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Theory and practice of counsellology in the education of social workers in Poland¹

What can I advise you...

The text concerns historical and contemporary ways and forms of education in the area of counselling (family, vocational, social, etc.) as practiced in the field of “social work” in Poland, analysed from the point of view of academic education quality standards, including those set by the Polish Accreditation Commission, as well as the reforms of the social assistance system. The changes in the system cause that the assistance activities now go beyond administrative activities, and put more emphasis on direct, specialist support for the family in various areas of its functioning: raising children, building healthy marital relations, education of children, including children with special needs, support for dependent persons, disabilities and people in crises. This support is implemented mainly through specialist counselling, which is an element of the education of social workers at Polish universities.

Keywords: social work, quality of education, counselling, family support, education of social workers

This text aims to indicate the areas of education in the field of counsellology for the university studies in social work and to show how important these tasks are in the Polish academic system of education and practical assistance. The considerations contained in the article are based on many of my professional experiences, concerning both teaching, research and expert work in the field of social work. The text contains references to each of the roles I performed in these areas, although it is the expert’s role that allowed me to obtain a certain distance and gained a kind of

¹ The text is based on the speech prepared for the 10th National Pedagogical Congress, which took place in Warsaw on 18–20 September 2019 and was organised by the Polish Pedagogical Society, Maria Grzegorzewska Academy of Special Education and the Faculty of Pedagogy of the University of Warsaw. The speech was delivered during a special symposium entitled *Knowledge about counselling in pedagogical studies. In search of a remedy for the problems of the modern world*, the initiating centres of which were the University of Wrocław, the Lower Silesian University, the University of Zielona Góra and the Scholarly Society of Counsellology (Naukowe Towarzystwo Poradoznawcze). The text is a revised, extended version of the speech, also including suggestions, comments and questions formulated by the audience after the presentation of the text, for which I thank them once again.

meta-knowledge of the studied subjects, which are the ways and forms of counselling and guidance (and sometimes also counsellogy) education in the field of “social work” in Poland. It is not, therefore, a description of only diachronic nature, taking into account the historical, social and political changes in the education of future social workers (Leś, 2001; Leś & Rosner, 1991; Kozak, 2012; Oleszczyńska, 1978; Wyrobkova-Pawłowska, 1986; Zasada-Chorab, 2004), but a synchronous and, due to the limitations of the text, synthetic analysis of the methods of education that are offered at universities in Poland.

Historical reports show unequivocally that the beginning of professional education of social workers coincided with the activity of the College of Social and Educational Work (*Studium Pracy Społeczno-Oświatowej*) of the Free Polish University (*Wszelchnica Polska*) in Warsaw, established by Helena Radlińska in 1925 (Kozak, 2012, p. 338). It was a thoroughly modern educational initiative, which was a response to pressing social problems, and was adjusted to the capabilities of the educational system in the emerging Polish state, which required administrative staff in every area of social life.

As Marta Kozak writes,

“The College developed a separate curriculum profile, different from that of foreign schools, adapted to current needs in the country. The College offered courses in four specialisations: an adults’ teacher, an organiser of cultural life for young people and adults, a librarian, a mother, child and youth care worker. The programme of the College was highly individualised (depending on the previously completed academic degrees by the student, often very different, e.g. medical, historical, economic, technical, Polish language)” (Kozak, 2012, pp. 338–339).

The education conceived in this way was supposed to provide a diverse and solid basis for the understanding of the social world because, while at the College, students learned theories and concepts in social sciences and humanities, i.e. pedagogy, sociology, psychology, philosophy, social policy. On the other hand, the model assumed a significant degree of “practicality”, the applicability of theoretical knowledge, including through the inclusion in the educational process of compulsory study visits to institutions, and thus learning about representatives of different social groups and their needs and living conditions; domestic and foreign study visits, e.g. to Czechoslovakia, Denmark, France and other countries, or participation in opinion poll surveys (Kozak, 2012, p. 339). The theoretical and practical model constructed in this way, initiated by Radlińska, was implemented by all social work training institutions – both in post-secondary schools, colleges training social workers and medical professionals, and then universities.

Nowadays, the inclusion of social work in the “reservoir” of university courses, often with the general academic profile, entangled it in a kind of academism. This has led to the need to carry out scientific research, to undergo assessment of the

scholarly output of the researchers, as well as to adapt to the requirements of legal regulations concerning the organisation of the education process (and therefore also the process of accreditation). These obligations change the perspective of teaching to a broader one, focused on the implementation of external standards of education or scientific research, and not solely on providing students and the staff of social welfare institutions with the competencies appropriate to carry out the aid activities by extending their cognitive perspectives based on reliable scientific knowledge. On the one hand, however, academic entanglement may result in such actions and decisions that may reduce the level of applicability of knowledge, as well as – in extreme cases – cut off students and graduates from the educational environment. On the other hand, the academism of social work, thanks to the theoretical classes incorporated in the study programmes, should have an unambiguously positive impact on the educational process, raising the level of current and continuously updated knowledge in the field of social assistance, support, prevention and re-socialisation, included in the practice of assistance. This dualism of the links between academic education and practice is illustrated in the figure below.

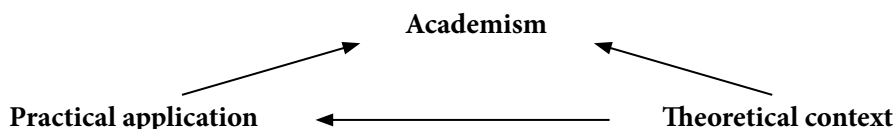


Fig. 1. An educational model for social work programmes in Poland (own elaboration).

According to Polish law, a social worker must have a university degree in social work or be a graduate of one of the following fields of study: social work, rehabilitation, social policy, pedagogy, sociology, psychology. Graduates of other fields of study can be employed as social workers, but only after completing an additional course in social work or the organisation of social welfare forms. The most common model of education at present, however, is studying “social work”, most often as a first-cycle study programme (undergraduate degree, bachelor’s degree), but sometimes also a second-cycle programme (a graduate degree, master’s degree)².

In Poland, more than fifty different types of universities educate students in the field of “social work” (these are universities, private colleges, state vocational colleges, which operate under the supervision of universities, social work colleges). This was sanctioned by the regulation of the Minister of Science and Higher Education of 13 June 2006 on the names of the fields of study (Journal of Laws 2006 No. 121 item 838), introducing an independent course of study called “social work”. Previously, social work was only a specialized course of study which was part of pedagogical or sociological programmes.

