

KAZAKHSTAN UNIVERSITIES: INTERNATIONALIZATION OF CURRICULA AS A FACTOR OF COMPETITIVENESS OF UNIVERSITIES

Ane Tynyshbayeva

L.N.Gumilyev Eurasian National University

Abstract. This article considers one of the most important trends in contemporary process of internationalization of higher education, its basic forms and characteristics such as the internationalization of programs and curricula, the establishment of regional and international university networks. The empirical basis of the study is grounded in sociological researches reflecting the process of reforming the social sector which were performed with the direct participation of the author. The algorithms of training professionals that possess varying levels of professional education and specialization were disclosed. The key competencies were analyzed and their typology developed. Maps of professions for each professional level of social workers as well as educational programs and working curricula for undergraduate and graduate degrees were developed in compliance with the European system and national standards of professional education.

Keywords: internationalization of universities, internationalization of the educational process, curriculum, professionalization of social area, training of social workers, professional competencies

Introduction

The powerful integration processes grasping every sphere of public life, including the higher school, have become a trend of the last decades of the modern society. Higher education and science have become a fundamental factor of social development and are put forward in the most priority national and universal components of a cultural, social and economically sustainable development of the world. The changes have become more apparent as they relate to the identity of universities and the processes occurring in the higher education system in Kazakhstan including the fact that national systems of higher education are developing in line with global processes and trends and are focusing on the needs of the world labor market (Zabirova & Jumageldinov, 2011: 149).

In Kazakhstan, the internationalization of higher education is closely related to the issue of professionalization of the social sphere as there is a demand in the country for modernization of social institutions in order to reduce the transaction

costs arising in the process of improving human capital during the interaction of individuals, social organizations, enterprises of different organizational and legal forms of ownership and state agencies. In this regard, the professionalization of social services is an important condition for enhancing the resource potential of individuals, groups, and communities as a dynamic process of professional development of a specialist oriented at formation of relevant personal and professional competencies in the area. In addition, there is also an acute problem of how to make the education attractive to students and encourage mobility of students, and create transparent and compatible degrees.

The key of the social sphere is the “Social Work” major. “Social work” as a type of professional activity and the subject of social work as a science is just starting to evolve in Kazakhstan. Training of social workers began in 1994, and the legal status of a social worker was defined by the law of the Republic of Kazakhstan “On special social services” adopted on 29 December 2008. “Social work” was also selected as a profession that requires a priority reform according to the priorities of the program TEMPUS IV «Professionalization of training in the social sector ETF - № 000471-2008». The main objective of the program - to make a transition to a three-level system of training in the European system of credit transfer (ECTS). The consortium of the project includes 56 organizations from 14 countries, among which: France, Italy, Greece, Spain, Hungary, Bulgaria, Great Britain, Romania, Moldova, Russia, and Kazakhstan. The main objective of the program - transition to a three-level system of professional training of the European credit transfer system (ECTS).

Within this program, in collaboration with partner-universities: St. K. Okhridski Sofia University, Academy of Grenoble (France), University of Milan (Italy) and Alexander John Cuza University (Romania) and the Kazakhstan universities: L.N.Gumilyev Eurasian National University, Sh. Ualikhanov Kokshetau State University, E. Buketov Karaganda State University the work on the reform and renewal of educational programs and curricula of higher education of “Social Work” major in compliance with the Bologna process and the European LMD standards was undertaken.

Methodology

The approach focused on a student gives great importance to the structure of the curriculum and the usefulness of training programs for the future status of the graduate in the society. In Europe, the economy puts pressure on the system of education so that the educational institutions produce the expected competencies. In this regard, the academic community has agreed to define competence as an ‘ability to act.’ The ability to act is manifested through the ability of an individual to mobilize knowledge (practical, theoretical, methodological, and communicational) in certain professional situations in order to achieve the desired outcome.

Accordingly, the educational programs must meet the competency requirements of the economic community, and the universities should be focused on the convergence of educational and professional activities. The competence-based approach ensures that the training content meets the expectations of the company. In general, in the quantitative paradigm, created through credits, educational programs are developed based on the expected learning outcomes (competencies) for a given labor market (Tynyshbayeva, 2011: 427).

All these issues can be solved only in cooperation with representatives of the labor market. Therefore, within the project the Consortium team conducted a study to identify skills requirements and find the 3 key specializations of the profession “Social Work” which would correspond with the national and international standards. Given the insufficient number of qualified social workers in the social sector of Kazakhstan labor market and with the goal as soon as possible to fill the gap in the need for professional resources caused by the new social policy in the country, the *main objectives* that were set are the following:

- examination of the needs in cadre in the social sector and defining of requirements set by the employer for the specialist;
- revising educational programs of bachelor and master degrees in the area of social work in accordance with the Bologna Process and Lisbon recommendations.

Expected result – reform of higher professional education and internationalization of curricula and programs.

