



The Role of Development Skills in Social Work Practice and Education in Finland

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Introduction

In this article our perspective is to discuss the intensification and perspectives of development work in the social sector in Finland and the question of social work skills in relation to the development in practice. Within the last decades Finland has experienced far reaching changes in relation to development work and social planning. What are the implications of this development for the master's degree programmes in social work? This forms the context in which we as members of the team of social work educators¹ have been planning our social work curriculum in Pori which has started in autumn 2004.

The Department of Pori was founded² in 2004 as part of the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Tampere. The department offers master's degree programmes in social work as well as in social policy and sociology. The City of Pori, which is located on the western coast of Finland, represents a new location of social work teaching in Finland. Instead of a single university Pori has the Pori University Consortium³, in which five different Finnish universities⁴ and different fields are presented with 2400 students and 190 staff members.

The Pori University Consortium has expressly regional targets. The many-sided development and raising the competitive potential of the Satakunta region by increasing the academic know-how are the reasons why the city of Pori promotes university education. The Department of Pori at Tampere University gives high priority to questions of welfare services and working life. This follows the development plan the city of Pori has been supporting through different projects and the funding of the professorship on welfare services for five years. In this context the education of qualified social workers (master in social work) and experts in welfare services is a new challenge.

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³ <http://www.porinyliopistokeskus.fi/>

⁴ The networked universities with branch departments in Pori are: [Tampere University of Technology](#), [Turku School of Economics and Business Administration](#), [University of Turku \(Degree Programme in Cultural Production and Landscape Studies\)](#), [University of Art and Design Helsinki](#), and [University of Tampere](#).

1 Trends of development work in the Finnish social sector

1.1 From social planning to development work

The discussion of development work in the social sector has been very active during the last decade in Finland. The concept of development work can be defined in relation to social planning. We understand development work as a new trend of state politics to promote social welfare affairs. It represents a different orientation for example compared to centralized social planning politics which were very much the case during the 1960's and 1970's. On the other hand development work can be understood as an instrument of steering when new practices and services are needed and new social problems emerge. (Oulasvirta et al. 2002, 18, 31.)

If we look back we can see that the entire concept of development work has changed. It has become more difficult to define the whole concept because it has become wider and more blurred. The idea of development work as specialized work towards new products, processes or practices has changed. Instead development work has become an everyday practice which happens everywhere. Almost everything can be understood as development work. The idea of development work as a way to search for innovations also changes when development work is taken more as a tool for political and administrative steering. (Seppänen-Järvelä 2004, 251.)

In the Finnish context the municipalities are responsible for organizing and developing social services at the local level – e.g. fitting the demands of laws and national standards to the local practices⁵. The municipalities have also an active role in identifying social problems and finding innovative solutions. During the 1990's projects have become a very widely used tool of development work. They are used as a way to promote change and innovations – but at the same time they are used to fund basic work which is organized in a project-mode (ibid.).

In the social sector the strong role of the state and the whole public sector has always been characteristic in Finland. This means that the organization, directions and funding comes mostly from the state. Inside this strong state control we find different periods of how social planning and development work have been organized. Past decades can be described as a pendulum of state direction. (Nylander et al. 2003, 3.) Next we give a description of the main trends of these periods.

1.2 Centralized steering and control

The period from the early 1970's to 1993 can be characterized as a time of growing state welfare in Finland. Especially the 1970's can be described as a period of strong and centralized steering and planning ideology. During this period laws and norms together with economic and resource steering were the main state instruments to direct and at the same time to develop the social sector. The state social planning was accompanied by strong control by the state. (Heikkilä 2004, 208; Oulasvirta et al. 2002, 17-19.)

The economic and resource steering was strongly connected to the detailed local plans which were a prerequisite to get state funding. Besides the law the most visible form of normative steering were different regulations and official instructions the Finnish National Board of Social Welfare used to give. These regulations were followed by all municipalities. The planning and development work happened mainly at the top level (central government) of the

⁵ In the beginning of 2005 there are 432 municipalities in Finland. 83 municipalities have less than 2000 inhabitants and 6 municipalities have more than 100.000 inhabitants. Major municipalities, 247, have from 2000 to 10.000 inhabitants. (<http://www.kunnat.net> (cited 25.10.2005))

system and the instructions distributed were the same for all municipalities. Local development happened under strong state direction and control. (Heikkilä 2004; Oulasvirta et al. 2002, 17-19.)

