

Social Professional Work and Education in the Netherlands

The challenges in Europe: A critical discussion on the opportunities for Social Work Education in the Netherlands

Abstract

The paper presents both general and specific aspects of the developing context in social work education in theory and practice according to the changing face of higher education in Europe. The intention is to describe and discuss the need for research and scientific knowledge in social work education not least of all for ensuring the relevant academic and professional competencies of future social professional work. By highlighting some of the events and maybe even inconsistencies in the changing Dutch and European higher education context, the argument for a greater research-orientation in social work education will be made. Some of the issues to support the argumentation include the inequality of professional standards throughout Europe and even maybe on a more disturbing note, the vulnerability of higher education social work students in this context.

The aim of this paper is to present the changing situation on a whole, its implications and to quickly move into an example of good practice as identified in an MA co-operation initiated in a SOCRATES network of 28 higher education institutions in Europe ten years ago. Just last year this MA (on Comparative European Social Studies) was selected as one of the top Joint Master Programme in Europe. Although not without serious 'growing pains', this post-graduate programme is, to this day, committed to offering students European (or international), research-oriented social work education. In fact, the research project carried out by students carries significantly more weight than the other course study modules. Over time, MA CESS has kept up with and overcome the challenges imposed by the very essence of Joint European Master Programmes in a context of change, but its stronghold on research and theory in social work education over all these years only demonstrates that the discussion is far from a new one and that, in fact, it might be best tackled when approached from a European or internationally based partnership of academics and professionals alike.

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The challenges in Europe: A critical discussion on the opportunities for Social Work Education in the Netherlands

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The recent developments in education in Europe are manifesting themselves quite loudly in the discussions on higher education in The Netherlands. Yet after much debate, The Netherlands still appears to fall short of its potential to fully accompany the progress made in Europe and appears determined to maintain a binary approach to higher education, i.e., a formal distinction between traditional scientific universities (*wetenschappelijk onderwijs*, *WO*) and those of higher professional education (*hogerberoepsonderwijs*, *HBO*). Having said that, some of the developments have led to irreversible changes that affect societies well beyond national borders. Social work educators in The Netherlands and throughout Europe are in step with the challenges therein and are seizing the opportunity of Europeanisation to maximise transnational ties leading to the production of academia and knowledge to tackle the social challenges that lie ahead.

Macro Analysis: changing configurations for higher education

Like many countries in Europe, Dutch higher education is experiencing transition. This transition has largely been prompted by two processes in Europe namely, the very ambitious 10-year strategy to reach a knowledge-based economy that resulted from the Lisbon European Council (2000) and parallel to this, the growth of the momentum behind the Bologna Declaration. The signing of the latter by the Dutch Minister of Education commits The Netherlands to reform the higher education system to reach a common frame of reference for a European Area for Higher Education; one that eliminates barriers in teaching and learning and, facilitates mobility and employability (Bologna Declaration 1999).

In essence, these processes present a clear opportunity to rethink the divided sector of higher education in the Netherlands with the aim to increase its competitiveness in a wider European context. This prospect has rekindled the old debate on the pros and cons of the Dutch binary system and the drive of Europeanisation has only strengthened the case for those advocating a more unitary approach to reflect and respond to modern (Dutch) society as part of a larger order.

In the early 1980s, the Dutch government introduced scale enlargement in universities of higher professional education (henceforth referred to as *hogescholen*), which drastically reduced their number and led to countless mergers amongst them. This has been accompanied by increased co-operation and co-ordination efforts between *hogescholen* and traditional universities in The Netherlands. By the late 1990s even the Dutch Ministry of Education began to promote more flexible, open approaches between the two sectors and actually formalised its support for mergers between the two (Huisman & Kaiser 2001, p16). In themselves, the mergers are largely administrative and hint at a particular financial motivation given that 'strength in numbers' is rewarded in the Dutch system. Nevertheless it also suggests a drive towards boosting competitiveness and openness in higher education.

By 2002 the Dutch government began to create conditions to adjust its education system towards these greater aims. In this light, it is interesting to look back at some of the 'adjustments' made to identify opportunities taken and opportunities lost.

