

THE INFLUENCE OF MENTORING AND INSTITUTIONAL PARTNERSHIPS ON GOOD PRACTICE MODELS AND PROFESSIONAL TRAINING IN SOCIAL WORK

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Abstract

The relationship with social institutions and the business environment is an essential component both in terms of the employability of graduates of the Social Work specialization and the adaptation of educational plans, of the contents taught to the existing changes in the economic and social environment by consulting employers and professional associations. Beyond the institutional, administrative, and legislative aspects regarding the training of professionals in the field of social assistance, the usefulness of mentors and models of good practice is considered. The practical research from the social assistance specialization of the „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iași regarding the importance and usefulness of students' practice in their professional training, had as its objectives the identification of difficulties in training professional skills for obtaining skills, the collaboration between professionals and practising students, the importance practices for social assistance specialization, identifying the perception of professionals towards practising students as well as identifying the professional's image as a mentor and model for them. The questionnaire was used for the practice coordinators and the undergraduate students from the social assistance specialization, and reports of the practical activity, structured thematically, were used. The conclusions of the research highlighted their perceptions on the role and training of social workers through practice activity as well as the practical implications and benefits of inter-institutional collaboration in professional training.

Keywords: professional training in social assistance, professional skills, institutional partnerships, practice in social assistance, mentor, models of good practice.

Résumé

La relation avec les institutions sociales et le milieu des affaires est une composante essentielle tant en termes d'employabilité des diplômés de la spécialisation Travail Social que d'adaptation des projets pédagogiques, des contenus enseignés aux changements existants de l'environnement économique et social en consultant les employeurs et les associations professionnelles. Au-delà des aspects institutionnels, administratifs et législatifs concernant la formation des professionnels dans le domaine de l'assistance sociale, l'utilité des mentors et des modèles de bonnes pratiques est considérée. La

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recherche pratique de la spécialisation en assistance sociale de l'Université „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” de Iași concernant l'importance et l'utilité de la pratique des étudiants dans leur formation professionnelle, avait pour objectifs l'identification des difficultés de formation des compétences professionnelles pour l'acquisition de compétences, la collaboration entre professionnels et étudiants en exercice, l'importance des pratiques pour la spécialisation en assistance sociale, en identifiant la perception des professionnels envers les étudiants en exercice ainsi qu'en identifiant l'image du professionnel en tant que mentor et modèle pour eux. Le questionnaire a été utilisé pour les coordinateurs de pratique, et pour les étudiants de premier cycle de la spécialisation en assistance sociale, des rapports d'activité pratique, structurés thématiquement, ont été utilisés. Les conclusions de la recherche ont mis en évidence leurs perceptions sur le rôle et la formation des travailleurs sociaux à travers l'activité pratique ainsi que les implications pratiques et les avantages de la collaboration interinstitutionnelle dans la formation professionnelle.

Mots clés : formation professionnelle en assistance sociale, compétences professionnelles, partenariats institutionnels, pratique en assistance sociale, mentor, modèles de bonnes pratiques.

Abstract

Relația cu instituțiile sociale și mediul de afaceri reprezintă o componentă esențială atât în ceea ce privește angajabilitatea absolvenților specializării Asistența socială cât și adaptarea planurilor de învățământ, a conținuturilor predate la schimbările existente în mediul economic și în cel social prin consultarea angajatorilor și a asociațiilor profesionale. Dincolo de aspectele instituționale, administrative și legislative privind formarea profesioniștilor în domeniul asistenței sociale, se are în vedere utilitatea unor mentori și modele de buna practică. Cercetarea practică de la specializarea asistență socială a Universității „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” din Iași privind importanța și utilitatea practicii studenților în formarea lor profesională, a avut ca obiective identificarea dificultăților în formarea abilităților profesionale pentru obținerea de competențe, colaborarea dintre profesioniști și studenții practicanți, importanța practicii pentru specializarea asistență socială, identificarea percepției profesioniștilor față de studenții practicanți precum și identificarea imaginii de mentor și model a profesionistului pentru aceștia. A fost utilizat chestionarul pentru coordonatorii de practică, iar pentru studenții ciclului de licența de la specializarea asistență socială, au fost utilizate rapoarte ale activității practice, structurate tematic. Concluziile cercetării au evidențiat percepții ale acestora asupra rolului și a formării asistenților sociali prin activitatea de practică precum și implicațiile practice și beneficiile colaborării interinstituționale în formarea profesională.