The way development work was done before the 1990's could be called a 'top-down' –model which is visualized in Figure 1.

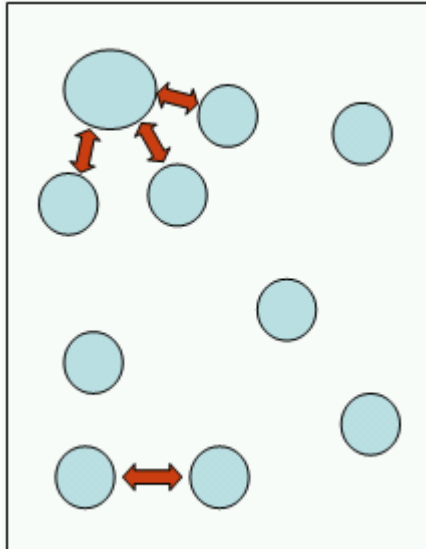


Figure 1. Top-down-model.

1.3 Deregulation and local self-determination

In Finland like in other western countries during the 1980's the discussion of decentralization of decision making, responsiveness to citizens and a service attitude by the administration increased. In practice this meant different deregulation projects and the abolition of norms. (Oulasvirta et al. 2002, 18.)

In the Finnish case after 1993 the steering and control functions of the state were severely reduced. On the one hand this happened by the closing of the National Board of Social Welfare. It was replaced by the National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health with a new kind of orientation. This change meant the weakening of normative steering and replacing it by steering through information as a new instrument for indirect steering and development. An emphasis on quality, horizontal learning, benchmarking etc. was introduced and implemented (Heikkilä 2004, 207).

On the other hand the role of the state was weakened by the state subsidy reform in 1993 which enhanced the independence of the local governments. The leading idea was to strengthen the decision-making of the municipalities and enhance efficiency and profitability by granting them one total sum of state money to organize all the services (Sipilä et al. 1997; Rintala et al. 2002.). It was understood that the situations and the circumstances in the municipalities in different parts of the country varied. So the municipalities had a free hand and they were in charge of the organisation of services as they best fitted to the local situations. At the same time municipalities got the responsibility for the local development work. So the use of economic steering instruments changed dramatically and the municipal boards got a new role in decision making.

The 1990s economic recession in Finland coincided with the process of weakening the state direction of social affairs (Hämäläinen & Niemelä 2000; Kautto & Uusitalo 2004). At the local level this meant that development work was almost totally cut in many municipalities. Additionally welfare services were very much narrowed. The great idea of local democracy as a tool of development turned to the democratic cutting down of local welfare services.

Characteristic of the 1990's situation in Finland was the unbalanced regional development (Hanssen 1997, 127; Kautto & Heikkilä 2004, 228). In this situation some municipalities or groups of them kept active as so-called forerunner or visionary municipalities (Kokko 2002, 58) and some municipalities totally dropped out of development work and tried to manage and pursue only their compulsory duties. At the same time non-governmental organisations became one significant actor of development projects. The development model of this deregulation period could be described as a disjointed-model (Figure 2.).

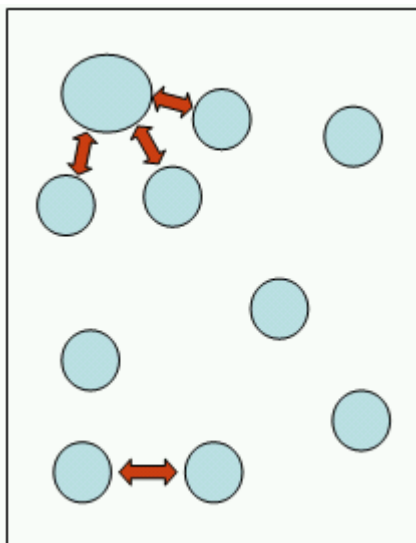


Figure 2. Disjointed-model

Political dissatisfaction with this situation of deregulation and the absence of steering tools led to new attempts to grant special services in social welfare. The new so-called earmarked state subsidies were directed to most critical services like child protection, work with mentally disabled, mental health work and welfare for substance abusers. (Heikkilä 2004.)