² No doctoral studies in “social work” are on offer, because it is not considered an independent scientific discipline.

The regulations governing education in the new field of study are not too restrictive and detailed, there are no standards of education in the profession of a social worker, as is the case, for example, in the teacher profession. However, the regulation of the Minister of Labour and Social Policy of 25 January 2008 on the specialization preparing for this profession carried out in higher education institutions is still in force (Journal of Laws of 2008 No. 27, item 158). Despite the requirement of a specific core curriculum which should be implemented by all public and non-public universities offering “social work” programmes, the curricula have diversified and the planned learning outcomes acquired during the study draw on the knowledge and skills of various scientific disciplines.

Moreover, the content, objectives and methods of education in this field are strongly influenced by social context and legislation. We teach and do research in a changing legal and social, as well as political and cultural environment. The result of this is that education in the field of social work faces many problems, which I will try to identify, referring to the process of preparation for one of the tasks of social work, i.e. (specialist) counselling³.

The present description of problems related to education in this area does not constitute a synthesis of the university’s offer, nor is it an assessment of the quality of education in general, because this is too complex of an issue to give unambiguous conclusions, especially since the criteria for assessing the quality of education are also constantly changing. However, I will offer a few remarks concerning education in one subject – counselling. There are six categories which both form natural criteria for analysis and pose questions about training in this particular area of social support: **(1) whom do we teach?; (2) when do we teach?; (3) what do we intend to achieve in teaching?; (4) how do we teach?; (5) what do we teach? and (6) who teaches?**

With regard to the above questions, it is necessary to begin by placing counselling in the broad spectrum of support activities undertaken in social work, understood primarily as a practical activity, in order to indicate the importance of the activity of social workers, especially those working with families or in the community, i.e. visiting the homes of their clients and entering into direct interpersonal relationships with them.

Guidance as a subject of education and an area of social work activity

The status of counselling is a very complex, multifaceted and undoubtedly difficult issue, requiring multidisciplinary research. In the definition of social work, which

³ It is worth adding that the problem of educational standards in the field of “social work”, i.e. the problem of a specific core of knowledge, skills and social competences which are necessary to achieve at university, was addressed at the Sociological Congress of Polish Sociological Association in September 2019, at the meeting of Social Work Section.

is the practice of helping and is understood as an activity which aims to create the conditions for the client to try to solve his problem on his/her own, using his/her own resources and using the family ("natural") support system, with the help of a counsellor, whose actions should not be perceived as oppressive. This makes the paradigm of an open relationship of dialogue and partnership, established between the client and the facilitator, which should be aimed at supporting the client's autonomy and resourcefulness in life, dominant and desirable in both social work and counselling.

The tasks of social work are seen similarly by Brenda DuBois and Karla Krosgrud-Miley. In their standard textbook, they describe social work as "professional activities aimed at improving the living conditions of individuals and society and at alleviating human suffering and solving social problems" (DuBois & Krogrsud-Miley, 1996, p. 25). The social workers who carry out these activities, called "professional carers", undertake assistance activities aimed at the assisted to "develop their abilities and increase their capacity to act, to make social assistance and resources available, to organize humanitarian and sensitive social services, and to develop social structures that will facilitate these activities" (DuBois & Krosgrud-Miley, 1996, p. 25).

This term also coincides with the definitions of laws and regulations governing the work of the aid system, which put into practice the principle of *empowerment*, i.e., the strengthening of the individual in his or her environment (usually in the family). The above-mentioned law of 1990 defines social work as "professional activity aimed at helping individuals and families to strengthen or regain their ability to function in society and to create conditions conducive to this goal" (*Act of 29 November 1990 on Social Assistance*, 1990). To clarify forms of this assistance, Tadeusz Kamiński points out that

"the social work is, therefore, to be carried out primarily within the framework of social assistance: local (in the place of residence) and institutional. It includes all kinds of legal, economic, psychological and pedagogical counselling, as well as assistance in the proper handling of specific difficult life issues. Social workers, as professionals carrying out the tasks listed in the Act, are therefore the core staff of social assistance institutions, although they may also be employed in an increasing number of emerging non-governmental organizations, associations and all institutions whose statutory task is to help those in need" (Kamiński, 2000, p. 434).

Bearing in mind such a wide range of professional duties of the future graduates, social work curriculum should take the broadest and the most universal form. Kazimiera Wódz argues as follows:

"the basis for the professional preparation of a social worker should be a general humanistic education at the university level, including knowledge of social sciences, politics, economics, social policy, social work history, the

methodology of social research, elements of management, etc. This general education should be the starting point for further specialized education, in which the most important role is played by knowledge of theories and methods of social work, **knowledge of different areas of social work practice** [underlined by author], knowledge of social legislation, and finally, knowledge of oneself and experience of dealing with representatives of minority, cultural, ethnic or social groups” (Wódcz, 1999, p. 139).

The need for broad competences and difficulties in implementing such ambitious tasks are indicated by social workers, surveyed by Marek Rymsza in his cross-sectional social research. In their opinion, these difficulties are primarily associated with an excess of bureaucratic duties and a significant diversity of the needs of their charges. As the researcher writes:

“the Polish social worker involved in social work combines “field” activities with “behind the desk” activities, which are located in a specific public institution, social organization or church institution (in Poland, it is usually literally a desk, because one’s own room or office is a rare comfort among social workers)” (Rymsza, 2012a, p. 12).

The author adds that the

“[t]urn towards empowerment [of the client – added by author] is still (...) more a postulate in Poland than an everyday practice of social services. It should be stressed that it is not a question of replacing protective activities with motivating ones, but of supplementing the former with the latter. It is, in fact, an attempt to popularize the policy adopted – unfortunately, only formally – already in the first Act of 1990 [*Act of 29 November 1990 on Social Assistance*, 1990 – added by author] and maintained in the second Act of 2004” (Rymsza, 2012b, pp. 205–206).

