



## Social Work Education and Training in Europe and the Bologna Process

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A short review of the last three decades shows that social work programmes have developed similarly in (almost) all European countries, both in terms of structural and content-related characteristics. Here I would like to focus on the following aspects:

- Increased academic focus of training
- Generalist programme
- International/European orientation

Increased academic focus means that social work programmes have been established at universities or comparable higher education institutions, such as universities of applied sciences. The only exception is France where the approximately 150, generally fairly small colleges and the 14 larger instituts regionaux have a hybrid position between vocational colleges and universities and are roughly comparable to academies.

But, as in practically all other European countries, their entry requirement for a place on a social work programme is also a higher school leavers' certificate (exceptions and transitional rulings are still in place in Austria and Switzerland, where universities of applied sciences have only recently been set up).

Further postgraduate programmes (Masters) and access to PhDs (directly or indirectly via neighbouring subjects) are open to graduates of an initial professional education programme in an increasing number of countries.

Increasing academic focus also provides a scientific focus for education. This does not simply mean integrating all relevant scientific theories into teaching, but also undertaking independent research, which in turn can itself be integrated into teaching.

All this necessarily requires teaching staff to have appropriate qualifications, and this applies especially to full-time teaching staff, that is, to lecturers who are appointed to teach social work as opposed to those from other subjects and faculties, such as psychology, sociology or law, who provide some instruction for social work students. Independent social work faculties with their own team of lecturers now exist in most European countries. In contrast, associate lecturers generally come from the practical side of the profession to complement the theoretical training.

With just a couple of exceptions that are valid for a transitional period, such as in Switzerland, teaching staff require at least a university degree, and this is often combined with further qualification requirements such as research experience and PhD, as well as any relevant professional experience. This is in full accordance with the sentiments of the Berlin

Communiqué, in which the necessity of increasing the quality of European higher education is stressed on page three (see below).

There has also been a degree of convergence concerning the contents of social work programmes. Almost all countries provide generalist programmes that are intended to prepare students adequately for the wide range of professional fields without too much specialisation during the programme. This also applies to the Netherlands, for instance, where their once highly specialised social sector programmes have been grouped into large units.

The only exception is again France with a total of 17 different programmes. In Great Britain, “youth and community work” and the qualification as a “probation officer” exist alongside “social work.”

A last point that is particularly relevant in regard to the Bologna process: in many European countries, social work training has and always has had an international and/or European focus. This is a result both of its history and the fact that social work deals to a large extent with topics and problems that extend across borders. This orientation also includes the international exchange of teachers and students.

I will now elaborate on the significance of the Bologna process for changing social work training in Europe. When I refer to the process I mean the harmonisation of the European higher education area within a decade that was set out in the Bologna Declaration of 1999. Since then, this process has developed its own powerful dynamic and, since the follow-on conference in Berlin in September 2003, covers 40 European signatory states from Albania to the Vatican, and now includes Russia.

In the Bologna Declaration and the two subsequent Communiqués of Prague and Berlin, agreement was reached mainly on the following requirements and recommendations:

- Introduction of tiered programmes
- Transparency and comparability of programmes
- Professional qualification provided by the programme and employability on the job market
- European dimension to the programme, including greater mobility for students and teaching staff
- Development of comparable methods and instruments of continuous quality assurance
- Mutual recognition of degrees.

To meet the requirement of introducing tiered degrees as a precondition for comparability and compatibility, 80% of the signatory states have now created or are in the process of creating the statutory conditions for the introduction of “undergraduate” (Bachelors) and “postgraduate” (Masters) programmes. Many countries have reorganised their higher education system partially or entirely to cater for this distinction. This part of the Bologna process therefore seems fairly uncontroversial and looks to be proceeding rapidly. However,

discussions are taking place in some countries about the length of Bachelors and Masters programmes and the exact national designation of the degrees. Various international conferences (including those in Dublin and Helsinki) have been held on the first question. So-called “qualification and level descriptors” for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes were worked out at these conferences, that is, descriptions of which qualifications should be included in the first and second degree programmes. Neither the Bologna Declaration nor these descriptors clearly lay down the formal length of the respective programme. The closing declaration of the Helsinki conference of March 2003 contains a recommendation that 180 to 240 ECTS<sup>1)</sup> credit points should be awarded for a three to four-year full-time Bachelors degree programme and 60 to 120 credit points for a one to two-year Masters programme. This means that someone who holds both degrees should have received at least 300 credit points.<sup>2)</sup>

Most countries that are introducing tiered degrees adhere to this recommendation. The introduction of credit points is here a further prerequisite for the required compatibility and comparability of programmes. The calculation of these performance points should be based on the respective workload of the students (including examinations taken). This represents a paradigm shift from a teaching to a learning paradigm. (Each country’s system of grades should of course be retained: these measure the quality of examination performance whilst the credit points are intended to measure the student’s workload. It is not currently clear whether and, if so, in what form the two systems will be convertible to one another.<sup>3)</sup>)

A further important step towards comparability is the modularisation of degree programmes. This means that the whole programme should be organised into (more or less) self-contained programme units or segments that deal with a specific topic. Each specific programme segment should include a detailed description of the skills and competencies to be conveyed in it.

The requirement for employability on the (European) job market with professional qualifications should ensure a stronger orientation of the programmes towards the relevant professional practice.

This should also be promoted by a stronger orientation of programme contents towards European topics and greater mobility during programmes and in teaching and research.