The Bachelor's/Master's System¹ (BaMa system)

One of the more significant prospects of 2002 was the introduction of the BaMa system in the academic year 2002-2003. The 4-year degree system for most disciplines was entirely replaced by the two-cycle degree system of undergraduate and graduate studies. This is a positive move in relation to accompanying the Bologna process but of limited relevance to social work education in the Netherlands. The present BaMa system creates the possibility to develop social work education programmes for undergraduates (Bachelor of Social Work) and graduates (Master of Social Work). In practice however, the binary system still distinguishes the professional from academic disciplines and degrees, which impedes student mobility in higher education both inside and outside The Netherlands.

A graduate of social work professional education in The Netherlands with academic pursuits must compete with students from traditional scientific universities and must apply to a traditional university for studies in a *related field* because Social Work falls under professional education and is *only* offered at a hogeschool.

The binary system is accompanied by funding regulations. A Master of Social Work degree programme offered at a *hogeschool* is not eligible for government funding. The regulations specify that only traditional universities are eligible for financial support for developing Master of Arts programmes. A *hogeschool* wishing to offer a Master's degree programme must find alternative funding. While providing some opportunities, the introduction of the BaMa system in The Netherlands cannot really reach its potential without more equality in the system. This means equal recognition of the higher education institutions providing education and a modernisation of its old system of funding to serve the conditions of higher education today.

Research and the knowledge society

Part and parcel of change in 2002 was the greater acceptance of applied and research-oriented education degree programmes at all institutions of higher education. In other words, *hogescholen* now have a legal base to develop the research-orientation of their existing professional degree programmes and to develop new ones (and the same idea applies for traditional universities). This is significant because one of the most contested formal distinctions between the Dutch higher education institutions was research as a strict feature of traditional universities. The stronghold on research was overwhelmingly one-sided, including the prestige and support that comes with it. In numerical terms, the allocation of research funds has not accompanied the developments in Dutch policy, but the perspective of Dutch policy on research has (in favour of applied research).

¹ This was made possible by changing the Law on Higher Education and Research and was accompanied by the implementation of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS).

The very term 'knowledge society' implies the idea that knowledge comes in many shapes and sizes and from a variety of stakeholders. Governments, institutions, businesses, are sharing, exchanging and co-operating for mutual gain. In this light, fundamental research has lost some of its appeal and is fading in comparison to applied research that responds to socio-economic challenges. This is a great opportunity for higher education in the Netherlands because the greater part of students in higher education are linked to higher professional education programmes rather than to traditional scientific university programmes (Boezeroy 2003, p.16). This feature commonly distinguishes The Netherlands from other countries in Europe.

The development provides a timely opportunity for higher education in The Netherlands to assume and expand its societal function as a source for knowledge through its teaching, research, and study. An example of this was the initiative of prior Dutch Education Minister L. Hermans to provide funds for universities of professional education to build up own expertise with the general aim of boosting competitiveness in the Dutch market. The Higher Professional Education Commission reaped the opportunity of the Minister's statements to promote the institutions as knowledge gateways (HOOP 2004, p.21). The intention is to explore the particular features of *hogescholen* and to use these as a bridge between the public (-education) and private (-business) sector; the main ambition being the promotion of innovative partnerships that can produce knowledge that is interactive with society.

The knowledge gateway has been put into practice by the establishment of readerships and accompanying centres of expertise. So far this has given rise to almost 200 readerships since 2001. The readerships are embedded in the various educational sectors of universities of professional education and about 35 of these relate to social work themes (HBO-Raad 2004). Mainly composed of teachers, their mission is to strengthen and exchange knowledge with relevant stakeholders. Most importantly, in addition to developing education and contacts with the professional sector, *hogescholen* have formally and openly been given the task to develop research. Even though, the funds afforded to the readerships and centres of expertise do not compare to the public research funds allotted to traditional universities, it provides an acknowledgment of the research potential and expertise available in higher education outside the traditional university sector. It is a step toward the placement of higher education institutions on an equal footing for reaching common (socio-economic) goals.

Comparative European Social Research & Theory (CESRT) is a readership and centre of expertise established in 2002 to deepen current social work education programmes, to professionalise teachers and to enhance social professional practice. The development and application of research and theory in social work education and practice is approached from a comparative and European context. This approach is based on the conviction that globalisation affects both the education and the profession of social work (Freitas 2004).

