are considered useful to SAS Master programme graduates is presented in Table below. The ranking is made on a scale from 1 (not important) to 4 (very important).

These skills/competences can be developed by using certain modern teaching strategies which would involve students directly and would develop their communication and teamwork skills. Some of these methods are: *methods for the development of creative abilities*: the cube, jigsaw technique, Know/what to know/have learnt chart, reciprocal teaching, Mind-mapping, Tour of Gallery, and *methods for the development of critical thinking*: brainstorming, Frisco, „synectics, „Phillips 6/6”, brainwriting.

The topics approached by the courses from the syllabus of the study programme *Social Work Services* favour the use of interactive teaching strategies. They have an active-participative character and therefore activities conducted during lectures favour cooperation, teamwork and communication.

The course in *European policies for security and social work* is the ideal framework for the development of teamwork skills because students have to design strategies or policies in the field of social security. The use of interactive methods in this context leads to the development of dynamic communication relationships and information exchanges between students. The relationship depends on the influences, behaviours, socio-cognitive conflicts and group mentality.

Table1.

Average values of competences specific to study programmes

Transversal competences	SAS
Design and conduction of sociological research, cultural studies, market studies	2,2
Social data management systems; knowledge and procedure usage of specific software and databases social indicators	2,9
The construction and use of social indicators	2,6
Diagnosis of social problems	3,0
Professional counselling and social integration	3,5
Managing relationships in organizations	2,5
Development, implementation and evaluation of projects, policies and social work programmes for different vulnerable groups	3,2
Communication and professional relationships with the beneficiaries of social work programs and other actors	3,3
Use of specific intervention methods in the direct work with beneficiaries of social services	3,4
Analysis and use of professional networking and communication with beneficiaries and other stakeholders	3,5

Source: Hatos, A., (2014). *Guidebook for Sociology and Social work on the labor market*, Oradea: University of Oradea Publishing House, p150-152

The analysis of specific situations and interhuman - interinstitutional relationships in the field of social work and health services, a competence targeted by this course can be achieved by giving students proper contexts for observation, analysis of realities in human relations within organizations. These observations will be turned into skills that can be used in real situations at work.

Conflict management in social work is a quality, namely a skill that can be trained and developed through case studies; these situations are mostly related to cases of professional deontology in the field of social work. The course *Career development in socio-medical services* can successfully approach real situations debated with practitioners in the field of social work. Their aim is to improve interpersonal relations, sharing experiences, confronting ideas, developing individual responsibility, etc.

The ability to act properly under stress and time management skills are achievable goals of internship stages. Students have the opportunity to get involved directly and complete tasks in a real, sometimes tense environment. I consider that Fishbowl Technique places students alternatively in two situations: active participants in a debate and also observers of interactions that take place (Pânișoară, 2008, 360).

A modern and efficient technique used for the development of C3.3. competence: *Designing efficient solutions in specialized intervention and counselling* is the *Tour of Gallery* which “*is a technique of learning by cooperation where students divided into micro-groups work together to solve a controversial issue which has more possible solutions*” (Negreț-Dobridor, Pânișoară, 2005, 226). This method stimulates creativity, develops critical thinking and encourages respect for other peers and tolerance.

So, the stimulation of students’ interest for their own training involves some efficient and valid methods, such as: heuristic approach, problem-solving, case study, role play, etc.

We can definitely state that case study is a method specific for the field of humanities, used especially in sociology – social work. The practical character of social work has led to what Ioan Cerghit (2006, 232). stated: the need for finding ways to bring training closer to real life situations, to practical and productive social activities. Intervention skills, research skills, systematization of collected information, finding solving alternatives are considered the most valuable competences developed by the graduates of Master studies in Social Work Services; all these competences are trained and assessed by the case study method. Thus, cases of abuse identified by the mass media, abandonment and drug abuse can be the premises for an analysis on the influence of environment and education on human behaviour. Debates that emerge from these analyses are guided by the teacher in the right direction and they stimulate students in supporting proper ways of solving certain issues.

Problem-statement as modern teaching method perfectly fits into the category of techniques which involve students in constructing information, developing cause-effect relationships and drafting the picture of a social phenomenon, for instance. The advantages of this method are obvious: development of operating schemes of divergent thinking and training creative skills. Knowledge of social policies in the field of professional insertion is possible through the transmission of information by lecturing on a certain topic. It can also be inferred through problem-statement, construction of proposals/measures and confronting the issues with the reality. In this way, students discover possible and valuable solutions or they can criticise the existing model. The method

can be used in Master studies because students already have some information in their field of study. It can also be used in the Master programme *Social Work Services*, especially in the course European policies for security and social work. Problem-statement leaves room for discussions, debates, discovery of solutions but it also creates a context which favours dialogue, discussions, revaluing of ideas and consequently the development of transversal competences.

Conclusions

Training in social services involves the development of a wide range of skills, given that the Master programme in Social Work Services aims to prepare specialists that would be able to practice social work in any type of social services. Thus, practitioners in this field captured the importance of transversal competences as prerequisite for performance in this area. Counselling various categories of people, intervention in critical situations, instrumenting certain cases, coordination in case management are only a few examples of situations that require professional approach, ability to relate to the others, team work and conflict management skills. Obviously, universities, the student and employers share the responsibility for the development of these competences but universities have the duty to create a stimulating, relaxed and optimal environment for the development of these competences.

Considering the profile of an ideal employee as well as the peculiarities of social work activities, we believe that graduates of Master studies in the field of social services need critical thinking to find viable solutions, to handle time pressure properly and also to be able to face all tasks that they are confronted with. Graduates have to be good listeners and need good communication skills. Therefore, teachers will focus on using methods for the development of creative abilities but also of critical thinking; all measures will be taken to train outstanding specialists.

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