

Social Work in transition: what can we learn from Europe?

“What can we learn from Europe” is a pertinent question for today, and it was just this enquiry that fuelled the first training project launched by the ‘European Social Work Thematic Network: European Platform for World Wide Social Work’

Two days of seminars and workshops were held at the University of [The West of England, Bristol, April 25th and 26th, to explore pan-European response to just such a question. Hosted by Dr Liz Frost, Faculty Director of International Developments, and the social work programme, with Tony Benjamin (Barnardos, Bristol) and Nick Pike (The University of Gloucestershire) also lending support, the seminars offered the opportunity to get some answers straight from the horse’s mouth.

Lecturers from The Network and Socrates/Erasmus exchange partners were invited . Talks and workshops were contributed to represent the whole of Europe: from Eastern Europe (Julija Eidukeviciute, Lithuania; Dr. Nora Harkai, Hungary) Northern (Rauni Rati, Finland, Dr. Anita Kihlstrom, Sweden) Central (Prof. Dr. Gunther Friesenhahn and Prof. Dr. Gudrun Ehlert, Germany; Answin Weissenborn, Austria), Southern (Prof. Annamaria Campanini, Italy) and Western Europe (Prof. Ann Davis, Birmingham and staff from The University of the West of England and The University of Gloucestershire). Each offered their experience of how social problems in their particular country are addressed by social work services. Workshop sessions and panel discussions gave the forty or so participants from social work practice, the student body, trainers and academics the chance to reflect on the similarities and diversities in European social work, and the mutual knowledge exchange such diverse experience offers.

For the UK, this was the first training project offered in relation to the membership of the ‘European Social Work Thematic Network: European Platform for World Wide Social Work’, As such it represented a massive learning experience across the board. Speakers offered access to understanding such issues as the change in family functioning in Lithuania since independence, contemporary youth work in Hungary, and the current policy on asylum seekers within the EU and in the UK. Additionally a plethora of workshops each offered at least two different European perspectives on various aspects of social work theory, policy, research or practice. With each day ending with an open panel discussion – ‘ask the European lecturers anything about their country’s social welfare’ - the amount of new learning available was stunning. A continuous knowledge exchange underpinned the whole two days. The informal evaluations were fabulous; everyone was just so excited by the topics presented and about how so much diversity and so much similarity can exist at the same time in one continent.

As well as being a really important educational experience, it had two other major outcomes. It also offered lots of good new networking in the time spent together. The EUSW thematic network currently has a hundred members, across every EU state, three of which came together in the Bristol area to play host to the workshops. However the more the better, and certainly there were potential members actually at the workshops, and interest generally was raised. The chances of making strong and far-reaching European connections for training and also for social work research and practice are there for the making.

The other important outcome of the two days of training workshops was offering the ‘training group’ of the network the chance to evaluate the project as a potential model – a pilot- for their future events.

Overall, then :- another success for the network: well done us!

Dr Liz Frost,

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A EUROPEAN SOCIAL WORK WORKSHOP

25th-26th April 2006
At the University of The West of England, Bristol, England

A product of the Thematic Network “EUSW: European platform for World Wide Social Work”

Initial report

Aims

This two day workshop, on transfer of social work knowledge across Europe, was devised to meet a number of aims:

- To offer training to local social work practitioners, trainers and students on what social work knowledge and skills are being used across Europe
- To undertake some comparative analysis of mutual social problems across Europe, and consider what social work methods are being used to intervene in those
- To offer local practitioners, trainers and students a broader knowledge base in relation to the EU context of education and training in contemporary social work
- To give specific consideration to the situation of the family and related social problems in Eastern Europe, and to the issues of migration and asylum
- To consider pan-European service development and practice methods for working with children, young people and families
- To improve networking with European colleagues from local practitioners, trainers and students, for building future links and ongoing knowledge exchange
- To pilot this particular model of training workshop, in relation to, for example, issues of scale, structure, content etc. and evaluate the outcomes to consider whether this might be a useful to model to offer in other parts of the Thematic Network

The Programme Structure

2 days of keynote talks, comparative workshop sessions and panel discussions were offered.

Presenters and trainers from The Thematic Network and across the EU - Germany, Italy, Hungary, Lithuania Sweden, Finland, UK - offered training to local participants

Day 1

The focus was on methods of social work being used in different parts of the EU, and the context in which they were being used, as well as the current situation of European social work. It considered, for example, social work organisation and the issue of citizenship, how research can underpin practice, and what kinds of theory can be drawn on for practice, and the whole issue of professional development.

Day 2

The focus was on social work with children and families across Europe. It considered for example the problems for families in periods of rapid social change, drawing on Eastern Europe's recent experience as an example. It looked at issues connected with migration and being a refugee, and the impact of this on children and young people, and their families. Other issues considered were how to work therapeutically with families, how to undertake preventative work in child protection, and what provision and social action can be deployed in youth work

Participation

The Thematic Network European teaching team reflected North, South, East and Western Europe, but was kept to a reasonably small number. Each visiting lecturer was 'matched' with a local lecturer, to offer European comparisons and to draw out and highlight issues for learning within the local context. This also generated a useful informal learning dimension.

App. 40 people attended the first day and 35 the second day.

The workshops were planned to be big enough for a good exchange of ideas, but small enough for everyone to be able to contribute and engage with the issues, and therefore really undertake some learning and personal knowledge building.

A very helpful atmosphere developed because the scale and friendly efficient organisation allowed a high level of formal and informal interaction between all participants.

The participants were self-selecting from within practice, practice trainers and facilitators, students, and lecturers.

Teaching and learning

The balance of key-notes and workshops seemed to be useful: two keynotes and questions and answers in the morning, and a choice of smaller workshops, allowing participants to pursue particular interests in a more educationally participative style in the afternoons.

The structure, therefore, offered formal and participative teaching methods, allowing participants access to new knowledge and spaces in which to personally explore and develop this, as well as contribute relevant experience,

Each day ended with a European panel, giving all participants the chance to question any or all of the European trainers on any aspect of social work in their country. This allowed people to follow up all individual issues and raise questions developed during the day. The dialogue also offered a chance for the visiting lecturers to reflect on local understandings.

Evaluation

The outcomes of the informal evaluation process suggested a very high degree of satisfaction. Participants commented, for example, on the breadth of learning they had undertaken, on how privileged they felt to be offered insight into the situation for example in Lithuania and Hungary, and offered a chance to engage with skills and knowledge transfer and re-application to their own contexts. Such comments as 'fascinating', 'I learnt an enormous amount' and requests for further such sessions were made (formal evaluation material to follow).

The European teaching team also felt that it was an extremely useful model and expressed a high degree of satisfaction with the workshops.

Overall Learning

In relation to the aim of establishing this workshop as a pilot for future events, this seems to have been very successful. The scope and size of the event, the range of teaching methods and the development of an informal as well as a formal learning culture were very helpful indeed.

The size probably could be increased, providing a range of small workshop opportunities was kept as a core principle. Using lecturers from across the whole of Europe is a very important principle, as is offering material on all aspects of social work – service delivery but also the various issues which contextualise and dictate how social work can be practiced.

Positioning such training courses in locations where the local practice or academic social work context is very keen to encourage European learning, and therefore willing and able to offer structural support and generally a supportive, friendly and network building situation is a further key element

**Dr. Liz Frost,
Co-organiser, participant and Core Board member**