The disappearance of the traditional planning culture made room for a new kind of project culture as a forum for development during the 1990's. New funding possibilities e.g. through EU-programs encouraged different local actors to co-operate and to start and develop project work. The volume of the different development projects has been so huge that it led to project chaos and also to a sense of exhaustion with projects at the local level. A step forward was the attempt of local actors to combine different development projects to larger entities. (Seppänen-Järvelä 2004, 251- 252; Arnkil et al. 2000, 224-233.)

State-promoted development networks

At the beginning of the 2000's the relation of steering and development is again re-conceptualised. There seems spread a longing for the old social planning approach and a search for new instruments as well. It has been said that the closing of the National Boards on Social Welfare and Health at the beginning of the 1990's was a mistake. A new kind of

regulation and control seems to be required after the decade of decentralization and deregulation. (Huttunen 2004, 49; Heikkilä 2004, 210-211.)

Another discussion concerning the instruments of steering has lately been concentrated on strengthening the fundamental and social rights of citizens which are grounded in the constitution. The main elements of this new philosophy of steering are adequate state funding, the right of citizens to obtain services, and minimum standards for the quality of services. (Heikkilä 2004, 211; Oulasvirta et al. 2002, 31.)

Besides these discussions the state has launched new large development programs in the field of social and welfare affairs as well as in other fields of the public sector. Development programs can be seen as a new instrument of strategic management besides other more traditional instruments like management by results and planning. (Seppänen-Järvelä 2004, 252; see also Arnkil et al. 2000, 224-233.)

The orientation of development work in the context of the 2000's has changed again. We could call the 2000's the network-decade or the companionship-decade. The organization of the development work is somehow again state directed. Now the state very strongly directs the special funding for the development work done in different networks. (Heikkilä & Roos 2004, 16.) This means that different companionships or networks of municipalities are necessary to get funding for larger development projects. The third sector as well as the Universities with social work programmes and the Polytechnics with social services programmes are integrated into the local and regional development work. This establishes a new form of co-operation between research, education and the field of practice which is a dominant feature of changes taking place also in the other Nordic countries (Juliusdottir & Petersson 2004).

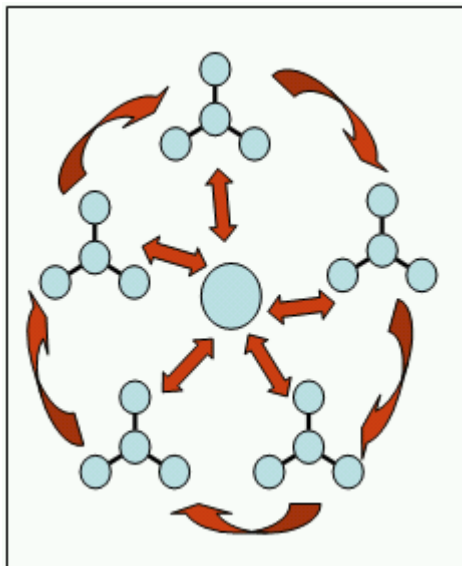


Figure 3. Network-model.

The new development work model is embedded in the National Development Project for Social Services in Finland⁶. Finland has launched this programme to reform its social services

⁶ <http://www.stm.fi/Resource.phx/eng/strag/proje/social/index.htm> (cited 25.10.2005.)

during 2003-2007. The purpose is to enhance the entire comprehensive service system. Along with the national programme to reform health care, this programme is one of the most important projects of the present government. A key issue is to improve the availability and quality of services.

Besides these programmes the state has also launched new structures for development work. 2001 saw the opening of eight regional Social and welfare centres of expertise which cover the whole of Finland. The task of these centres is to network in their county areas and promote development work by bringing together different actors from practice, education and research. The structure and tasks of these centres are based on law and they are funded by the state (Sosiaalialan osaamiskeskukset 2002). An example of the resources for this new kind of development work are government grants to the joint projects, for example of regional development units in specific fields.

We have outlined the main phases of the Finnish development during the last decades. The last one, the network model, represents a new orientation, which is very much promoted by the state. In this phase the practice does not equal the theoretical model. There are lively networks, networks that are forming and networks which ought to be organized. A critical question is if this networking is the best way to organize services and promote development. Co-operation takes much time, it is not always the most effective way to organize things. Also the basic level municipal social work and social services may stay outside the development done in special settings. This model has many possibilities but it can also restrict different new efforts and lead to over-standardisation.

