



The Development of Social Work as a Speciality and the Profession in Estonia¹

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For Estonia and its people social work is one of the vitally important fields that had to be built up from almost nothing since independence was regained in 1991. During Soviet times social work and social workers did not receive the necessary attention. Severe social problems were denied and kept hidden since according to official communist ideology, life in the Soviet Union was the best in the world and getting better all the time. Social workers did not receive specialised education and their functions were to be carried out by the workers of trade unions and the party, by teachers and by the workers of the personnel departments.

In the 1990s big changes, having also an effect on social life, took place in the development of Estonian society. Concepts such as *social work* and *social worker* were rediscovered in Estonia. There are certain prerequisites for the success of any activity (including social work). One of the most important ones is being a professional, a worker with thorough preparation. Social work as an occupation requires specialised academic education, which is based on theoretical knowledge and practical skills that have been acquired through theoretical knowledge.

Specialised knowledge is a foundation for attaining a specialised qualification. However, at the same time one has to keep in mind that social work as an occupation is constantly changing, there is no absolute knowledge - everything is relative, dynamic and changing (Tamm, 1998). The changing nature of the activity requires reflection by a social worker, who also has to be able to evaluate his/her work and its basis and learn from experiences.

Academic specialised education implies also the development of a new professional identity and higher levels of competence. This underlines the necessity of specialised education.

Social work as a profession

In Estonia education in social work existed since the beginning of the 20th century. However, during the fifty years of Soviet occupation education in social work was not provided. During the last ten years both academic education and practice in social work have been developed in Estonia.

1935 - Home-economy Institute (Kodumajanduse Instituut)

Several associations dealing with welfare, both for youth and adults, were established in Estonia in the 1930-1940s: the Estonian Red Cross, the Estonian Union of Child Welfare (Eesti Lastekaitse Ühing), the Estonian Women's Union (Eesti Naisliit). In many aspects the practical

¹ In our understanding the "specialty" is something you can have from the university, e.g. teacher specialty, social work specialty, public administration (maybe it can also be a professional education) and profession is something you get after the university - when you start work as a social worker? It means that you have special education to be professional social worker.

provision of social assistance rested on the shoulders of women who acquired their education in Western countries or developed their skills under the supervision of more experienced workers. There was a need for educated social workers (Tulva, 1996).

The Institute of Home Economics, established on August 1st, 1935, educated social assistants. Training lasted for three years and emphasis was laid on the social-pedagogical approach that was widespread in Central Europe. The institute was supported by the Union for Estonian Women (Eesti Naisliit), but teachers were paid by the state (Tulva, 1996). Social assistants that graduated from the institute commenced work in county and town governments, educational establishments, youth and other organisations, child welfare centers, orphanages, hospitals and homes for the elderly.

The first four cohorts of graduates from the institute were able to start working for the society before the Second World War broke out. Subsequently, several changes took place at the institute, the result being that the training department for social work was closed.

1950-1990 - Social Work in the Soviet Estonia

The system of governmental of Soviet Russia was adopted more and more in Estonia. The whole social assistance system was reorganised according to the new principles and was subordinated to the central government. The priorities of the Estonian government such as child and mothers' welfare were replaced by services for the protection of war veterans and invalids, and also for organising the life of pensioners. Departments of social insurance were established in bigger cities and clients could turn to those for help. Those problems mainly concerned incapacity for work and direction to residential care institutions. Support and help was provided as far away from the client as possible and on a higher level.

There is a certain change noticeable in the 1970s and 1980s. During that period people were motivated to work and their coping was supported through a system of different amenities and recognition. This was usually carried out in connection with the work place. Personnel departments together with party organisations of lower rank assumed the main responsibility for providing social support. They decided who would be the beneficiaries. Over that period of time and for that purpose such commodities as TVs, home equipment, cars, vouchers for vacation and trips to foreign countries were handed out. This was a method for stimulating people's motivation for work (Tamm, 1998).

Institutions for social assistance - orphanages, homes for elderly people and boarding schools for people with disabilities - were all closed to the public. People in those institutions did not exist for the rest of the society, they were hidden away. In those circumstances whole generations grew up having never seen a disabled person.

