The quality of professional social work education: the philosophy of capabilities in the education system in England

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Abstract— **The aim of this paper is to answer the question: "What are the current foundations of the social work education system in England and whether and how they can be used to reform the social work education system in the Czech Republic". While social work education in the Czech Republic is yet to be reformed, England has taken a number of measures over the past decade to promote the quality of training for helping professionals in social services. One of these has been the development of a holistic approach that links and unifies qualification training and creates a coherent concept of professional learning and development. This has been the Professional Capability Framework (the Framework) in England since 2012, which has been progressively rolled out across social work - from qualifying training to continuing education programs for highly skilled strategic staff [1].**

Keywords— **social work, quality of education, capabilities, professionalization**

I. Introduction

Social work education in the UK has grown out of diverse community activities and a strong stream of case-based social work support provided by charities. The earliest forms of university education were designed to provide workers, whose work was then referred to by a variety of names (settlement workers, charity workers), with knowledge, particularly in the areas of administration and psychological theory. Some of these activities (typically the settlement movement) were carried out in collaboration with universities (e.g. University of Birmingham, London School of Economics). These schools provided various qualifications, e.g. social work with youth and communities, but also work in organizations (e.g. hospitals, government offices, etc.) [2].

In the absence of a single form of qualification, the term 'social work' in England was used to refer to a wide range of job roles and positions, the association of which with social work would no longer hold, at least for some, today. The existence of different routes to professional and academic qualifications in social work led, for example, to the fact that until the end of the 20th century social workers could obtain a 'social work certificate' by studying at secondary schools and colleges, or a diploma in social work by studying for a master's degree at university [3].

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Although there have been several attempts to standardize and unify social work education in England throughout the history of social work education, the tendency towards diversity in educational models in England has persisted to the present day (as we shall see below). This specificity of the British social work model became fully apparent in 1989, when the European Union (EU) promoted the common recognition of those social work education programs that consisted of at least three years of professionally oriented undergraduate study. As social work qualifications in England did not meet this requirement, they were not recognized in other EU countries [4].

II. Failure as an impetus for change

Major changes in education policy first occurred with the passing of the Care Standards Act 2000. The Act created a prerequisite for determining the necessary qualifications for social workers and enabled the establishment of a new regulatory body, the General Social Care Council (GSC), which allowed the professional title 'social worker' to be protected for those on the relevant register. The General Council began the process of registering qualified social workers in 2003 and the designation 'social worker' became a protected mark in England. As early as September 2003, the first social work programs were launched in England under the new standards created by the Act. The nature of these standards was based on the so-called competence logic. The media coverage of the tragic deaths of children who were in the care of child welfare authorities further contributed to the need to review the state of professional training. The death of Peter Conelly in 2007 not only triggered the need to revise social workers' practice but also awakened interest in reviewing and rethinking the entire educational system5. In the Czech environment, however, even tragic cases of care failure usually do not have the power to trigger fundamental systemic change [6] [7].

In 2009, the Social Work Task Force (the Task Force) was set up to undertake this assessment. Already in 2010, the Government reduced the General Council's activities and transferred most of its regulatory functions to the Health and Care Professions Council from 2012. The latter carried out its regulatory function in relation to social work education until 2019, when responsibility for social work education standards was taken over by the government-led cross-departmental body "Social Work England".

In 2009, based on its investigations, the Task Force proposed 15 recommendations that began to have an early impact on educational practice and their nature has influenced the nature of social work education to the present. The changes included a wide range of measures, from curriculum revisions to the introduction of an assessed and assisted year for newly qualified social workers to the establishment of the Academy of Social Work (hereafter referred to as the Academy), which was intended to support the all-round professional development of the profession. The Academy itself was not intended to have an educational or regulatory function; its task was primarily to express and convey the specific disciplinary perspective of the profession. Of particular interest in terms of our interest in the management of education is the change in the basic approach to educational philosophy, which was to be newly based on the so-called professional competency framework [8].

III. The new concept: a framework of professional competences for social workers

One of the recommendations of the working group was to create a holistic concept that would link and unify skills training and create a coherent concept of professional learning and growth. This has been the Professional Competency Framework (the Framework) in England since 2012, and has been progressively rolled out across the social work sector, from qualifying training to contingency programs for highly skilled strategic staff [1].

An important characteristic of the professional competence framework is that it covers both qualification training and continuing professional development. It is therefore an overarching framework of generic professional competences that sets consistent expectations of social workers at every point in their professional careers. The framework itself does not define the specific areas of practical knowledge and skills that are required for each specific job. Nevertheless, it can be well used as a starting point for the design and delivery of learning activities along the entire career pathway for social workers [9].

The framework enables the integration of education, continuing professional education and practice through five different routes. It introduces the concept of capabilities, defines nine professional domains, introduces an integrated approach to assessment and learning, works with four qualification levels and adopts a developmental approach to social work education at qualifying and post-qualifying levels [10].

