

Training for Social Work within the higher education landscape

1. The Flemish Community: a partner within the federal State Belgium

Belgium gained its independence in 1830. In recent years, the country has evolved, into a federal structure. Now, the management of the country falls to several partners, which exercise their competencies independently in different fields.

The federal State keeps holding important areas of competence, including: foreign affairs, defence, justice, finances, social security, important sectors of public health and domestic affairs, etc.

Apart from the federal State, there are three language-based Communities: the Flemish Community (6 million), the French Community (4,5 million) and the German-speaking Community (75.000). The Communities are competent in such areas as culture, education and social welfare, etc.

Further we have three Regions, based on economic concerns: the Flemish region, The Walloon Region and the Brussels Capital Region (1million). They are competent in such areas as economy, labour market policy, housing, spatial planning and the environment, etc.

Regions and Communities are entitled to run foreign relations themselves in the areas of their respective legal competence.

The same Parliament and the same Government execute the competencies of the Flemish Community and the Flemish Region.

Belgium is further divided into 10 provinces and 589 municipalities, which play the role of local authorities.

2. Higher education in the Flemish Community

Higher education in Flanders is offered at universities and '*Hogescholen*' (university colleges). The *hogescholen* have come into existence rather recently, i.e. in 1995, when over a hundred of training institutes which used to offer one single or a few programmes only, merged into larger organisations, covering multiple sectors.

All study programmes of a higher level are categorised in different fields of study. The study fields within which a university or a *hogeschool* offers study programmes can differ from one institution to another and are stipulated by law.

The courses prepare students for specific professions in such fields as industry, commerce, agriculture, health-care and rehabilitation, social work, teaching, ICT, applied arts or the media. Courses are theoretical and practice-oriented and include periods of work placement.

Training for Social Work

The genesis of the professional social worker and the training preparing for it in Belgium (and in Flanders), is similar to the development in other countries in Europe and the New World. At the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th, social movement organisations and philanthropic charity works started the first courses and study circles. These initiatives aimed at the training of leaders and executives of programmes and projects which addressed the social problems of an industrialising and modernising society. After World War I, social movement organisations also took the initiative for the foundation of the first so-called social schools. Eight social schools came into existence between 1920-1922. After World War II, over a relatively short period's time the Ministry of Education passed twelve new recognitions. Fully in line with the structure of the realm of education in Belgium, they included official, public schools on the one side, and private schools of Christian or liberal tendency on the other side.

During its first decades, the training for social work was classified as a secondary level education. By the Royal Decree of 28th February 1952, the study programme got its recognition as a higher technical training spanning three years. In this way, the government recognised its practical orientation as well as the necessity of a scientific approach.

Nowadays, the study programme Social Work is offered by 11 *hogescholen*. In addition to a common trunk, the curriculum offers some specialisation in different fields of practice:

- social work, oriented towards psycho-social guidance;
- social advice and legal services, specialising in the application of social legislation and in advocacy outgoing from social organisations;
- community educational and cultural work, preparing professionals for the field of non-formal education, cultural animation and community work;
- Personnel management or the training in personnel administration and personnel policy.

Every year some 2500 students start studying in social work. The female share of the students' population is at 75 percent. Most students are eighteen to twenty years old and have just finished their secondary school. In fact, as a prerequisite for admission to higher education, students have to submit the state-approved diploma issued by a secondary school. Higher education is highly selective in Flanders. For example, only some 60 percent of the students in the programme of social work finish their study successfully.

Graduates of the schools can find several opportunities to complement and deepen their training. Schools for social work and some private organisations offer a variety of post-graduate courses and seminars on methods, social policy, supervision... Besides, the universities offer facilities for graduates to obtain a master degree in sociology, psychology, criminology etc. after three or four years of further advanced study.

New opportunities

At present, responding to the Sorbonne Declaration and the Bologna Declaration, the Flemish Government has installed new legislation on higher education. This reform creates new possibilities for collaboration between *hogescholen* and universities and for the organisation of advanced studies in social work.

