

European Social Work

Commonalities and Differences

Edited by Annamaria Campanini and Elizabeth Frost



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Introduction

by *Annamaria Campanini* and *Elizabeth Frost*

“Social work addresses the barriers, inequities and injustices that exist in society. It responds to crises and emergencies as well as to everyday personal and social problems.” This definition of Social Work, officially adopted by IASSW in Copenhagen in June 2001, clearly DG Education and Culture sums up the role of Social Work and its aims.

At the dawn of the 21st century, the new Europe has to face many problems of a different nature. Some of these arise from the integration of people from non-European Countries with different cultures, habits and backgrounds, and other problems are the result of economic poverty appearing in new forms. Social change has brought new pressure experienced personally and in different ways: substance abuse, depression, eating disorder, alienation and relationship breakdowns may be the outcome for some individuals. Further problems may simply arise for families and individuals in their life cycle in relation to a post-modern complex society.

Furthermore, in recent years, European countries have faced different experiences: Germany had, for example, to deal with problems related to immigration, to the economic integration of the former GDR and to people of German origin returning from Russia, Romania and other eastern countries. Italy had to concentrate on problems deriving from the high number of immigrants coming from North Africa, former Yugoslavia and Albania. The United Kingdom has seen increased rates of drug use and suicide. These different experiences have necessarily required different approaches, forcing social work educational and professional structures to tune their expertise in accordance to the national needs. Today's result is the presence of institutions and operators who are able to respond successfully to their regional needs and demands but are less able to respond to needs in a European context. That may limit the transferability of knowledge and the mobility of social workers across Europe. There is therefore a need to develop connections among the various European actors in social work in order to develop common approaches to key issues in social work education and equality in social rights and treatment.

The European Union offers support for developing such connections in education via specific programmes, for example Socrates/Erasmus. This book is the product of such an EU funded initiative designated a “Thematic Network”. Essentially the Thematic Network is an opportunity for universities across Europe to network together to advance knowledge and educational practice in a particular subject area. The authors of this book mainly represent their countries within this thematic network

The goals of the Thematic Network

This Thematic Network, in European Social Work, is striving towards the following aims

- to involve academic and professional bodies in Social Work across Europe to establish a shared knowledge base;
- to compare and develop European social work curricula in order to disseminate successful approaches to common problems;
- to help students develop a European perspective and approach to social work issues;
- to encourage the use of new information technologies to support exchange of information within a European context;

Additionally the Thematic Network has proposed the following core objectives:

- To identify commonalities and differences in social work education across all European states;
- To develop sources of reference for social work teachers, students, institutions and practitioners to enable them to compare and develop European social work curricula;
- To access European practice and placement opportunities;
- To access information about pre – and post – professional social work courses all over Europe;
- To access information about social work research opportunities and projects to facilitate new initiatives;
- To create international courses, organised by member institutions, delivered across Europe. These courses, open to all European students and social work actors, will also draw upon contributions of experts from outside the EU.

Until now very few steps have been undertaken towards developing a European dimension in social work education or building educational links across the EU to inform and enhance practice developments. This Thematic Network is the first real Europe-wide initiative of this

sort, although there have been some useful attempts at smaller scale initiatives, involving fewer partners in Europe. It seems to be the most suitable instrument to develop a shared knowledge base, with which to strengthen Social Work both as a discipline and as a profession. It also offers opportunities for partners to engage in a productive and meaningful debate in relation to teaching methods and curriculum contents. This has the potential to drive forward positive changes in each of these areas. In this context the Network will aim to facilitate greater student participation in their own education, more reflexive learning and sustained personal growth as practitioners.

As well as the aims and objectives outlined above, the Thematic Network is committed to concrete outcomes to benefit exchange and enhancement of social work knowledge across Europe. A website for accessing information on pan-European issues has been established, www.EUSW.org, and regular newsletters are available in paper and electronic form. A summer school for students and professionals is also being planned.

History of the Thematic Network

The Thematic Network which has produced this volume has evolved from a longstanding set of partnerships involving a core group of European Social Work Course.