It was characteristic for that period that the work of a social worker as an assistant was carried out by people specialised in fields bordering on social work, e.g. doctors, teachers, lawyers, psychologists, kindergarten personnel, also so-called functionaries like the representatives of the party and trade unions. There was no specialised training or education during those years.

Social Work in Estonia since Regaining Independence

On August 20th, 1991 Estonia declared independence. Reforms have been started in every field. The system of social assistance is also being changed considerably. The tasks of organising social assistance services lies once more with the authority of local governments.

There is an understanding for the need of a completely different social policy and social work since Estonia regained its independence. Along with this people started to see the importance of specialised, thorough and consistent education of social workers. There are several factors that will influence the content and conditions of social work and social workers in coming years: new laws in Estonia and the general direction established by them, governing views of social policy and the change in them, influences coming from the European Union, the growing acuteness of social problems and the success of new forms of intervention.

At the beginning of the 1990s positions such as those of social worker and social advisor were established at local government level and new people were recruited. Due to the lack of professionally trained people those positions were taken by workers from the former trade unions, teachers, people with medical training, kindergarten personnel - almost one in ten people practicing social work had gained the position incidentally (Tamm, 1998). Several new positions were created. It has been stated that the number was 49 and they did not reflect the work of social workers adequately (Niinemets, 2001).

So there was a need of professionalising social work in society. In order to improve the quality of social work the relevant educational structures had to be established quickly. Higher education was provided again in the field of social work. Hence social workers have been educated at Tallinn University of Educational Sciences since 1991 and at the University of Tartu since 1992.

The 1995 Social Welfare Act and the Concept of a Social Worker

The concept of a social worker as a profession has been used since 1995 in Estonia, which is when the Social Welfare Act came into force. In the Social Welfare Act (1995) a social worker has been defined as a person who has obtained the respective higher education. Hence, specific higher education is one of the preconditions for assuring the level of professionalism of a social worker.

Malvet & Mikkola (1998) point out that 'social worker' is a professional title and not an employment position; meaning that a person that has obtained the profession of a social worker can also work in the systems of education, health, legal protection etc.

The Education System for Social Workers

Education in social work is currently provided in two higher institutions of Estonia -- Tartu University and Tallinn Pedagogical University and in two colleges that are the branches of the mentioned universities. It is also possible to acquire this education in Tallinn Pedagogical College.

Educating Social Workers at the University Level

According to the November 29th, 1991 decision of the Council of the University of Tartu, a Chair of Social Work was established and started December 1st, 1991 in the Department of Sociology, Faculty of History. Lecturers were hired mainly from the field of sociology and psychology. The first students, pursuing their master's degree, started in the autumn of 1992, first students studying towards the bachelor's degree were accepted in 1994. Until 1997 there was an age limit for social work students - only people that were 22 years and older were accepted. There was a presumption that people who had just graduated from high school might not be mature enough to study this speciality (Kiik, 1998).

Since 1998 it is possible to specialise in two directions. First it is possible to become a social advisor in which case one would be prepared to work with the problems of an individual. The second option is to study towards becoming a social director in local governments, social offices and other public offices. The occupation of a social director requires thorough knowledge of social policy, which is knowledge about the society, its developments, economic possibilities and rational solutions in organising education, health security, labour market, pensions and assistance. Until 1998 the curriculum had an emphasis on work with clients. The need for change became evident from the wishes of students along with the arrival of new lecturers. The curriculum was officially changed by the faculty council in April 1998 (Kiik, 1998).

Social work has been taught at Tallinn Pedagogical University (TPU) since 1991. The main challenge has been to compile a programme, which would include knowledge from the Western world but serve the specific interests of modern Estonian society. The main goal is to prepare social workers for a Bachelor's degree. Theoretical study modules are closely connected with field education in different kinds of welfare settings, as well as at the local administration and departments of health care and social welfare.

It is also possible to pursue a master's degree (80 credits) at the University of Tartu and Tallinn Pedagogical University. Preference is for people having obtained the bachelor's degree in social work or in similar fields (e.g. special education, psychology, sociology etc.).

