Internationalization of bachelor social work education in Europe

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Incomplete Draft

Abstract

Many universities in Europe are involved in ‘internationalizing’ their social work curriculum. This has been realized by a variety of courses with an international profile or by student and teaching mobility. Some of the social work educators regularly meet at international conferences to exchange their experiences, convinced of the importance of cross-border exchange, but other colleagues are rather skeptical about the additional value of internationalization. This paper focuses on the debate about internationalization of the social work curriculum at BA level. We present the first results of an international survey, carried out at different universities in all corners of Europe. The survey intends to answer questions about the current state of internationalization of the BA curricula in Europe; how do we internationalize our curricula, what are the aims and what are the challenges? Do we think that this might lead to better qualified social workers for a practice dominated by a more local or national focus? It is argued that globalization of social problems needs global consciousness of social professionals. Could an internationalized social work curriculum have the potential to enhance the development of a more sustainable social work profession and practice in our own countries and abroad.

1. Introduction

The internationalization of social work education is often promoted at international conferences, network meetings and in policy statements of universities. In some countries, internationalization is a criterion of accreditation of higher education, in Europe not least because of the Bologna declaration (1999). It is argued that a curriculum with an international dimension better prepares students to a globalized social work practice and gives them access to international theory and knowledge.
Nevertheless, little is known as to what extent institutes for social work education in Europe are successful in implementing internationalization in their curriculum. Do global and regional perspectives influence social work education? Internationalization of education is less self-evident then it seems to be and often more than one challenge has to be overcome. For example, students and lecturers can have problems with a foreign language, less means can be available to participate in international networks, or staff members are not convinced of the supplementary value of an international curriculum.

There has not yet been a systematic study of the extent to which the importance of an international dimension is recognized and incorporated in new degrees in general (Lyons, 2006). In literature and on international forums, this topic is seldom discussed and investigated. In this article, we address the challenges of internationalization of the bachelor curriculum in social work in Europe. The aim of the study is to contribute to the exchange of experiences and initiate a discussion as to how internationalization of social work education in Europe can be improved. In the theoretical part of the article, we discuss the concepts of globalization in social work practice and internationalization of social work education. We first explore a local and a global perspective and elaborate how both perspectives influence the social work profession and social policy. Next, we discuss the concepts, content and structure of international social work education. In the empirical part, we present the outcomes of a questionnaire which was completed by 33 staff members of universities spread over Europe. The outcomes give an impression of the internationalization of education of the universities concerned and the challenges they are confronted with. Finally, in the discussion section we give our conclusions of this study and suggestions for further discussion.

2. Globalization and Social Work Practice

The current era in Western societies is one of big transformations; the mobility of goods, information and people has never been so noticeable. Primary among the problems facing social work is the globalized economy and protracted economic recession, which has caused many, if not most, Western welfare states to reduce provision to citizens (Stoesz & Karger, 2012, pp.646). Globalization is affecting the practices of those who would previously have seen their work as essentially rooted in local conditions and community needs (Lyons, 2006, pp.365). The problems of clients of social work are caused as much by global forces as by national forces, and we cannot understand local problems without reference to global economic, political and cultural circumstances (Ife, 2000). The professional practice does not stand apart from the global. It is a local response to a series of difficulties, which are influenced by, if not created and sustained by,
global factors (Lawrence, Lyons, Simpson, & Huegler 2009). Globalization has influenced thinking about welfare policies and has implications for social work practices. All social work practice, wherever it occurs, must now be regarded as working at the global/local interface, at the point where global forces impinge on the human experience (Ife, 2000 pp.9).

It is important to emphasize that both globalization and localization are of themselves neither good nor bad. Just as localization can be liberating or oppressive, so globalization, despite its problems, has the potential for many positive benefits (Ife, 2000). In many parts of the world, people are reacting to the forces of globalization by attempting to reinvest new meaning into the local. The emphasis on the local is important because this is the space where everyday life practices occur. Local needs seem to demand local responses. Linking the local and the global is described in many different ways; as the local-global dialectic (Lyons, 2006; Healy, 2008), as a paradoxical process (Gray, 2005) or reconciling the irreconcilable (Dominelli, 2012). Clearly this articulates dilemmas, debates and concerns and different responses to these dilemmas are found, in resisting homogenizing tendencies.

