

# SYNCHRONOUS COMMUNICATION BETWEEN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS AND EMPLOYERS IN THE FIELD OF SOCIAL WORK

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## Abstract

Typical of post-communist and post-industrial development of society in Central Europe is inter alia the inability of a significant part of the population to keep pace with the global societal requirements. The statistical data of social security offices indicate that the disintegrated persons or persons at risk of disintegration represent about one third of the population. The complexity of the phenomenon and the size of social demand for professions dealing with it trigger the process of training for professional qualification of social workers and the competition between quantitative and qualitative requirements for vocational training and its standardisation. From the perspective of both the educators and employers, it is necessary to assess the importance of theoretical training and experiential learning of future social workers and also the employability of young graduates from social work study programmes in the labour market.

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**Keywords:** Employability of young graduates, employability factors, labour market

## Contextual factors

Matters related to the employability of graduates from bachelor's degree programmes and follow-up master's degree programmes in the field of social work in the labour market rank among the often discussed and closely watched topics by the society. The growing societal need for qualified workers brings about the high demand for studies among young candidates as well as (in lifelong learning - LLL) persons lacking any useful qualification or persons at risk of unemployment. Essential for employability of graduates in the labour market is their choice of a particular study programme (oriented at social and health topics, social and theology topics,

or at social work focusing on social policy, or at a related field of study of development and humanitarian work), and also the environmental factors influencing the employability of the graduate in his place of residence, the level of his qualification (tertiary vocational school, bachelor or master degree). From the educators' perspective, also important is the **contact between the student and the potential employers already in the course of his studies, his practical experience and/or also the quality of personal portfolio defended at the state examination?? in social work, such as the preparation for selection procedures in order to get a job.**

- **Social work represents a regulated profession and activities** (in accordance with Directive No. 2005/36/EC)

- **Minimum standards of training for professional qualification** for the fields of study, basis for accreditation of educators, minimum standards for practice and supervision – study outputs are defined, learning journey fully respects the processes of experiential learning, evaluation of outputs from practise is changing

- **Multilayer linkage between theory and practice** in the course of training for professional qualification of social workers – methods of implementation of requirements raised by social practice and development of the field, development of [www.nsk.cz](http://www.nsk.cz) vocational qualification (specialisation) of social care/ social work

- **Contact between the student and potential employers** as early as during the study, his practical experience and/or also the quality of portfolio defended at the state social work examination as a preparation for the process of vocational qualification (National Register of Qualifications - NRQ), as a basis for employability in the labour market for getting and retaining a job, for the sake of education for the future

**Minimum standards of training for professional qualification** quite clearly define the content parameters of the study, which are identical across the educational programmes in the Czech Republic and in the EU Member States and represent the key prerequisite for accreditability of the fields of study. This has been fully confirmed also in interaction with partners under several projects in Scotland, Poland and Slovakia.

## Methods

In spite of high societal demand, a certain number of graduates from social care/social work study programmes **fails to find a job, namely 2.7 %** (the data stated by the Charles University - Education Policy Centre for 2014), and additional **unspecified number of graduates fails to find a job matching their level of qualification** or they get a job outside their profession.

The development of social work theory and practice, diversification of labour market needs in this area call for:

- **Synchronised communication between educators and employers,**
- Persistent efforts to **update the technical content of taught subjects,**
- **Quality supervision and mentoring of a high volume of field experience in social work** – approximately 25 - 35 % (tertiary vocational school, bachelor or follow-up master degree) of the volume of practical training in the field
- Last but not least, educating the mentors and offering them training courses within the system of **lifelong learning – or in the form of the so called social clinics.**

**Partnership** as a factor increasing the chances of graduates to get employed in the labour market in the area of social work. A number of projects is being developed both by schools and employers to support the partnership between schools and employers. The educators, however, have to make do with a limited number of suitable partners in the commercial sphere, whereas the companies on the other hand prefer to target their recruitment activities at a fairly narrow segment of the fields.

