

THE IMPROVEMENT OF INITIAL TRAINING OF PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCES THROUGH STUDENTS' PRACTICE PROGRAMME „CHILD PROTECTION FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE”

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Abstract: *The article approaches the problematic of the development of students' professional competences providing an example of using theory in practice in the field of child care services. It subject is approached by elaborating a curriculum, tools and resources required in practice stages that take place in specialized institutions. The results of the project and the impact of activities on students and potential employers as well as ways to assure sustainability are presented throughout this study.*

Keywords: *professional competences, practice stages, work tools, academic commitment and fulfilment.*

1. Introduction

Increasing the quality of educational systems and of professional training, openness to the social, economic and cultural environment, to the society as a whole represents a strategic direction in educational policies on European level. Competitiveness and professional dynamics increase the employers' expectations who consider that the students' practical training does not meet actual needs and requirements of specialized institutions. In this framework, the objectives of the project entitled *Practice programme for students “child care services – from theory to practice”*, promoted under the acronym *PractiPASS*, project financed from The Social European Fund, Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007-2013, met the requirements of initial professional training; the Development and implementation of common tools for professional training; Sharing learning experiences through exchange of good practices and dissemination mechanisms of knowledge and expertise; Active involvement of social partners and all actors engaged in professional training.

The project developed and strengthened inter-regional partnership between University of Oradea, University of Bucharest and „Aurel Vlaicu” University of Arad on the one hand and of local partnerships between universities and public and private institutions, potential employers of undergraduates on the other. 600 students enrolled in Bachelor and Master Programmes (Social work, Psychology, Sociology and Special Psychopedagogy) of three national universities were granted access to practice in public and private institutions. Their activity was supervised by a practice supervisor from the university and guided by tutors from hosting organizations. They were specially trained to work with students by specialists from our country and from abroad. Along with practice stages, students benefited from a comprehensive career counselling and orientation programme, developed in order to familiarize students with the rigours and conditions offered by potential employers.

2. Students' commitment and participation

Practical activities which involved students facilitated an integrated approach of knowledge in child protection services and the development of transversal and specific competences in agreement with the demands and needs of field, government and non-government institutions and with the dynamics of the society.

This approach of training future specialists' benefits from an integrative vision not only on curricular level but it also offers the opportunity to multiply and disseminate good practices between all partners involved in the project. The aim of these partnerships is to develop valuable methodological tools with high impact on specialists' training in the field of child care services.

The analysis of student questionnaires applied in the three stages of inquiry which contained three commitment items and participation in their own training, revealed that average results at the level of each university are stable in time. The highest variation registered between stages is of 10 percentage points. The students of the University of Bucharest state more frequently than students of the other universities that they often have a participative (active) behaviour in practical activities, lectures and seminars. 84% students of the University of Bucharest state that they often respond to teachers'/tutors' questions, 62% students of the University of Oradea and 78% students of the University of Arad has given the same answer. Moreover, students of these three universities are determined by an intrinsic motivation when they are involved in student activities (for example in the third stage, 85% students of the University of Bucharest, 82% students of the University of Arad and 78% students of the University of Oradea state that they study often and with desire to learn more; the average weight of those who stated that they often fulfilled optional tasks proposed by tutors is of 80% at University of Bucharest, 75% at University of Arad and 75% at University of Oradea). The intrinsic motivations are diminished but of similar size in all universities (they took part in the practice stages to obtain higher grades: always 40% and often 32%, while the percentage for the University of Arad is 35%). We can conclude that the transfer between theoretical and practical knowledge maintains students' interest, their active involvement and intrinsic motivation. The cooperation with tutors from partnership institutions determined the re-evaluation of curriculum and practice activities by integrating new themes, methodologies, work tools and employers' demands.

Fig 1. Comparative data on students' commitment and students' participation, stage I

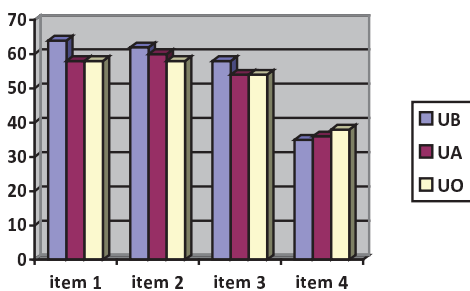


Fig 2. Comparative data on students' commitment and students' participation, stage II

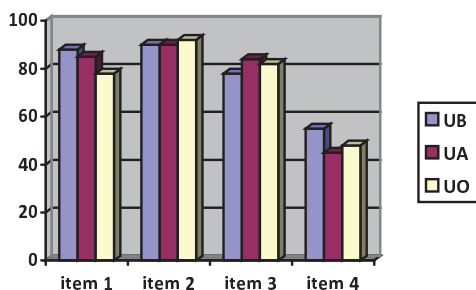
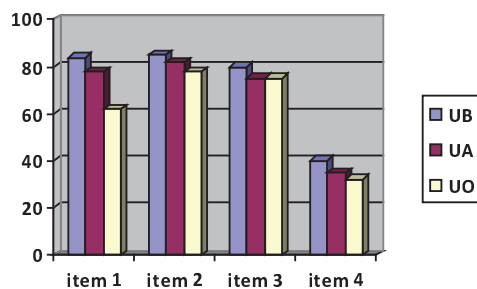