Ever since 1985 the European Community (later the European Union) has been stimulating the exchange of students and teaching staff of *hogescholen* and universities along with the collaboration among higher education institutes through specific programmes such as *Erasmus* or *Tempus*. The authorities thus want to promote the free flow of goods, capitals and persons within Europe. Yearly, tens of thousands of young people could have an experience abroad during their studies facilitated by a European grant. Social schools, they too, increasingly turn to these European programmes.

It is obvious that these important European developments are consequential for the Flemish universities and *hogescholen* and their departments. Social higher education in our country promotes students' mobility and the exchangeability of curricula through participation in the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) system. The development of international systems of quality care, the so-called accreditation, should improve the quality, but also the transparency and comparability of the diplomas. The European dimension has gained a clear position in the curricula of an increasing number of programmes, teaching staff and students. A quite important consequence is the introduction of the universal system of two cycles for 'undergraduates' and 'graduates'. The first cycle is to last at least three years and leads to a 'bachelor' degree. Moreover, a diploma of the first cycle must already give access to the labour market. The Bologna Declaration does not mention the duration of the second cycle, but it is only stipulating the name of the 'master' degree. In general, this cycle will take one or two years. Finally, a doctorate or PhD will conclude the third cycle of higher education. The *Sorbonne and Bologna Declarations* do not record about this.

In many countries and in the French-speaking part of Belgium, a training programme in social work or in social policy, which includes a second and third cycle, already exists. After years of struggle and disappointments eventually the social work trainings in Flanders got the superstructure at university level with a second and possibly a third cycle. It is now possible for some social workers to graduate, like in other countries, as a '*master in social work*' or a '*master in social policy*' at last. Such construction can not but strengthens the social position of social work in Flanders and its scientific underpinnings. At any case, the collaboration between universities and *hogescholen* seems to gain momentum through the impending creation of associations and the like. This collaboration within associations will bring up opportunities to optimise the offer in training programmes. A good linkup and flexible bridges between *bachelor* and *master* programmes will facilitate the mutual exchange of both students and teaching staff.

1. Professional and Training Profile of the Social Worker: A Common Trunk

It was the *Vereniging van Vlaamse Sociale Hogescholen* (VVSH), associating all Flemish social work training institutes, that elaborated the proper profile of social work training. First, option-specific profiles were drafted through workshops and close consultations of both the training institutes and representatives of the work field. On this basis, a ‘common trunk’ was then further worked out. This contribution is updating this very version.

2. The core of the professional profile

At its Congress in Montreal in June 2000, the International Federation of Social Workers termed the core of the professional profile like this:

“The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance wellbeing. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work.”

We endorse this definition. It is portraying the essence of the profession of the social worker clearly. Now we want to elaborate its content and scope. Today we actively participate in the discussion to review the definition, with more emphasis on sustainable social development and social work as a passionate profession.

Mediating between man and society

Social workers supply professional services in order to enhance the personal, interpersonal and social functioning of people and to lift the obstacles that may occur in these spheres. Interventions of social workers may be occasioned by:

- (1) The rights, liabilities and ambitions of people within their diversity of positions and social roles, i.e. the positions of
 - a) father, mother, partner, etc. within primary social relations;
 - b) client of services and social facilities;
 - c) participant, member or volunteer in the frame of organised social and cultural life;
 - d) employee in a corporation, institution or agency;
 - e) citizen within society.
- (2) The requirements and expectations made by society as they are embodied in institutions, facilities etc.
- (3) The tensions and conflicts occurring in the relation between the individual or the group and the social environment which can refer to both individual troubles and collective, social problems.

The different occasions are no isolated elements for there is a constant interplay between the functioning or dysfunction of people and their being or not being given opportunities by society, i.e. by structural, societal factors.

