

# CRITICAL ASPECTS IN THE BUILDING OF PROFESSIONAL AND TRANSVERSAL SKILLS IN THE ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT FOR STUDENTS MAJORING IN SOCIAL WORK

Loredana-Marcela Trancă, PhD.,  
Faculty of Sociology and Psychology, West University of Timișoara  
loredana.tranca@e-uvv.ro

**Abstract:** *The present paper aims to present the results of a study that identified the critical aspects in building professional and transversal skills in the university environment for students in the field of social work. The objectives of the research are: analysis of the role of the course modules, seminar, laboratory and practice stages in the formation of skills in the university environment; identifying the participants' perception of the way in which professional and transversal skills are currently built; identifying difficulties in ensuring professional and transversal skills according to the qualification offered by the curriculum, as well as identifying measures for curriculum optimization at university level. The study was based on a qualitative methodological approach, using the focus group as a research method. The sample consisted of 166 participants, social work students from three universities in the West of Romania, and the research tool used was the moderator guide. The study's conclusions brought to the forefront the need to improve the curriculum, which should be more flexible, taking into account all the actors involved (students, teachers, employers), but mainly with regard to the beneficiaries, respectively the graduates' career interest. At the same time, curricular design of transversal and professional skills requires coherent, functional and flexible integration of all types of content: cognitive, action and attitude.*

**Keywords:** *professional skills; transversal skills; social work students;*

## 1. Introduction

Social work in Romania is continuously changing and following the new issues engendered by the evolution of social processes: this is why universities are bound to train specialists by developing proper professional

skills. “The domain of the social work occupations is a quite recent one for Romania and this fact leads to a series of difficulties in correlating and harmonizing the university professional education with the labour market.” (Neamțu, 2012) A study regarding the degree in which educational curricula train graduates according to their major, to related domains or to different domains (Isăilă, Miron & Andrei, 2011) shows that social work is part of curricula training for related domains. Future social workers need to be trained both theoretically and practically to be able to resolve current problems and to apply the knowledge and competencies acquired depending on everyday practical requirements. “The social work profession is considered complex because of the multiple skills required in the interventions made and the diversity of the situations that occur”. (Costin & Bran, 2016) The validation of competencies is named among the most frequent used active measure of the employment policy (Sava & Crașovan, 2013). In social work practice the competences have to convey with the creativity in order to find solutions for new and complex problems (Rădulescu, 2010) The ACPART study (Voicu, Tufiș, & Voicu, 2010) carried out in Romania in 2010 shows that, for both graduates and recruiters, specific skills acquired after graduating from social science programme are important, but they come second after transversal one, because employers are interested in wider domains rather than employers in the technical field who pay more attention to specific competencies. Transversal, teamwork, and communication competencies are decisive only when there is a certain level of professional competencies (Isăilă, Miron & Andrei, 2011). According to the *Declaration of Bologna* (1999), the role of higher education is to arm students with competencies and skills (knowledge, attitude and behaviours) that employees need to do their job and that employers seeks when hiring. The general goal of the Strategy of education and professional training in Romania for 2016-2020 focusses on adapting educational and professional training programmes to the competencies and trends on the labour market: this is why we need to improve the quality of the teaching-learning process by correlating higher education graduates’ educational offer, aptitudes, competencies and skills with employers’ needs. Likewise, the European Commission initiative “*New skills for new jobs: anticipating and meeting competency requirements of the labour market*” underlines the necessity of consolidating human capital and the ability of integrating professionally through higher competency levels. Through transversal skills people can more easily adapt to the complex and diverse reality. After Mureșan (2015), “a lack of transversal competences has been noticed, and consequently the higher education should be more focused on the development of the transversal skills and the adequate improvement of the educational process”. One of the most important trends noticed by the European Commission