Quality Assurance

In 2002 a system of accreditation was established for all higher education institutions. A single organisation called the Dutch Accreditation Organisation (NAO)² was created to evaluate degree programmes according to an established set of common (quality) criteria. Programmes not meeting the criteria no longer get accreditation; they fail to qualify for public funding and fail to obtain recognition for their degree programmes (Nuffic 2003, p.3). The

² This organisation was renamed the Dutch Flemish Accreditation Organisation (NVAO).

move away from institutional control towards one of programme control is a positive development because it aims to ensure the quality of a given programme, independent of the institution in which it is offered. Since the accreditation system assesses all higher education degree programmes equally against a set of established common criteria, the new system can accommodate the various types of higher education offered.

Closing remarks

The changes in the Dutch system of higher education, largely brought about by external influences, have to some extent acted as a catalyst for change. They have, at least, drawn attention to the state of the art of higher education in The Netherlands. On a more general scale, greater awareness of European and international trends in higher education have made it easier to acknowledge the value of applied research and degree programmes. These developments may already suggest a first sign towards a more unitary system of higher education in the Netherlands where institutions can offer degree programmes with a range of directions and levels while sharing equal status and recognition. While there seems to be a positive shift in the direction of quality standards for higher education programmes and initial funding for developing research in *hogescholen*, the inequalities in the higher education system still exist. Whether The Netherlands will continue to feel the pressure for change leading to a more open, flexible and competitive (education) market remains to be seen.

Meso Analysis: constructing a research-orientation in social work education

In The Netherlands, *hogescholen* provide over 200 degree programmes including Social Work education. There are about 42,000 students studying social work in over half of the approximately 50 *hogescholen* (HBO-Raad 2004).

The nature of social work education in the Netherlands is still very oriented to educating future social workers with regard to practical skills and competencies and much less so in relation to research skills. The research study conducted in the last year of the social work bachelor programme is very practice-oriented with a direct relevance for the working field (Nuffic 2004). Research skills are not considered to be a significant part of the expertise required by social work professionals to perform their tasks. Unfortunately, this research 'gap' also impedes a student's competitiveness to continue with a postgraduate degree programme.

Having said that, Dutch social work education is part of a greater changing social work environment, which with some luck will continue to provide an impulse for change. The widespread combination of trends inside and outside the country is increasing the pressure for a form of transformation in social work education. Three very noticeable current trends include the shift from a specialist to a generalist approach to social work education, the impact of internationalisation on social work education, and last but not least, the academisation of social work education (Labonté-Roset 2004). Altogether, these trends are central to the social work educator since their importance relates to the perceived environment in which the social work professional is expected to work.

Generalist trends to meet market forces

Until very recently social work education in The Netherlands was taught by way of specific fields of action namely, traditional social work, social pedagogical work, creative therapy, community work, social advocacy services and personnel and labour management. Time has revealed, however, that the different fields have more in common than originally thought, especially when assessing the competences required for the different working fields. Consequently, the specific fields are disappearing quickly and are being reshuffled, removed or renamed into single 'social work' programmes leading to a broad, generalist Bachelor. The latter is the case for traditional social work, social pedagogical work and community work. Creative therapy and social advocacy services, on the other hand, are being moved to other disciplines altogether, i.e., health sciences and law respectively. This generalist move is meant to do more than decrease the risk of overlap in teaching programmes; it aims to respond to the market itself. In the Dutch context, the specialised social worker did not prove able enough to tackle the social problems in Dutch society. It is now thought that the inter-relation of social issues and their respective challenges create a greater call for an all-purpose or generalist social worker that is flexible, dynamic and capable of engaging in a variety of issues at once.

Internationalisation as an educational opportunity

The on-going processes of integration in Europe and accompanying forces of globalisation are changing the face of education in general. Social Work education is no exception. It too is increasingly influenced by ICT, by student exchanges, by visiting guest lecturers, by international social work modules, by joint-European programmes, etc. The influence of this exchange is not only on the rise it is irreversible.

Students of social work all over Europe are learning *differently* through their exposure to social work education and practice in other countries. This exposure helps them grasp larger, less evident concepts behind social work practice by forcing students to step out of their own context and to consider others. The importance of this should not be underestimated because social workers everywhere are facing similar challenges in multiculturalism, managerialism, social exclusion, poverty, violence, etc. The social complexities of a modern society are not limited to particular national borders and therefore need be addressed from a more comparative perspective that can lead to a sharper understanding of (a shared) reality.

