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*Challenges of the Social Work Educational Program at the Eötvös Loránd University in a Rapidly Changing Socio, Political Context*

ABSTRACT

The social work training program at the Eötvös Loránd University – which is the biggest in Hungary – provides high level knowledge in the social sciences, psychology and law, as well as comprehensive knowledge of the theory and practice of social work. The aim of the social work education is to give theoretical and practical knowledge for the students in the field of social services and child protection, to prepare them to recognize the social circumstances of individuals, families, groups and communities and to become capable to use adequate helping methods. In our study we intend to give a general overview on the social work training program and outline a vision of the future of how to deliver adequate knowledge for the students which allows them to engage into social work praxis.

KEYWORDS: Social Work Educational Program, Competence and Personal Development, Mission Statement, Future Challenges, Hungarian Context

1. *Introduction*

The focus of this study is the social work training within the largest educational establishment of Hungary, the Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE)<sup>45</sup>. We

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<sup>4</sup> The Faculty of Social Sciences of the ELTE was established as a result of the integration processes in higher education of the 2000s. The social policies higher education was launched at the ELTE in 1985 as a postgraduate programme, prepared by the social policies group of Zsuzsa Ferge. Following a long process of consultations, finally in 1990 the full-time training could be started, which, besides social policies, provided education also in social work.

<sup>5</sup> A.B. ACZÉL., Á. DARVAS, J. MÁNYAI, *Szociálismunkás-képzés a Bárczi Gusztáv Gyógypedagógiai Tanárképző Főiskolán*, in «Esély», 5, 1992, pp. 71-75. and K. B. TALYIGÁS, G. HEGYESI, *Honnan indult a szociális munka oktatása és gyakorlata idehaza, és hol tart most?*, in «Párbeszéd», 2014, 1-2, pp. 1-18,

attempt to present the challenges we have been confronted with in recent years and the solutions to these, and the innovative educational methods we have considered. Although the social work educational program has a history of 30 years within this university, we do not intend to detail the entire educational history of this period. The emphasis of the study is mainly on the events of the last 5-7 years, as during 2015-2016 the requirements regarding higher education and its outcomes were modified for the purpose of a European-level harmonization<sup>6</sup> within the framework of the European Higher Education Area<sup>7</sup>. We give an insight into the main developmental issues of the program deliberately starting from this period.

The aim of our study is to outline the possibilities of renewal in this field, taking into account the factors substantially influencing the present and future of the social work education within the ELTE. We put a special emphasis on the practice part of the education, focusing thus on subjects of competence and personal development and on field instruction. Considering the multiplication of restraints imposed in the social, political, and economic field in recent years in Hungary, the increasingly critical situation of social work, the changes in higher education, and the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is outstandingly important to reflect on what our educational institution can do to protect the profession, to prepare students to field work on a high level, and to allow for a methodological renewal of the profession inspired by reflections on practice. Since the COVID-19 pandemic brought about multiple challenges and also outcomes to be further applied in organizing and delivering the educational program, we will briefly touch upon these as well in the study.

## *2. Rapidly changing socio, political context*

In order to understand the present and future of social work education in Hungary, it is indispensable to understand the changes brought about by the regime change in 1989, and the challenges arising from the current social and political environment. Subsequently to the regime change, many social issues were unveiled. The transition from the system based on central instructions to the market economy brought about the rising of private property, simultaneously the rate of state-owned businesses decreased. Besides mass unemployment, income inequality and poverty continued to grow as well. The situation of the Roma also worsened. By 1993, 17% of the active population was unemployed. The families with children were two times harder affected by the regime

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<<https://ojs.lib.unideb.hu/parbeszed/article/view/5414> > (last access 03.10.2022).

<sup>6</sup> I. BUDAI, G. SZÖLLÖSI, *A szociális munka gyakorlati kutatása*, in «Párbeszéd», 1, 2020, pp. 1-19, <<https://ojs.lib.unideb.hu/parbeszed/article/view/7408/6802> > (last access 03.10.2022).