International quality assurance systems that are as uniform as possible should be set up to ensure transparency and comparability.<sup>4)</sup>

In a recently published study, ENQA (European Network for Quality Assurance) ascertained that quality assurance agencies currently exist in 24 European states. These mainly perform evaluation and accreditation of both study programmes and whole higher education institutions.<sup>5)</sup>

The last point concerning the mutual recognition of degrees in the signatory states, which is stressed particularly in the Berlin Communiqué, has seen the lowest level of implementation. Although the Lisbon Convention on mutual recognition was passed in 1998 by the Council of Europe, it has by no means been ratified by all of the signatory states and is based on individual recognition, i.e. individual students have to have their degrees recognised individually in the country where they want to work.

The Berlin Communiqué thus recommends a universal “diploma supplement”<sup>6)</sup> to be introduced by 2005, that is, an annexe to each degree certificate in which each national higher education system, the type of institution and the level of the degree are described in more detail in order to simplify recognition in accordance with the Lisbon Convention.

### **What does the Bologna process described above then mean for social work education in Europe?**

Firstly, it means that we are a part of a rapid and, for many countries, very radical change in the area of higher education that is gaining momentum. Whilst this requires intensive engagement with the individual elements of the process and a good deal of work and energy in implementing it, this rapid change also offers a whole host of chances.

The introduction of tiered programmes opens up the possibility of retaining a generalist programme at Bachelors level and then catering for the greater specialisation that is required particularly for new professional fields by offering specially tailored Masters programmes. The study programme is thus at the same time a part of lifelong learning. After an initial professional phase following the Bachelors degree, students can go back to university to acquire the knowledge and skills needed for their subsequent career.

Further, joint courses can be developed by various European universities particularly at Masters level (European Joint Masters Programmes), thus guaranteeing a European and/or international orientation. There are a not inconsiderable number of successful programmes like this in the social work field. One of these, the ten-year-old MACESS<sup>7)</sup>, supported by 32 universities, the Council of Europe and the European Commission, was highlighted in 2002 as one of 11 best practice examples by the European University Association (EUA). The experience gained here demonstrates that new forms of intensive co-operation arise by developing and carrying through such programmes.

A further opportunity is represented by the changeover to modules. This represents an educational reform which promotes a new debate on, and stronger integration of, the requirements of professional practice, whilst also meeting the requirement for “employability.” My experience at my own university is that the process of modularisation triggered a long and intensive discussion about the knowledge, skills and competencies that need to be conveyed, which ultimately led to a high level of agreement about programme goals. I cannot remember ever experiencing such intensive debates, yet at the same time also agreements, about programme goals. The introduction of credit points for the individual modules means we have to look more closely at the students’ respective workload for each module and to come to an agreement here: how much reading, how many assignments or exams can be required in a single module when the work required for the other modules is taken into account? Some professors find it difficult to move away from the idea of them defining the content, required reading and examinations of “their” courses autonomously without co-ordinating them with colleagues. The fact that both the structure and the content, including the learning goals, of the modules is described exactly means that students are more aware of what they can expect and demand from lecturers.

In my experience, the required quality assurance, both internal and external, initially gives rise to general anxiety. Will our university and programmes stand up in comparison with

others? Are we not giving the students too much power if they are to evaluate, to assess, the individual lecturers?

One thing is certain: quality assurance is linked to stronger competition. But has this competition not been imposed on us for years anyhow by university policy? In Germany, for instance, regular rankings are carried out by independent institutes, i.e. league tables of universities and/or subjects that are published by large newspapers and which students increasingly use to select their place of study.

Preparing for external evaluation and/or accreditation<sup>8)</sup> by internal reports and investigations provides us with an analysis of our strengths and weaknesses, and that helps us to improve things. In my experience, evaluation and accreditation processes by external experts also help us to understand the internal goals of our own institution.

At my own university, the regular evaluation of teaching by the students, in connection with the practice of awarding prizes to the best lecturers, has led to lecturers seeking to learn more about university teaching methods and to try out new techniques; and they are duly proud when they win one of the prizes. It also enables us to identify those who are weaker and to offer special training courses to these.

A last point from my own experience: even in areas where the development of common European programmes seems to be too demanding, joint modules can be developed that are implemented in the respective university and enable both students and professors to complete a part of their study or teaching at another university. However, this requires more (specialist) language training to be integrated into the programme.

The question of simplifying mutual recognition of programme credits will be dealt with in the next paper. I can tell you this much in advance: it will only be successful if we move away from individual recognition and towards institutional recognition. There are a number of ways of doing this, the advantages and disadvantages of which are open to discussion.

#### Notes:

1. European Credits Transfer System – a system of comparable evaluations of student workload for individual courses originally developed within an ERASMUS model project and which has now become the basis of developing similar performance points systems in most European countries.
2. Conference on Master level degrees. Helsinki 14th – 16th March 2003. Conclusions and recommendations. [www.unige.ch/eua/](http://www.unige.ch/eua/)
3. The ECTS co-ordinators of the EUA recommend the development of a ranking system equivalent to the British or American marking system (the best 10% are A [German “excellent”], then 20% B [German “very good”] etc.)
4. “Realising the European Higher Education Area,” Communiqué of the Conference of Ministers responsible for Higher Education in Berlin on 19th September 2003, [www.unige.ch/eua/](http://www.unige.ch/eua/)
5. The Danish Evaluation Institute, Quality Procedures in European Higher Education. An ENQA survey, 2003. [www.enqa.net/pubs/asso](http://www.enqa.net/pubs/asso)
6. The Promotion and Implementation of the Diploma Supplement, Project Report 2003, [www.unige.ch/eua/](http://www.unige.ch/eua/)

7. Master of Arts “Comparative European Social Studies.” [www.maccess.nl](http://www.maccess.nl)

8. In some countries, “evaluation” or “accreditation” are synonyms for validation using quality standards and the award of a quality label; in others “evaluation” refers to institutions and “accreditation” to programmes of study.

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