Cuvinte-cheie: formare profesională în asistență socială, competențe profesionale, parteneriate instituționale, practica în asistența socială, mentor, modele de bună practică.

1. Introduction

Social work developed a lot in Romania in the post-communist period, requires the training of professionals in the field according to the educational standards established by the National Education Law, no. 1 of 2011 with subsequent amendments and additions, Law no. 258 of 2007, regarding the practice of pupils and students, of Order no. 3955 of 09/05/2008, regarding the approval of the General Framework for the organization of internships within undergraduate and

master's degree programs and the Framework Convention regarding the implementation of internships within undergraduate and master's degree programs. According to these legislative regulations, the professional practice activity in the training institutions complements the didactic activity to learn and practice the skills specific to the social worker profession. In this context, specialized practice becomes a discipline in itself included in the education plan, for which credits are allocated, a required number of hours as well as the evaluation method. The legislative framework also establishes the main concepts and terms used for the practice activity as well as the main elements regarding the organization, conduct and evaluation of the practice activity for students.

2. Concepts necessary in organizing the practice activity

For a good organization of the practice activity, it is necessary to know and use the specific terminology of all practice partners. As stipulated by the legislation stated in the introductory part, the practice activity for students is carried out based on Framework Agreements and Conventions between the training institution as the practice organizer (art 3, paragraph 1 of Law 258/2007), a practice partner (art 3, paragraph 2 of Law 258/2007) and the student (Law 258/2007). The main terms refer to the duration and periods of practice, to the main responsibilities but also to the elements of the analytical program regarding the student's practice portfolio and the assessment method.

3. Institutional partnerships for practice activity

The practical activity of the students from the Social Work specialization within the Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences within the „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iasi is carried out based on institutional partnerships with social institutions and the business environment. Using these partnerships, the conditions, and criteria for coordinating and carrying out internships for students are established and ensured. They consider specific responsibilities and obligations for each partner, negotiate conditions depending on the evolution of the labour market, and update specific skills in terms of employability.

Etymologically, the word partner comes from the French *partenair*, translated as *together*. As a definition, partner means „each of the participants in a common activity considered about the others” (<https://dexonline.net/definitie-partener>).

Law 258/2007 regarding the practice of pupils and students, updated, certifies that the partnerships of training institutions contribute to the training process of students and pupils (art. 3, paragraph (2) of Law 258/2007). The same law establishes the role of the partner institution in the professional training of students and pupils by fulfilling certain obligations and responsibilities. They refer to the institutional resources related to logistics, technology, labour protection and last but not least to the guidance and follow-up of the practice activity in

correlation with the analytical program and the practice portfolio (Chapter III, Section 1, Art. 10-16, Law 258/2007).

Also, the law establishes the obligations of the practitioner, i.e. the student or pupil in the practice activity. These obligations refer to the obligation to carry out the internship, to comply with the contractual terms regarding compliance with the institution's internal order regulation, the activity regarding the analytical program, respectively the practice portfolio, but also the presence or resumption of the practice activity for any reason that would prevent the student's presence (Chapter III, Section 2, Art. 17-20, Law 258/2007). Students from the Social Assistance specialization within the Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences of the „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iasi carry out the practice activity based on the *Practice Regulation*, visible on the faculty's website https://www.fssp.uaic.ro/images/files/Regulament_practica_2018_FSSP.pdf). The regulation establishes all aspects and methodological norms of this activity. The practice of Social Work students can be done *at the workplace*, especially for distance education students, *on their own*, proposed by the student or master's student, when he will conclude an individual and *organized partnership*, through offers proposed by the Department or the University.

To conclude institutional partnerships, the Department of Sociology, Social Work and Human Resources, the Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences of the „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iasi, carry out specific annual or thematic promotional activities with institutional representatives as guests who can participate in the professional training of students and coordinate practice activities (The fair of practice, volunteering and internship offers in the field of social assistance, 7 editions; The career fair under the auspices of Career development opportunities through internships, internships and volunteering, 3 editions, ROSE; Social Assistance Days).