For a standardized description of the requirements for compliance of the university graduate to the qualification level the need emerged to consider specific sectors of social practice in order to identify the composition of skills inherent in employees working in the professional sphere. Therefore, it was necessary to clarify two questions: what are the professional competencies of specialists acquired in the company and the competencies of graduates received through higher education system. The study used the methodology developed by the Academy of Grenoble (France): The sample for the survey and interviews with government employees (the founders) and specialists in the field of social work.

Research objectives - to identify the requirements for professional competencies and functional responsibilities set up by practitioners (specialists) for university graduates majoring in “Social Work” as well as:

- a) mobilize of social and economic partners and their involvement in the project with the goal to ensure their further participation in the development of a two-level education (bachelor – master degrees);
- b) allow teachers to get acquainted with socioeconomic realities so that the design (engineering) of education programs considers the ultimate goal of learning: professionalization of education for students;
- c) identify conditions (bottlenecks), related to human resources that prevent development of social work;

d) identify three key professions of “social work” sector corresponding with the 3 training programs (first, second degrees of professional Bachelor, third - master’s degree in social work);

e) edit the three professional cards;

f) identify existing educational programs in colleges and universities and develop professional cards in accordance with 3 identified key professions;

g) identify the characteristics of these educational programs that convey the discrepancy with the expectations of the “social work” sector.

Description of the instrument. Questionnaire for surveying the decision makers (managers of social institutions, departments) working in educational institutions in “Social work” direction. *Types of establishments for the survey:* social institutions, professional lyceums of social area; college training professionals for the social sector; universities training professionals for the social sector.

The empirical basis of research

The empirical basis of the research stands on findings of surveying the management, organizers, and specialists of social work in the agencies and institutions of social protection of Akmola and Karaganda Oblasts and the city of Astana. The survey involved 500 respondents, including 60 face-to-face interviews and 440 questionnaires completed in written. The survey covered 56 enterprises and social institutions of Astana, Kokshetau, and Karaganda cities of Akmola and Karaganda regions of Kazakhstan.

The study proposed a number of questions the answers to which made possible to determine the corrective actions aimed at improving the training of future social workers in higher and secondary professional education.

Human resources related factors hindering the practice in social sector

Findings of the research showed certain difficulties occurring in practice in the social sphere including: lack of qualified specialists to address social problems, lack of domestic theory and practice of social work, consumeristic attitudes of beneficiaries to the state provided social services, the outflow of graduates due to low wages; and challenges with assessment of the needs and demands of the population. One of the important points that should be noted is that many social workers work in different state institutions the goals of which are not always in compliance with the values of the profession.

Key professions of social area

The study of social services in social institutions as well as analysis of the functional responsibilities of the respective positions showed that the key occupations that were identified include Social Work (Bachelor and Master degrees) and their specialization:

1. Social Work. Specialization: Rehabilitation and integration;
2. Social Work. Specialization: Social work with children and families;
3. Social Work. Specialization: Management in social work.

Professional competencies of the profession: the specializations of social work (Bachelor degree)

For Kazakhstan, these key social work specializations are in demand and timely. The employers have indicated which competencies should be developed for each of these key occupations:

Social Work. Specialization: Rehabilitation and Integration: Use a differentiated approach to various social and vulnerable groups in the social rehabilitation and integration; provide support to clients over a certain life period; use legal mechanisms to legal and regulatory framework for social rehabilitation and integration and apply innovative technologies in social rehabilitation and integration in the social work practice based on scientific grounds.

Social work with children and families: offer and organize support to families and children, establish the necessary links and contacts. Use legal mechanisms in the social work with families and children as well as methods and technologies with different categories of families and children; perform social diagnosis of urgent issues of the family; study technical expertise and international experience of social work with families and children. Social work with children and families should be aimed at solving everyday family problems, strengthening and development of positive family relations, and development the socialization capacity of the children and families. A social worker should be able to establish rapport with the family and identify the problems of children and adults; to council families and children on various aspects of their life; to carry out a social diagnosis of problematic family and child issues; social prevention to minimize the social risks. A social worker should participate in the development of social policy and social support for children and families, perform social, economic and political diagnosis within the assigned territory and social processes in the society, analyze the political and socio-economic evolution of the social sector, analyze the social needs of families and children and develop long-term vision for the model of social policy.

Experts believe that the role of social workers is extremely high in the organization and implementation of policies and social support to families with children. The social actions that were proposed include: working towards implementation of the policy directions of the program and effective plans, adopting and implementing a strategic choice in line with the style of leadership, mission, and resources; determining the scope of actions, assessing the social public policy; implementing an effective social support in line with objectives and criteria of final outcomes.

In the area of social protection and family support to carry out: social diagnosis and needs assessment for social development of families with children; prevention,

brokerage and leisure activities; intake, information sharing, referring, developing a plan of assistance and support; legal support and creation of conditions for the exercise of its rights and freedoms; psycho-pedagogical education of family members, provision of emergency psychological assistance; establishing and maintaining relationships with social institutions designed to provide social support to children and families.

