

ECONOMICS*Sociology*

Hanna Slozanska, Role of Australian Association of Social Workers in Higher Social Work Education Forming, *Economics & Sociology*, Vol. 3, No 1, 2010, pp. 115-121.

Hanna Slozanska

*Ternopil National Pedagogical
University, Ukraine*

ROLE OF AUSTRALIAN ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS IN HIGHER SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION FORMING

Received: March, 2010
1st Revision: March, 2010
Accepted: April, 2010

ABSTRACT. It has been analyzed the role of the Australian Association of Social Workers in programs of social workers preparation in the higher educational establishments of Australia.

JEL Classification: P17, H4,
N 37

Keywords: Australian Association, social workers, higher social work.

Introduction

The social work profession is committed to the pursuit and maintenance of human well-being. Social work aims to maximise the development of human potential and the fulfilment of human needs, through an equal commitment to:

- working with and enabling people to achieve the best possible levels of personal and social well-being
- working to achieve social justice through social development and social change.

This involves: upholding people's interests and rights; working with individuals, groups and communities in the pursuit and achievement of equitable access to social, economic and political resources; providing assistance to improve the well-being of clients. *Clients* are individuals, families, groups, communities, organisations and societies, especially those who are neglected, vulnerable, disadvantaged or have exceptional needs; raising awareness of structural inequities; promoting policies and practices that achieve a fair allocation of social resources; acting to bring about social change to reduce social barriers, inequality and injustice.

To accomplish its aims, the social work profession pursues: the development and application of knowledge, theory and skills regarding human behaviour, social processes and social structures; the development and redistribution of resources to meet the needs of individuals and communities.

Australia Social work

In Australia Social work operates at the interface between people and their environments. Social workers are qualified professionals who practise their profession in a broad range of government and non-government settings.

Social workers practise in a variety of ways, including: engaging in interpersonal practice, groupwork, advocacy, community work and social action to address both personal difficulties and public issues undertaking research, social policy development, administration, management, consultancy, education, training, supervision and evaluation to further human well-being and social development.

The social work profession recognises its responsibility to contribute to the international social work community. The profession supports human welfare projects at local, state, national and international levels [2].

Social education — activity of specially authorized educational establishments and establishments directed on the harmonious forming of children and youth, development of their natural abilities, mental and physical abilities, education of high moral qualities, that assists to the conscious and active participation in social-economic, political, cultural and other spheres of public life [2].

Such approach determines the basic directions and maintenance of social workers preparation in Australia, where the differentiated different levels system of social education, which is based on the professional orientation and where the early professional preparation takes an important role, that begins at level of general school – in the form of profiling.

The development of social education in Australia coincides with opening of the first educational courses for preparation of social workers at Schools of social work in 20-30 years of XX century. From the 1940 the social education becomes part of university education. The programs of preparation of social workers existed only in three educational establishments; a quantity of graduating students, mainly – women, was not large, because the programs were not popular among entering persons [13].

From the 1970 the situation became better, but it was not ideal. A number of social work programs graduates became bigger, however the programs remained unpopular because of the low labour payment of graduates [16].

The situation changed in 80-90th of the XX century. Rapid social transformation and integration in the world economy had a great influence on the development of social education [8].

In 2004 there were 22 educational establishments that prepares social workers in Australia. Every year the quantity of graduating students of the programs from social workers preparation exceeded 1000 persons [12].

In Australia today the large attention is devoted to the question of social workers preparation, as one of professional preparation directions, from the side of state, exactly the state establishments (territorial communities, establishments and services for adult and children-invalids, state establishments, hospitals, social services, refuges) form considerable part of demand on the specialists of given type.

The system of social workers preparation in Australia is built on principle of life long education, that, from one side, allows the specialists to perfect its professional abilities and promote a level of qualification, and from other, enables to capture new specialities and to the basis of already got diplomas, and also allows the enterprises to control a level of professional competence of its workers [2].

The main tasks of Australian life long education that deals with the professional preparation of social workers are: 1) individual freedom in the educational trajectories choice according to its capabilities, queries and possibilities; 2) consideration of necessities of customers of professional personnels and preparation of mobile, oriented to the market relations specialists; 3) development of democratic freedoms in activity of professional educational establishments, that form own original on-line tutorials.

In Australia the system of preparation of specialists for the social work is component of higher education. On the modern stage preparation of social workers carry out 27 Schools

of social workers preparation, which are subsections of universities. They include the higher educational establishments that prepare social workers of general type and educational establishments, which prepare social workers of the different specialities [14].

In Australia all higher educational establishments are under the state control, only three of them are private. The state and private educational establishments offer different possibilities of receipt of education in the sphere of social work, however they are interrelated and allow possibility of transition of students from one level to other.

