

## LIFELONG LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT FOR SOCIAL WORKERS

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## ABSTRACT

**Aim.** In the paper, the authors demonstrate the influence of the education and educational level of social workers on the quality of social work as a profession that helps people in unfavorable situation. They point to the importance of lifelong learning, which is essential for advancing the knowledge and competences of social workers in practice.

**Concept.** Lifelong education for social workers is currently a necessity for their functioning not only on the basis of the rapid, dynamic changes in their problems and social clients, but also for rapid and dynamic changes in the use of methods and techniques of social work.

**Method.** The study deals with the educational development of employees in the profession of social worker. It defines and identifies forms of continuous education of social workers, which can have different methods and which can result in different competencies of a social worker.

**Results.** The study confirms that the lifelong learning of social workers requires constant access to support and information about education, but also to set opportunities and thus facilitate access to the education of social workers. It is necessary to realise that the competences of the social worker must be in accordance with the education that the social worker has.

**Conclusion.** The scientific articles and contributions that we offer in this study point to lifelong learning, which has the effect of expanding the possibilities of a social worker's work with several types of clients, increases his competences and thus acquires a lot of knowledge and skills that are subsequently applied in practice.

**Keywords:** education, lifelong learning, social worker, competencies, profession

## INTRODUCTION

Social work as a practical activity is one of the 'helping professions,' which requires a social worker to be able to work in various fields of social work. It covers a wide range of activities and requires knowledge of various professions of social life. "On the other hand, personal assumptions and skills also play an important role, thanks to which a human and empathic approach can positively affect the lives of many people" (Žalec, 2021, 827-832).

Current social work has been significantly influenced by the historical development of social work in the world and in our country. Already during the first Czechoslovak Republic, new ideas appeared in connection with the concept of social work, social policy, and social care. After 1989, there was a need to implement social work with regard to its theoretical definition and its subsequent connection to practice. After the change of political regime, social problems (unemployment, prostitution, various types of addictions, integration of released prisoners into society, racism, care in children's homes, care for the disabled, Roma ethnicity and others) began to emerge that the state was not prepared to address. At present, social work as a scientific discipline has its own code of ethics, work methodology, formal teaching method and is organizationally linked to the state administration.

Social work in practice is connected with the legal and social legislation of the Slovak Republic and includes laws, regulations and legal norms that determine the competencies of all those affected by social work, care and assistance. (Maturkanič et al. 2022; Oláh et al. 2009).

Training is a basic prerequisite for the quality performance of a social worker. Education in social work leads to expertise that justifies the performance of social work as a qualified professional activity.

## SOCIAL WORK

Social work as a profession deals with serious social problems, therefore it can only be performed by qualified social workers. An important part of the qualification is vocational education obtained during vocational training, which is further expanded by continuous education. Vocational training is included in the higher level of education and is part of higher education or part of the third level of vocational training in vocational schools. The training of social workers is provided by secondary and higher education institutions of the humanities, economics and other specialisations (Oláh et al., 2009).

Secondary education in social work in Slovakia is carried out at business academies, secondary pedagogical and girls' schools. Higher education takes place at five universities. The first independently opened Department of Social Work was in 1991 at the Faculty of Education, Comenius University in Bratislava. As early as 1990, however, studying social specialisation as part of his master's degree in sociology began at the Faculty of Arts of Comenius University. Higher education in social work is different in our country in terms of organisation and content. Social work can be studied as a separate field, but also as a specialisation of related fields (andragogy, sociology, psychology etc.). Curricula and syllabi differ in the extent to which they emphasise a particular group of subjects. This disunity is a consequence of the initial preparations in an effort to establish a new concept for the study of social work (Budayová, 2019; Budayová, 2021a, b; Machalová et al. 2003; Tkáčová et al. 2021a).