Because of this interplay, the interventions always have a double orientation. On the one hand there is the strand of empowerment, meant to support people at developing the capacities they need in their personal and social life. On the other hand, social workers make the necessary efforts to contribute to realising the conditions within the different structures of society for ensuring the dignity and rights of people.

Social workers are thus continually operating in the area where individuals and groups with their own possibilities, difficulties and expectations collide with society setting norms, offering opportunities or imposing limits. From this very position, they contribute to the solution of both (inter-) personal troubles and societal problems and they act as a bridge between man and society.

Core tasks

Social workers are practising their profession as employees of services. They work in many sectors of the social system: within health care and welfare work, justice, education, social-cultural work, industries, trade unions, health insurance companies, etc. The above outlined professional profile gets a different content specific of each sector or even sub-sector.

Nevertheless, it is possible to distil some core tasks:

- social workers supply help of a social-judicial and/or social-educational kind to persons, groups and organisations.
- they take up co-responsibilities for the well functioning and often for the policy of the organisations they are employed at.
- towards society, they act as indicators, signalling social problems or advocating for persons and groups.

Differentiation

Social workers work in diverse sectors and functions. In order to show how their professional profile coincides with different activities, we give a brief presentation of the options offered within the basic training programme. The options are social counselling, social work, personnel management and socio-cultural work. This classification adequately mirrors the reality in the work field.

- The option **Social Counselling** focuses on socio-judicial help, offered by social organisations such as trade unions, health insurance companies, social secretariats, public agencies etc. Essential components of the social counsellor's work are: social law application, wages and social benefits administration, familiarising people with their rights and duties, mediating between people and agencies. In social organisations assistance is often connected with advocacy and lobbying.
- The option **Social Work** trains assistants to work for the many autonomous or incorporated social services of the welfare society. Providing clients with help and psycho-social guidance, advising decision-making authorities belong to the core of the social worker's profession. Social workers point out to agencies what the social backgrounds of people's problems are and, by doing so, they both prevent and remedy.
- Those who graduate in the option **Human Resources Management** have received a comprehensive training including both personnel administration and personnel management in firms and companies, non-profit-organisations and public services. The professional activities of personnel managers encompass the entire careers of staff members, i.e. personnel planning (staff selection and recruitment), personnel development (on-the-job training, career coaching), terms of employment, labour conditions, industrial relations and organisational development.

- **Social-cultural Workers** are trained to organise and coach educational programmes, cultural activities and processes of social activation in the broad socio-cultural field, i.e. in youth work, socio-cultural work with adults, community work, cultural centres etc. Professionals in this option are also assigned tasks of organisational administration and policy development.

From this survey it is clear that social workers perform a wide range of functions. It goes without saying that the division into options does not fully cover reality as there are many borderline areas where social workers hold mixed functions. For instance, recently we have seen new developments which simultaneously have a caring function and require socio-cultural action, e.g. in the local authorities' fight against poverty.

From the chart below, showing the most common tasks and interventions of social workers, one can derive that our basic training bears the complex social reality in mind, as it prepares for a large variety of tasks, at least at an elementary level. Each option, however, emphasises its own aspects (shaded in the chart): specific types of help are given more attention in the different training programmes than others are. These option-specific types of help are:

- Socio-juridical help, dossier administration and advocacy in the option Social Counselling
- Caring-oriented assistance, psycho-social help and dossier administration in the option Social Work;
- Personnel administration, personnel management, training of staff in the option Human Resources Management;
- Educational work, cultural work, activation and advocacy in the option Socio-cultural work.

Organisational development, preventive or pro-active work and lobbying have been shaded for all options since social workers face tasks of this nature in any function.