<sup>7</sup> The members of this alliance initiated in Europe work together for the renewal of higher education and the promotion of the mobility of students and teachers.

change. At that time, every tenth child lived in a family where the head of the household was unemployed<sup>8</sup>. The years that followed the regime change are very important from the perspective of the strengthening of the social work profession, since systemic solutions had to be found to these social processes. In 1993 the Social Act came into force, then, in 1997, the Child Protection Act regulating child welfare and child protection was issued. Thus a varied social system was built up, providing basic and special services and addressing the needs of different target groups. This process of strengthening and professionalisation was further bolstered by the fact that a series of NGOs were established in the field of social services and child protection, and important organisations for the representation of the profession's interests were born. In 1995 it worked out the Ethics Code of Social Work, which is still in force and is revised every five years<sup>9</sup>.

One can conclude that starting from the 1990s a modern system of social services and child protection was created. At the beginning of the 2000s, the pace of the development slowed, and since 2010, a recoil, even setback can be observed in the service providing of the system. While the ability of providing help of this field diminished, the administrative and control functions consolidated<sup>10</sup>. As Ferge said, a so-called perverse redistribution can be observed, that is the aim appears to be to strengthen and support the middle-class which is in a better financial situation, while individuals belonging to the lower layers of society – 4 million people live in poverty, and another 1.3 million people live in extreme poverty – are gradually deprived from access to the continuously decreasing resources<sup>11</sup>. This is coupled with severe losses regarding the values of democracy, with a deficit of democracy<sup>12</sup>. These processes trigger challenges regarding the transformation of the Hungarian system of social policies and social work practice due to the worsening of the life prospects of marginalized groups and to the deepening of poverty. Moreover, they send a strong political message as well, namely, that the state does not identify with the basic principles of social work, retrieves itself from services.

These impacts, or one could even say threats, pose serious challenges to educational institutions as well. How can students be prepared to deliver authentic help in an environment which is disdainful and exclusionary towards the clients? To be self-conscious social workers in a social and political environment undermining the values of social work? How can they be encouraged at all to

<sup>8</sup> M. SÁGI, *Társadalmi folyamatok a rendszerváltás után*, 2009, <<https://ofi.oh.gov.hu/tudastar/jelentes-magyar/tarsadalmi-folyamatok>> (last access 03.10.2022).

<sup>9</sup> <[http://www.3sz.hu/sites/default/files/Etikai\\_Kodex\\_2022.pdf](http://www.3sz.hu/sites/default/files/Etikai_Kodex_2022.pdf)> (last access 03.10.2022).

<sup>10</sup> Zs. BUGARSZKI, *A magyarországi szociális munka válsága*, in «Esély», 3, 2014, pp. 64-73. and K. SZOBOSZLAI, *A szociális munka a változások tükrében: kik vagyunk, hol tartunk és mit kellene tennünk?*, in «Esély», 3, 2014, pp. 87-94.

<sup>11</sup> <<https://24.hu/kozelet/2018/09/17/ferge-zsuzsa-orban-csomagja-durvabb-mint-bokrose/>> (last access 03.10.2022).

<sup>12</sup> Zs. FERGE, *Magyar társadalom- és szociálpolitika 1990-2015*. Budapest, Osiris, 2017.

choose this specialty, then this profession? A survey by Andrea Gyarmati (2021)<sup>13</sup> points out that the 70-80 thousand people employed by the Hungarian social field are in a vulnerable situation, and work under inappropriate conditions; the extent of staff turnover is alarmingly high, there are institutions where it reaches even the annual 36% rate, while the number of vacant posts is also very high, the sector lacking near 4000 employees, while labour supply is insufficient. According to the referenced survey, the average Hungarian social worker is a 48 years old woman with higher education, who works for more than 10 years in the same agency usually financed by the state or by the local government, with a net monthly salary of 207 thousand forints (approx. 492 EURO)<sup>14</sup>.