Compared to the top-down –model the direction of social planning is now no longer clear. The best or most important knowledge is no longer accumulated at the top level. Instead local practices and networks are important fields for knowledge production, leading to good practices and development.⁷ The direction of the steering by information does not happen only centrally from the top down. Instead local networks are steering themselves and other equals by means of information dissemination. They control and evaluate their own practices and negotiate to different directions. (Nylander et al. 2003, 4-5.) In this situation we could at least ask if we are moving closer to so called-knowledge intensive organizations which are more familiar in the business world (ibid. 8-9).

2 Development skills and social work education

2.1 Qualifications for professional social workers in Finland

Social work education in Finland has a diverse history beginning from the late 1800's. During the past decades different (lower and higher) degrees provided the qualification of professional social worker. The period before the 2nd World War was the time for first steps in social work education with different short courses and early stages of vocational training. After the 2nd World War, during the 1940's the vocational training of professional social workers was launched. Bachelor-level training was established although parallel to this there existed still different short courses due to the shortage of workers in the field. The scope of this education was to train social welfare officials with a good knowledge of law according to the requirements of municipalities. In a process that started already in the 1960's social work developed as an academic discipline. At first it happened as a part of social policy

⁷ This orientation to development work and steering can be compared to the Open Method of Coordination of the EU (Heikkilä 2004, 208; Kari & Pakaslahti 2003, 192-196).

programmes. Since the year 2000 social work has been an independent academic discipline at six universities⁸. (Vuorikoski 1999; Asetus 615/1999.)

At present we are beginning a new historical phase. Since August 1st 2005 Finland has a new competence law (Laki 272/2005), which prescribes the educational qualifications for different tasks in social work and social services. According to this new law the qualification for a professional social worker is the master degree in social work as a major subject or master degree in another major subject and social work as minor subject which are together comparable to studies in social work as a major subject. This new law follows the practice of social work education established since 1999 in Finland.

How does practice reflect this competence law? In the field the educational background of professional social workers varies. There is variation at first because of the different training generations of social workers. Secondly there is variation because of the shortage of educated professional social workers; someone has to do the job and municipalities are forced to hire non-qualified substitutes.

Social work as a context of development skills

Historically and roughly speaking social work has two traditions: (1) client or case work and group work orientation and (2) structural social work and community work orientation (Toikko 2005; Toikko 2001; Matthies et al. 2001; Popple 1996). The first operates mainly with individuals and groups in their surroundings. The latter operates at political and policy level to change contexts, environments and social structures. Traditionally in Finland social work practice has operated mainly within the first one and with secondary emphasis on the local community policy level. Hence management, leadership and development skills have not been emphasised within the field of social work. A requirement for these skills was strongly brought about with the growth of the network-model in the social sector. Today it is seen that development and management work pervades all social work areas: individual, community and structural matters. It has to do with organizing and managing services and processes. Assessment and development processes both in individual life situations and structural matters are core functions of social work.

In Finnish social work education two major topics are emphasized: professional skills in the direct work with client and scientific research skills. There are several reasons for this. Client work skills e.g. social work methods, interaction skills, group work skills and community work skills are needed to operate as a social worker in municipal, governmental and civic society organisations and settings. As a university subject among other subjects in the social sciences social work education emphasizes also research skills. Majoring in social work is compatible to other social science subjects. Holders of Masters of Social Work possess basic knowledge and skills to work as a researcher in a research institution or in a university department or other research settings and to practice post graduate studies.

New challenges for social work education have been raised in many contemporary discussions and processes. The reform of the degree structure in 2005 in Finland following the European Bologna process has set new challenges for education. Among others one task for broader consideration is the focus on skills for the working life. Beside the Bologna process social work educators have faced other expectations also. These expectations have

⁸ Master degree in social work is taught in six Finnish universities in different parts of the country: in Helsinki, Jyväskylä, Kuopio, Lappi (Rovaniemi), Tampere and Turku.

several sources. Firstly Finland experienced a deep recession and cost cuts in the 1990's. Accordingly there was a shortage of social work development and leadership skills. Secondly towards the 2000's several actors including the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, the Ministry of Education and the Union of Professional Social Workers emphasised development and leadership skills in the social sector (Murto et al. 2004; Aaltonen 1999; Niiranen 1995). And thirdly there is a vivid discussion over the administrative planning and reform model in the social sector in the direction of New Public Management, the provider-purchaser split, network skills and process management (Harris 2003; Eräsaari 2002).