The local-global dialectic has been described by Gray (2005) as a paradoxical process. Gray distinguishes indigenization and universalism. Indigenization, referring to the extent to which social work practice only fits local contexts. Universalism, referring to trends to find commonalities across divergent contexts such that it is possible to talk about a universal social work profession with shared goals and values, wherever it is practiced. Indigenization challenges universal knowledge and the cultural hegemony of dominant discourses globally (Wong, 2002). Universalism should be aware of the dangers of overstandardization by global standards and international definitions and of cultural imperialism if used mainly to promote Western social work (Gray, 2005 pp. 236). The dominance of English in international social work networks and publications is therefore often criticized.

There are a number of indications, currently, that social work in many countries is becoming more alert to its international dimension (Lyons, 2006). Weather we talk about migration, poverty, trafficking of woman and children, drug trafficking or other phenomena, increased skills and knowledge are required from social workers who are better informed about the relevance of international events and processes and the range of resources on which they can draw (Ibid; pp.377). Otherwise we risk that we fail recognizing the effects of global and regional processes on the etiology of social problems.
3. Internationalization of social work education

The importance of Internationalization\(^1\) of higher education is confirmed worldwide. Internationalization is high on the agendas of national governments, international bodies and institutions of higher education (de Wit, 2001). In Europe, 29 countries in 1999 in the Bologna Declaration agreed to ‘the promotion of the necessary European dimensions in higher education, particularly with regards to curricular development, inter-institutional co-operation, mobility schemes and integrated programs of study, training and research’ (Bologna declaration, 1999).

The idea of internationalization has guided social work education since its modernization in the 19th century. The International Committee of Schools of Social Work was already founded in 1929. Its first president was Alice Salomon and the importance of international relations in her life and work ‘can be neither overlooked nor valued enough’ (Feustel, 2006). She was convinced that knowledge of foreign specialist literature enabled students and professionals to recognize more clearly domestic problems and issues (Kruse, 2003). The International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) conceptualizes its professional mission as ‘to promote the development of social work education throughout the world, develop standards to enhance quality of social work education, encourage international exchange, provide forums for sharing social work research and scholarship, and promoting human rights and social development through policy and advocacy activities’ (www.iassw-aiets.org).

In this study we define internationalization of social work education as the process to integrate a ‘globalized’ social work practice into teaching and research. Concrete, internationalization of social work education becomes visible and tangible in the content and form of the curriculum, student and staff mobility and in policy documents of universities. As such an international curriculum is a part of internalization of education.

Three types of arguments are given concerning the meaning of internationalization for social work education: firstly the preparation of students on the globalized social work practice, secondly the improvement of learning processes of students in education and thirdly the improvement of social work practice. The first ‘preparation’ argument points out that social work education has to prepare students to the increasing globalization of social work practice at home and abroad. According to the latter, students can acquire skills and competencies that will enable them to function in an international setting, such as mastery of foreign languages, knowledge and insights into foreign cultures, and the history and geography of other nations. The second ‘learning’

\(^1\) Both the verb ‘internationalization’ and the noun ‘international’ can be found in literature. We prefer to use the verb internationalization of education because this reflects better the dynamic character of it.
argument stresses that internationalization promotes a specific kind of learning processes of students. Contemporary learning theories show that new experiences require expanding one's frame of mind and creating "new spaces of meaning" (Che et al., 2009, p. 103 in Greenfield e.a.). International courses, especially (but not only) when students go abroad, are likely to create a disequilibrium, which in turn can lead to transformative learning processes (Greenfield, Davis & Fedor (2012). Concerning the third type of argument, Healy (2008, p.4) stresses that internationalization of education contributes to the improvement of social work practice. She mentions: 1) an improved social work practice, 2) more humane and socially oriented public policies at the national and global levels and 3) an enhanced status for the profession of social work through its increase visibility.

Reflecting on the discussion about the rationales of internationalization of education, Stier (2004) pointed out three divergent ideologies which give a deeper insight. I) Idealism: this is the normative assumption, internationalization is good per se. International cooperation and education can contribute to the creation of a more democratic, fair and equal world; ii) Instrumentalism: internationalization facilitates labour force’s mobility, with pragmatic and economistic goals, maximize profit and sustainable development; iii) Educationalism: internationalization enriches the overall academic experiences of students and teaching staff by being exposed to and having to adapt to an unfamiliair setting (with its unique culture, teaching style, norms and grading system). Stier states that because internationalization in itself is an ideological endeavour educators (teachers and policy makers) must expose and reflect over their own ideological motives and aspirations (ibid, p. 95).