Professional competencies of the profession: specialization in Management of Social Work (Master's degree)

Given the existing problems in the management of social support to children and families with children in difficult life situations the following core competencies were identified for the management of social work in social and legal protection: performing territorial social, economic and political diagnosis; analyzing social and territorial needs and demands; protecting clients' interests at various levels; implementing in practice the legal norms concerning education, health, and social protection; organizing and coordinating communication between agencies, organizations, institutions of social and legal protection of citizens; possessing own methods of modeling and forecasting in the social sphere.

Analysis and assessment of the views of practicing workers in social area on training curriculum in higher education institutions

The study also assessed the opinion of experts (professionals) on existing training programs at universities and gap analysis between the higher and vocational training needs of social practice. As a result, the following was identified: the level of preparedness of graduates, in general, meets the needs of the employer. However, some experts mention insufficient readiness of cadre which to some extent is related to the lack of clear specialization. The opinion of employers and practitioners regarding the existing education acknowledges the high theoretical preparedness. Educational programs meet the requirements. However, graduates are not familiar with the practical skills of planning, assessment and defining the prospects of developing targets at the institutions of social area. In order to improve the quality of training of social workers the respondents proposed to: follow continuity of training programs in the education system "Lyceum-College-University"; increase the duration of internship; expand the knowledge and skills of social work in working with children with disabilities.

The professionals also indicated the difficulties they face in practice: shortage of qualified professionals to address social problems, lack of domestic theory and practice in social work, consumer-like attitudes to social services provided by the state, the outflow of graduates due to low-wage, challenges in assessment of the needs and demands of population. Many social workers work in different state institutions the goals of which do not always correspond with the values of the profession.

The functional responsibilities of the positions in the social sphere

In accordance with practical needs the functions of social workers were defined as follows: development and self-realization of an individual and strengthening the families. Functional location of activities: public institutions of social protection, medical and social service institutions, and educational institutions. Conditions: Work in establishments, covering a certain territory, self-governance and responsibility, provision of a package of social services, compliance with international social work ethics, responsibility for decision-making, approval of certain actions by higher level management. Work relations: connection with other services (social pedagogue, psychologist, and medical practitioner), organizing family's contact with other institutions and agencies, cooperation and coordination with concerned departments and agencies. Main activities: organization of assistance to families and children, establishment of the necessary links and contacts. Supporting people over a certain period of life, organizing control over the situation in order to protect the clients, interacting with authorities and management. Improving the quality of services and social protection; identification, collection and compilation of information on families in need of social assistance; administrative work in social services and social protection for families and children; provision of various types of counseling and correction of interpersonal relationships within the family; advocacy assistance and family support.

The list of positions in the structure of practice in the social sphere.

Respondents identified positions that can be replaced by social workers:

- Head of the employment and social programs department, Deputy Head;
- Head of the social sector programs;
- Head of the department of in-home social support;
- Senior specialist, leading specialist;
- Social worker, care providing social worker;
- Director of general type Center for rehabilitation of pensioners and people with disabilities;
- Councillor-Specialist.

Conclusion

Based on this study the core competencies and specialization of the higher training of social workers were identified. Identification of key occupations was based on examining the social work specializations in institutions and within the social welfare system as well as the functional responsibilities of the respective positions. Three key specializations of the social sphere were defined: social work in providing social services, social work with children and families, and social work management. Maps of the profession were developed and educational programs for undergraduate and graduate programs were designed. The module approach to the professional activity was applied when developing the plan. The training course is

structured in a way to provide both general training and in-depth study of methods and main tools for working with families and children.

In conclusion I would like to demonstrate how the internationalization of higher education influences the strategy and policy of a certain university. L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University actively cooperates with foreign universities including the countries of Europe - 31 contracts, the CIS countries – 61, countries in the Americas and Oceania - 15 contracts, Asian countries - 37. The University has joined the Eurasian Association of Universities and the Association of International Studies of CIS and Baltic countries (2002), signed Magna Carta of European Universities in Bologna (Italy, 2006), is a member of the International Academy of Higher Education. The contribution of the Eurasian National University in the development of education is marked at the international level:

- the university has passed the international certification of quality management system (2005),
- was awarded the prestigious international reward “United Europe” at Oxford University (2005),
- honored by the International Socrates Award for the contribution to intellectual development of Modern Society (Oxford, 2006),
- was internationally accredited by the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan Ministry of Defense (2009).

L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University is among 500 world’s best universities according to the Times Higher Education-QS World University Rankings and is on the first place in the National ranking of universities in Kazakhstan.

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✉ **Dr. Ane Tynyshbayeva, Assoc. Prof.**
Head of the Psychology Department
L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University
5, Munaitpasov str.
010008 Astana, Kazakhstan
E-mail: ane.tynyshbaeva@gmail.com