Taken as a whole, the internationalisation of social work education is found in existing Dutch curricula in different ways, in different measure, in different social work faculties. The contribution of programmes like Erasmus or Socrates has done wonders for this. And while the Dutch language remains somewhat of an obstacle, efforts encouraging visiting students to conduct comparative social research, modules on 'international social work' and English in teaching programmes are steps to encourage a wider vision on teaching social work education in Europe. Yet, the international dimension in social work education is actually quite vulnerable to the changing interests of faculty leaders who need to be convinced of its added value; its return. Furthermore, the application of student-centred learning methods (i.e., competence-based learning) can also be seen to hinder efforts of internationalisation. Some thinking on how to *meaningfully* incorporate an international dimension in project-based / problem-based learning may a difficult but nonetheless desirable undertaking.

Research in social work education

The research-orientation of social work education in The Netherlands has until recently been an undervalued discussion, which partially explains the lack of a research-orientation in social work education itself. This is a direct outcome of the traditional Dutch binary system since social work education is first and foremost practice-oriented. Yet, the decentralised approach to the development of education programmes in higher education provides social work faculties with the space to develop own curriculum, i.e., the programme's practical and research orientation but the focus is placed on practice. Research remains a small, indirect component (an 'added-on' element, a technique to legitimise results) that lacks the deliberate aim to contribute to social work knowledge and social work skills.

Research is thus a relatively new term in Dutch social work education altogether and an understanding of the term *for education* is still developing. It may well be that its objectives may first need to be developed apart from existing forms of research in the social field that in some cases may have given research in social work a 'bad reputation', i.e., research for policy development using a prescriptive view of social work practice; research by private consultative bodies that lacks legitimacy or relevance for the field. These examples tend to create a negative association between research and social work and undermine research in social work education.

The identification of a 'meaning' and 'role' for research in Dutch social work education may not be too far off. It may be enough to transform the implicit character of current research components in social work into a more explicit factor in the education programme. Maybe the question is to ask about how to educate (future) social workers in a way that will give them the implicit and explicit analytical tools required to reflect upon and perform the profession they chose to embark upon - and hopefully further develop.

It is difficult to change a long-time tradition of this nature. On the other hand, the increasing move towards academisation in higher education and the desire for competitive national in highly complex societies imply a need for a critical assessment of Dutch thinking on social work education. This is further suggested given that there is already an accepted means available for guiding change - the current Bologna process. The Bologna Declaration and accompanying documentation provide standards and criteria for more open and equal higher education opportunities in the European continent. If explored and developed in a wider European context, it can serve to decrease the inequality of social professional standards in Europe by means of more equal educational practices.

This change does not necessarily imply the desire to produce researchers instead of social workers. The potential of a more research-oriented programme in social work education does however imply a way of thinking about the social work profession. It is about developing knowledge that provides students with an understanding for quality in the profession and for professional performance. The research dimension can help the social work student gain a better understanding of the context in question and the dynamics in play. It is a process-oriented skill acquired over time and indispensable for students to learn how to tackle queries, to describe knowledge and to develop social professional expertise (CESRT 2004).

Closing remarks

The multi-dimensional character of social work (generalist-orientation) combined with trends of academisation (scientific-orientation) and internationalisation (comparative-orientation) are

significant triggers for change. It is a fine time to rethink the make-up of social work education and to ask whether it provides students with the skills needed to function optimally in the social professions in the 21st century. To this end, the development of a more research-orientated programme in Dutch *hogescholen* may be in sight, if only at the undergraduate level.

Micro Analysis: Good practice in MA Comparative European Social Studies (MA CESS)

MA CESS is a 1-year MA degree programme on Comparative European Social Studies hosted and delivered by the Hogeschool Zuyd Maastricht and validated by the London Metropolitan University. Originally set up in co-operation with a SOCRATES network of 28 higher education institutions in Europe, it was recently recognised as one of the top 11 Joint European Masters Programmes. MA CESS celebrates its 10-year anniversary in the upcoming academic year 2004-2005.