For educators in the field of social care the following is proved to be crucial

- To create the **Portal of systematized practice,**
- Necessity to **synchronise communication with employers,**
- To exert consistent efforts in order **to update the technical content of taught subjects,**
- To perform **quality supervision and mentoring of a high volume of field experience in social work.**

In this context it appears necessary, due to high degree of diversification of work positions and client groups in social practice, to focus on **modelling of career pathways of graduates in the field of social care,** namely already **in the course of the study, to guide the students through self-experiential training and subsequently through higher-education counselling support oriented at career counselling.**

**Building bridges between theory and practice. Cooperation in projects. Safe labour mobility. Anticipated consequences of application of the drafted Act on social workers and professional chamber.** To initiate projects coordinated at the national level, such as the Continuing Education Fund project called "Placements at Companies – Learning through Practice" ("Stáže ve firmách – vzdělávání praxí"), to support its sustainability. Unfortunately, its funding by the European Social Fund often leads to a time-limited or purposeful involvement also of those companies which do not really consider the balanced partnership with students and

especially the subsequent use of their work. Therefore, also the unique project **Meet the Companies (Seznamka s firmami)** shall be mentioned, implemented by the Ingenio et Arti accredited education centre. The principle of the “dating agency“ is more important than the immediate economic impact, namely that no branch is unattractive and no company too small. The project does not primarily seek to place the interns, but rather to establish a partnership between the student and the company that can be initiated through the commonly defined topic of the thesis or through the project defended at the state examination. The Meet the Companies project was recently officially released on [www.bakalarkavpraxi.cz](http://www.bakalarkavpraxi.cz). In order to achieve its purpose, a representative sample of students shall be collected within a reasonably short period of time who are interested in elaborating the bachelor's or master's thesis for a specific company partner.

Another, highly appreciated form of cooperation between the educators and employers are job fairs, career preparation of students and young graduates by the respective practitioners, presentation of career information.

## **Results**

Below you will find some of the results of the probe into conditions, process and efficiency of employability of graduates from bachelor (National Register of Occupations 6) and master (National Register of Occupations 7) Social work study programmes, and opinions of graduates, educator and employers:

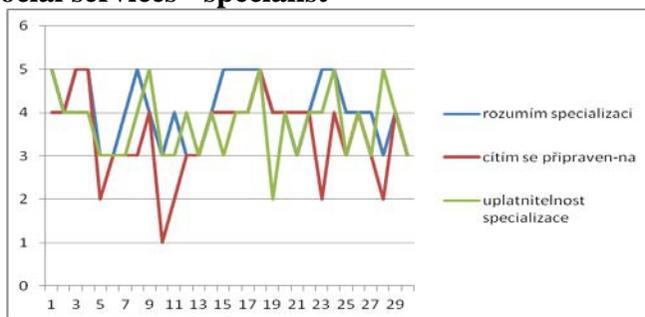
The survey of the process of preparation (training), preparedness and employability of graduates from social work study programmes as perceived by them, by the educators and by the employers was conducted in the period from January to December 2014 among the total of 120 students of the Charles University, among the total of 20 contracted registered providers of student's practical training and placements (the data was collected during the Job Fair in the field of social work, held at the Charles University), among the academia providing education in the “Social and charity work” field of study (The Hussite Theological Faculty of the Charles University, The Protestant Theological Faculty of the Charles University, The Faculty of Arts of the Charles University, in total among 20 members of academia). Altogether 160 respondents have been approached and the survey and assessment of results were done by the author of the probe and the paper.

**NRQ/7 Opinion on one's own competences to perform the specialisation of a social worker** in accordance with the drafted Act on social workers and professional chamber and with the National Register of Qualifications

Self-reflection of the graduates from social work study programmes:  
**liaison officer in social services - specialist, advisor in social services - specialist, resocialisation worker - specialist, social worker - specialist.**

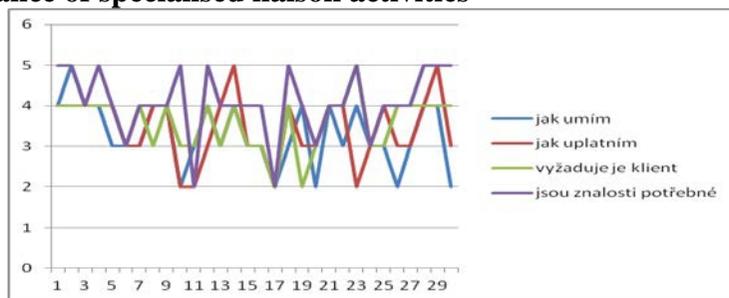
- To what extent do I understand (4) the professional specialisation/qualification (on a scale of 1-5)
- To what extent do I feel professionally prepared by school and practice (3.5)
- To what extent does the social practice need specialisation – employability of respective specialisation/qualification (3.5)