The policies mentioned in the Acts were to equal the weight and importance of two pillars of aid activities – protective programmes (called the “rescue service”) and activation programmes (“activation services”). The legislation assumed that programmes addressed to clients would be of two kinds – focused on activation and caring. The former would be addressed to people with a real chance of becoming independent in life, the latter – to people permanently incapable of living independently (Rymsza, 2012b, p. 206). As we can see, putting these assumptions into practice is encountering greater and greater difficulties.

However, there are more areas within the scope of social assistance. Therefore, new functions and institutions are created, the aim of which is the social activation of individuals who benefit from the state’s social support on a daily basis. Among other things, thanks to the Act of June 9th, 2011 on family support and foster care system (Journal of Laws 2011 No. 149 item 887), new professional and social roles

have been specified to be taken up by a representative of the new profession – family assistant, whose basic task is to directly support specific families. “The functioning of assistantship as an important form of support, assistance and guidance in the social assistance system is, therefore, a challenge to implement widely and effectively” (Duda & Wojtanowicz, 2018, p. 18). Izabela Krasiejko states that “we are witnessing the emergence of a culture of assistant practice with the family, that is a set of activities unique to a professional group and distinct in relation to the activities of another group, which constitute its characteristics and identity” (Krasiejko, 2016, p. 5).

In 2020, the activation policy was implemented by another regulation (*Act of July 19 on the implementation of social services by social service centres established for this purpose*; Journal of Laws. 2019 item 1818). The newly created welfare centres are to undertake all activities aimed at enriching the human capital of individuals and communities. They also offer counselling and informational activity, based on in-depth diagnoses of needs, including social needs.

Summarizing the review of the legislation regulating social work in our country, we can point to several laws, the regulations of which institute assistance services addressed to specific individuals and their families in the form of counselling.

The basic task of social welfare centres, which is to practice social counselling, is carried out as part of the duties of social workers and results from the provisions of the earlier Act of 12 March 2004 (Journal of Laws 2004 No. 64 item 593). The article no. 46 of the said act indicates particular types of these activities:

1. Specialist counselling, especially legal, psychological and family counselling, is provided to persons and families who have difficulties or need support in solving their life problems, regardless of their income.
2. Legal counselling is ensured by providing information on the applicable family and guardianship law, social security and tenant rights protection.
3. Psychological counselling is carried out through the processes of diagnosis, prevention and therapy.
4. Family counselling covers the problems of family functioning, including the problems of care of a disabled person, as well as family therapy” (Journal of Laws 2004 No. 64 item 593).

The quoted article, in accordance with the amendment to the Act which came into force on January 1, 2012, was replaced by the following: “Family counselling covers problems of functioning of the family, including problems of care for a disabled person, as well as family therapy”. This description significantly broadens the scope of counselling activities, which are already extensive and comprise psychological and pedagogical (educational) counselling helping the family deal with conflict resolution, effective communication, support of children and youth in their relations with school and peers, family roles, values shared by family members. They also include legal and professional counselling, requiring completely different knowledge and competence than the ones mentioned above.

Specialist counselling is also mentioned in other legal acts. Article 10 of the Act of 9 June 2011 on family support and foster care system states that work with the family should be based on consultation and specialist counselling. The obligation to undertake these activities as a social service is also imposed by the Act of 29 July 2005 on counteracting violence in the family (Journal of Laws 2005 No 180 item 1493). Article 3 of this Act states that

“those affected by violence in the family are given assistance, in particular in the form of: 1) **medical, psychological, legal and social counselling** [underlined by the author]; 2) emergency intervention and support; 3) protection against further harm, by preventing violent persons from using shared accommodation with other family members and prohibiting contact with the victim; 4) providing, at the request of the affected person, safe shelter in a specialized support centre for victims of domestic violence”.

All the sources mentioned above, in legislation, scholarly papers and research reports, emphasize the idea of educating a social worker professionally, and this professionalism does not only mean gaining knowledge of legal regulations but also a certain readiness to perform various professional roles that require preparation in many fields. Mikołaj Brenk writes more about it in his works, presenting the evolution of the profession of a social worker in Poland, which stops being a volunteer and becomes a professional (Brenk 2012). Magdalena Piorunek also justifies this when she writes that

“In the Baumanian era of liquid modernity or Giddens’ late modernity all of these categories of influence change, the transformative context of an individual’s functioning creates new problems, confronts them with new choices, gives new opportunities and possibilities, but also brings new threats. It contributes to a significant differentiation of biographical patterns, a multiplicity of life stories, social stratification characteristic of a free market, rich societies in which the amplitude between success and failure, wealth and poverty, social advancement and marginalization is enormous” (Piorunek, 2010, p. 7).

Therefore, according to the perspective adopted by Alicja Kargulowa, counselling becomes a form of assistance that is addressed not only to people in difficult life situations but also to those who are not affected by the traditionally understood difficult or crisis situation (Kargulowa, 2016). This is because of the uncertainty that characterizes our life in a fluid reality, which abounds in climatic breakdowns, health risks, unstable political and economic situations, and affects everyone. Hence the need for help, not only guaranteed by natural support systems but also professional help, becomes an element of the social world (Piorunek, 2010, p. 7–8).

Modern support activities have many dimensions, aspects and often concern significantly different life situations of clients/counselees. They can be provided in the form of specific guidance, information, but also an in-depth diagnosis of the

needs and capabilities of the clients. This may include assistance in collecting and filling out the documents necessary to obtain benefits from various social security systems, as well as assistance in the performance of educational functions or spiritual support. The counselling becomes part of corrective, diagnostic, educational, prophylactic or institutional goals, which is supposed to make the provision of competent help – as an essential task of social work – real.

The provision of diverse knowledge about counselling thus proves to be one of the most important educational goals. A well-prepared graduate of the “social work” course of study should have knowledge of counselling provided by a lawyer, psychologist, social worker, family assistant, social service specialist, and social service coordinator. Deficiencies in this area and emerging difficulties may result from a low level of standardization of social services; incompleteness of support provided by the counsellor (no further action after giving advice) as well as lack of professional diagnostic tools; lack of systemic mechanisms facilitating mentoring processes and motivating clients.

The quality of education in counselling in the field of “social work”. Analysis of research results

The quality level of education for the “social work” course is determined by the parameters adopted in the process of assessment of the entire system of higher education. Therefore, the “quality of education”, which is the starting point for this article, is another ambiguous and challenging notion that is the key term for the research on the education of social workers. The definition of this concept is not as easy as it is constantly being modified. Changes in the understanding of what constitutes quality of education are conditioned, among other things, by the reforms in higher education in which we have been participating for several years due to the gradual implementation of Act 2.0 (*Act of July 20, 2018, Higher Education and Science Law...*, 2018). This Act introduces regulations and sets out internal documents, including those for institutions that verify the quality of education.