MA CESS

MA CESS was founded in an ERASMUS co-operation dating back to 1991. In 1994 the co-operation grew into a SOCRATES network of 28 institutions, which ventured to develop social work curricula based on the conviction that a comparative European approach was essential in the social professions. The common vision of this transnational network enabled the launching of the Joint European Master of Arts on Comparative European Social Studies (MA CESS) in the academic year 1994-1995.

In itself, a Master *of Arts* (or MA) in Social Work could not and does not exist in the Netherlands for reasons already made explicit in this paper³. MA CESS is no exception to the rule. The MA CESS programme is delivered in a Dutch university (of professional education) and a university in the United Kingdom validates the degree so that students graduate with a recognised MA from the UK. Given its one-year duration the programme consists of 90 ECTS credits⁴. The MA CESS set-up ensures it's running alongside the Dutch system since the degree itself is validated abroad. Recognition in the UK can be considered as indirect recognition in The Netherlands. Overall, this construction with the UK is desirable given the 'odd' Dutch qualifications.

The challenges of sustaining this transnational set-up, including the ability to maintain a programme of its stature over time has seen the gradual evolution of a well-built transnational educational framework with rigorous quality control measures, e.g., regular course evaluation meetings and student evaluations. The appointment of an external examiner to review course material and samples of the students' work keeps quality at the core of the programme. This and a combination of other internal check systems lead to a yearly quality assurance report presented to a quality control board of the UK institution.

Ten years of developing criteria for quality assurance, accountability and transparency towards the various transnational stakeholders places MA CESS at the forefront of developments in these areas vis-à-vis other Dutch higher education programmes. The teachers

³ A Master of Social Work is possible in a university of higher education but not a Master of Arts in Social Work.

⁴ This is not yet officially settled.

that developed these systems are also at the forefront of social work education in their respective countries. Interestingly, they have also continuously developed their passion for Social Work Education at the European level and are visible in current transnational co-operations and have taken leadership roles in European level movements such as the European association of Schools of Social Work (EASSW), the European Network of Quality Assurance in the Social Professions (ENQASP) and the European Association of Training Centres for Socio-Educational Work (FESET). A core teaching-group at the forefront of European issues in Social Work Education ensures that students get access to the most current issues, discussions and approaches in Social Work in Europe. For MA CESS this know-how is key for stimulating innovative teaching and equally important, thinking in the social professions all over Europe.

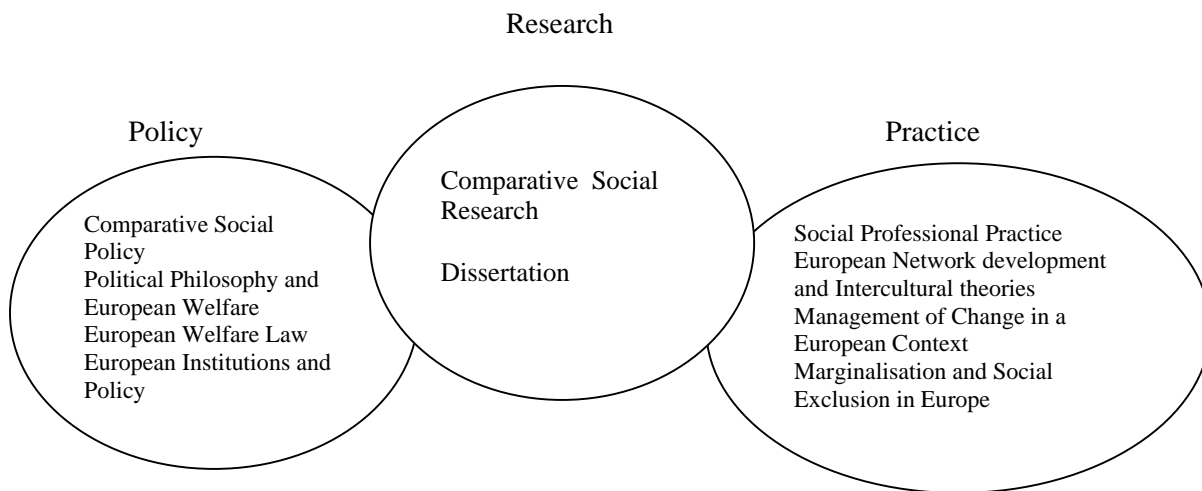
The main drive of the MA CESS programme is the genuine belief in the added value of European (or international) research-oriented social work education. To this day, the conviction remains that research skills are an essential element of the professional expertise required by social workers to increase their professional performance namely, to systematically collect, categorise, and analyse information used to understand, share, and further communicate (new) knowledge. This parallels the need to successfully cope with or, better yet, skilfully manage the complex social situations faced in the social professions. A research-minded social worker is able to reflect upon the profession to understand beyond the evident; to take distance from the immediate, to adapt according to (new) knowledge, and to pass it on appropriately. The role of research in the MA CESS programme is thus to develop knowledge that provides students with an understanding for quality in the profession.