3.1. The purposes of institutional partnerships in professional training

Institutional partnerships regarding the training of professionals aim to practice skills to obtain specific skills. For social assistance, within the Department of Sociology, Social Work and Human Resources, Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences of the „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iasi, the exercise of professional skills during the education cycle aims to put theory into practice through activities associated with curricular subjects, of professional practice, volunteering activities, exchange of experience through national and international internships, research activities. A good example is the international conference *Cross-border Perspectives on Social Assistance* organized by the Department of Sociology, Social Work and Human Resources of the „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iasi, in partnership with the Department of Sociology and Social Assistance within the State University of Moldova, Chisinau and Department of Social Sciences and Social Assistance within the State University „Alecus Russo” from Balti. The general objective of the conference is to facilitate the exchange of knowledge, experiences, and practices in the field of social assistance. The

conference aims to provide a platform for academic discussions and interdisciplinary collaborations between researchers, practitioners and decision-makers in social assistance from Romania and the Republic of Moldova, to identify innovative solutions and promote the sustainable development of this vital field (<https://www.fssp.uaic.ro/departamente/sociologie-si-asistenta-sociala/evenimente/perspective-transfrontaliere-asupra-asistentei-sociale>).

For these activities, partnerships are concluded with governmental and non-governmental institutions and/or organizations, of a central or local nature, with economic agents and representatives of the economic-financial field, with central or local authorities, with health institutions, with trade unions and/or professional organizations as well as with other university centres.

3.2. Standards and competencies in the training and professional development of social workers

The methodology regarding the National Framework of Higher Education Qualifications (CNCSIS) describes the qualifications corresponding to the 3 cycles established by Law 288 of 2004 on the organization of university studies with subsequent amendments and additions: bachelor's, master's and doctorate. According to the same document, the qualification process is a result of learning to certain standards, assessed and validated by a body with attributions in these skills. Therefore, „qualification means the official recognition of the value of individual learning results for the labour market, as well as for continuing professional education and training, through a study document (diploma, certificate, attestation) that confers the legal right to practice a profession/profession” (Methodology for the creation and use of the National Framework of Qualifications in Higher Education from June 29, 2009). So, the qualification is obtained based on the learning results, expressed through knowledge, skills, and competencies. The training process in social assistance considers the learning outcomes expressed through two types of competencies: *professional competencies* and *transversal competencies*. These competencies are visible in the course sheets of the curricular area in higher education of professional training in social assistance. Although theoretical, the professional competencies in social work are translated as the practice of the main professional skills on the theoretical basis specific to the field. To these are added transversal skills concerning communication, teamwork, transdisciplinary, social interaction, personal and professional development (Iovu, Lazar & Cristea, 2020). If these types of skills are the responsibility of the training institutions, the continuous professional training activity of social workers is related to the national standards proposed by the National College of Social Workers in Romania (art. 26 of Law 466/04.11.2004) through the Code of Practice that complements the Code of Ethics of the social worker profession (published in M. Of. 173/6 March 2008). This Code of Practice establishes the main professional standards and its responsibilities according to the main professional steps specific to professional development (The code regarding the practice of the social worker; <https://www.cnasr.ro/>).

3.3. Guidance in social work practice

Beyond the institutional, administrative, and legislative aspects regarding the training of professionals in the field of social assistance, the usefulness of mentors and models of good practice is considered. Most of the skills specific to the assistance field are practised through the *Specialized Practice* discipline, which involves simulating the professional's activity under the direct guidance of a social worker. The specialized practice activity starts from the idea of putting theory into practice but also of observing, learning, and practising transversal skills through direct meetings with the beneficiaries, participation in the teamwork activities of the professionals and the direct involvement, gradually, in the specific intervention activities. The social worker designated as a *practice tutor*, (as stipulated in the *Practice Regulation* Practice regulations for students of the Social Assistance specialization of the Faculty of Philosophy and Social-Political Sciences, University of Iasi) within the social work institutions has the role of a guide in the training of the student in social work, as stipulated by the Law on the practice of students and pupils, number 258 of 2007, updated in 2015. Through the actions and professional activities in which the students participate, it represents a professional model of what it means to communicate with the beneficiaries and with the members of the multidisciplinary team, the types of reactions and the procedures regarding the intervention and last but not least, the respect of the code of ethics specific to the profession. The code of practice of social workers establishes the main criteria and conditions for the professional advancement of social workers employed in the field. For the professional employed in the social protection system, the training and assessment regarding the transition from one level of competence to another requires the presence of a supervisor.