Gothenburg, as much as anyone, can be identified as one of the initial driving forces behind establishing an initial "Erasmus" network, one of the educational funding initiatives encouraged by the EU. In 1993 overtures were made to The University of the West of England and to the University of Parma in Italy by Gothenburg University Social Work programme, Sweden, to become involved in what were then designated "Erasmus Networks". The network at this point was co-ordinated by Gothenburg, and also contained Swansea in Wales and Mannheim in Germany. (UWE immediately took up the opportunity for involvement, Bergen in Norway joined 1 year later, and Athens in 1996). The purpose of the network was essentially to provide placement and learning opportunities for social work students. However the ongoing links of the network itself also provided a stable and consistent basis for all our future developments. Although an unintended outcome, the consistency of the group in itself was invaluable.

The first two network meetings produced considerable energy and enthusiasm for not just staff and student exchanges but other kinds of co-operation, and in 1995 curriculum development work was funded

by Brussels to be undertaken, primarily by Gothenburg and Bristol, to develop shared interests in social work with minority ethnic groups into a joint module called "Ethnic Diversity and European Welfare Practice". The module could be taken in England or in Gothenburg, by students from these and other European courses. The curriculum content was primarily concerned with commonalities and differences in social work policy and practice relating to service users from ethnically diverse backgrounds, whether refugees or "guest-workers" immigrants or second generation inhabitants. Erasmus staff exchange arrangements facilitated lecturers from all partner courses to contribute to the module's teaching. This worked well in Gothenburg and indeed the module is still offered and undertaken by their national social work students, visiting students and students from their International Masters in Social Work Programme.

Parma University incorporated aspects of the diversity module into the normal curriculum, by organising seminars on multi-ethnicity and drawing on contributions offered by University teachers and guest lecturers coming from institutions which are members of the Network. In May 1998, a congress on "Social work in a multi-ethnic society" was also organised, whose proceedings have been already published. Through these experiences, several modifications were introduced in the syllabi. New contents were included in Social Work education which aimed to develop both theoretical and operational educational paths in relation to the new challenges and opportunities that the presence of foreign immigrants may pose for the profession.

Staff still visit from the network to teach on the Gothenburg course. However not all countries found the joint module easy to instigate. For example from the English perspective two problems arose: – at this stage there was insufficient interest from the students to recruit numbers to keep the module afloat, and also very few students were able or willing to undertake the course in Sweden (despite its being taught in English language) or in Italy, due to language difficulties. By 1996, then, when the notion of an Erasmus network was dismantled by Brussels and individual Socrates bilateral agreements introduced instead, firm relationships between the seven social work programmes mentioned above were established, some staff and student exchange was being productively developed and an inter-European module had been established. Perhaps, even more importantly, there was also a shared sense of potential for further development. The grouping decided to harness this potential by continuing to meet as a network once a year for evaluation, planning and instigating new initiatives.

But also by 1996 the network were becoming aware that for some countries one of the major frustrations of the current arrangements focused around the issue of being unable to persuade our students to undertake periods of time abroad, for placement or academic studies. A range of factors were preventing students participating in exchange opportunities with European partners. Lack of language skills, which probably also effects student's confidence in travelling abroad; the minimum period of student exchange visits of 3 months, increasing numbers of mature students with families and/or part-time jobs to consider, and financial hardship, may militate against the student's travelling.

There was, then, a sense that a change of direction might be needed. The network had done much thinking and planning and curriculum development; it had ironed out differences in expectations and difficulties in establishing common standards; via popular staff exchange systems staff were developing areas of comparative knowledge and bringing this to their teaching. The benefits were clear. But for all this dynamic change some countries had a sense that students and staff were missing opportunities to develop a truly European outlook on social work, and to focus on comparative approaches to the work.