Fig 3. Comparative data on students' commitment and students' participation, stage III



3. Recommendations for the improvement of practice tools

All practice tools have been developed by experts from universities by consulting specialists from the institutions where students attended practice stages. Tutor training has focused on the development of a unitary vision on learning experiences which would involve students. The aim of this vision is to develop professional competences in the field of child protection services and to solve the tasks from their practice notebook according to the course syllabus. Students, tutor supervisors, tutors and the practice responsible have made the following observations regarding practice organization and the efficiency of working tools developed and applied in the three practice stages:

The clarity of tasks from the practice notebook and of the explanations from the practice guide;

The possibility of practical application of course contents;

Students' active involvement in content selection according to their needs and interests;

The development of transversal competencies centred on problem solving and decision making in child protection services;

High interest for field work, which enabled direct contact with the beneficiary;

The flexibility of practice schedule;

Wide access to information and communication sources;

The Practice Notebook:

Reassessment and adjustment of tasks from the practice notebook to the study programme curriculum to avoid the lacks of synchronization that we have noticed.

The usage of practice notebook starting with the 2nd semester of the 1st year of study to increase the degree of correlation between theoretical concepts and practice.

We consider that in the 1st semester, students could use *The Practice Journal* as working material because it help them to structure information and to get used to the requirements of practice and the institutional environment.

Reorganization of space given to each theme and offering students the possibility to fill in the Practice Notebook in an electronic format. A tool for tutors' assessment made by students could be designed to complete the Practice Notebook and offer feedback to tutors.

An assessment in terms of quality that would identify the elements of critical rationality is the SWAT analysis. Students could express their opinion about the strong and weak points of the practice stage.

Practice Guide:

It is concise and explicit, offering the students and tutors the possibility meet the expectations of practice in child protection services and it can be adjusted to each field of study according to its structure.

In terms of student grading procedures, we consider that a peer assessment and self-assessment questionnaire could be applied. Motivation is linked to noticing the degree of

students' involvement in the practice stages. Co-participation in this process is important because they accustomed to teamwork irrespective of their field of study.

Institution observation grid is advisable to be designed based on the tutor's or tutors' coordinator's presentation of the institution. To avoid redundancy, students should only fill in the service or department presentation where s/he attends practice, if the institution is the same as in the previous practice stage.

The Student's Observation and Assessment Sheet performed by the tutor is of formative type and tries to grasp different relevant aspects of practical activity from the perspective of knowledge, competences, abilities but also regarding behaviour, punctuality, perseverance, initiative, communication and responsible involvement in practice tasks. We believe that this sheet can be adjusted for the practical assessment of students' activity from other fields of study.

The Career Guide is a useful tool used by the students in counselling activities for personal development and the development of interpersonal competences required for a successful insertion on the labour market. UAV students suggest the improvement of the guide by adding self-knowledge tools of one's interests and abilities for career development. Group counselling activities were appreciated by UAV students that rank as necessary the activity of the career counselling centre.

4. Sustainability

The closed partnerships, the methodology and practice tools developed and validated during the practice stages provide a stable framework for the organizational development of the faculty and for the initial training of professional and transdisciplinary competences of students studying social work and psychology. The assumption is made based on the following considerations:

- The transdisciplinary approach of practice is a model that could be generalized because it provides a global approach of a subject which is interesting both for students and for their field of study. It set them in real situation, like the one found in their professional life.

- The methodology of practice organization and unrolling, proposed and validated throughout the project, offers a generous framework for long term practice organization. It is based on collaboration between the university and other institutions, NGOs, private sector.

- The identification of students' training needs in accordance to employers' demands was achieved by consulting the representatives of different institutions during a debate. We consider that this type of interaction would be very useful to adjust the curriculum to de dynamics of professional training.

- The improvement of communication and human resources development through interactive methods and simulation of key-situations.

- The training of practice tutors should be continued and their experience should be used to train other groups of students.

- The improvement of collaboration between partner institutions and the continuation of students' voluntary work will increase their changes of employment.

- The improvement of curriculum quality, of study programmes in social work and psychology by taking into account the employers' suggestions and the conditions on the labour market.

- The project results are curricular resources available and accessible to all teachers that will coordinate practice stages.

- Organizational development through the opportunity to access the PractiPass project's webpage for the promotion of activities and services, through the development of new joint partnerships and access of resources and through examples of good practices developed during the project's implementation period.

- Finding more practice locations, access to a higher number of institutions, the involvement of more tutors is a useful exercise in the practice preparation. The students that took

part in study tours in other EU member states should revalue their experience. The study tours allowed them to be aware of the way in which similar institutions from abroad function. (Belgium, Hungary)

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