In addition to legal regulations, a specific organization culture is also important as it sets the objectives and is based on certain values. This is the reason why the process of education quality management, which takes precedence over resolutions, protocols, and reports, is currently being verified in institutions checking the quality standards of education at Polish universities. There is a growing awareness of what the quality management process really involves, and that it is not just filling in forms, preparing documents, excessive bureaucracy or – finally – standardization.

Today, the quality of education is already understood positively as supporting the process of studying and learning. Piotr Grudowski and Kajetan Lewandowski define this term as “the degree of fulfilment of the requirements for the educational process and its results, formulated by stakeholders, taking into account internal

and external conditions” (Grudowski & Lewandowski, 2012, p. 400). This process should be consciously and purposefully managed, including the activities of various institutions, including national administration, local governments or welfare institutions, which are the future beneficiaries of this process. The authors divide the factors determining the quality of education into internal and external (Grudowski & Lewandowski, 2012, p. 402). Internal factors are related to the institution implementing the educational process, i.e. quality, the openness of students/doctoral students, the nature of the curriculum content within the discipline, but also a specific self-awareness of the stakeholders of the educational process in terms of pro-quality orientation (Grudowski & Lewandowski, 2012, p. 402). However, the external factors indicated by them are related to institutions and organizations constituting the environment of the entity implementing the educational process, i.e., “the location of the university (densely/sparsely populated areas, well/poorly communicated, strongly/sparsely industrialized, etc.), the law, budget, labour market absorption, type of education implemented by the institution” (Grudowski & Lewandowski, 2012, p. 402).

Another researcher of quality of education, Diana Green, adds to the above set of educational quality parameters, taking into account the “soft skills” of the employee, which are: the excellence of performance, lack of shortcomings, level of preparation for achieving the objectives of the institution, the extent to which the expectations of stakeholders are met, readiness for continuous development (Green, 1994). It also indicates several specific fields and tasks of education, which are essential in quality assessment, and which consist of: material and human resources, but also the objectives and content of education, ways to motivate students to intellectual work, properly formulated objectives, methods and forms of evaluation of the education process (Green, 1994, p. 115). The quality (of education) can also be interpreted as a degree of adjustment (action, process) to the goal or as an added value (Wójcicka, 2001, p. 43). A truly “qualitative” approach is represented in the UNESCO declaration, which sets as its primary objective the acquisition of competences adapted to the specific social context in which the students live. These competencies are to be expressed not only in equipping learners with specific knowledge and skills but also in the social attitudes that characterize them – committed, pro-state or pro-civic. Both competences and attitudes are supposed to foster high positions in the labour market as well as satisfaction with professional goals.

The presentation of the conceptual framework concerning the quality of education and the place of counselling in the social welfare system, as well as the transformation of forms and methods of education in the profession of a social worker is the basis for the formulation of answers to detailed research questions concerning education in the field of counselling. I have collected research material mainly from websites of universities which offer education in the field of “social work”. It is possible because the current procedure of evaluation of the quality of education used by the Polish Accreditation Commission (PKA) assesses access to public information,

and therefore information about the curriculum, learning outcomes, educational content, and student recruitment is one of the elements of programme evaluation, as well as of the evaluation of applications to open specific fields of study. Universities which want to receive a positive opinion of PKA should provide precise and clear information about their current and planned educational programmes.

In this text, the subject of analysis are descriptions of the programmes of 50 universities to which I had access via their websites. Thanks to this, it was possible to collect data, although not always complete (on their websites, universities publish only the information that does not undermine their interests or copyright and is useful from the point of view of a candidate to study there). Below I am compiling and discussing the data that I managed to obtain during the analysis of the sources found.

At the outset, I have noticed that universities offering courses in social work have a varying legal status, most of them being state universities (cf. Chart 2).

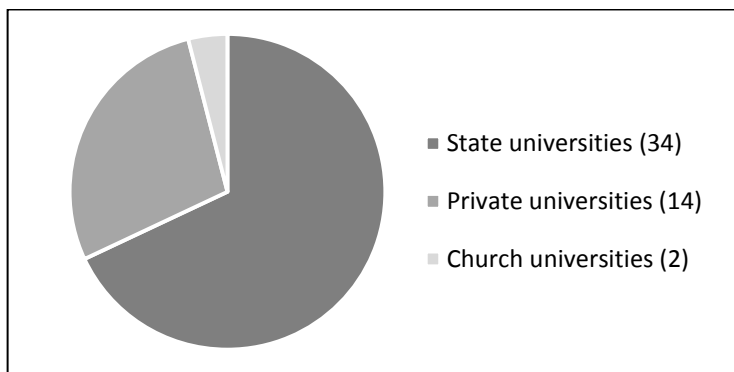


Fig. 2. Universities in Poland offering first and/or second cycle programmes in “social work” (as of 30 March 2020).

Source: Own elaboration.

The data presented are not surprising, because social work is not, as a rule, a field of study for which large groups of students are recruited, so offering it at private universities, which are mainly paid from tuition fees, is less frequent than at state universities.

This is an important finding because it is necessary to know what lies behind the organization and “philosophy” of social work course in the academic practice. At the state universities, the research workers are responsible for teaching and empirical research, as well as for all matters concerning the organization of the educational process, which, due to its time-consuming nature, may lead to a decrease in the quality of education. It is different at private universities, which often have specialized units which deal with all bureaucratic issues related to education, including

the process of ensuring the quality of education, or at State Higher Vocational Schools, which focus on teaching tasks.

Whom do we teach?

When looking for an answer to the question of who studies social work at the surveyed universities, it is worth starting by identifying the type of educational institution (see Chart 2 in the Annex). The knowledge about the type of university at which the education in social work is conducted should lead to the conclusion about the recipients of the education. Each activity, including educational one, must have a clearly defined goal and recipient. Both what to teach and to whom are important, and I mention this first not without reason. The message and scope of the content should be different for full-time students and for part-time students who receive complementary education needed for their professional work. This is important for setting tasks, conducting exercises, organizing ways of learning and verifying the learning outcomes in a given field. Unfortunately, it is rare for Polish universities **to separate the curricula of full-time and part-time programmes**, and most often the curricula of both forms of education are identical, only adjusted to the requirements of law and business calculations (due to the different number of teaching hours). This is a solution that complies with the law, but it would also be worth taking into account the issues I mention below⁴.