Among other essential characteristics of the Framework is that it formulates its assumptions in general terms and is therefore applicable to all specialisations and roles of social workers. It encourages social workers to meet the requirements of a professional regulator. The Framework describes the range of roles that social workers can take on in the context of their lifelong professional careers and enables employers to support social workers in these roles. The undoubted strength of the Framework is its alignment with the Global Definition of Social Work and the Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics. At present, it is still a 'living' document and is likely to evolve as the profession evolves. The application of this professional framework should enhance practice and support continuing professional development.

IV. A new philosophy: capability as a starting point for the Framework

The framework was developed, among other things, in response to concerns about the mechanical and overly bureaucratic concept of competency-based professional standards in social work education [11]. Capabilities can be defined as, "The integration of knowledge, skills, personal qualities, behaviors, understandings, and values used appropriately, effectively, and confidently, not only in familiar and highly focused specialized contexts, but also in response to new, complex, and changing circumstances" [12].

The capability concept links knowledge and skills and is intended to replace the competency-based approach to learning with an integrative and developmental model. It is holistic in the sense that it also includes cross-cutting areas such as ethics and continuing professional development. The distinction between skills and competences is not always clear and the debate on their relationship is still ongoing. However, many agree on the argument that the concept of competencies better reflects the future potential of the student/social worker to learn and grow professionally [13].

The competences included in the Framework create a prerequisite for legitimizing the activities of social workers and for taking responsibility for their impact. The Framework assumes that as social workers gain experience and deepen their professional expertise over time, their competences develop. As a result, they are able to take responsibility for more challenging tasks, their actions have greater impact and they are better equipped to work in uncertain contexts [14] [1].

V. Main structure of the Framework

The Framework is most often depicted in concentric circles that are divided by bisections (Figure 1). The individual layers of the circles represent the level of development of the respective competences, while the cut-outs show the specific competences. The framework was first introduced in 2012 and subsequently updated several times. In this chapter, I discuss the status of the innovation as of 2018. The framework guides the learning and development of social workers through:

1/ initial qualification training,

2/ an assessed and assisted year in employment, and

3/ continuing professional development (CPD) throughout the social worker's career.

The colored sections of the diagram reflect the nine domains of the Framework as applied through the social worker's career at nine different levels of experience. The nine levels of experience also relate to the difficulty and complexity of social work that a social worker equipped with the appropriate level of competency development should be able to manage and perform. The transition between levels is determined by people's ability to manage problems, according to their complexity, level of risk and responsibility in different professional settings. In addition to the nine domains, as of 2018, the Framework also includes three superdomains, which divide the nine domains into three areas (Purpose, Practice, Impact) [1].

It is an advantage that the Framework focuses on describing professional development rather than specific job descriptions. It provides a general structure against which social workers and managers can understand what is expected at the appropriate level. In this way, the Framework allows for a more flexible approach and opens up space for the different strengths and ambitions of social workers. It encourages social workers to continue to develop and to strive to achieve advanced and strategic skills that they can apply as educators and as leaders [15].

Figure 1 Framework of professional capabilities for social workers

A. *Capability domains*

The framework is generically divided into three overlapping superdomains, which divide the core capability domains into three spheres. These superdomains relate to the purpose of social work, the practice of social work and its impact. Purpose primarily encompasses the domains that define the profession's core purpose, values, ethical principles, and underlying philosophy. Practice brings together domains that define specific skills, knowledge, methods of intervention, and critical and analytical abilities. Impact then defines domains of competencies that oscillate around the social worker's readiness to effect change through leadership, professionalism, and in the context of the organizational environment. However, the superdomains cannot be seen as simply a structure dividing the domains into specific categories (Purpose, Practice and Impact). Their

characteristics are reflected in all domains. It is clear that Impact can be directly related to interventions and skills; professionalism is directly related to Purpose. All nine domains are then directly related to Practice1.

The core domains of the Framework comprise nine areas, including 1/ Professionalism; 2/ Values and Ethics; 3/ Diversity and Equality; 4/ Rights, Equity and Economic Security; 5/ Knowledge; 6/ Critical Reflection and Analysis; 7/ Intervention and Skills; 8/ Context and Organization; 9/ Professional leadership.

B. *Experience levels*

In addition to the domains, the framework also includes levels of experience that cover both the pre-qualification and post-qualification phases of a social worker's professional development. The pre-qualification phase includes four levels: 1/ commencement of training; 2/ readiness for entry into practice; 3/ completion of first practice; 4/ completion of final practice. The post-qualification phase includes: 1/ assessed and assisted year in (first) employment; 2/ social worker; 3/ experienced social worker; 4/ advanced social worker; 5/ strategic social worker [16].

The framework is also presented as an alternative to the national social work job standards in England, although these standards continue to apply in the rest of the UK. Instead, the Framework offers a different perspective and articulates standards or rather levels of competence in relation to the performance of a particular job role. For example, a social worker may have the professional competencies of an advanced practitioner but be working in a particular role for which the level of experienced social worker is expected. The Framework has a real impact on job descriptions and employers are already formally incorporating the Framework into appraisal schemes and job descriptions [15].