To get a further insight in internationalization of social work education we explore what can be understood by an internationalized curriculum, student and staff mobility and university policy. To articulate the international dimension of a social work curriculum we first follow Rothabi e.a. (2007) who recommend to use globalization concepts. Examples of concepts they propose are: cultural competence, human rights, inequality, migration, south/north, social justice. The concepts can be integrated in existing courses or in specific modules. Although the authors do not give criteria to select the concepts, we think the idea of globalization concepts can help to recognize the extent internationalization is integrated. In this study we tentative distinguish concepts related to international institutions (European institutions), international policy (global agenda, human rights, sustainability), international profession (international definition of social work) international social problems (poverty, migration, cross national social problems, international conflicts and disasters) and international communication (language).

Concerning the structure of an internationalized curriculum, international issues, cross national comparisons and reflections can be incorporated in the total curriculum for all students or in more
specialized courses for all (comprehensive approach) or a selected group (minimum approach) of students or in a combination of both (Healy, 1986,1995; Hendriks, Kloppenburg, Gevorgianiene & Jakutiene, 2008).

Student and staff mobility is another important segment of internationalization of education which contributes to cross-national cooperation, education and field placements abroad. Different models of student and staff mobility can be identified in literature varying from a one-time occasion to intensive exchange program between universities (Nuttman-Shwartz & Berger, 2011). Activities vary from study, research, conference visits to placements. International placements for students demands an international infrastructure and cooperation within which, qualified supervision is identified, practicum sites are established, procedures for mutual exchange, funding and administration procedures are regulated.

Universities differ to what extent they have the dispose of an international policy statement. Most of the time policy statements on internationalization are formulated university broad and function as a framework for university institutes and faculties. A policy statement on internationalization can vary in extension and prescription of activities. Elements of policy documents are for example mission statements, objectives, guideline for education and research, mobility, accreditation, financing, administration etc. Critical remarks on policy statements of universities often concern: alienation with educational practice, lack of support among lecturers, and practical challenges to be overcome.

4. Survey

A survey was conducted to determine i) the extent in which social work education is internationalized at different universities spread over Europe and ii) to clarify the challenges in the internationalization process. The survey was defined to European schools of social work and limited to the bachelor because not all universities (specially new universities) dispose of a master program. The topics of the survey were the internationalized curriculum, mobility of students and lecturers and international education policy. Questions about mobility were limited to domestic students and lecturers who go abroad because the focus was on the internationalization of education for students who are following the complete degree course of their university.

Questionnaire

A digital questionnaire was constructed consisting of multiple choice questions, questions with scores on a 10-point scale (see Figure 1) and open questions. Before entering the questionnaire the respondents were asked to read an instruction.
The questionnaire was piloted with two staff members of a Dutch and a German university respectively. We asked them to provide us feedback on relevance, covering, clarity of the items and on length of time for completing the questionnaire. We improved the questionnaire accordingly.

**Respondents**

To include staff members involved in internationalization and active in international networks and conferences, we approached universities represented by attendants in international conferences and members of the European Association of Schools of Social Work. To cover as much as possible the whole European region the aim was to include at least one university from every European country with a maximum of two per country. In total 40 persons received a digital questionnaire, and 33 of them completed the questionnaire (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2 Participating countries of the European Union**

The staff members were requested to evaluate the internationalization of the bachelor social work education on the basis of the questionnaire. No definition of internationalization of social work education was given. Respondents were assumed to answer the questions from their own experience. The staff members who responded differed in their role and position in relation to internationalization. We distinguish three groups of respondents based on types of roles related to a position as lecturer in education (n=13), a management position (n=5) and a combination of...
management and teaching (n=15). On a 10-point scale we asked the respondents to rate how well, informed they considered themselves in relation to the international dimension of the bachelor social work. On average the respondents considered themselves well informed (M= 6.6, SD=2.1). Seven respondents rated themselves insufficient (< 5).

Data analyses
A descriptive analyses of the quantitative scores was conducted by computing mean scores and percentages. The answers to the open questions were analyzed using a code system.