On the long term, ensuring proper quality in service providing is hindered by the fact that since 2006 the number of candidates to social work departments decreased by two-thirds<sup>15</sup>. While previously the BA program each year started with 60 students at ELTE, the largest such institution in the country, at present it starts with 20-30 students. For many years, MA studies are provided only as distance learning with each year counting around 10-15 students. It is important to note that many of our students pursuing the first cycle (bachelor's degree) come from families with a low social status, and often with traumas, therefore their background largely determines their motivations to be helpers. Typically, they also work while studying in order to provide for themselves. The majority of students pursuing the second cycle (master's degree) are middle-aged, and since they already have working experience, they typically wish to learn new methods, which is also a means of preventing burnout, not only of deepening their professional knowledge.

The ongoing reform in higher education targeting large universities and transferring their governance to foundations is a further threat; once academic autonomy is limited, on the long term it becomes an exclusively political decision what specialties can be launched<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> <<https://telex.hu/belfold/2021/03/10/szocialis-agazat-munkaerohiany-gyarmati-andrea-idosellatas-ksh>> (last access 03.10.2022).

<sup>14</sup> According to the data of the National Statistical Office (KSH), in 2021 the net average salary is nearly 30% higher than this amount: 273 thousand forints (650 Euro), <<https://infostart.hu/gazdasag/2021/03/31/273-ezer-forint-volt-a-netto-atlagkereset>> (last access 03.10.2022).

<sup>15</sup> <<http://tamogatoweb.hu/index.php/olvasnivalo1/infograf/371-felveteli-2019>> (last access 03.10.2022).

<sup>16</sup> This is a process affecting 11 universities, thus 180 thousand students, namely 70% of the active university students, which, according to the discourse of the government, seeks to create an efficient and competent higher education system. The government concludes long term strategic agreements (for 15-25 years) and financial contracts of 3-5 years with the foundations. Since this transfer affects significant public property (amounting to 1000 billion forints), this can also be viewed as the privatisation of national property. The abolishment of academic autonomy is indicated by the fact that the board of the foundation sustaining the university would be formed by the government, <<https://www.portfolio.hu/gazdasag/20210401/ujabb-10-egyetemen-indulhat-a-modellvaltas-az-osszes-hallgato-70-at-erintik-szeptembertol-a-valtozasok-476768>> (last access 03.10.2022).

### *3. Factors affecting the development of educational program*

The way how practice determines the renewal of the social work education curriculum can be interpreted along three factors. On one hand, the interest and needs of the students determine education, and the university has an academic influence over the students; on the other hand, graduating students have an influence on practice due to the acquired knowledge, and transform it through their presence; third, the actual condition, possibilities and freedoms of the social work practice largely determine training by accommodating field education, namely through what students engaged in field tasks perceive of the practice.

In a reaction to the power relations triggering the exclusion of the clients of social work students and newly graduate professionals produce their own, innovative answers based on anti-oppressive practice. In a reaction to restraints experienced from the beginning of the 2010s and to the depreciation of professional values at governmental level, and taking inspiration from the university education, our students funded several NGOs (i.e. the Új szemlélet/New Vision group, a professional organisation mixing community and radical social work, the Kontúr/Contour Association, providing programs for children and community enforcement actions in the segregated neighbourhoods of the capital)<sup>17</sup>. Likewise, many of them joined organisations advocating social rights as employees or volunteers (like A Város Mindenkié/The City is for All, Migration Aid<sup>18</sup>). It is important to specify that social higher education tries to react, to the extent of its possibilities, to actualities, as such processes have an influence on expectations towards practice and on the quality of field training as well; we maintain a continuous dialogue in order to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

### *4. Educational goals, mission statement of our social work educational program*

The aim of our educational program is to deliver theoretical and practical knowledge that can be used in the social field and child protection work, to prepare students to be able to assess the social condition and needs of individuals, groups and communities, and to apply the appropriate methods when helping them. Our educational program enables them to achieve these by providing high quality knowledge in social sciences, psychology and law, and thorough knowledge of the theory and practice of social work.

Our students spend a great amount of time on field during the seven se-

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<sup>17</sup> <<https://ujszemlelet.blog.hu/>> (last access 03.10.2022) and <<https://konturegyesulet.weebly.com/>> (last access 03.10.2022).