There have been some educational responses to these expectations. Universities have improved curriculum contents. Different educational institutes produced separate leadership education programmes and extension studies. Some polytechnics constructed higher degree programs and universities created professional licentiate studies and developed post graduate degree study courses on the matter. Also in the Pori team we deliberated how to respond to the demands for wide expertise and field experience: How to educate project work skills, development skills and leadership skills alongside with client work and research skills?

2.2 Structure of the master degree in social work

We present the Finnish structure of social work education in figure 4. According to the Bologna process Finland follows the two-cycle degree system since 1.8.2005. Despite this two-cycle system we take new students to the universities straight to the master programmes and they are assumed to take both the bachelor and master level degree. We have some special master programmes too but there is no intake to the bachelor studies only.

On the bachelor programme the studies consist of basic studies and intermediate studies of social work. In addition there are common studies for social scientists, language studies and studies in minor subjects. The master programme concentrates on deepening the knowledge and skills in the main subject. Master thesis studies form about half of the whole master studies.

The content of social work major studies can be divided into four main themes which run through both the bachelor and masters programmes. The first one is social work theory. The second one consists of different fields of social work and of organizational questions. The third theme is professional skills in social work and the fourth is research methods and research skills in social work.

We see these four fields as the principal elements of the social work programmes in Finland. In practice there is some variation and different emphasis in the social work programmes at six different Finnish universities.