Schools from preparation of specialists in social sphere are the special category of educational establishments, which concentrate big experience in the field of social workers preparation, develop the models and forms of activity, open wide possibilities for retraining and in-plant of specialists of social sphere training. The schools, as subsections of universities, carry out its activity according to the law "About the higher education" 2003 [3].

But at the same time there is no strict order in governing of social educational establishments in Australia. Schools are provided with the definite independence in the questions of management. Their activity is controlled by the annual collections of the School committee (School Committees), on which are given and come into question financial, educational, skilled and other statements, that represent activity of educational establishment [15].

In Australia there is no leading organ that would regulate the activity of Schools of social workers preparation. Control after the observance of on-line tutorials, by the level of qualification of educational establishments leaders, by quality of education, that is given in the educational establishments during all period of social workers preparation, laid on Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youths Affairs. Degrees and diplomas in industry of social work are awarded by the state according to reference Australian Qualification Framework Implementation Handbook, ratified by Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youths Affairs and concerted with Australian Association of Social Workers [4].

The Australian Association of Social Workers is organization that has the power to accreditate the Schools of social work in Australia of all levels of education^ bacheloe degree, master degree and doctor degree.

The Australian Association of Social Workers (Inc) (AASW) is pleased to make a submission to the Inquiry. The AASW is the only professional body representing the social workers in Australia. Membership of the AASW currently nears 5,000, has been growing steadily for a number of years, and is expected to continue [1].

The AASW is also a member of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), based in Oslo, and our current national president is a member of the Executive Committee of the IFSW. The Association is well-positioned to speak on behalf of the social work profession in Australia and, at the same time, draw on its significant links with social work colleagues in other countries [2].

The AASW enjoys a direct link to social work education in Australia through its policy, Eligibility for Membership: Policy and Procedures for the Review of Australian Social Work Courses [1]. Through this policy the AASW assesses and approves (or rejects) schools of social work based on the course content, standard of education, organisational arrangements, and field practicum arrangement. In order to be eligible for membership of AASW, and in order to access a significant number of clearly identified social work employment opportunities, a graduate must have possession of a degree from an approved school of social work [1].

There are 21 schools of social work currently operating in Australia. Universities which have applied to establish a school of social work for the first time, if accepted, will only receive provisional approval until the first cohort of students is about to graduate when

the course is once again formally reviewed and the process of approval, continued provisional approval or rejection is addressed [5].

The minimum standard of social work education in Australia is a bachelor degree. The AASW does not recognise diploma-level qualifications which are broadly gathered under the rubric of welfare studies. There are some welfare studies degrees. However, these are neither assessed nor approved by the AASW for the purpose of eligibility of membership [10].

Through its membership of IFSW the Association enjoys a collaborative working relationship with other member countries and is currently observing the IFSW process to review the definition of social work and the minimum standards of training for social work education.

Australia's higher education sector performs very significant functions in terms of the overall outcome and quality indicators for the Australian community. It is by no means the only sector. Through its contribution to education and training, it prepares individuals for a very wide range of professional and occupational functions [6].

The graduates of Australia's higher education sector will directly, or indirectly, inform or influence the social, cultural, economic and community aspects of the Australian society. In turn, they will also inform our international relations and the development of more sophisticated and/or better means of addressing critical problems and issues which face the Australian community and may also be experienced internationally [1].

The Association believes that government must recognise the value and importance of the outcomes of higher education upon the Australian community, economy, cultural and international perspectives. Analogous to economic terminology, this is an important investment in the future of this nation. Productivity is not measured alone by economic indicators but by a full range of indicators which include the social, cultural and community health of the country.

For over 15 years, Australia's higher education institutions have been grappling with the positive and negative attributes of technology in its various forms, continuous overt, and often covert, cuts to its funding base and increasing demands for their services. Access to higher education has become a more equitable process across the breadth of economic and cultural groupings. The sector also has had to critically address the impact of the dominant paradigm of economic rationalism [5]. This critique has, appropriately, extended beyond a critique of its impact on higher education more broadly to the Australian community at large.

The review has asked what attributes will higher education graduates need to operate effectively in their personal and professional lives in this emerging environment. One of the cornerstones of higher education should continue to be the development of critical thinking capacities which has been augmented by specific knowledge and practice-related information which can be integrated into practice. This is important for any professional or occupational group and is the cornerstone of contemporary social work education. Thus, graduates of social work education have been provided with the necessary conceptual tools and the most contemporary thinking, research and information in social work practice. This has been done within a model which integrates knowledge and practice and results in a graduate who emerges with a functional level of skills and knowledge to enable him/her to take up practice as a beginning social worker.