It was as a response to this that the grouping of countries began to generate ideas and stimulate initiatives in relation to a different aspect of the Socrates/Erasmus scheme: the "Intensive Programme". Briefly, an Intensive Programme is a course of study which includes staff and students from several partner institutions, with emphasis on pan-European perspectives and shared learning opportunities. Unlike student exchange programmes, they can be of limited duration, for example 10 days or so. This in itself opened up the range of students able to participate, as mature students, for example, could attend with far less likely disruption to family life than 3 months exchanges caused. The IP system seemed to be able to allow for the development of the European dimension to the curriculum, with guaranteed student participation.

At a "network" meeting in the summer of 1996, a comprehensive programme of IPs was agreed. This was based on the interest and subject specialism of each programme, and the belief of the other programme representatives that their students and staff would find the particular theme relevant and useful. Content and presentation of bids was worked on collectively, although remaining specifically the responsibility of a single programme. Four IPs were submitted to Brussels for funding, of which two were funded. By the academic year of 1997-8, the network had successfully acquired EU funding for two IPs, each in-

volving between five and seven of the European social work programmes.

From 1997-2,000, UWE co-ordinated an IP entitled “European Mental Health Social Work”, and “Professional Social work in Europe”, was co-ordinated by the partners from Gothenburg University in Sweden. A third IP on ‘Supervision in social work’, co-ordinated by Parma University, was funded in 2000, and a fourth was also funded in 2002 on “Service User Involvement in Social Work”, which has now also been funded for 2003-2004.

By 2000 then, this grouping of universities had added two successful IPs to its list of joint achievements, but still had a sense that there was considerable potential within the Socrates scheme to further develop their knowledge and understanding of pan-European social work, and to help other European countries’ lecturers, practitioners and students participate in the development of, and access to, such knowledge. From just such a discussion at a group meeting in 2001, the initial proposal for the Thematic Network was developed.

Forming the Thematic Network

The hypothesis formulated by the group was discussed with the staff of the International Relations Office of the University of Parma and then subjected to the approval of the academic bodies who recognised the importance and welcomed the idea that the University of Parma would be the voice to express a need commonly shared by all the group that had been cooperating together for so many years.

A short analysis of previously approved Thematic Networks indicated that a project coordinated by the Fachhochschule Koblenz (DE) had just finished: this project, anyway, was more addressed to the study of social professions in Europe. Therefore it was established that there were no previous experiences of initiatives dedicated to Social Work education.

The pre-proposal, prepared on the basis of the agreements taken with the original group, was sent to Brussels in November 2001, even though the number of participating partners had not reached the level set out in the Commission’s guidelines. It proved more difficult than expected to get information on, and make agreements with all the eligible Countries.

Despite all this, the approval of the pre-proposal was confirmed in January 2002 and the words of encouragement offered by Marianne Hildebrand, the head of the DG Education and Culture convinced us

that we should go on with the preparation of the final application, sent to Brussels on March 2002.

A relevant moment for the broadening of the partnership was our presence at the IASSW International Congress in Montpellier (FR) in July 2003: participants from Parma and UWE presented the initiative to conference delegates from a wide range of European countries. This raised the profile of the initiative and encouraged others to join. The final approval arrived in July 2003 and the activities started with the first annual meeting in Parma from 30th October to 2nd November 2003.

Structure of the book

In this book every Thematic Network participant country will chart the most important features of social work in their state. It will offer readers the opportunity to discover what social work represents in the various areas of the European continent. Each chapter will explore facets of the work and educational context, professional issues and policy matters. By reading individual chapters a fundamental appreciation of social work in any of the member countries can be gained, and by reading the whole volume it is possible to develop an awareness of some of its commonalities and differences across Europe.

This volume will address some key themes in social work in each European country. It is intended that any reader could pick up this book and gain an introductory understanding of social work in the countries of their interest. Clearly this is ambitious. In reality only some facets of the general picture have been selected.

First of all each chapter will consider the background of social work in its country, including historical, political, social and cultural issues of significance. For example it might consider how social work activities gradually evolved. In some countries this may have been through the church and notions of charity. Alternatively a national commitment to poverty relief may have stimulated the growth of social work. It is also the case that in some countries particular tragic events created the need for social intervention. The chapters will then address how and when the state became involved in providing welfare services.