(2008) in the field of future necessary competencies is the considerable growth of social work services by 2020. The field of social work tries to respond through the content of the curriculum and, in particular, through practice to social work imperatives of disadvantaged categories that require support. In this regard, a disciplinary, multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach is envisaged, because only such an integrative approach can successfully face to the complexity of the problems that exist in social work. Validation of prior learning is permanently mentioned as a solution to address the skills matching, the skills demand and supply, the needed skills for the new jobs (Sava, Borca & Danciu, 2014). The goal for university management is the introduction of competency-based approach in identifying and defining learning results to improve the employability of graduates (Pârvu, Ipate & Mitran, 2014). In the context of the necessity of continuously developing competencies to meet fluctuating circumstances on the labour market to achieve a quick, successful transition to a job (and a career), this study relies on the need for developing academic programmes, on the complexity and implications of training and on the learning opportunities for the students majoring in social work. In Romania, the levels of competence in social work educations are: university, postgraduate and research. The social work education in Romania is provided in 17 state university and 4 private universities at the license level. The areas where social workers in Romania can work are described by Trancă (2015a). Changing the curriculum is justified by the evolution of both scientific and technical knowledge and by the changes of practical social needs. The tools for the assessment of transversal skills should be relevant to different contexts (Tam & Trzmiel, 2017). Baci (2015) describes the skills used by social workers in the intervention process. Transversal and professional competences, i.e. what students are able to do professionally, the skills and behaviours that allow them to face the complexity of this working environment, have a significant importance in increasing the chances for professionalism and performance of the future professionals in the field of social work (Trancă, 2016, 2015b).

## **2. Methodology**

### ***2.1. Objectives***

The goal of this research was to identify critical aspects of building up professional and transversal competencies in the academic environment for the students majoring in social work. The objectives of the research are analysing the role of course, seminar, laboratory, and practice modules in the development of competencies in higher education; identifying the perception

of the respondents of the way in which professional and transversal competencies are being built; identifying the difficulty of ensuring professional and transversal competencies according to the study programme; and identifying measures regarding the optimisation of curricula in higher education.

## ***2.2. Method and procedure***

To reach the objectives of this qualitative-exploratory study, we have chosen as a research method the focus group because it provides the participants the opportunity of participating in a dialogue allowing access to the inner coherence of the topic by building up a constructive framework with a diversity of points of view or opinions, of experience stories, of perceptions or attitudes that point out their perspective on critical aspects of building up professional and transversal competencies within study programmes. 10 focus groups were organized. Focus group moderators managed the debates allowing everybody to state his/her position based on one's own experience, perceptions or aptitudes regarding the topic. The focus group had three phases. In the first one, the expert explained the participants the objectives of the project, supplied information regarding the recording of the meeting and its use, and got verbal approval on participation to the focus group and on recording the focus group (the interviews were audio recorded and the audio material content was analysed). In the second phase, the expert moderated the debates based on a moderating guide; in the third phase, the moderator briefed the information, asked for completions, and asked for and supplied feedback for the participants. The mean duration of a focus group was 60-80 minutes. Participation was associated with no physical, psychic, social or legal damage. No name, address, or identity was used in the study thus observing the right to privacy and personal life of the participants to the focus group.

## ***2.3. Instrument***

The research instrument used was a moderation guide containing as topic the relevance of disciplines in the curriculum (evaluation of the most/least relevant disciplines); structuration of curriculum discipline content; value of course, seminar, laboratory and practice modules for competency development (structure and duration of teaching-learning activities); role of actors involved in competency development; building up of professional and transversal competencies; satisfaction with the quality of activities and results; responsibilities in developing competencies; difficulties/hindrances/issues in ensuring competency development; most

appreciated teaching and activity management methods; correlation between overall credits and number of classes – teaching-learning interaction proper, projects, editing specific materials, tutoring, individual preparation for evaluation; optimisation of the curriculum; suggestions for building up professional and transversal competencies in agreement with complex, unique, and varied situations of the future job.

#### ***2.4. Participants***

The sample consisted in 166 participants. Each focus group had a maximum of 20 participants: 125 students majoring in social work in three universities of Western Romania, undergraduates in day course and distance learning in the 3rd year and MSc students in the 1st year having majored in social work; 35 representatives of social work services, public and private institutions that are also partners (for the practice courses) of the universities participating in the research; 6 staff involved in the development of academic programmes (tenure teaching staff from the three universities involved in the research).