It is the AASW's contention that an integrated practice-based learning model represents one of the most effective teaching models [2].

The Association believes that the demand for social education places during this period will increase dramatically. As our society becomes more technologically based, there will be an increase in the demand for a wide range of appropriately trained professional and occupational groups to address both the positive and negative effects of this trend [1].

Similarly, radically improved technological capacities will broaden the access to higher education and give far greater access to rural/remote Australia.

The demand for social work education will, we believe, increase dramatically. The 1990 DEET report indicated that at the turn of the century, social work will be amongst the top ten most demanded professions [7]. Changes in our social and political climate since that report will, in our opinion, continue to result in a further increase in demand. Demand for social work education has increased by 35 percent since 1985 [6].

The Association is mindful of the need to monitor the development of social work education to ensure that the supply of trained social workers does not exceed demand.

Importantly, we are also concerned to ensure equitable access to higher education which includes equitable access to social work courses. At the present time, five schools of social work offer courses by distance education, addressing one of the barriers to access.

As indicated in the introduction, the AASW performs a significant role in setting and monitoring of standards of social work education [1]. In doing so, we are mindful of the tension between our accountability function and the important independence of the higher education sector—in this instance, the universities. We believe that any government must pay careful attention to the balance between the need for accountability and the inappropriate direction of policy and implementation at higher education level. Over involvement in this domain has a serious adverse effect on an important higher education role, critical thinking and the development of new approaches.

We believe that the quality of higher education courses should always be attuned to changes in knowledge-base, the nature and shape of the sector and the demands of employers and key stakeholders. However, with regard to the last point, we believe the autonomy of the universities is paramount.

The AASW has been, and will continue to be, a strong supporter of universal access to education and, as such, is opposed to any fee paying system. This having been said, we recognise the existence of fees and view with some concern the continued trend towards increases in fees and the introduction of full fee paying students in a number of Australian universities. We believe that this has serious implications for equality of access to education. This will have a direct impact upon otherwise highly suitable students who are unable to afford fees and may not be successful competitors for any subsidised funding arrangements which may be put in place.

Moreover, we are deeply concerned about the prospect of full-fee paying international students as a means to generate necessary resources to higher education institutions. Our concern in this regard pertains to social work education alone. Social work education, by its very nature, is practice-based and integrated into the cultural and contextual environment in which it is taught. As a result, social work education in Australia is not easily transferable to another cultural and political context.

Though this may be easily construed as an English-to-non-English speaking transference, the panel will be interested to know that an Australian trained social worker seeking admission to practice in the United States of America will be required to sit three exams which will demonstrate their capacity to practice in the American context. An Australian qualification is no more immediately transferable to an American context than it is to a Japanese, Malaysian, Indonesian context, or vice-versa [9].

It must also be acknowledged that social work training, along with other practice-based integrated professional courses must be appropriately financed. It is more expensive than a liberal arts course and any attempts to reduce funding to social work courses will result in/risk poorly trained professional groups who will then practice in society.

The introduction of a variety of financing options should be approached with considerable caution and with a clear eye to the question of access and equity. Performance-

based funding models focus almost exclusively on publication outputs and research, but do not take into consideration the importance of the quality of teaching.

Means testing has never been a reliable indicator for adult education, particularly if it is firmly linked to the income of parents, as will be the case for a large number of higher education.

Similarly, by student loan schemes and voucher systems will have the effect of discriminating against people who are economically disadvantaged, in particular women who are financially dependent upon partners, who are mothers and who are also students. A significant number of mature aged social work students are from this background.

The Association is concerned that existing allocation systems for a quantitative research to the expense of qualitative research proposals. Whilst establishing cause/effect relationships in social welfare research may be difficult it should not be disadvantaged in the allocation of research funds [7].

Conclusion

The Association is gravely concerned about the implications for higher education in Australia, both in terms of its capacity to continue to provide appropriate support and training for social workers and, importantly, the questions of access to education for appropriately qualified students within Australia wherever they might live.

We are confident that the questions of access and equity will be raised in many other submissions and it will challenge the review team to ensure that these principles are maintained. However, we believe that failure to maintain these principles will further widen the concerning gap between the "haves" and "have nots" in Australian society.

At the present time, the Association's view that social work education in Australia operates in both an efficient and effective manner and is certainly highly accountable to both the university and professional body. The blend of training opportunities in both on-site and distance education have provided far greater access for students across Australia. Through the process of regular university and AASW reviews, we believe that schools of social work have a continual imperative to review their standards of practice, curricula and teaching methodologies to ensure the best quality outcome that will meet the needs of the students, the profession and other key stakeholders.

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