5. Results

Aim of internationalization
A majority of the respondents (87%) agrees that internationalization of education contributes to qualitative better social work. Of all respondents, 58 % confirms that the purpose of internationalization is to prepare students for a practice abroad, but they also indicate that their education do not, or partly, realize this. To elucidate their scores, respondents added for example that students who followed an internationalized curriculum: became competent practitioners in different countries, adapted to new social and cultural contexts, developed comparative competencies, become aware of trans-cultural and global issues, become connected to worldwide movements, developed critical thinking, and were better able to reflect on the national context and learn languages.

Curriculum structure
According to the model of Healy, 51 % of the respondents indicates that internationalization is especially formalized in separate modules. Of this group of respondents, 12 % says that all separate modules are mandatory, 31 % notes that all are optional (minimum approach), and 57% points at a mix of mandatory and optional modules. According to the comprehensive approach (Healy 1986, 1995) 62 % of all respondents state that internationalization is an integrated, thus mandatory, part of the whole curriculum for all students.

Content
Figure 2 demonstrates that more universities offer international subjects in the mandatory part (for all students) than in the optional part (for a selected group of students) of their curriculum. An exception to this are the subjects ‘global agenda’ and ‘international conflicts and disasters’. More universities offer them in the optional part of their curriculum. The subjects ‘international definition
of social work’, ‘globalisation’ ‘human rights’ and ‘poverty’ are offered for all students by most universities (> 80%).

Figure 2. Percentage of universities that offer international subjects mandatory or optional

Education in a foreign language.
Education, which is given in a foreign language differs between listening, reading and writing. Averaged over all universities, 35% of the mandatory literature is written in a foreign language, 18% of the lectures are given in a foreign language and 14% percent of oral or written presentations of students are in a foreign language. Less than 10% of the universities indicate the use of cross-national e-learning programs. In total English is the second language at 18 universities, French at two universities, and German and Spanish at one university (22 respondents completed the item).

Mobility of domestic students and staff
Table 1 illustrates the average percentage of students and staff members who spend a certain time abroad for their studies, respectively work and the purpose of their stay.
Table 1 Percentage of mobility of domestic students and staff and purpose

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Staff</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mobility</td>
<td>15% spends yearly a certain</td>
<td>33% spend yearly a certain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>abroad for their studies</td>
<td>time abroad for their work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>58% placements</td>
<td>33% study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>57% study</td>
<td>79% teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15% research</td>
<td>94% conferences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14% conferences</td>
<td>82% networks</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>46% field visits</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>64% research</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Policy and ambitions

Most of the respondents assess the realized level of internationalization of education related to the ambition of the university formulated in policy statements, negative (see Table 2). Explanations for negative assessments vary from a lack of skills, motivation, fundings, or the absence of a mission for their BA social work. Positive assessments are explained by the improvement of educational practice and emphasis on shared importance of internationalization.

Table 2 Percentages of positive and negative assessment of the realized level of internationalization related to the ambition of the university

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage positive or negative assessments</th>
<th>75% of respondents</th>
<th>Negative (score&lt;5)</th>
<th>25% of respondents</th>
<th>Positive (score &gt;5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>-Language knowledge and skills are limited</td>
<td>-Implemented international courses</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-It depends too much on a few motivated individuals</td>
<td>-Increasing student and staff mobility</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-No mission statement</td>
<td>-Students acquire profound knowledge of intercultural aspects</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-We cannot host international students because we do not have enough classes in English</td>
<td>- Improvement ICT possibilities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-No funding/finances</td>
<td>- Our approach is pragmatic and flexible</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-It is easier at MA or PhD level</td>
<td>- Joining the EU is of great importance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Challenges

Answering the question about the main challenges in internationalizing social work education, respondents predominantly mention language barriers. This challenge firstly hampers the realization of internationalization. Teaching staff has to improve their English in order to teach in English, to develop courses in English and to participate in international networks. Secondly, a perceived lack of interest among both lecturers and students is highlighted. Probably this can be related to another challenge which is described as a dominant vision on social work as a ‘local’ profession. Thirdly, a challenge is to implement internationalization as an integrated an regular part of the curriculum. One of the respondents stated ‘as it is now, I have to do a lot of push and pull’. Finally a lack of financial resources is considered a challenge. Limitations in Erasmus and other funding make mobility more difficult.

Conclusion and discussion

References