### Advisor in social services - specialist



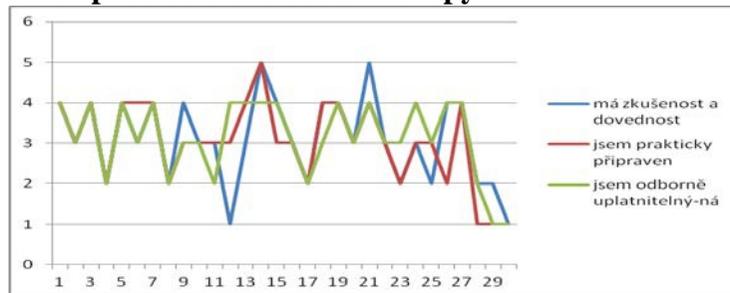
The response to question concerning the understanding of specialisation/qualification was 4 on average, and the response to both the questions whether I feel prepared and the question concerning the employability of the specialisation/qualification was 3.5

### Performance of specialised liaison activities



The respondents gave the following answers to the question regarding the **expert knowledge**: What is my knowledge (coefficient 3), To what extent do I use the knowledge (coefficient 3.5), What knowledge is required by the client group (3.5), To what extent is my knowledge necessary and compatible with the structure of provided social services (4)

## Resocialisation processes and social therapy



Assessment of **expert skills**: I have the experience and the skills to provide independently resocialisation and social therapy (coefficient 3), I have practical knowledge to establish contacts, to investigate, to provide counselling and to represent (3), I am employable as a professional in the social and legal area, in state administration and local government (3) **(continuous process of legislative amendments)**

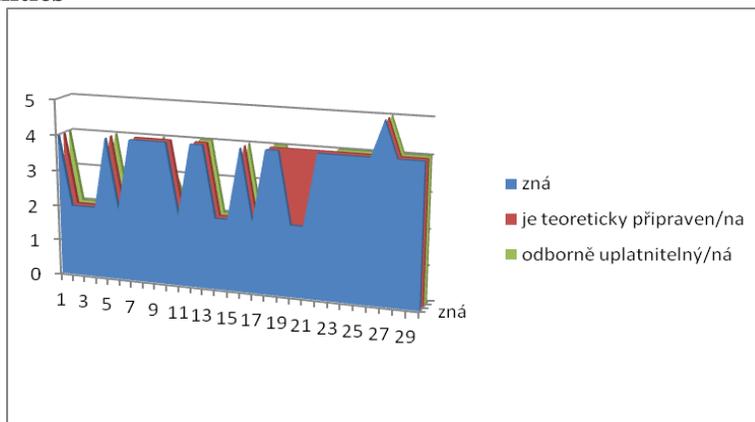
### A probe into the conditions, process and efficiency of employability of graduates from bachelor Social work study programmes (NRO 6), opinions of graduates, educators and employers

**Employers** presented their opinion on expert knowledge of young graduates – the aim was to map their opinion on expertise, skills and competences of graduates from social care study programmes:

- The graduate is familiar with the rules, legislation, procedures...
- The graduate has theoretical knowledge to perform social work in individual areas of social care...
- The graduate is employable as a professional in the social field.

*The respondents were asked to circle one of the answers on the scale: 1 definitely not/ 2 rather not/ 3 I do not know / 4 rather yes/ 5 definitely yes*

### Procedures for identifying citizens in unfavourable social situation, analyses of their needs, and the ways of acting in respective communities



The interviewed employers of young graduates responded as follows: The graduate is familiar – average coefficient 3.4, The graduate has theoretical knowledge - 3.5, The graduate is employable as a professional - 3.2