VI. **Evaluated and assisted year in employment**

One of the recommendations of the Task Force in 2009 was the introduction of an 'assessed and assisted year in employment' for recent graduates of qualifying studies. The assessed and assisted year in employment (hereafter referred to as the assisted year) is offered to all newly qualified social workers through their first employers. It provides both planned support and assessment against the national standards of the profession. The Assisted Year enables newly qualified social workers to consolidate their training in the context of practice experience. It aims to develop the skills of newly qualified social workers and build their professional confidence in practice at the start of their professional career. The government provides employers with a financial subsidy to implement the supported year [8].

The university education system for social workers in England has been supplemented in recent years by various alternative qualification models. Their emergence has largely been driven by the high demand for social workers.

VII. Apprenticeship model of social work education

In addition to the standard university-based training system, which builds on the Framework and Standards for the Professional Qualification of Social Workers in a Higher Education Setting, a group of employers supported by Skills for Care has promoted an apprenticeship model that is certified by the Institute for Apprenticeships. It also produces specific standards to regulate the training process. This training program combines direct experience of social work practice with participation in a training program at the end of which an examination is taken before an external board. It is therefore mainly suitable for workers who are already employed in social services. Graduates of this training program receive a Bachelor's degree and are qualified to practice social work [17].

Other current government initiatives include the introduction of fast-track programs (Frontline, Step up to Social Work, Think Ahead) for graduates from another university discipline (not social work) where these candidates can gain qualifications to practice social work in an accelerated learning process [18].

VIII. Frontline

This model of social worker training was created in 2014 as a qualification model for social workers in the social protection of children. The program starts with a five-week summer school at the university, during which adepts acquire field-specific skills and knowledge. Participants are then placed in groups of four in the social protection department, where they work directly with children and families under the supervision of an experienced social worker. Upon successful completion of the first year, participants will qualify at the Bachelor of Social Work level and become registered social workers. Graduates of the first year are then employed in social work departments and continue their studies towards a Masters qualification. The number of people interested in this form of social work study is increasing every year.

IX. Step up to Social Work

This accelerated model of social work education has been offered since 2010. Step Up is a 14-month training program that allows its graduates to earn a bachelor's degree in social work (as opposed to Frontline without a master's degree). In addition to theoretical education at the university, students also receive intensive practical experience. Step-up has been designed for graduates from other disciplines (other than social work) who already have experience of working with children, young people and families. This program of study is designed in direct interaction with employers. It involves both practicing social workers and academics working together, which, according to the authors of this model, enables the whole learning process to be accelerated (compared to the traditional university model of study). In the first year of the program, 42 local authorities were involved; by 2020, 136 local authorities were involved (89% of all local authorities in England).

X. Think Ahead

This is a modified version of Frontline. In this case, it is a two-year program for graduates from other disciplines who want to become mental health social workers. The program begins with a six-week summer school designed to prepare students to enter the workplace. Upon completion, students will begin practical training in community-based services for people with mental illness. This training lasts a year. Here, students are guided in groups of four under the supervision of an experienced social worker. Each group shares cases for which the supervising social worker takes ultimate responsibility. In the first half of the year, they handle an average of 21 cases; in the second half of the year, the caseload increases to an average of 35 cases. At the end of the first year, participants receive a bachelor's degree in social work and can register as social workers. In the second year, they can obtain a paid position and complete their master's degree in social work.

XI. Continuous professional development

Participation in continuing professional development is a prerequisite in England for maintaining registration with the regulator and therefore a prerequisite for practicing. In terms of design, it is significant that the current approach emphasizes professional development, not just education in the narrow sense. The content of continuing professional development is not specified and is left in the hands of social workers, with the assumption that it is individual social workers who know most precisely what their development needs are. Many see this development as a sound trend that reinforces professional interests [19].

During the registration period, which is one year, social workers undertake a variety of developmental activities which they continually save to their online account. At the end of the year, the social worker confirms in their online account that they have fulfilled the continuing education requirements during the period. 2.5% of registered social workers are then randomly selected and contacted by the regulator. These will then be subject to a quality check of the documented continuing professional development records. Continuous professional development is not only associated with participation in training or courses. Although participation in formal training and programs may be part of continuous learning, continuous professional development can include any activity that the social worker believes would benefit their development and enrich their practice. It may include, for example, reflecting on client complaints, listening to a podcast, reading articles or books. Self-reflection is an important part of continuing professional development, but so is the use of feedback from colleagues, supervisors and also people using social services [20].

XII.   Inspiration for social work education in the Czech Republic?

Social work is a socially constructed reality and it is natural that its form varies from country to country 21. A major difference in the education of social workers in England and the Czech Republic is that social work education in England receives considerable public attention and support. This is evident not only in the level of public debate, which has often been provoked by tragic events, but also in the extensive and well-developed institutional base of social work, which is completely unimaginable in the Czech environment. An independent professional regulator (Social Work England), a professional body (the Academy) are only selected examples that have no analogy in the Czech reality. The second area in which the system of social work education in England differs from the Czech one is its diversity. However, I consider the relatively recent system of crash courses to be a British specificity forced by the current shortage of social workers on the labor market, rather than a systemic element worthy of emulation. A third notable area is the emerging model of professional capabilities, which emphasizes lifelong professional growth, continuity and autonomous professionalism for social workers [11].

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