Therefore, the acquisition of skills in the field of social assistance subscribes to the presence of a guide, with the meaning of a mentor, in all actions and professional activities carried out as well as in the fulfilment of the specific didactic objectives stipulated in the discipline sheet, i.e. to complete the Practice Portfolio.

Mentor, etymological (fr., lat.) = guide, guide would fully satisfy the explanation regarding the responsibilities of the social worker designated as a practical guide or as a supervisor in the exercise of skills for obtaining skills. The mentoring activity can represent a way of ensuring the initial training and facilitating the insertion into the labour market of beginning professionals to build their social and professional identity, as an extrapolation of the definition in the field of education concerning didactic mentoring. The mentor must ensure, through the guidance provided, the beginner's transition from the trial stage to the job stabilization stage as provided by the National Education Law no. 1/2011, in art. 248. (Order 5485, 2011). The mentor familiarizes the beginner with the organizational climate and culture and facilitates relations with professionals but also with the beneficiaries, which are the main responsibilities of the social assistant practice guide for students majoring in social work.

4. Methodological aspects and directions of analysis

In 2023 research was carried out based on the Specialized Practice activity of students from the Social Work specialization within the Faculty of Philosophy and Social Political Sciences of the „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University of Iasi, proposes to identify the skills needs of employers to which they want to respond graduates of this specialization. Other directions of analysis focused on the importance of partnerships for the professional training of social work students, for which objectives were set related to challenges regarding the training of professional skills, the collaboration between professionals and practising students, but also the identification of the professional's image as a mentor and model for them.

The questionnaire was used for the practice tutors, for a group of 28 professionals, and for the undergraduate students from the social work specialization, 365 reports of the practical activity, structured thematically, were used. The activity reports are a mandatory element of the Practice Portfolio for the Specialized Practice discipline from the Social Work specialization of the bachelor's cycle. Based on these Activity Reports, student feedback on the activity is accounted for in practice. This feedback contributes significantly to the annual analysis and adaptation for carrying out the practice activity by establishing, within the partnerships, the conditions, responsibilities, but also objectives and requirements regarding the acquisition of skills required in the labour market.

4.1. Results analysis

The quantitative research had in mind the comparison but also the establishment of correlations between the responses of the students and those of the practice guidance professionals. One of the objectives of the research regarding the practice of social work students was *to identify the difficulties in the training of professional skills for obtaining skills in the practical activity of the social work specialization.*

For the questionnaire, there were preset answers on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1 was the most difficult and 10 was the easiest.

For professionals, in order of difficulty from 1 to 10, they were:

1. the ability to relate and identify problems.
2. self-assessment of the need for training.
3. risk assessment.
4. creativity.
5. assertiveness.
6. the ability to relate.
7. communication.
8. empathy.
9. application of work techniques.
10. teamwork.

For students, the answers related to difficulties in:

1. the relationship with the beneficiaries.

2. lack of knowledge of the types of beneficiaries.
3. fear of making decisions regarding the intervention.
4. confusion in the performance of tasks.
5. difficulties in identifying the types of beneficiaries.
6. lack of patience.
7. lack of a professional vocabulary.
8. difficulties in identifying the needs of beneficiaries.

An analysis of the answers regarding the difficulties encountered in the training of the professional skills of practising students from the social specialization, shows a correlation in terms of their ability to relate to the beneficiaries, justified by the lack or limited knowledge of the particularities of the types of beneficiaries, an insufficient training students' theory in terms of professional vocabulary and work techniques. These lacks or insufficiencies lead to difficulties and fears regarding the approach to the beneficiaries, difficulties in communication, fear and stress in communication and decision-making.

For these answers, we find the justification that most of the practice reports used were from the first and second years of undergraduate education, and the practical experience was short, one semester and two respectively. For the first year, the experience was one of familiarization with the assistance field, based only on theories and general knowledge in social work, in the second and third years, the experience will be based on theories and techniques specific to the field.

Another research objective considered *the importance of practice for social work specialization*.