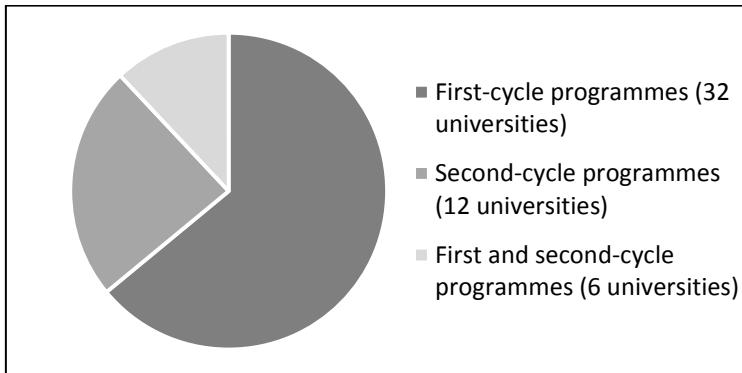


Fig. 3. Universities offering first and second-cycle programmes in “social work” (as of 30 March 2020).

Source: Own elaboration.

⁴ Due to the lack of access to statistical data on the number of students in full-time and part-time programmes, only the universities which teach “social work” on a full-time and part-time basis, as well as in the first-cycle and second-cycle are included in the data.

Full-time students of the first-cycle programmes, recruited immediately after graduation, may need extended content on the functioning of the social assistance system, but also the basics of pedagogy, sociology, psychology, and especially knowledge and skills in the area of interpersonal communication. It is also worth paying attention to the nature of **the generation of contemporary youth** communicating with the use of information technologies, forming the so-called *Generation Z* (also known as *Post-Millennials* or *Internet generation*), for whom the Internet is the primary tool for expanding knowledge. This results in a real, perceptible change on the level of building relationships, ways of life, assessment of other people, but also a possible sense of exclusion, depressive states, low self-esteem (Wawrzonek, 2019). As I pointed out earlier, a counsellor, especially in the field of social and family support, should have extensive competence in communicating directly, assertively, with respect for the other person, knowing how to listen and react empathically. Therefore, in addition to the course in counselling theory, it is worth considering the need for an extensive complementary workshop module to develop interpersonal skills. Classes for full-time students should include more content to achieve learning outcomes in the area of social skills and competences rather than just academic knowledge. There are even ideas in universities that the curriculum should not include counselling classes at all, but should offer classes in other fields (legal basis, psychopathology, development pedagogy) and at the same time offer **an extended curriculum of classes aimed at inter- and intrapersonal development of the student**. The skills of negotiation, mediation, but also communication and language etiquette are essential here.

Students undertaking undergraduate studies in the extramural (weekend) mode, intended for working people (universities sometimes call them programmes for students 40+) require less introduction to legal or practical issues. The generational specificity of this group of students is different. They are people with professional experience, usually gained in professions requiring constant contact with people. They may also be professionally active social workers, who need to complete their education in order to obtain the qualifications required by law. Then their education can focus on the latest, innovative knowledge in the field of counselling, introducing modern solutions and good practices to their institution⁵.

Second-cycle programmes are, according to the philosophy of the Bologna process, less professional and more focused on research and analytical activities leading to independence in scientific research. Hence, **in the second-cycle programmes, there is a natural place for knowledge in the field of counselling**, so necessary, e.g. for analysing the mechanisms of providing assistance to counsellors in educational, care and assistance institutions. However, the analysis of diploma theses in the field of “social work” allows us to conclude that counselling activities are still

⁵ This does not mean that modern knowledge of counselling and its applicability in institutions should not be the subject of first-cycle programmes undertaken by high school graduates. However, I would like to draw attention to the great need to supplement education with workshop classes in the field of building inter- and intrapersonal relations.

treated as additional, side effects of other activities, resulting from the tasks of a social worker. However, this is a highly multi-faceted problem different than the one considered here, which requires further analysis and research.

The issue of preparing the recipients of educational activities is also related to the recruitment process for the field of “social work”, which is actually a bogus activity. There is no **mechanism to verify the candidate’s aptitude**. This observation concerns both private and state universities. The admission process is dominated by the school-leaving certificate ranking list, which is only of formal nature. This applies to both first and second-cycle programmes, as it is rare that universities take steps towards proper “qualitative” verification of the competences of future social workers and the knowledge they possess.

In addition, an unfavourable social stereotype is imposed on both students and, later on, graduates of social work, which is expressed in the opinion that a social worker is either a person who wanted to become one or a person who did not get admitted to their “dream” programme (e.g. psychology or sociology). The academic community is also often convinced that these programmes and the profession of a social worker are chosen by people who because of their low level of preceding educational achievements could not choose any other professions and any other subjects (sometimes very distant from social work, such as military science, biology, computer science, psychology). This means that people with inadequate predispositions and a low level of identification with the future profession may be eligible to study social work. What should be also observed is low public awareness of the professional roles that can be played by graduates of this programme. Such problems result from the lack of an adequate recruitment process during which one could get to know candidates and thus adjust the curriculum to their real educational needs. On the other hand, **the same study programmes are offered to both full-time and extramural students**. The only difference is the number of hours, with those in extramural programmes usually limited by half or more. The extramural programme limits the direct contact between the academic teachers and the students, and contributes to the fact that many classes are conducted in a minimum number of hours, and the emphasis is placed mainly on the independent work of the student. Therefore, the question arises whether classes requiring interaction, training, or interpersonal communication, such as those involving preparation for counselling, can be carried out in minimum time and with a significant burden on the student’s own work with textbooks or materials? The answer tends to indicate that in fact an increased number of hours is required for such types of classes, which would constitute a laboratory of social life, and more specifically – a laboratory of the counselling situation.

When do we teach?