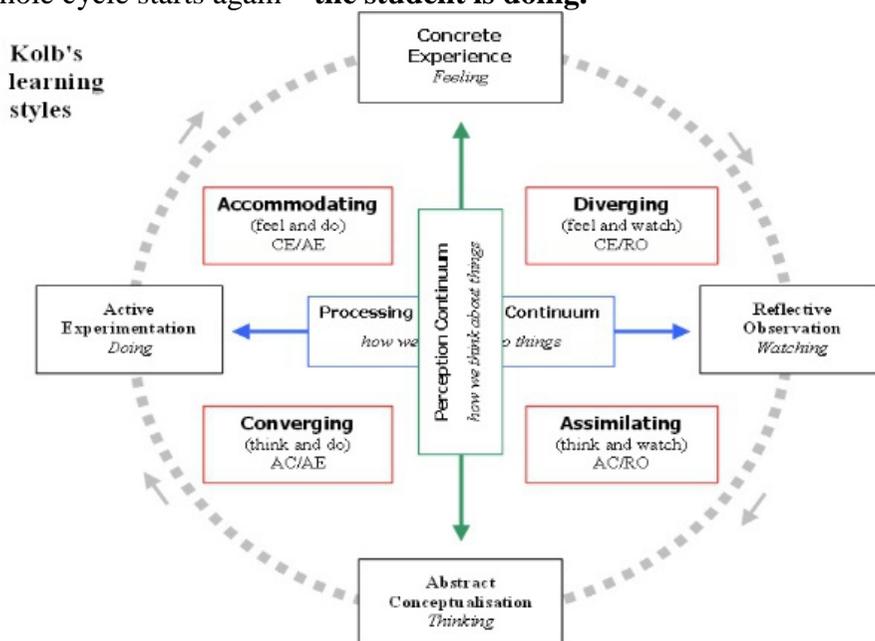
**Minor shortcomings in teaching concerning certain practical experience, skills, way of thinking**

**Kolb's experiential learning cycle during the placement – (1)**

Concrete experience – own activity, the student visits the client, **the student is feeling**,

(2) Reflective observation – the mentor discusses the experience of the student or the student himself reflects the course of the visit, where he succeeded and where he failed, **the student is watching**, (3) Abstract conceptualisation – drawing general conclusions, based on the experience with the visit the student makes general conclusions, he links the concrete experience with the theory, he lays foundations for the next visit, which procedures would be fitting or which would not be fitting, he develops a plan of changes to be tested in the next activity, **the student is thinking**,

(4) Active experimentation – the student develops and tests the new plan for a visit at the client, he tries new alternative procedures during the visit, which constitutes a starting point for new concrete experience and the whole cycle starts again – **the student is doing**.



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Experiential learning is effective if all 4 methods of learning are gradually used in the process of learning. The student can start at any stage, but the sequence of stages shall be observed. It is not the mentor, but the student who arrives at conclusions and draws general conclusions. The assessment was done with the use of the Kolb's learning styles inventory.

## Conclusion

- To provide **comprehensive knowledge and skills** in social care fields of study
- To strengthen the positive impacts of structured and consistently applied practice – the principle that **the students are learning what they are doing** (to encourage experimental learning, common learning, hierarchical learning)
- To create other ways of education which enable the students to apply in practice what they learn
- To focus on **innovating the ways of assessment** and on verifying whether the applied knowledge and skills of students correspond with the target learning outputs defined in accredited fields of study and subjects
- To improve the level of acquired knowledge and skills of students, and thus also the **quality and competitiveness of graduates**

Social work has had a long tradition. Social work of some form has been present throughout the history of mankind, but as a branch of human activity, a field of study and a regulated profession it has markedly shifted from its charity forms prevailing in 1800s to the current concept of an expert worker, through gradual **standardisation of social services and their establishment in the social order**.

A social worker is a professional who avails of the relevant knowledge and responds in his work to the actual situation of the persons, his clients. Day by day he works with the consequences of poverty, diverse social dysfunctions, consequences of social disintegration of persons. In order for him to be able to work effectively, the educators shall very **precisely determine the volume and level of theoretical training and controlled and supervised acquisition of experience from social practice**. In spite of that **the lifelong learning of social workers** is crucial, namely for the sake of their long-term employability in the labour market.

Moreover, if top quality social work is to be delivered, it will be necessary to **support the professional status** of social workers in every possible way and the generally improve the social prestige of the area of social work. Social workers nowadays face strong dilemmas they have never faced before in Central Europe.

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