The questionnaire for professionals had questions with predetermined answers, on a scale of one (min) to five (max). Thus, scales 5 and 4 were tied regarding the fact that practice is useful and very useful, followed by supplementation in all semesters, supplementation during the summer and a lot of exercise, a lot of practice. Regarding the students' answers, they identified, in order of importance: personal and professional development, gratitude for this opportunity, acquiring knowledge about different types of beneficiaries, providing information in the student's understanding, observing the social worker in the relationship with the beneficiary, practising skills and putting theory into practice, facilitating direct contact with beneficiaries, a plus for understanding real situations in social work, practice is the key to understanding and perfecting any job.

If the professionals saw the specialized practice activity as a necessity to exercise the skills for longer periods, the students customized the ideas related to their own needs and feelings regarding the necessity of the internships.

Another question related to this objective refers to the *identification of the perception of the professionals facing the practising students*. The question had predetermined answers, and the order was as follows: possible future colleagues, students who have a project to complete good and very good professionals, and I didn't think about it. The last option was not checked by any professional practice guide.

It is understood that professionals understand the importance but also the necessity of internships for students, the argument being the collaboration in the future with well-trained professionals.

The same objective was associated with the question related to *the collaboration of professionals with students in the practice activity*, to which the professionals declared themselves: satisfied and very satisfied, but they requested the stimulation of courage regarding involvement and participation, stating that they are open to any question and any type of guidance such as and that they value negotiation and flexibility. The students again personalized the answers exemplifying satisfaction as availability and understanding of the professionals, their patience, ethical attitude, stimulation of teamwork, experience and organization in the work of the social worker.

Regarding the question that follows *the expectations they have from the practice activity*, both professionals and students emphasized putting theory into practice. Regarding the students' expectations from the practice activity, they identified: direct meetings with beneficiaries, field activities, involvement in the work team, participation in activities and practising skills as well as observing the social worker when working with the beneficiary or when managing situations of crisis. Of course, the practice activity requires all these expectations formulated by the students, but not all practice places can fulfil these requirements, due to the specifics of the social work services. The most requested expectation is directed towards working directly, practically with the beneficiaries and through direct involvement in the intervention process. Professionals understand the expectations of students that fade when they are asked for theoretical knowledge, progressive involvement, individual study of the beneficiary category, dedication and want to participate and personal development.

The question regarding *the challenges and recommendations for the students' practice activity* is related to the previous arguments in that the students identified situations such as too few interactions with the beneficiaries, the reluctance of the beneficiaries, the lack of practical activities, the lack of a professional vocabulary for students, the fear of not mistakes in working with beneficiaries, lack of information on the types of beneficiaries, crises and attacks of some beneficiaries. Beyond the expectations they had from the practical activity, the students identified the particular situations of working directly with the beneficiaries, which requires very good theoretical training aimed at knowledge in communication and particularities of the category of beneficiaries but also in practising the skills in long periods of practical experience.

The professionals identified the challenges and recommendations in the field of resources and organization of the practice activity. The main challenge is the organization of the practical activity itself, due to the very large number of students but also the work schedule. Other challenges relate to the correlation of theoretical information with practice, but also the lack of professional communication skills of the students.

Another objective of the paper was *to identify the image of a mentor or professional model for social work students*. Most of the tutors combine the idea of a role model with that of a mentor, by taking responsibility for training future professionals. If the mentor is seen as a facilitator in the activity of the new employee with attributions in familiarizing and supervising the activity, the idea of a good practice model displays a complex picture to be observed of the professional for the student, who will have to imitate and/or practice attitudes and skills of him in the direct activity with the beneficiaries. The models of good practice stimulate the development of professional skills specific to the field, encourage involvement, critical thinking, and the practice of formulating decisions.

5. Conclusions

The present research focused on the influence of institutional partnerships in the professional training of students through mentoring and the models of good practice of professionals in the field of assistance. The conclusions of the research highlighted their perceptions on the role and training of social workers through practice activity as well as the practical implications and benefits of inter-institutional collaboration in professional training. For better familiarization with the nursing field, it would be useful, in parallel with practice, to involve students in volunteer activities.

The training of professionals in social work requires a lot of practice to acquire the necessary skills in working with beneficiaries. Initial training institutions allocate practical-applicative disciplines in the curriculum through which students practice putting theory into practice. For these disciplines, partnerships are needed with public or private institutions that declare their willingness to be involved in the training of professionals. Permanent contact with partner institutions is particularly important because they provide updated information about the requirements of the labour market. This contributes to training adapted to the requirements of the labour market in the field of assistance, but also to an increased employability rate of graduates.

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