Next each contribution will consider the issue of social work education, looking first at how social work education emerged historically and into what kind of institutional context. Issues such as how and when the identification of need for a specialist education arose will be considered. Whether the existing university system has been accepting of the academic status of social work education and at what academic

level, may form part of this discussion. There are considerable national variations in the relationship between the academic establishment and social work education and the chapters will highlight these differences.

As well as the status of social work education the chapters will discuss the curriculum. Many countries have differences in relation to their ethos, philosophy, subject areas and the importance they give to social work practice. In each chapter the issue of theoretical underpinning will be given consideration and the relative influences of disciplines such as psychology, sociology, social policy and psychoanalysis will be traced. In some countries social pedagogue is considered a distinct discipline. The ratio of practice focus within courses and what this suggests about the status of such activities will also be discussed.

The issue of the meanings of the term "social worker", in each country, and how it is different from other "social" professions, will form the next section of each chapter. In different countries social workers have very different roles which may render the term problematic. In some countries there are for example social pedagogues, social educators or care managers undertaking locally defined activities. Each chapter will attempt to clarify the definition and activities of these kinds of categories. This will underline which activities are considered to be the provenance of social work and which are not. For example whether workers who deal primarily with the relief of poverty via administering state benefits would or would not be considered as social workers, is subject to national variation.

Professionalism is the next concern of each chapter. They will illustrate issues of status relative to professionalism generally in their countries and discuss the process of becoming professionalized and the extent to which this has been achieved. The mechanisms which indicate and reinforce professional status will be explored. Professional registers, associations and professional codes are some of the aspects which may be considered. In many countries the professionalism of social work has been and continues to be somewhat ambiguous. Factors such as its traditional female orientation may be implicated in this, as is the profession's own some times ambivalent attitude towards the whole issue of being a profession.

The next aspect to which each chapter gives attention is the question of what kind of role and what kind of activities does national and local policy and law define for social work. This context clearly dictates not just the activities of a social worker but the kind of agencies within which this work is carried out. In some countries the voluntary or non – governmental sector is primarily responsible for such welfare

delivery whereas in others the state provides most social services. Where social workers are employed, as well as the statutory and policy orientations of their activities leads to much differentiation across Europe.

In the last section of each chapter authors were asked to highlight what they see as the most significant contemporary issues in social work and the challenges their countries currently face. As the reader will see there are both significant commonalities and differences in the European picture. The book's conclusion will address the most important of these themes.

It is very important to keep in mind that the authors of this book present their particular view of their country's situation. In almost every case the author is the representative of one teaching institution which is part of the Thematic Network. Clearly they have attempted to capture the essence of social work in their state. However it may be that a different emphasis may have been given by another author. Within the Network some countries are represented by more than one institution. Where this is the case, liaison has resulted in agreement as to the content of this chapter.

In a changing Europe striking differences in social work exist due to federalism, regionalism and the emergence of forms of political independence. Rules, laws, roles and less tangible but important aspects of social work education and practice demonstrate considerable variations. For example it is worth noting that even though the UK now consists of the political entities of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, currently only England and Wales are represented in the network and England contributed the chapter. Similarly in relation to Belgium separated contributions were made by Flemish and French authors and were joined together by an independent editor. The limits of space available within the volume have had to occasionally impose some restrictions on the breadth of contribution.

Who and what the book is for

This book about social work and its different regional applications should help teachers, students, and professionals to develop a comparative approach. It will also be useful for both associations and professionals because it offers an insight into practical issues and social problems within different regions of Europe.

This book represents a fresh attempt at developing a general overview of basic information about social work in 24 European countries.

Although this is not the first book dealing with such a topic, it is the most comprehensive and inclusive so far. Not only does it include virtually all European countries, it explores the various different sectors of intervention of social work and it attempts to facilitate comparison of the same themes across different countries

This book should be included in the curricula of all European establishments, as tangible evidence of the desire to build a common vision of European social work and, at the same time, to offer its readers the opportunity to gain valuable knowledge of commonalities and differences.