## LIFELONG LEARNING

Further education of social workers within formal education is provided by the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic (Department of Human Resources Management and the Centre for Labour, Social Affairs and Family) and the Ministry of the Interior of the Slovak Republic (Institute for Public Administration). These bodies provide and coordinate the training of social workers. The Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family of the Slovak Republic has developed a concept of training and further education of employees in the social sphere, which

through its implementation project defines target groups, content, forms and methods of further education, further organises educational activities for employees of the ministry and presents new knowledge from the field of social work not only from Slovakia but also from abroad. The Ministry also organises pilot projects focused on the development of communication and social skills, cooperation of regional entities, development of volunteering activities, training of supervisors, and implements Phare projects in cooperation with foreign entities. The training of social workers is also implemented through the Tempus, Socrates, Leonardo and Vinci projects. University teachers also have a share in education as part of their teaching activities, as well as the third sector through civic associations and foundations (Kuzembayeva et al., 2022; Martin et al, 2020; Oláh et., 2009).

Thus, the education of social workers does not end with the successful completion of university studies. The need for further education is also pointed out to a large extent by the graduates of the field of study themselves, who in their practice encounter mainly problems in the field of consulting, lack of managerial skills (Al-Rahmi et al. 2021).

Staff training and development is essential in advancing any profession. At present, knowledge acquired at school is often not enough, and increasing demands are also placed on employees who do not only work in senior positions. The recent relatively new situation brought also Covid-19 pandemic, which slowed down the unprecedented growth of prosperity in developed countries (Hašková et al, 2020; Ionescu et al., 2021; Ionescu et al., 2022; Judák et al, 2022; Novikova et al. 2021; Murgaš et al., 2022) and raised totally new questions for mitigating the negative effects of the pandemic within education (Ludvigh Cintulová & Radková, 2021; Tkáčová et al. 2021b; Tkáčová et al. 2022; Záhorec et al., 2021;).

Education of social workers at the Labour, Social Affairs and Family Office is stipulated by Act No. 55/2017 Coll., On Civil Service and on Amendments to Certain Acts. (Law 55/2017)

The service office of the relevant labour, social affairs and family office plans, organises, provides and enables the training of its employees. It also creates conditions for the education of civil servants through continuous education and training. The provider of education is mainly an educational institution of further education and a service office. The implementing legal regulations of the Office of the Government stipulate all details on the forms of continuous education, the content of adaptive education, the types of competence education and the systemic approach in the education of civil servants (Law, No. 55/2017).

Continuing education can be carried out in the following forms:

- mass forms of continuing education, which are intended for a larger number of civil servants and are carried out mainly through conferences and a lectures;
- group forms of continuous education, where the course belongs (it is a separate educational form, which consists of several teaching units

selected according to a predetermined curriculum), a seminar (its goal is to consolidate and expand knowledge from a specific thematic area related to the professional profile of a civil servant), workshop (its intention is to expand the acquired knowledge and acquire new practical skills by assigning and developing specific tasks, while there is a mutual exchange of views in order to find the most advantageous solutions), training (is a practice-oriented form of education);

- individual forms of continuous education are mainly briefing (demonstration of career to a civil servant), coaching (is a way to support the development of skills and abilities of a civil servant by a senior civil servant or a senior civil servant) Act No. 55/2017 Coll. and amending certain laws. Act No. 55/2017 Coll., On Civil Service and on Amendments to Certain Acts;
- distance forms of continuing education, which include e-learning (using information and communication technologies) and a webinar (presentation, lecture, workshop or seminar, which is distributed over the Internet);
- in the form of self-study, which is carried out independently and independently of the training activities provided by the service office;
- other forms of continuing education are mainly traineeships (a traineeship in a host institution with a training component which the civil servant completes in a limited period of time and the purpose of which is to apply theoretical knowledge in practice, to acquire and improve practical abilities and skills), study visit ( is a combination of various forms and types of educational activities subject to a specific educational goals, which the civil servant completes in a defined period of time outside the service office) (Office of the Government of the Slovak Republic, 2017).

## COMPETENCES OF A SOCIAL WORKER

At present, it is not easy to determine the exact competencies of social workers, as social work as a separate discipline solves a wide range of social problems.

Several authors point to the large scope and diversity of social work tasks. High variability of social work is therefore one of the problems of clearly defining the scope of professional competencies of social workers, as it includes not only risk management, law enforcement, client support and advocacy, but also therapeutic intervention, community building, community education and many other activities. In connection with the definition of the professional competencies of social workers, we consider it effective to pay attention to social work as a profession and to touch on the problem of professionalisation of social work (Hudecová et al., 2010; Soria-Barreto et al. 2021).