INTERVENTIONS	SOCIAL COUNSELLING	SOCIAL WORK	PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT	SOCIAL-CULTURAL WORK
Assistance	Social-legal	Caring-oriented		
Dossier administration				
Advocacy				Including activation
Psycho-social assistance				
Personnel administration				
Personnel management				
Educational work			Education, training and development	
Cultural work				
Organisational development				
Preventive and pro-active work				
Influencing policy				

Social work and values

Before elaborating the profile of the basic training programme, we first have to mention the social-ethical aspects of the profession. Interventions of social workers are never value-free. Some of the fundamental values and principles, which guide the actions of social workers, are:

- social justice;
- democracy;
- respect of each person's identity;
- recognition of the dignity and equality of all people.

These values and principles are very consequential for professional action, which is to be aimed at people's emancipation in the end. In other words, people ought to be regarded to be equal partners in their interaction with the social worker. They are not only object of assistance, but also subjects who make choices of their own –at ethical among other levels- and who co-determine the goals and the process of the interaction.

3. The core of the training profile

Now let us outline the chief supports of the training profile. In times of lifelong learning, basic training programmes should emphasise the qualifications young graduates need to have in order to make a successful start within the professional field. The professional practice of the social worker is a practical one, and is bearing a problem defining as well as a problem solving nature. Of the essence, the social worker is always acting in unprecedented situations that hardly tolerate standard recipes and standard helping or training procedures. In order to obtain the capacity to act in a professional manner, students need to:

- thoroughly train themselves in social sciences and at methodical level;
- Simultaneously train themselves for finding an appropriate terming and for solving problems in ever-changing situations, by combining imagination and pragmatism.

In the training programme of social workers the focus is on professional competences. Competences are defined in close relation with the work field. The process of defining common competences for social work education in Flanders is still running. The educational programme is constructed to supporting students in developing their competences. The study programme is organised in modules with a number of credits for each. There is no fixed module package for all schools. Schools are flexible in organising their study programme. The aim is to come to mutual recognition inside the country as well as with other social work training programmes in Europe.

The core elements of the modules are:

- a multidisciplinary training in social sciences;
- the study of the way in which the social welfare state is organised and training in applying the social map, i.e. the survey of facilities people can have recourse to, corresponding with their demands and needs;
- the study of educational methods, training in their application and training in social competences;
- work placement in the field (which is an intensive learning period, supervised by both a teacher-coach and a professional, allowing the student to gradually acquire a starting professional ability);
- reflection on theory and practice through supervision, papers and a final report.

To know how to use concepts, data and theories of social sciences

The training for social work is aimed at training professionals who are able to act professionally at wording and solving problems. A broad, multidisciplinary training in social and human sciences is indispensable:

- with a view to attaining a sound comprehension of the current challenges of man and society;
- with a view to better understanding both concrete personal, interpersonal and societal problems along with their broader context;
- with a view to understanding the complex interplay between personal and social problems;
- with a view to gaining insights into opportunities for stimulating processes of change in persons, groups, organisations and in society as a whole.

This is why the multidisciplinary underpinning of the social work training can not be reduced to a mere comprehensive training of the person or to social-cultural training separated from the proper training profile. On the contrary, it constitutes an integral part of the training itself. Students have to acquire insight into fundamental notions, lines of thinking and the main acquisitions of the social sciences and at the same time the aptitude to apply them. Moreover, they should be able to find their way in the professional reading list containing descriptions and analyses of social problems from the viewpoint of one or more disciplines.

Disciplines of highest relevance to social workers are philosophy, sociology, economics, law, psychology and biology. In addition, it is crucial for students to have a good understanding of the political and social history of modern and contemporary times.

To know the work areas, being able to apply the social map

All students should acquire cognition of the organisation of the modern welfare state. They must know the different spheres of activities of social workers. They must obtain a solid insight into and a practical familiarity with one work field in particular, according to the option they choose for. They should have an understanding of the organisation of the work field, the public policy related to it, the evolving views on goals and tasks, the current issues and difficulties.

Students should be able to aptly use the social map in order to advise clients and target groups on the facilities of the welfare state and to help them at calling on them.