<sup>18</sup> <<https://avarosmindenkie.blog.hu/>> (last access 03.10.2022) and <<https://migrationaid.org/>> (last access 03.10.2022).

menters: they perform exercises to gain experience in personal and skills development, and participate in external field work, namely in field practice implying social services, child welfare and child protection services and provisions.

Research has an outstanding importance both in social work and social work education, a central element of the educational program is the social sciences camp, an ethnographic field research, which is a determining component of our program since its beginning. The social sciences camp is built on a complex methodology and requires students to spend four days on field. They apply several methods during research: questionnaire, interview, observation, involvement in community life through informal discussions. Besides the local population, they establish contacts with the local professional helpers as well. This camp is preceded by a seminar on research (2<sup>nd</sup> semester) in order to prepare students and is followed by a seminar (3<sup>rd</sup> semester) for the procession of results. In addition, students are involved in domestic and international research and projects of the department; in many cases, their own projects (resulting in a study or thesis) are also connected to such research projects. By involving students into research projects, we aim at encouraging them to pursue MA degrees. Moreover, the social policy training is another important opportunity in pursuing studies. We support students with academic interests by engaging them into doctoral studies in social policies as well.

The curriculum underwent significant update in recent years induced by a bidirectional process. An internal impetus consisted in the need to continuously embed the state-of-the-art methods and new knowledge in social work into the program with the aim to ensure reflection on social processes; an external urge consisted in the need to adapt to transformations in higher education, and to comply with university or faculty level expectations. Taking into account the restructuring and to a certain extent limitation of the curriculum (decrease of courses, increase of credits), and the conditions of youngsters who are working, the latter entailed enlarged opportunities to combine student life and work. At present, we offer three specializations at the bachelors' degree: 1) Child welfare, child protection; 2) Psycho-social disability and addictology; 3) Excluded groups.

##### *5. Subjects on competences in focus*

In the course of the social work bachelor's degree, students attend a personal and competence development course, through which they become familiar with work in various segments of this field and acquire a stability of their professional identity. As a result of the changes of past decades, these elements of the curriculum are given less hours of training, in turn are more concentrated.

The personal development course is of two semesters (semester 1 and 2), while competence development also consists of two elements: during the third semester, it is included in the course named 'The psychology of supportive relationships', while in the fourth semester, it is included in the practical course

on 'The methods of individual and family work'. Evidently, the development of professional skills is present in each course, aligned with the topics and genre of the specific subjects, as part of the conscious professional development. Some of the courses already achieve that level of competence development, where students acquire the skills to be able to develop themselves certain abilities, for example in the framework of social work in groups or family consultation.

The students gave the following feedback on the competence development course in an anonymous assessment: «Personally I think that work within seminars is much more appropriate for acquiring knowledge in this profession than lectures, as the teacher delivers not only encyclopaedic knowledge, but a certain mentality as well» (Student feedback regarding the competence development course).

The competence development groups aim at acquiring the ability to establish and maintain relationships, to cope with problems, to be sensitive towards problems, to recognize and understand dilemmas linked to providing help<sup>19</sup>.

«During the semester it also became my own expectation towards myself to take more seriously role plays and to get involved more. I managed to fulfil this expectation, since I feel much more comfortable in these exercises of various situations, also I manage better to put myself into certain roles, which helps me understand how a client feels when sitting in front of the social worker and having to talk about their life, even about things one would not really want to share with a stranger» (Student feedback regarding the skills development course).

The competence development exercises conducted in the safe space of a classroom help students get a taste of the practical work and deepen their self-awareness as well. «These exercises were really significant for me, since in the next semester we will have to do traineeship, so with these classroom exercises we had the experience how it would be like when we would actually sit with the client» (Student feedback regarding the skills development course).