The methodological approach of this study consisted in developing research methodology; collecting data through the focus group method; analysing results; and editing the study report.

### **3. Results and discussion**

The main aspects aimed at in this investigative approach were the relevance of disciplines in the curricula and the structuring of discipline content; the role of the actors involved in the development of competencies; the actual building up of professional and transversal competencies; the difficulties identified in ensuring competencies; suggestions for the academic curricula.

#### ***3.1. Relevance of disciplines in the curricula and the structuring of discipline content***

The most relevant disciplines in the curricula are those introducing specialty disciplines, partial specialty disciplines, disciplines developing communication and IT competencies; the least relevant disciplines are those with no practical relevance for current society. In a socio-cultural and technological context in continuous change because of progress or new scientific approaches and of new realities, we need to harmonise curricula contents with current needs. A discipline that is very relevant for the participants is practice since it aims at completing in the most proper way the

basic theoretical knowledge acquired by the students through the teaching-learning process and contributing to the perfection of professional competencies and skills necessary to a social worker according to current occupational standards and to the national training framework. Participants opined that practice should benefit from more attention, i.e. share 50% of the total classes of a curriculum. At present, practice shares only about 10% of a curriculum. The participants argued that practice is the main field of work experience and of uniqueness in applying knowledge; that it provides the possibility of acting independently to take professional responsibilities; that it allows improving and correcting theoretical knowledge and based on observation; that it allows consolidation of long-term theoretical knowledge; that it allows students to experience a real working environment and, thus, get better self-knowledge, explore one's potential and test one's own limits (self-evaluation), and see if he/she is fit for a social worker job; and that it allows students to operate with the instruments specific to a social worker, to develop ethical behaviour and to observe professional deontology rules. Though the role of students is not vital for the practice institution, they are challenged to work together with experienced social workers and to improve their work routine to prove they can become social workers. As for the proportional structure of the curricula, participants opined seminars and laboratories should share 30% of the curriculum and courses 20% of the curriculum. Currently, courses share about 50% and seminars share about 40% of the curriculum.

### ***3.2. Role of the actors involved in the development of competencies***

Teaching-learning activities through courses, seminars, laboratories or practice support the student's participative role in developing professional and transversal competencies. Participants to the focus group consider that they are the main actors in the development of competencies, followed by the teachers and, last but not least, the practice supervisors in practice institutions. Students believe that the student-teacher relationship is a partnership in which the teacher facilitates student's active learning, guides the student in the process of knowledge, provides the opportunity of experiencing through learning situations, encourage and prepares for self-information and self-education, thus developing a set of competencies necessary for optimal socio-professional insertion. The student is an active participant in one's own knowledge and development, being concerned with exploring, advancing new ideas or original solutions, developing arguing abilities, valorising one's own competencies, and being able to use knowledge in new situations. The practice supervisor's role is to provide consulting and supervision in the acquisition of knowledge and the

development of professional skills, to guide and make students accountable for their work duties, to stimulate student's interest in the profession of social worker, to mould professional conduct, and to harmonise academic requirements with practical life.

### ***3.3. Actual building up of professional and transversal competencies***

The system of professional and transversal competencies is a reference elements of curricula; therefore, it has been included in their grounding note. Curricula aim directly at balanced development of competencies in the study programme by providing the necessary knowledge and developing proper skills and attitudes. Current diagnosis of building up competencies shows we need teamwork to update the educational offer. Participants mentioned they need at least one annual meeting with employers or social partners and with academic staff to debate aspects related to the adjustment of curricula to the demands of the labour market. Occasionally, students in the last year are questioned about the usefulness of the disciplines in the curriculum and each semester they test students' satisfaction with faculty activities. The relevance of disciplines in the curriculum and their content, as well as the way knowledge is conveyed is aimed at occasionally within working meetings with social work department members.