The analysis of the programmes available on the university websites shows that the subject of “counselling” often does even not exist in the study programmes – neither in the “core” nor in the “specialized” modules. However, when they do appear, the universities place them in the schedule usually not in the first year of study (unless they use a different format, as mentioned above, i.e. they introduce communication workshops as a complement to the content classes in law or developmental psychology), but in later years. **Counselling is taught as part of second-cycle programmes.** However, this poses another problem, as programmes in the field of social work at Polish universities are constructed in such a way as to ensure full professional qualifications in the field of social assistance at every level. This results in the fact that the second-cycle programmes duplicate the first-cycle ones, aiming at only broadening the previous learning outcomes in this area. This happens to the detriment of the quality of education at the first-cycle programmes because more content must be assimilated in a shorter time, which does not guarantee the achievement of all the learning outcomes. This translates into specific opportunities and skills that may not be fully utilized in the future career of the social worker to the detriment of both him and the client – as the two main actors of the counselling relationship. For this reason, **it would be best to place counselling classes at a later stage of education**, perhaps just before the professional internships, when students participate in community interviews or even conduct them themselves. It is important to know what a client can expect from a social worker, who very often takes on the role of a social, family or legal adviser. However, it should be kept in mind that internships are usually held after the first year when the student has only partially achieved the learning outcomes and therefore, does not have many vital skills mastered.

At this point, it is worth posing the question: what is the reason of this situation when counselling classes are transferred to later years of study or are even entirely lacking? In the past, it used to be about the “minimum staffing” requirements; nowadays, it is more about the competence of the people conducting the classes. Very often, universities do not employ practitioners and use their own human resources. The academism referred to in the first part of the text, which affects education in the field of social work at universities in Poland, causes that **counselling on social work may become an unnecessary subject, because it is too general, requiring interdisciplinary knowledge** about the system of assistance, interpersonal activities, law and educational impact, i.e. the knowledge that few lecturers have.

What do we intend to achieve in teaching?

For the future practice in the profession of a social worker, it is important that the counselling classes include the acquisition of all competencies, including knowledge, skills and social competences. This can be achieved best in the academic teaching, because the classes usually concern theoretical issues, i.e. goals and types of social counselling, typical counselling attitudes, the place of social counselling in the social welfare system, etc. Moreover, in the teaching programme for future social workers, it is crucial to equip them with practical skills in applying social counselling procedures or undertaking counselling activities, as well as listening or conversation skills. The awareness of the purpose of the classes is fundamental here, also for the whole concept of education (one is derived from the other).

Meanwhile, the objectives of counselling classes tend to be formulated very differently and relate to different areas of counselling practice. Here are some examples: acquisition and deepening of theoretical and practical knowledge in the field of vocational counselling; development of professional skills in accordance with the field of study; getting students acquainted with the issues of family counselling – its organization, functioning, key processes (communication, problem-solving) and the most common problems; introducing the aims, principles and structure of family counselling practice, discussing the main issues raised in family counselling; showing the most common causes of problems in family life and appropriate response to them; practical guidelines for conducting interviews in family counselling, presenting ways to help the family in a crisis situation⁶. As can be easily seen, the level of generality and detail of the above examples of educational goals in the subject of “counselling” can vary. Sometimes, however, **these goals are set too ambitiously**, and it is not that they are formulated too broadly, but they concern competencies that require additional qualifications and knowledge, as can be seen from the following examples: the student defines the basic concepts: family counselling, the division of family counselling, knows its origin; knows the theoretical issues of counselling: subject, aim and methods, knows the most common risks and errors in counselling; knows methods of helping families in conflicts, crises, and educational problems; knows the primary literature of the subject in Polish, can initiate and conduct a conversation and give advice, knows how to organize a family counselling centre. The last outcome of the classes and the ensuing competence goes beyond the strictly counselling activity and concerns the process of managing an institution, thus requiring legal and financial knowledge, not included in the study programme of “social work”.

It should not be forgotten that the learning outcomes of particular subjects must fit those of a particular field of study. These outcomes can be grouped, and

⁶ These are quotations from the university websites, which contain descriptions of learning outcomes for the subject of counselling.

universities in Poland are allowed to choose between the **general academic and practical study profile**, which cannot be assessed as to their quality or level of difficulty. They are simply entirely different and target different groups of recipients, called stakeholders: internal – (potential) students and their educational needs, as well as external – representatives of the social and economic institutions or organizations operating in their areas. The profiles strongly determine the curricula, which is connected with the objectives, but also with the human resources, the needs of the labour market and institutions creating it, or the characteristics of the institution of higher education (academic or vocational, although it is not at all the case that an academic institution has to offer general academic profile programmes only). They are different – they have different formal restrictions, concerning the instructors, internships, practical classes, and above all, they differ in the basic concept, which should be key here. Rarely, however, does this concept have a clear, substantive character with clear objectives in terms of the type of knowledge, skills or social competences. With regard to counselling, there is no explicit range of content of teaching to resolve the dilemma whether it is knowledge of the counselling system and its institutions or the specific tasks and skills of the social worker-counsellor that are more important. However, this does not contradict the assumption that social work, **due to its nature and teaching tradition, should combine both perspectives.**

Study programs in “social work” are usually based on the educational standards of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, valid until 2012, and the requirements resulting from the Social Welfare Act of 2004. There are required subjects in the curriculum, but **there rarely is any added value**, which would allow building a course brand, based on the achievements of the staff, cooperating institutions or implemented projects – scholarly or social. The teaching profile is one thing, while another is the study programme concept, recruitment of students, but also the possibility to help the local community.

Learning outcomes are part of the study concept and should be assigned to scientific disciplines in accordance with the legal regulations. Social work is a practical activity and research area that is largely interdisciplinary, but **learning outcomes tend to draw on diverse disciplines.** The dominant disciplines are pedagogy and sociological sciences, but also psychology, legal sciences, economics and finance, politics, cognitive and social communication sciences, law, economics, philosophy, linguistics, family sciences, information technology, health sciences. The multi-faceted and content-related counselling should definitely draw on the disciplines from the area of social sciences and humanities, but in its content-related layer, it should also refer to knowledge from the area of health sciences or computer science, which is particularly important in situations of crises, e.g. pandemics, war crises or natural disasters.

How do we teach?