Besides these courses, we have to mention the personal development groups as well. Within social work education, a key educational element is the personal development practice contributing to the self-awareness of the students. It is important to encourage future helpers to become aware of their own abilities and coping strategies. Abilities can be acquired through learning while doing, thus the self-reflection and empathy of the individual enhances<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> K.B. TALYIGÁS, M. FEUER, Z. HÁBERMANN, G. HEGYESI, Á. KÖVÉR, *Az elmélettel való integráció elősegítése a terepgyakorlat során.*, in «A szociális munka elmélete és gyakorlata 6. A szociális munka oktatása» G. HEGYESI, Á. KÖVÉR, K. TALYIGÁS K. (eds.), Budapest, ELTE TÁTK, Budapest Főváros XIII. kerületi Önkormányzata, 2012, pp. 124-185.

<sup>20</sup> M. BARCY, *Segítő módszerek, fejlesztő-támogató eljárások. Hatékonyságuk, alkalmazásuk, technikáik (Egyéneknek, csoportoknak és közösségeknek)*, Budapest, ELTE TáTK, 2012,

The aim of the personal development groups is to boost self-awareness among students, to enable them to engage in self-analysis, critical reflection, self-reflection, and to enrich their communicational tools. These groups ensure the possibility for participants to experience group dynamics, group cohesion, a so-called we-experience<sup>21</sup>.

An important opportunity to gain self-knowledge and develop professional skills is provided by field practice. The personal and competence development exercises ensure good opportunities to prepare for field practice. The way how these elements reinforce each other was summed up by a student as follows:

«I had that great fear regarding this course that it would turn out I wasn't suitable for this profession. [...] As I always feared that alright, in this safe environment, inside the walls of the university it is good what I do and how I'm doing it, but if I get out in a real-world situation, with people I have no idea how they would react, would it be still fine what I'm doing. I think that field practice would help me overcome this fear» (Student feedback regarding the skills development course).

## 6. *Field education in focus*

In what follows we intend to reflect on the links and relevant aspects between the theoretical and practical teaching of social work, from the perspective of the challenges of the program. For this, first we need to draw up several value neutral facts in order to obtain a real view on the methodology of the practical training, and to get a clear view on the difficulties and dilemmas we are confronted with when organising and delivering training within the university education of a mainly practice-based profession.

- In Hungary the professionalization of social work was uneven, and trainings followed the evolvement of practice.
- The social and financial recognition of social work is extremely low, and there are many employees working in the field without proper qualification.
- The profession lacks efficient advocacy.

In our view, the Global Definition of Social Work<sup>22</sup> is at the basis of the social work field education in aiming at preparing committed professionals with proper social worker identity. Upon graduating, our students acknowledge the importance of this in a pledge: «[...] I will endeavour to draw the attention of those in power and of the entire society on social inequalities. In

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<[http://tatkteszt.elte.hu/file/SEGITO\\_MODSZEREK\\_FEJLESZTO.pdf](http://tatkteszt.elte.hu/file/SEGITO_MODSZEREK_FEJLESZTO.pdf)> (last access 03.10.2022).

<sup>21</sup> B. MIKLÓS, *Személyiségfejlesztő csoport - tematika*. Budapest, ELTE TÁTK Szociális Munka Tanszék, 2020.

<sup>22</sup> IFSW, *A szociális munka globális definíciója*, in «Esély», 6, 2014, pp. 96-100.

my work, I will follow the guidelines included in the Ethics Code of social work» (ELTE, Social work pledge, fragment).

The Global Definition of Social Work<sup>23</sup> has a twofold influence on field education. On one hand, it states that social work is a practice-based profession, on the other hand it makes clear that its practice is expected to impact in a positive manner the structural changes in society. It stipulates that social work training, thus preparing individuals to become professional helpers is unconceivable without experiencing real-life field work. The widespread theoretical knowledge is a strength of the educational program, as on a theoretical level, the social work educational program transmits an adequately critical mentality rooted in social sciences and psychology, an important element of which is the understanding of social structures and the critical analysis of actual processes in social policies.

Due to the specificity of this profession, the social work teacher-student relationship is not a traditional teacher-student relationship, but rather a master-disciple relationship, which enables the grounding of the theoretical knowledge, personal and skills development and the preparation for practice. Field traineeship is organized in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> semester (in a framework of 150 and 300 hours), coupled with field education seminars in 3 hours weekly. In our view, education has to be in a constant interaction with practice. The quality of the social work education is largely determined by the ability of the institution to find and engage dedicated field instructors with adequate personality; we make efforts to achieve this.