Acquiring competencies specific to the domain is also facilitated by a proper material basis (self-service shelf access and borrowing library, electronic data bases) allowing student individual study.

At present, curricula observe national standards specific to the field. Thus, disciplines belong to three distinct categories: fundamental disciplines, that aim at developing basic competencies, abilities and attitudes; specialty discipline, that aim at thoroughgoing studying specific operational contents; and complementary or interdisciplinary support disciplines that expand the intellectual and professional horizon by developing communication and transfer abilities. As for their curriculum status, disciplines are compulsory and optional.

The competency profile for the field of social work developed depending on the National Registrar of Qualifications in Higher Education in agreement with the needs on the labour market and with the national qualification framework is presented below.

Professional competencies: 1. Identifying, collecting information, documenting, evaluating and recording information, analysing, evaluating and operating specific interventions to reduce social risks at individual, family, group, community, and societal levels. 2. Developing, implementing and evaluating projects, programmes and policies of social work for different vulnerability categories. 3. Developing services and activities of prevention

as well as support activities for the beneficiaries of the social work system. 4. Providing consulting in accessing community resources for people or social groups excluded or with social exclusion risk (institutions, services, benefits). 5. Counselling and other specialised intervention methods used in family or institution environments (hospitals, schools, penitentiaries, anti-drug centres, social work specialise institutions, etc.) observing the values and principles specific to social work. 6. Communicating and professionally bounding with beneficiaries and other actors involved.

Transversal competencies: 1. Approaching objectively and theoretically and practically argued problem-situations to effectively solve them while observing the values and principles specific to social work. 2. Applying effective working techniques in trans-disciplinary teams at different intra- and inter-organisational hierarchy levels. 3. Self-evaluating objectively one's own need for professional training and identifying resources and ways of developing personally and professionally in order to insert and adapt to the current requirements of the labour market.

To develop these competencies, study programmes in social work need 3 years (6 semesters); the average number of teaching-learning activities is 22-28 h/week and specialty practice take a minimum of 90 h.

Professional and transversal competencies specific to each discipline are detailed in syllabi.

### ***3.4. Difficulties identified in ensuring competencies***

Difficulties identified by the participants to the focus group in ensuring competencies are listed below:

- Differences between theoretical information and information from professional activities during practice. Information not updated provided by some disciplines.
- The teaching of too theoretical courses detrimental to the supply of practical skills, and seminars with no teacher-student interaction. Exaggerated similarity of teaching methods in both courses and seminars in some teachers.
- Low involvement of practice supervisors in the building-up of students' practical skills.
- Overlapping of information, repetitions or gaps in certain disciplines; similar content of discipline with different names.
- Lack of flexibility of curricula, which limits students' choice of optional subjects (very few choices or no choice at all).
- Lack of disciplines that study current social phenomena in the field occurred lately because of the social dynamics, or of disciplines aiming at individual strategies when looking for a job or a career.



- Too permissive or too flexible rules regarding the compulsoriness of attending courses and seminars and of taking exams, which results in low attendance rate in terminal years and difficulties in building up discipline-specific competencies.
- Unbalance between the numbers of disciplines per semester.
- Similarity between exam and viva voce in certain disciplines; in some cases, seminar activities are not taken into account in the calculus of the final grade.
- The employers' requirement that recent graduates (below one year after graduation) have a work experience upon employment.

### **3.5. *Suggestions for the academic curricula***

The participants' suggestions regarding the optimisation of curricula in higher education are as follows:

- Harmonising curricula at national levels per study programmes, as well as discipline topics.
- Higher flexibility in choosing courses equivalent from a credit perspective and in developing specialised competencies: universities should be challenging the students that wish to improve through individual study and under the guidance of a teacher in a particular discipline. Providing sets of optional disciplines could be a solution to match curricula and students' interests. Introducing several transversal disciplines (knowledge, abilities and attitudes that transcend a certain study programme and/or a certain profession) useful to the practice of several professions and for life, in general.
- Introducing specialisations for a certain field of interest in the 3rd year such as social work for disabled people, social work for the elderly; social work for child and family protection; social work for substance-addicted people, etc.
- Favouring individual work and increasing students' responsibility for one's own career.
- Reducing the number of theoretical classes particular in the 3rd year and increasing the number of practice hours or reorganising practice. Turning the entire 3rd year or at least the entire 6th semester into a practice semester (with no theoretical disciplines) or with disciplines that prepare students for their future jobs (professional guidance disciplines). Cumulating the visits to institutions per semester in maximum 3 weeks (the first three ones in the first semester of the 1st year), followed by practice stages proper for longer periods.
- Introducing a maximum of 5-6 disciplines per semester and moving some disciplines from one year to another for better coherence between competencies. Removing some disciplines that are no longer current,

correcting the time allotted to some disciplines or adding new disciplines to the curricula to compatibilise study programmes, broadening students' competencies and harmonising the process of knowledge with practice in accordance with the dynamics of science and social reality. Avoiding content overlapping of related disciplines.

- Developing more visit programmes and more national and international exchange programmes to benefit from other students' and teachers' experience in the field.

- Course disciplines should share 20% of the curriculum, seminars, 30%, and practice, 50% of the total number of hours. Redistributing the number of hours to allot several seminar classes to practical disciplines and more course classes to more theoretical ones.

- Alternating periods of theory, practice and theory per week to allow practice to be concentrated and more effective (currently, practice goes on successively, for about 4-6 h/week).

- Developing more functional tutoring programmes to support the students methodologically to improve educational performance, to support the students organise individual study, and using learning resources to develop students' potential for the future profession.

- Correlating the number of credits with the number of real hours of activity per discipline.

- Diversifying teaching styles and teaching classes in a more interactive way to make teaching-learning more attractive and to capture students' attention, to stir their curiosity and to arouse their interest. Giving up supplying information already in hard copy textbook and alternating teaching methods (making them interactive) with emphasis on exercises and role play, and using video and other teaching aids particularly during seminars. It is necessary to point out practical experience of the teaching staff in teaching.

- Introducing intermediary (mid-semester) evaluations to motivate students to learn and get involved during the entire semester, not only during exam session.

- Using online platforms to facilitate communication and interaction with the students and between the students, teaching staff and practice supervisors. This could contribute to actuate the teaching – learning – evaluating process.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Improving the curriculum to build up transversal and professional competencies should be designed flexibly taking into account all the actors involved and, most of all, the main beneficiaries, i.e. the students' career interest. In designing transversal and professional competencies, we need to

integrate coherently, functionally and flexibly all content types: cognitive, actionally and attitudinally. This study presents several critical aspects regarding the building up of professional and transversal competencies, while putting into practice an improved curriculum is still a challenge. This article can contribute to the improvement of academic instruments and methodologies to extend learning opportunities; it can also have an essential instrumental value in the improvement of curricula in the field of social work in social work. The study could be extended to all 21 universities in Romania that develop social work programs, by comparing the development of professional and transversal skills offered by state and private universities.

