

Introduction

Social Professions for a Social Europe State of the Discourse about Common Challenges

The title of the book is identical with the title of a former publication (Seibel/ Lorenz 1998)* in which the findings of an Europe-wide evaluation concerning the impact of the ERASMUS-programme for social profession were presented. In picking up the title this book refers to the past, it takes stock of the present and develops scenarios for the future.

In the 90s, after the fall of the Iron Curtain and the ongoing enlargement of the EU, it became clear that an enlarged Europe will be more diverse and more complex. And an enlarged Europe must reflect upon its western orientation (its bias). The extension of Europe towards the East is not a concern of social professions per se, but in the context of the enlargement and the renewed links between the Western and the Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC), the question of belonging and social coherence came to the fore - a crucial topic of social professions right from the beginning.

In this decade the challenges for social professions and for concepts of their training were quite different in Western Europe and in the CEEC. In many countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the social professions had to define and to assert their place within society and politics and to develop an appropriate self-concept for this purpose. In Western Europe, the social professions were confronted with the reframing of the social, the re-structuring of the welfare systems, whereas the "new European" countries had to invest a huge effort in order to establish appropriate welfare structures and services.

In the 90s a Thematic Network Project "ECSPRESS", was created within the Socrates-Erasmus framework by the three important

* For all references please visit: http://www.ecce-net.eu/vero_en.html

European associations in the field of higher education of social professionals, namely the EASSW, ECCE and FESET. The network was developed as a multi-faceted platform for research, training and the exchange of academic discourses and practice oriented concepts.

In the following years practitioners and academics from many European countries participated in several conferences, mostly held in the CEEC, in order to contribute from different fields of social services and with different perspectives on the themes deriving from the developments mentioned above (Chytil/ Lorenz/ Seibel/ Strienzenec 2000; Elsen/ Friesenhahn/ Lorenz 2002; Seibel/ Otto/ Friesenhahn 2007).

In the last ten years it became also clear that social professions in all European countries, independent of their geographical location in Europe are confronted with similar challenges.

‘Social professions for a Social Europe’ therefore refers also to the future in which the common task is to strengthen social professions and to support their societal activities in a market-oriented Europe.

Ten years after the first conference on "European Dimensions on Training and Practice of Social Professions" (Chytil/ Seibel 1999) representatives of the "ECSPPRESS" network and new colleagues got together again in Ostrava in order to review the development since the last conference, to take stock of the current situation and to discuss future trends and possibilities of co-operation of the social professions throughout Europe. This conference offered new perspectives.

Some of the ‘old-timers’ of the ECSPPRESS process, most of them from Western countries, but some of the CEEC, looked back contently to what they promoted in the last decades and resumed the results, demanding of course that the process should go on. However, the younger participants from east and west just met, forwarded their opinions in their contributions and discussed – in other word: for them, the European discourse on the problems of social professions just happens in a similar way all over Europe, without any emphasized

'bridging' between the former parts of Europe. The European discourse as a whole is self-evident by now!

This book reflects some of the common topics challenging the social professions actually in Europe. Without any doubt, these topics have changed under the influence of economic and political processes.

The political corner stone of this development is surely the so-called Lisbon Strategy. Its aim is to make the EU "the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion, and respect for the environment by 2010".

As a consequence of this strategic aim competition is introduced as a suitable tool in all sectors of European Union development.

Furthermore and in connection with it the investment in education and training from a Human Capital perspective is seen as a crucial means to achieve this goal.

This strategy has profound effects on the social services and the social professions as evidenced for instance by the growing influence of the new "paradigm" of economical thinking in the provision of social services both nationally and across borders.

Linked to this is also the restructuring of Social Welfare Provisions in the old member states of the European Union and the structuring of Social Services in the new member states.

New legislation in many European Countries demonstrates the withdrawal of the state from social responsibilities and their transfer to the local level and/or private initiatives.

Finally the so-called Bologna Process has changed the architecture of Higher Education in Europe making it more performance oriented.

Under the roof of ECSPRESS, we publish in this book some contributions from east and west – or better to say: from all over Europe – to three elected areas which are important for social professions and for universities who educate those professions. These areas are:

1. European dimensions in the curriculum development of the social professions. (Collecting information on European elements in the context of basic training; European modules for joint European degrees)
2. The role of the social professions in fighting social exclusion. (Overview of initiatives that exist at the academic and practice level in tackling this central issue)
3. Social professions in changing the socio-political contexts in Europe. (Analysis of the changes in social policy in Europe and discussions of the implications for social work in western, eastern and central Europe)

By this publication, we want to disseminate the findings and statements to the European discourse to a wider audience, especially the professional and scientific community of the social professions, who share this discourse across the countries.

The editors are grateful to the colleagues who presented their papers and delivered them in a form ready to be published.

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