During the social work bachelor degree, regarding the organization of field education, we put the emphasis on three important aspects, which also indicates our endeavour to innovation:

- 1) Field education in social work, the network of personal relationships of the teachers, their range of influence cannot stay strictly in the academic sphere; despite our limited possibilities, we tried to enhance interaction between the university and field instructors through field visits, open professional events, and meetings of field instructors. We would like to emphasise that there is still a huge gap between theory and practice, but without the contribution of dedicated masters, field education cannot fulfil its function.
- 2) Engagement towards the values of professional help provision is important. Social work education has to reflect continuously on practice, and on the activity of the students undergoing field education. This is supported by seminars for processing field experiences, programs, occasionally international study trips or the motivational accounts of students returning from international traineeships, which we hope that significantly contribute to the reinforcement of their professional identity and add to their knowledge.

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99-100.

- 3) It is of outmost importance to point out good practices and to encourage students to learn about these. This could imply the example and presence of actively working instructors as well, field visits, encouraging students to make use of international opportunities (receiving student delegations, organising comparative courses and lectures, common visits to institutions). In recent years we enlarged our network of relations, and established contacts with many EU universities and NGOs. In addition, we encourage our students and former students with international experiences to share their knowledge.

### *7. Challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic*

The pandemic induced significant challenges in higher education and thus in practice-based social work education as well. The first and second wave had different impacts on organizing and delivering education, however both significantly restricted the possibilities of teachers, field instructors, and students, while this period resulted also in many new tools and innovations. During the first wave, we had to react very rapidly, and in one week switch to online education. The most significant challenge was posed by the competence development subjects and field education. Regarding the former, our teachers contributed to the development of professional skills with many interesting tasks, case analyses, discussions on films. It is to be noted that our psychologist colleagues attempted to countervail the tensions and existential uncertainty of students caused by the quarantine through supportive discussions and individual consultations. Regarding field practice, we tried to adapt flexibly to the processes undergoing on field, which brought mixed experiences besides general uncertainty and chaotic conditions.

The engagement and involvement of students into the online programs represents a challenge. We try to keep ourselves dynamic through online events at the department and international seminars. Such a successful initiative related to this endeavour was the World Social Work Day 2021 organized with the participation of 11 educational institutions.

During the past two years, mentors and demonstrators help our work, who encourage even in the online area the educational advancement of the students and their involvement into the community life. They contributed to the renewal of the curriculum as well and mediate between the students and department in order to ensure efficient communication.

It has to be stressed that although good solutions were invented regarding education and cooperation, these were born out of constraint. It is still to be seen how and when the losses caused by the pandemic affecting the society as a whole, the social field and the educational system can be processed and counterbalanced. At present we consider that the online area can be a proper field for domestic and international forums, and for the active cooperation of edu-

cational and research institutions, field sites, but the social work education and field training requires personal presence.

## 8. Conclusion

In accordance with the practice-oriented character of our educational program, the study highlighted two structural components of our efforts to innovation: the competence and professional personality development, and the field education. Through these we presented the reflections of the students, the facilitator role of the teachers as masters, and the relevance of the cooperation between field instructors, as masters and practitioners.

We have to emphasize that the events and quests of recent years left open many questions, thus we regard them as future challenges. Our endeavour did not change: ensuring quality education and a high level theoretical and practical training for our students. However, taking into account the structural changes, we have to find ways to preserve the importance of competence and personal development courses, despite the decrease of the number of overall courses; likewise, despite the difficulties in the field of social services and child protection, we have to continue to ensure professionalism and quality in field education.

Regarding graduating students, it is always important to assess the coherence of the curriculum, whether students feel any shortfalls, what they would prefer to add to the curriculum, and which subjects they find worth enhancing for the grades following them. We also need to monitor whether we are able to offer courses for the understanding and handling of new societal issues, and whether the content of the subjects is up to date.

The pandemic causes serious social and economic damages and shortages, thus social work has a role to play in rebuilding and processing the losses.

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