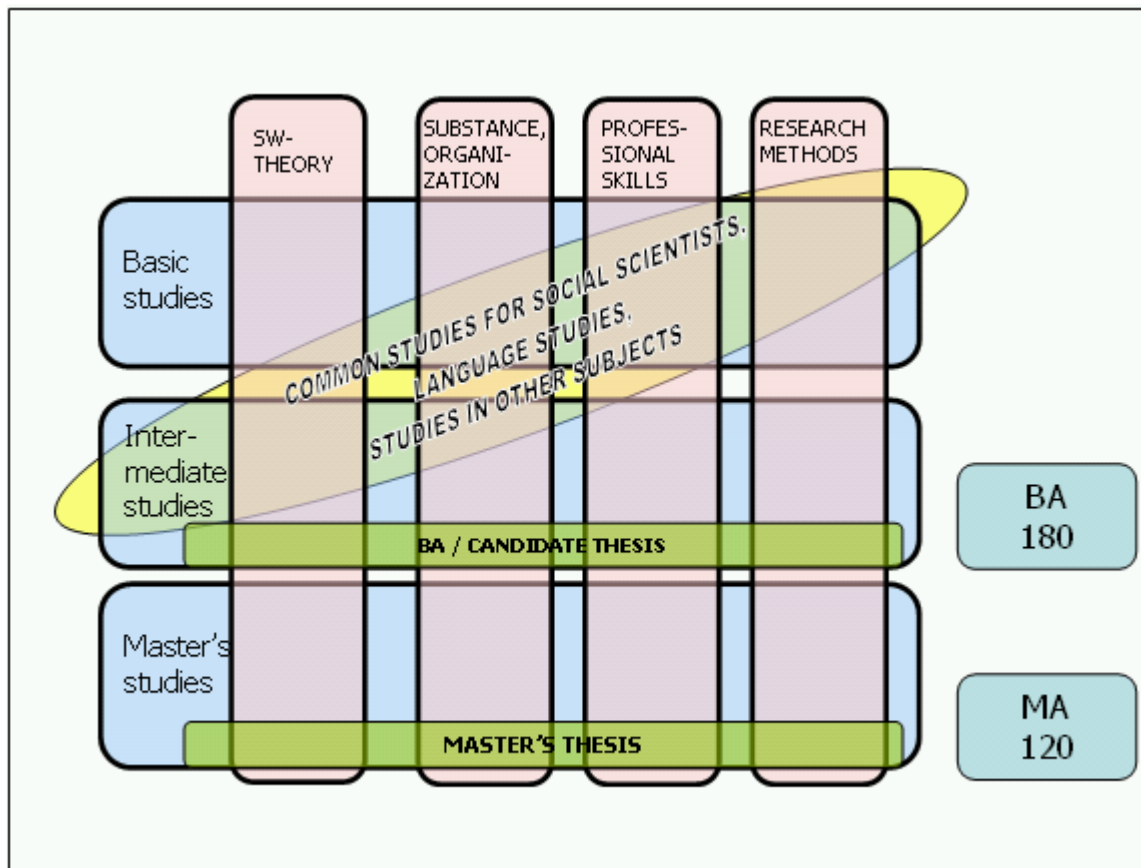


Figure 4: Structure of Masters degree in social work

Social work skills in the Pori curriculum⁹

Social work professional skills are taught at all educational levels. At the basic level there is an introductory course to social work skills called Openings to social work profession (3 credits). This first year course reflects self-knowledge through group work and interactive methods. At the intermediate level the emphasis is on client, case and group work skills. There are several courses on professional social work skills mainly during the second year of the bachelor studies. The courses are Introduction to Social Law, Practical Skills of Social Work, Methods of Practical Social Work, Seminar of Practical Skills and Practice Education (all together 20 credits).

At the master level the focus is on the development and management of social work processes and social services in organisations including supporting multidisciplinary studies (15 credits). The aims are to advance theoretical knowledge and to develop practice skills by combining the development skills studies and ongoing development process in an organization (figure 5). Students participate in ongoing development projects for two months. Development practice can be divided into three phases: planning, implementing and evaluating (Austin & Solomon 2000; Davidson & Perlmutter 2000; Rostila 2004). Students participate in one or several phases of an ongoing development work in practice and they are supervised by a university teacher and a practice teacher. They report the phase of the ongoing development project and reflect on theoretical elements concerning the ongoing

⁹ This section follows the Curriculum of Social Work 2005-2006 at the Tampere University Pori Unit. <http://www.uta.fi/opiskelu/o-opas/yht/pori/> (cited 25.10.2005.)

process. As a part of their practical training the students report also their individual involvements in three phases: planning, implementing and evaluating. The development project and the students' reports are discussed in a joint seminar.

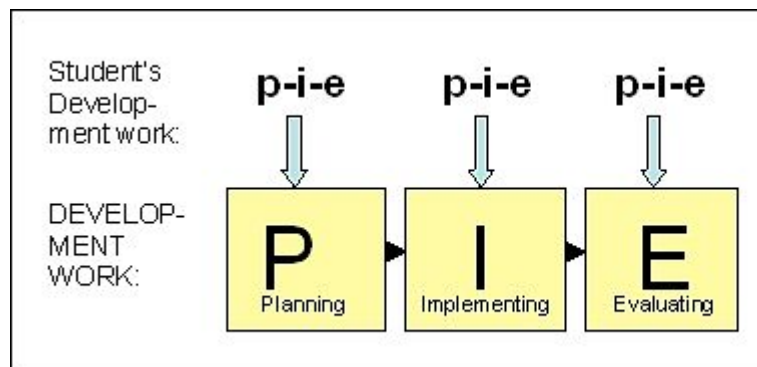


Figure 5: Process of development work (Rostila 2004)

3 Discussion

In this article we have firstly drawn a picture of the historical pendulum of steering and development work in the Finnish social sector and social work practice. The role of the state has been a focus but there has been variation of the focus. Today instead of directing and regulating the state enables and creates settings for the networks to develop and operate. In many cases being part of networks is also an obligation.

Secondly, a comparable pendulum swing of orientations can be seen in the history of social work education. The focus of the education of qualified social workers has at first moved from social officials and inspectors to client workers. The latest discussion asks again for management and organizational skills of social work professionals. These skills are seen to be needed in many stages from managing client work processes to development work and management of social welfare organizations.

Both the steering and development work and the social work profession are in the middle of a process of transformation. In this situation we have more questions than answers about the future state of affairs. Where is this trend leading to? How do we face the new challenges and how can we ensure the continuity of functional traditions and established practices? The emerging managerial issues are partly seen as a threat to traditional or 'real' client oriented social work. At the same time we can ask if the managerial and developmental skills could bring also some strengthening elements to the social work profession. In the field there is a fear of the disappearance of social welfare expertise from the municipal managing level. Should we let it pass to other professions or should we try to save it? Finding a fruitful new balance between the traditions and future trends is challenging for social work educators and developers. The new degree structure following the European Bologna process may possibly provide new answers.

More broadly it is a matter of the relationship between education, research and practice and finding ways to cross the boundaries. Networking and crossing boundaries between education, research and practice are future challenges for all actors. Co-operative knowledge production, circulation of knowledge and knowledge management are new elements of development work. Universities face new role demands in these networks. In the field of

Finnish social work education the newly started Pori unit with its own programme represents one case that seeks new solutions in the middle of old traditions and new demands.

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