Since 1998 students can also take the subjects of social work via the Open University system in both universities. This is a very good opportunity for people already working in the field and to everyone interested in social work. It is possible to pursue both the bachelor's degree and the master's degree. Since 1998 students can also study towards becoming a social work organiser at the Pärnu College of the University of Tartu. The curriculum there has the emphasis on practical skills.

In 2001 new curricula, in response to the suggestions of the Bologna declaration were accepted by the University Council of Tartu. The new curriculum, called '*Sociology, Social Work and Social Policy*', requires 3 years of study and taking of 120 credits. At the same time, the curricula for the master's degree of '*Social Work and Social Policy*' were accepted. This takes 2 years and 80 credits to complete. In educating social workers on the academic level, the emphasis is on professional competence, the development of occupational skills and the efficiency of students' scientific knowledge.

Social work as a profession is popular among young people. An indication for this is the very high competitive application rate (up to 1:16) for acceptance to the university (Kiik, 1998).

2001 - Occupational Standards of a Social Worker

In 2000 a workshop was held in Estonia in order to work out the occupational standards of a social worker. Occupational standards are a basis for assessing occupational qualifications and should give an overview of the conditions guaranteeing the level of competence, which is accepted on either the grounds of regulative, historical or international requirements (Occupation Act, 2001).

The occupational standards document determines the requirements of knowledge, skills, competence, experience, values and personal characteristics that derive from the occupational qualification. (Occupation Act, 2001)

The III, IV and V category qualification occupational standards of a social worker were adopted on October 22nd, 2001 in Estonia. The standard is the basis for the comparison of international

documents certifying qualifications. Occupational standards is valid for four years, and can be amended before the expiry date (Sotsiaaltöö 2001, p. 6).

"A social worker working in the institutions of the state, local government, private or third sector has to meet very many conditions, both with regard to knowledge and personal characteristics. The occupational standard was enacted in order to form the profession of a social worker so that it would be uniquely understood and in order to adopt defined preconditions to the occupation. Every occupation has to have its qualification requirements so that a skilled worker could be distinguished from an unqualified worker or from someone who is unable to carry out the job. Knowledge and skills can be refreshed in accordance with the occupational standard, which amounts to an upgrading of the qualification" (Sotsiaaltöö 2001, p. 6).

Present problems and future perspectives

Social workers have been educated for almost ten years now in Estonia. It appears from the study report made at the request of the Ministry of Social Affairs ('The Present Situation and Future Vision of Social Workers and Social Assistants') that the demand for education in social work is quite high (Table 1).

Table 1. The demand for additional education of social workers 2000-2010

Level of education	Vocational education	Secondary+ education	Vocational secondary education	Vocational higher education	Academic higher education	Degree
Demand	40	75	50	1000	250	85

Source: Tiit, E.M. 2000.

It appears from the table that on average 25 social workers with academic higher education, 8-9 with a scientific degree, 100 with vocational higher education, 5 vocational secondary education, 8 with the complementary education in addition to secondary education, and 4 social workers with vocational education should start working every year within the next ten years. Considering the fact that some of them will probably drop out (i.e. choose another profession, stay at home etc.), all the figures presented should be increased by 10-20% (Tiit, 2000).

Information about the demand for education of social workers can also be obtained from another study. The results of that survey indicate that (N=220) the typical social worker in Estonia today is 43 years old, female, and 13% of the social workers questioned have a professional higher education. 55% of the social workers questioned do not have the professional education nor are they currently obtaining it. The study is based on questionnaires to which all social workers of Estonian cities and towns answered (Saks, Tiit and Käärrik, 2000). It could be said that the demand for education of social workers will become a key question in respect to the development of the profession in the years 2001-2010.

The problem for Estonia at the present is that there is no occupational union bringing social workers together, one that could issue respective certificates. The formation of such a union would be a big step towards the development of the professional identity of a social worker.

In the future more and more social workers with specific professional education will be needed, those who have a profound understanding of social work and a strong professional identity. The development of a future course of academic studies for social workers is important, as well as

refresher courses after graduation from high school. The education in the field of social work should give the student an idea of developments in society and create strong interest in the global processes of social policy and in the practice of delivering social services.

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