## References

- Baciu, L. (2015) *Deprinderi în asistența socială*. Timișoara: Editura de Vest.
- Costin, A. & Bran, L. (2016) The Social Worker's Role of Educator. *Journal Plus Education*. XIV(1):285-292.  
<http://www.uav.ro/jour/index.php/jpe/article/view/651/714>.
- European Commission (2008). *New Skills for new jobs: anticipating and matching labour market and skills needs*.  
[http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/com868\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc/com868_en.pdf).
- Isăilă, Ș., Miron, A. & Andrei, D. (2011). *Relația dintre educație și învățare pe tot parcursul vieții și piața muncii*. Cluj Napoca: Institutul de Formare Economică și Socială. [https://www.prois-nv.ro/docs/studiu\\_regional\\_ocupare%20\(3\).pdf](https://www.prois-nv.ro/docs/studiu_regional_ocupare%20(3).pdf).
- Guvernul României (2015). *Strategia educației și formării profesionale din România pentru perioada 2016-2020*.  
[https://www.edu.ro/sites/default/files/\\_fi%C8%99iere/Minister/2016/strategii/Strategia\\_VET%2027%2004%202016.pdf](https://www.edu.ro/sites/default/files/_fi%C8%99iere/Minister/2016/strategii/Strategia_VET%2027%2004%202016.pdf).
- Mureșan, M. (2015) Collaborative Learning and Cybergogy Paradigms for the Development of Transversal Competences in Higher Education. *Euromentor Journal*. 6(2): 21-29.  
<https://search.proquest.com/central/docview/1695792187/12CF8FE266944CB5PQ/6?accountid=8107>.
- Neamțu, G. (2012) The Specific of Professional Education in Social Work Adjusted to Labour Marketplace. *Revista de Cercetare si Interventie Sociala*. 39: 39-58.  
<https://search.proquest.com/central/docview/1665202542/D43A702BFD724E68PQ/11?accountid=8107>.
- Pârvu, I., Ipate, D. M. & Mitran, P. C. (2014) Identification of Employability Skills - Starting Point for the Curriculum Design Process. *Economics, Management and Financial Markets*. 9(1): 237-246.  
<https://search.proquest.com/central/docview/1520014389/12CF8FE266944CB5PQ/8?accountid=8107>.

- Răduleacu, A. (2010) Learning Opportunities in Building the Professional Competences in Social Work Intervention. *Revista de Asistența Socială/Social Work Review*. 1: 64-69. <https://search.proquest.com/central/docview/251345627/557040F58521426BPQ/1?accountid=8107>.
- Sava, S. & Crașovan, M. (2013). Career Counselling and Validation of Competences as Keys for Facing Unemployment. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*. 76:734-738. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.04.196>.
- Sava, S., Borca, C. & Danciu, L. (2014). Models of Quality Assurance in Evaluation and Validation of Competencies, for an Easier Access to Higher Education. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*. 142:176-182. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.07.640>.
- Tam A. & Trzmiel B. (2018) Transversal Skills as a Missing Link Between School and Work: Experiences from the Asia-Pacific Region. In: Pavlova M., Lee JK., Maclean R. (eds.) *Transitions to Post-School Life. Education in the Asia-Pacific Region: Issues, Concerns and Prospects*, vol 41. Springer, Singapore. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-6476-0\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-6476-0_3).
- The Bologna Declaration of 19 June 1999*, The European Higher Education Area [https://www.eurashe.eu/library/bologna\\_1999\\_bologna-declaration-pdf/](https://www.eurashe.eu/library/bologna_1999_bologna-declaration-pdf/).
- Trancă, L. M. (2016). Competences of Students in Social Work from the Perspective of Practical Work Supervisors in the Field of Delinquency. In Tomiță, M. (ed.) *The Fifth International Conference Multidisciplinary Perspectives in the Quasicoercive Treatment of Offenders Probation as a field of study and research: From person to society*. Bologna: Filodiritto Editore.
- Trancă, L. M. (2015a) Die professionelle Ausbildung von Sozialarbeitern in Rumänien. In Sagebiel, J., Muntean, A., Sagebiel, B. (Hg.) *Zivilgesellschaft und Soziale Arbeit. Herausforderungen und Perspektiven an die Arbeit im Gemeinwesen in Rumänien und Deutschland*. München: AG SPAK Bucher. 254-274.
- Trancă, L.M. (2015b). Tehnici și abilități utilizate în practica asistenței sociale a persoanelor cu dizabilități de către studenți [Techniques and skills used by students in the practice of social work for people with disabilities.]. In Goian, C., Trancă, L.M. (coord.). *Formarea practică în asistența socială. [Teaching social work practice]* Timișoara: Editura de Vest. 92-100.
- Voicu, B., Tufiș, C. & Voicu, M. (2010). *Absolvenții recenți de învățământ superior și integrarea lor pe piața muncii (APCART)*. <https://sandamariaardeleanu.files.wordpress.com/2011/10/absolventii-recenti-de-invatamant-superior-si-integrarea-lor-pe-piata-muncii.doc>.