Learn how to act methodically

Methodical work represents an important pillar of the professional practice for any social worker. This is always the case, irrespective of whether it is about formulating and solving individual, relational or social problems or whether this action consists in working with individuals, groups or organisations.

Social and communicative skills constitute the very basis of any methodical action. During their training period, students should reach better understandings of the basic mechanisms of interaction, communication and decision making, in interpersonal relations as well as within groups or among organisations. They should also be trained in:

- applied observational skills;
- applied conversational and meeting skills (participating in or conducting conversations and meetings);
- applied skills of dealing with conflicts and negotiating;
- applied skills of making reports.

Moreover, social workers should be competent at methods of social-judicial advice, social assistance, social-cultural work, personnel management, prevention and policy-influencing work to an extent proper to the practical situation and with a view to curative or preventive action.

During their training period, students should gain insight into the main models of methodical action, derived from the interplay between theory and practice. They also should get familiar with the professional and scientific discussions on these models. What methods are treated and trained in more depth will partly depend on the options and the preferences of the school concerned.

Students should, through both training in the *hogeschool* and during the work placements, acquire the competence to:

- plan interventions (once-only interventions or long-term programmes or projects);
- choose the appropriate methods, starting from the problem diagnosis and with a view to the set goals, taking into account the client or the target group and the organisational and social framework;
- act in a procedural order, i.e. including the possibility to adjust one's intervention and methods during the process itself on the basis of evaluation, taking into account the evolutionary possibilities of the client or target group and/or modifications in the situation.

For who is working with people, helping them to cope with their situation, life prevails over doctrine. This is why students should acquire the attitude to deal with the methodical devices in a non-dogmatic way. They should also develop the elementary creativity to renovate or even to design new action schemes that respond to the concrete situations.

To know legislation and how to apply it

Rights and duties are partly written down in laws, decrees and decisions. To know how to practically deal with rules and regulations is an essential part of the competency of social workers.

The amount and complexity of legislation brings about the need for selection during the training period. It can not possible be an end for the basic programme to impart to the students an encyclopaedic knowledge of law.

All students have to achieve a basic knowledge of:

- the structure of the law system, the classification of law and the hierarchy of sources of law;
- social law, especially labour law and social security legislation.

Further elaboration of social law aspects, related to the particular option, is needed. Depending on these options, a thorough knowledge of differing, field-related part of laws and regulations must be acquired....

The acquisition of the ability to seek information from and to refer to legislation and to apply it in a problem-linked way is equally important as the actual cognition of law.

To adopt a professional attitude

The development of expertise requires, apart from continuing education, a systematic reflection upon the professional actions. This presupposes theory and practice being integrated: organising practice in a systematic way, by evaluating one's own practice from theory and by questioning and/or developing theory from practice.

This skill and attitude are to be imparted to the students as early as in the basic training and should be an overall outcome of the entirety of the training anyway. Reports on work placements, supervision talks, papers and the final report are good devices for that purpose. Students should also be familiarised with such methods as discussions of progress and work proceedings and supervision, applied in practice to support professional action.

Social-ethical reflection on the professional actions

The training to be a social worker can not be reduced to the training of a kind of 'social engineer'. His/her action cannot possibly be value-free. Students are to be stimulated for ethical reflections on their profession and their acting as a professional. Cognitive understanding of the social-ethical aspects of the profession, coupled with a practical social and ethical commitment, belongs to the fundamental basic qualifications of the graduate in social work.

4. The diploma Bachelor of Social Work

All Social Work education in Flanders is professional higher education. The study programme encompasses 180 credits. The diploma is given by the Flemish ministry of education. Quality control and accreditation is done by external bodies, where professionals, academics, policy makers and employers have an important role. Each study programme has to draw up a self evaluation report, which will be critically discussed every three years with the external body. The final evaluation report contains feedback and suggestions for improvement. It is a public report and leads to a competitive position with the country.