The condition for professionalisation is the improvement of the system of education of social workers, which enables higher education and lifelong learning. Emphasis on the need for lifelong learning is based on the fact that social work

develops in the specific existing social environment that determines it, in an environment where theory is enriched by professional reflection on practice and this reflection is processed and applied again in practice (Čechová & Kredatus, 2001, 59).

Professionalisation in social work can be understood on two levels:

- as the professionalisation of social workers – it is a process of acquiring specific professional traits (skills, knowledge and personal qualities) that are necessary for the professional performance of the social worker's work and also the acquisition of professional traits that advise the social worker professionals;
- as the professionalisation of the profession of social worker – i.e. the process during which the profession of social worker acquires the character of a profession which has not yet been specified (Žilová, 2005).

It follows from the above that a social worker should therefore meet certain personal and also professional qualification preconditions, which together form the competences of a social worker and are necessary for the performance of this profession.

In terms of qualifications, societal expectations are currently being created which presuppose that the social worker will have to meet the following qualification standards:

- level of education – university bachelor's or master's degree,
- focus of education – the most suitable focus is in the field of social work or other socially oriented fields, e.g. sociology, social pedagogy, social psychology,
- practical experience – at least within the practical training of students in schools, as well as further education, which necessarily belongs to the professionalism of the social worker and to the professionalism of the work performed (Kobylarek et al., 2022; Žilová, 2005).-

Such competencies are called key competencies. We define them as the knowledge, skills and abilities with which it is possible to hold a large number of functions and positions that are needed to manage problems at a given moment.

Key competencies include:

- communication and cooperation – **the ability to consciously communicate** and actively participate in solutions in group processes;
- problem solving and creativity – the ability to recognise problems and solve them creatively in an appropriate way;
- independence and performance – the ability to independently plan, implement and control the course and results of work;
- responsibility – the ability to accept co-responsibility to an appropriate degree,
- thinking and learning – the ability to further develop one's own learning, to think systemically and in context;

- argumentation and evaluation – the ability to objectively assess and critically evaluate one’s own, common and foreign ways of working and their results (Belz & Siegrist, 2001).

Author Zdena Havrdová in her literature (1999; Cergetova et al. 2021) states the following set of six competencies related to the work of a social worker:

- Competence 1: Ability to develop effective communication

The social worker can listen to and create conditions for open communication between individual clients, groups and communities. Active and empathic listening can be seen as an important relationship device between a social worker and client (Rogers, 2014). Part of teaching communication by social workers involves practicing specific skills of active listening: encouraging, clarifying, paraphrasing, mirroring, summarising and appreciating.

- Competence 2: Ability to orientate and plan the process

The social worker, in cooperation with clients and other experts, gains an overview of their current and potential needs and together they plan procedures that respond to the identified fact. It can also identify risk factors and limit cooperation.

- Competence 3: Ability to support and lead to self-sufficiency

The social worker encourages clients to use their own strengths and abilities, it also helps them take responsibility and secure their rights.

- Competence 4: Intervention and service delivery

The social worker provides and ensures an adequate level of support, care, protection and control and is involved in prevention. It promotes collaboration between individuals, groups, communities and organisations.

- Competence 5: Contributes to the work of the organisation

The social worker works as a responsible member of the organisation, contributes to the evaluation and improvement of their work and effectively uses all resources.

- Competence 6: Ability to grow professionally

The social worker is able to consult and manage his professional and personal growth; is able to make informed decisions, cooperate in the network, achieve the set work goals in a set time and contribute to positive changes in their field. (Budayová et al. 2020; Hudecová et al, 2010; Králik et al. 2022; Roubalová et al. 2021; Tkačová et al., 2022).



## CONCLUSION

The social worker is currently subject to requirements, competencies that are necessary for his work and which the social worker should meet. The social worker acquires knowledge through school education, within the framework of professional internships at school in individual facilities, at offices in the field of social work. In practice, he acquires competencies within the departmental education and self-education in the field of social work. Through each form of education, the social worker acquires a wealth of knowledge, skills or competences, which he then applies in practice. Hence the importance of education in social work and the high level of expertise of social workers. The findings show that it is important to place emphasis on the education of social workers and to create a space for the departmental education in which social workers are most interested, while also showing an interest in self-education.

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