Another important issue that arises in the context of the curriculum of the “social work” course at various universities is the implementation of the requirements of a specific educational profile, i.e. academic or practical, concerning the ways and methods of teaching. It boils down to the question of the extent to which the educational profile determines how students are taught and prepared for professional or research work. The established practice in this area, combined with relatively short history of teaching practical profile courses result in **courses usually taking the form of cycles consisting of lectures and complementary classes**. Rarely do these classes actually implement specific skills that equip students with specific work tools. These would be particularly important in subjects concerning counselling issues, where knowledge is as important as the ability to talk, listen, make decisions or negotiate. However, study programs lack study visits, workshops, laboratories or counselling seminars. Moreover, diploma theses in the area of counselling are not prepared, and these could be, e.g. case studies or descriptions of the methods of working with clients. This issue is often solved (only seemingly so) by assigning **diploma theses of the empirical (research) nature**; many universities, however, only assign a social project (implemented and evaluated) as meeting the requirements of their diploma thesis.

On the other hand, institutions of higher learning, mostly universities, are reluctant to take advantage of the possibility of adopting the practical profile of teaching, as if natural for social work, and choose the general academic profile, which, however, is most often constructed in an improper way. In carrying it out, they do not focus on **preparing the student for research work**, including equipping them with, e.g. the ability to use research tools or to be involved in the scientific research. Counselling is not present as a research area in every academic centre; hence it is treated instead as a set of knowledge and skills that can be “passed on” to the student during classes, rather than as a field of research, searching for its own solutions, strengthening interpersonal competence.

The proposed **forms of classes in this area of knowledge are traditional**, as are the teaching methods. These are most often visual presentations (including multimedia), discussions, lectures, or group work, without taking into account the forms of activating students, forcing them to seek solutions and innovations, changing their thinking, entering new areas of knowledge, but also initiating changes in attitudes to specific issues. The methods of blended learning or education in cooperation with institutions are not used. This also applies to **the methods of verification of learning outcomes, which are mostly traditional**. These are often written tests and even multiple-choice tests, which do not verify either skills or social competences, so crucial in the area of counselling.

Another essential issue in this context is internship. The regulation of the Minister of Labour and Social Policy of 25 January 2008 on the specialized course of

study in higher education institutions preparing for the profession of the social worker requires 240-hour internships. They are usually organized in social welfare institutions. However, usually, the range of internships is extended to other organizations or institutions where a social worker can be employed (with no indication whether they only perform administrative tasks or specialised duties in the field). The cooperation with an experienced social worker established during the internship enables the student to have direct contact with the clients, learn ways of support and communication, get to know the clients' backgrounds, and to adopt **the professional ethos**.

The need for internships, as a key element of counselling activities, may be contrary to the provisions of the Act of 20 July 2018. – Law on higher education and science (Journal of Laws 2018, item 1668), concerning the general academic profile. In accordance with Article 67 point 5 of the Act, with regard to the implementation of the practical profile for first-cycle programmes, a minimum of six months of internship is required and three months for second-cycle programmes -. For the general academic profile, the Act does not require this, so universities are not obliged to introduce internships. In reality, universities do make use of this right, and in the curriculum of the academic profile of the field of study of social work, there is no provision for internships, which is a solution that reduces the quality of education. The fact that a university implementing the academic profile does not have to include internships in its curriculum does not mean that it cannot do so. Some universities believe that the damage to the student resulting from the loss of the possibility to practice soft skills is too obvious to give up the possibility of their own interpretation of this regulation⁷.

When creating the curriculum, the universities work out the ways of conducting classes, i.e. they determine the content and methods of teaching, but also define what the prerequisites for a student to achieve the learning outcomes of a subject are. Rarely during counselling classes, preliminary knowledge is required, e.g. only in few cases does the teacher assume that it is indispensable for the student to have “knowledge of the basics of counselling within the scope of the course in *Methodology of counselling*, and the basics of social work within the scope of the course in *Introduction to social work*”. Sometimes only general psychological and sociological knowledge is defined as prerequisite, although without distinguishing detailed ranges or areas of psychology.

The recognition of the student's prior knowledge is important because “social work” as a separate field of study (and not only a specialization in “pedagogy” as before) offers a broader educational and community perspective on the application of the content taught including counselling. Assigning it to “sociology” as

⁷ The internship was the leading subject already in the College of Social and Educational Work of the Wszechnica Polska University. The study of the mechanisms of functioning of various institutions lasted four semesters. During this time, students visited the institutions first, and only after that, they learned about the ways, methods of work and various job descriptions.

a higher-level scholarly discipline can offer a broader view of the social context and a focus on social problems and issues, thus providing the student with knowledge about the environment in which he or she conducts counselling activities.

There is also another problem with this, which boils down to the question whether the very different specialities opened at a given university should be justified by the needs of the local community. Perhaps it is worthwhile to refer to the forms of education used in the College of Social and Educational Work of Wszechnica Polska University. It had four fields of study: social care, social policy, librarianship and adult education, with two further other specialized fields – urban and rural. Today, social needs are different, but their identification would require intensive research and diagnosis in this respect in order **to be able to attach the resulting specialized fields of study to the local environment**. However, it is worth bearing in mind that students, if they have the opportunity to choose their fields, are not guided by the needs of the market or the local environment, but often by the media. Moreover, one should also consider how to successfully offer a specialised field that has not been chosen but must be imposed on students (which may result from opening only some courses, due to too few candidates in others). The answer to the question of how we teach is thus complicated and requires solving many very complex issues.

What do we teach?

The list of subjects in the curriculum usually results directly from the already quoted regulation of the Minister of Labour and Social Policy of 25 January 2008 on the specialized course of study in higher education institutions preparing for the profession of the social worker. However, evaluation of the quality of education is not tantamount to standardization. The Polish Qualification Framework, to which study programs refer, is – in principle – a universal tool for creating original educational programs: bold, innovative, unique. Universities do not always take advantage of these opportunities, focusing on tradition, experience, and sometimes only duplicate existing educational models.

In the study programmes for “social work” counselling is not always understood in the same way. **The subjects in which counselling knowledge is taught are called in various ways:** *social counselling, family counselling, specialized counselling, vocational counselling, family social counselling, marriage counselling, vocational guidance*. The cited names show the areas of interest of the discipline, but also to some extent, reveal the problems of Polish families that social workers can see every day.

Therefore, we are not dealing here with the general subject of “counselling”, because counselling classes within the course in “social work” are to prepare not only for the profession of the social worker-counsellor but also for the related professions. However, since most of the courses in “social work” at state universities are conducted under a general academic profile, there may be room for reflection on

the theory and practice of counselling, a very broad issue also in the context of the whole practice of assistance.