The programme is set upon three main pillars to address social work in Europe. They are comparative research, policy and practice. These three pillars are reflected in the programme modules whereby the research component (introduced at the beginning of the academic year) develops as a continual link between policy and practice and culminates with the final dissertation. In any given module, guest lecturers and convenors will make use of research examples, experiences, remarks or even tips during their sessions.

To ensure that the challenges coming from society can be understood, tackled and overcome, more accents need to be placed on generating knowledge in the social professions. The study of social issues is key to the well being of society at large. MA CESS dwells on the search for solutions for comparative social problems experienced by social professionals in Europe. It is an on-going quest that calls on students and teachers to bring together all available know-how (common sense, personal experience and academic studies) as a point of departure.

Similarly to the objectives of CESRT (p.4), MA CESS address issues of participation and accessibility to society's main institutions and traditions, e.g., education, health care, work, leisure, social services, public services and human rights. Equally important are the ever-increasing debates on the responsibilities between the state, the market and civil society. Altogether, the common risks of insecurity and uncertainty in modern society lead to a need to study societies, their challenges, their opportunities and their implications for social work education and practice.

The MA CESS Modules



The formalisation of research in MA CESS

The Comparative Social Research module is one of two modules formalising the research component in MA CESS. It is one of the four compulsory modules in the programme. In the academic year 2003-2004, it was composed of a transnational team of teachers and guest lecturers from the UK, The Netherlands, Spain, Finland and Germany over a two-week period. The employment of scholars, policy experts, practitioners and researchers from all over Europe in the MA CESS teaching staff is considered central to teaching comparative research skills to social professionals. It attempts to deliver research across in a way that makes sense to (current and potential) professionals. Students are presented with research practices that reveal real issues and challenges in conducting comparative research in the different fields, countries, organisations, etc. The students are directly and deliberately exposed to the link between research and practice (and policy). They are encouraged to think analytically regardless of whether the issues are treated or identified as practice-based.

Delivering the module is sometimes tricky. The added value of presenting students with different perceptions and approaches to research also demonstrates existing contradictions that often puzzle students. It takes time for students to accept that there is no single way to do social research; that it is a process coloured by the individual, the organisation, the field of inquiry, the country, etc. Equally challenging is to see that guest lecturers share their experiences with the 'how' questions of the research process rather than 'their' research per se.

Much like the other programme modules, Comparative Social Research is participatory in nature. Teachers and students are encouraged to explore a range of research methods appropriate to the development of research projects in the social field through the lectures, seminars, case studies, simulations, debates and inputs from social research experts at both formal and informal moments. The learning process is taken a step further in the module's assessment whereby students are marked on the development of an individual research plan (which can be further developed into the research plan for individual dissertations). It is one

of the first exercises used to get students to think and write methodically about how they wish to inform others about how they wish to put their research idea into practice.

The learning outcomes of the module are mostly aimed at an understanding of the value of research and research methods in social professional work, especially the comparative value. Theory and literature are used to support the understanding and use of comparative social research (and methods) in different environments and from different perspectives, i.e., policy research, evidence-based practice research, action research and evaluation studies. Of similar importance, is that students learn to identify philosophical, ethical, organisational and professional issues when conducting research and critically reflecting upon personal value systems and preferred research methods (MA CESS/CSR 2004).

The second formal research component is the Dissertation Module. It is a module that lasts the entire academic year and carries 3x the weight of any other module. By means of regular meetings with recognised academic supervisors, the student conducts an extended investigation into a topic of choice in the social field. For some students this is the biggest challenge in the programme because the different academic traditions also imply very different levels of research experience. The final assessment of the module is a 20, 000 word empirical comparative study (in English) carried out over a 6 month research period. The student is offered one-on-one supervision throughout the entire research process.