The names of the courses generally do not fully reflect the **content taught**, which – as shown by the analysis of syllabuses available on universities' websites – is described in **very general terms**. They concern, among others, the theory of counselling, the definition of counselling and guidance, the function of counselling and the competence of the counsellor, information about the institutions performing tasks in the field of counselling, counselling conversation as a method of work in individual counselling, counselling for selected social groups, such as people with disabilities or at risk of social exclusion.

During the courses, teachers use **classical literature** on the subject, with two essential bibliographic items: a monograph entitled *O teorii i praktyce poradnictwa* [*About the Theory and Practice of Counselling*] (Kargulowa, 2006) and a collection of studies entitled *Poradownawstwo – kontynuacja dyskursu* [*Counselling – a continuation of discourse*] (Kargulowa [ed.], 2009). The authors of other studies, appearing on the list of both obligatory and/or additional readings, are Alicja Czerkawska, Bożena Wojtasik, Daria Zielińska-Pękał, Ewa Trębińska-Szumigraj, Elżbieta Siarkiewicz, Edyta Zierkiewicz, Zdzisław Wołk, Marcin Szumigraj. This certainly proves the **high recognition of counselling** as an area of knowledge, researched by scholars representing the group of A. Kargulowa.

Who teaches?

The education of social workers requires the selection of appropriate teaching staff. In Poland, the field of study called “social work” has been established relatively recently; therefore, there are few academic teachers who are graduates in social work. Hence the classes with students are conducted by employees assigned to other disciplines and courses, such as sociology (sociological sciences) or pedagogy. It is noticeable that for students of social work, this is **an identity problem** because these disciplines not only represent a separate set of concepts and theories but also have their own methodology and terminology. The teachers, moreover, do not always have any contact with social work and social welfare practice, so they conduct general course classes, without referring to the requirements of social work and understanding the meaning of the actual welfare activity. This also applies to counselling classes, which should be conducted by specialists, persons with a scientific background in counselling or professional experience in the counselling profession, and this is usually not the case.

Before the abolition of “**minimum staffing**” requirements, which had to be assigned to all the fields of study, the situation had been unclear, because social work was also represented by historians, literary scholars, doctors and even physiotherapists (although many representatives of other scholarly disciplines can be

mentioned here). Today, the quality of education is based on the verification not so much of the competences and qualifications of certain lecturers as on the compatibility of their scholarly achievements or professional experience with the content they teach. Competence and experience, qualifications and the number of academic teachers and other persons conducting classes must ensure that the classes are run properly and the students achieve appropriate learning outcomes. This does not mean, however, that in the course of “social work” in the near future classes will be conducted only by specialists assigned to this field.

This is the last, troublesome and at the same time costly matter for the university – the need to employ **practitioners**. Not all universities want to employ people connected with the labour market, although when a practical profile is adopted, they should also be involved in teaching. However, employing them is a financial and organizational problem for universities, which must, first of all, provide teaching loads to their full-time employees. Therefore, sometimes highly specialized classes are conducted by random people unprepared for the job, which obviously does not improve the quality of academic education.

Conclusions, recommendations, problems

Today, universities in Poland offer the first and second-cycle programmes, but in fact, very few universities offer the “social work” programme on the level of the second-cycle. It is not one of the most besieged fields of study, although the problem is not only the lack of students or candidates interested in being trained as social workers but also the lack of a clear idea how to train them. Before 2018, it had also been difficult to hire suitable lecturers as part of the “staffing minimum”, which was a barrier preventing the second-cycle programmes from being offered. Therefore, private universities generally did not even take up this challenge, while for state academic institutions, second-cycle programmes may have generated an additional risk of the Polish Accreditation Commission downgrading their quality assessment. Because the Polish Accreditation Commission thoroughly checked the compliance of the achievements of the teaching staff with the planned learning outcomes, the study programmes were built on the basis of the staff they already employed, which made the system highly inflexible and caused the universities to be more schematic in terms of planning, content selection, the introduction of new subjects, the teaching methods and ways of verifying the learning outcomes achieved by students.

Nonetheless, in each study programme, there is a place for counselling classes, although it may be expected that the programme will be taught in a routine way, as a set of core theories and concepts and not in response to the needs of students. .

There is a lack of study models in the existing curricula that would:

- ♦ be innovative, introducing flexible curricula, tailored to the needs of both students and stakeholders;

- ◆ use European Union funds through the National Centre for Research and Development, thanks to which periodically implemented educational projects could be created;
- ◆ consider the conclusions of scientific research conducted by academic teachers, focused on specific projects;
- ◆ be implemented in cooperation with the socio-economic environment;
- ◆ be standardised – understood as using and developing a specific core content;
- ◆ encourage both research workers and social workers-practitioners employed at the university to undertake doctoral studies and/or in-service training -, which could additionally help to reduce the shortage of highly qualified social service staff.

An interesting new proposal could be the specialized course for the “social assistance counsellors”, focused on developing the competences of social counsellors, using practical forms of education. A practical module would be added to the lectures and practical classes, either carried out in an institution or conducted at the university with the participation of a representative of a given organisation or institution. Thanks to this, students would have the opportunity to experience a real-life counselling relationship, not only that described in monographs or projects, which would also give them a chance to achieve learning outcomes in three areas – knowledge, skills and social competences.

However, whether it is about social work in general or only counselling, one should be aware of the learning outcomes in these areas and the opportunities to develop practical knowledge, thanks to the university’s cooperation with the institutions or organisations in its environment. As Anna Elżbieta Michalska suggests:

“Alumni, employed in a broad network of institutional and organisational support, could suggest to universities what kind of knowledge is particularly needed and what skills and competencies are particularly important in maintaining a high level of professionalism. In general, a graduate of a university that cares about the effectiveness of its programmes should have the ability to understand social phenomena and processes, the ability to analyse and evaluate them using social science theories, and the ability to use the knowledge gained to solve difficulties in working with people and groups at risk of social exclusion. These are just some of the important learning outcomes that can contribute to the greater compatibility of knowledge with the needs of practice” (Michalska, 2016, pp. 22–23).

It can also be counselling practise.

Translated by Anna Maria Kola

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