The types of comparative social research dissertations written in MA CESS are broad but can be divided into three general types namely, critical comparative research on literature and theoretical issues, comparative empirical research or a combination of these two. In general terms, the bulk of dissertations belong to type two. Among reasons for this, is the pure curiosity of students to explore 'their' issue by doing fieldwork in 'another' country. Today's students are extremely interested in the human interaction of this type of research even with the awareness of its many pitfalls. Mostly they use qualitative research methods in the fieldwork. Interviews and observation are common and to a lesser extent, small scale questionnaires. Encouraging and guiding this inquisitiveness is at the heart of the module. This is precisely what stimulates the students to reassess what they believe to know and to go on to produce (new) knowledge in the process. Consequently, this is imperative for increasing the knowledge-base in social work.

By the end of the research process, a student should have the ability to conduct a substantive piece of research in the chosen field of study. Two important parts of this process are of course the literature review and the selection and justification of methodologies (MA CESS/DISSERTATION 2004). From a student's perspective, the time allotted for the research process is never enough, but the half (full-time) year available should provide students with time to acquire the analytical skills they need to pass on their (new) knowledge effectively in a formal, academic report (the dissertation).

The social issues addressed in dissertations vary greatly and so do their levels of comparison. In every case, students are strongly encouraged to develop a topic that builds from own, available know-how in the existing field of study or expertise. This not only aims to ensure motivation but also helps identify issues that are worth exploring at an MA level. Equally important are the discussions with students on the relevance of their identified topic for social professional work in Europe. This seemingly distant consideration of most students is actually quite important if MA CESS students are to contribute to developing a European knowledge base in social professional work.

MA CESS as a knowledge-building network for Europe and The Netherlands

The added value of a transnational knowledge-building network like MA CESS (students, teachers, alumni) is found in the links established between curricula, the mobility among teachers and students, and the development of patterns for intercultural behaviour. Over the last ten years, MA CESS has created an intrinsic system of (intercultural) relations between students, teachers, academic traditions and social values. In this exchange, an education system was born and is still being explored to produce something 'more'. This 'more' is a teaching and learning approach that combines knowledge building with sensitivity towards a mixture of communication styles, without dwelling on intellectual traditions.

The bonds created among the MA CESS Network are as important as their differences. These bonds, formal or informal, act as buffers against the challenges of cultural and linguistic diversity. The use of one common (teaching) language, one common (teaching) approach, one common curriculum, one common (and mostly new) assessment system, one set of common rules and regulations, are examples of techniques MA CESS has had to create to survive. In doing this, it has promoted innovation in teaching as well as developed a trust in the European or international vision of the people and approaches applied.

The possibility of giving meaning to curricula that transcends geographic, cultural and linguistic borders is one to be encouraged. It not only enriches the education systems of those countries involved but also prepares social work students and teachers for their role in a globalised society that is influenced by these very same factors.

Closing remarks

MA CESS is not a Dutch *Master* of Social Work. It is a *Master of Arts* in Social Work delivered in Maastricht and validated in London. This difference is largely credited to its research-orientation. While the programme has received some of the merit it deserves, it's existence is a constant struggle for survival because of what it is not. As a Joint European Master Programme, it is not really part of the Dutch or English higher education system. It is an 'extra' offered by the partner institutions. The programme is not recognised in the Dutch higher education system and its graduates generally do not get the degree recognised in their national education system. Lastly, the students do not usually mix with the Dutch students in the regular social work degree programmes of the institution. This is the strife of Joint European Master Programmes of every kind.

All in all, MA CESS should not replace or be compared to an MA programme offered as a regular graduate degree in a single higher education institution. Its characteristics are too particular for this. It does, however, offer insight into how challenges can be turned into opportunities to promote research-oriented social work education.

The desirability of *research-minded* social work education throughout Europe has to do with research skills being part and parcel of the professional expertise needed to optimize the performance of social professionals. It incorporates a systematic way of thinking that enables social professionals to reflect upon, appreciate, engage in, assess and manage the complex problems faced by the people they will meet in their every day work. Finally, the importance of generating knowledge in social professional work should not be underestimated as a means to tackle today's huge collective challenges. The further development and exchange of this knowledge in Europe offers great potential for preventing its social predicaments.

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