

**Reflections on the First Joint European MA on Comparative
European Social Studies (MA CESS)**

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Abstract

The establishment of MA CESS 10 years ago (1994/5) by higher education academics from different European countries and scholarly traditions has also highlighted the role of comparative social research in the social professions in higher education. Whilst an established programme in terms of longevity, this short paper reflects upon MA CESS gradual development without losing sight of the ambition to search for solutions for social problems in comparative, intercultural ways and as experienced by social professionals in Europe.

Key words

Comparative social research, higher education, European Master

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The conviction

It started with a conviction: a comparative European approach is essential in the social professions and hence the need for its introduction in the curriculum of higher education institutions in Europe. This was the conviction of the six-member Erasmus Network of 1991 that grew to 28 members by the end of the decade (Lawrence & Reverda 1998); it was the cornerstone for launching of the Network's MA CESS (degree programme; and it is the conviction in MA CESS today, 10 years down the road, with over 200 alumni Europe-wide.

MA CESS as a post-graduate degree

The interest to make MA CESS a post-graduate degree was very much linked to the wish to increase the knowledge base in the social professions with a European perspective and a strong research base – two characteristics that can be undervalued in under-graduate social professional education. The differing definitions, role and nature of 'social work' are taken on board as a strength whereby these differences according to Lorenz (1994) provide a precious source for investigation. Furthermore, and in line with Askeland and Payne's (2001) discussion on the construction of cross-national activities, MA CESS's ambition goes beyond 'broadening the mind' and towards new actions and research (e.g. spin-off projects) for innovation in social professional education and practice.

The exercise of comparison that investigates similarities and differences is also used as a means towards a better understanding of the 'others' in society. While there may be the aspiration to contribute to specific contextual problems, MA CESS has tried to advance transnational social research in the social professions in general too, as a way to promote dialogue and curiosity in the 'others' in a European context and in view of increased globalisation.

From professional to academic careers

What is markedly different in MA CESS today in comparison to 10 years ago, is the typical student profile: a predominantly young student with limited professional experience outside a study placement. Regardless of whether this is part of a general trend in higher education, it remains an interesting development that affects both the input and output of teaching and learning. It can be argued that the youth factor (accentuated by lack of professional experience) implies a lack of 'professional identity' previously anticipated at a post-graduate level. However, the growing stock of young graduate social professionals also provides educationalists with a timely opportunity to nurture the students' potential as future social work professionals in a European context. More specifically, the students' recent academic experiences as 'learners' make them quite receptive to new ways of thinking and doing. They are not only interested in research skills as elements of professional expertise to enhance professional performance, they are open to the search for 'other' ways to cope with and, better yet, skilfully manage the

complex social situations they will face in social professional work. As a result, the idea of a research-minded social professional that 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 is taking shape slowly, but surely.

The changing face of education

The current MA CESS programme, founded on the three main pillars of research, policy and practice, reflects the original MA CESS programme modules and provided a basis for course development after the programme's first evaluation. By the academic year 1996-1997 MA CESS went from 6 to 9 modules and split them into a set of core modules (European Institutions and Policy, Comparative Social Policy, Comparative Social Research, and Social Professional Practice in Europe) and another set of optional modules (International Network Development, Managing Change in Organisations, Marginalisation and Social Exclusion, Political Philosophies of Welfare and European Welfare Law). The dissertation remained constant. The new set-up broadened the academic programme, which brought with it the changes needed for further in-depth study of social issues relevant to the European focus in MA CESS (Lawrence & Reverda, 1998). Since then, and in the presence of rigorous quality control, most programme development occurs within modules, i.e., the introduction of current debates and experts. Having said that, there is a time lapse since the occurrence of significant programme changes; this, coupled by a changing educational climate in Europe, has re-generated discussion in MA CESS and its place in a growing market for Joint

European Master Programmes, especially in view of the new EU Erasmus-Mundus Programme and its respective global dimension. In addition, the development of the Bologna Process and namely, the aim for more compatible higher education systems in Europe are not without its consequences for MA CESS either. In this view, the competition increases not only between the growing number of Joint European Master degrees but also with those recognised in the respective national education systems.

Research in MA CESS

Going back to the three pillars of the programme, the research component in MA CESS develops as a continual link between policy and practice and culminates with a final dissertation. Its formalisation in MA CESS is found in the core module on Comparative Social Research and in the research process of the final dissertation. In both cases, the employment of European scholars, policy experts, practitioners and researchers has proved central to teaching comparative research skills to social professionals. It is part of the challenge to deliver research in a way that makes sense to current and future social professionals, by presenting them with research practices that reveal real issues when conducting comparative research in the different fields, countries and organisations. The students are directly and deliberately exposed to the link between research and practice (and policy). They are forced to think analytically regardless of whether the issues are treated or identified as practice-based. Having said that, module delivery has proven to be tricky. Over the years, the conscious choice to present students with different perspectives on research also involves the revelation of existing

contradictions and limitations that students seldom want to hear, i.e., How to accept the co-existence of opposing philosophical perspectives, each with own methods and values. How to concede to differing opinions about 'who' should conduct research into social professional practice in the first place? How does one actually establish the 'valid' and 'controlled' characteristics of research when measuring complex, interactive, social phenomena? It takes some time for students to internalise and accept that there is no single design for comparative social research; that it is a process coloured by the individual, the organisation, the field of inquiry, the country, and so forth.

In the end, encouraging and guiding the students' inquisitiveness remains at the heart of the research pillar (and research process). Time after time, this has proven to be fundamental for stimulating students to reassess beliefs and to go on to produce new knowledge in the process. It not only aims to ensure motivation but also helps identify issues that are worth exploring at an MA level. Equally important in the process are the one-to-one discussions between supervisors and students on the relevance of their topics for the social professions in Europe. This seemingly distant consideration of most students is actually quite important if MA CESS students are to continue to contribute to the development of a European knowledge base in social professional work.

The research undertaken by MA CESS students compares social professional practice and policy, which according to Reverda & Richardson (2000), is led by the students' epistemological and ontological approaches. These can then be divided into four paradigms namely, research that clarifies or

enhances the theory and practice of social work, research that assesses a socio-political context (of which social work is a part), research that aims to bring about change in society through the participation of those integral to the process itself and finally, research that refines and re-defines social work practice. Predictably, the research crosses professional boundaries, which can be linked to an increasing awareness of the importance of holistic perspectives (Reverda & Richardson, 2000) in social professional education and practice.

Changing role of the EU

With the benefit of hindsight, the incidental exchanges of the original MA CESS group of teachers/co-coordinators in the social professions were greatly facilitated by the Erasmus Programme (1987-1994) promoting teacher exchanges for curriculum development. It provided both the financial support and moral encouragement to develop MA CESS as the first Joint European MA on Comparative European Social Studies. Albeit mechanisms for the implementation of EU objectives, Erasmus and the succeeding Socrates-Erasmus (1995-1999/2000-2006) programmes have been key to the evolution of transnational educational practices in the social professions, for what started off as EU support for ad hoc, small-scale or bilateral exchanges has evolved into structural strategies to support large-scale, multilateral networking on social (professional) studies. This has led to formal networks of all shapes and sizes including those developing academic programmes with a European focus (e.g., a European Master or

Joint Degree programme like MA CESS) and subject-specific Thematic Networks (e.g., European Network on Social Work - EUSW).

MA CESS as a knowledge-building network

The added value of a time-honoured 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. The bonds, in particular, have acted 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.

Closing remarks

MA CESS is not a Dutch Master of Social Work. It is a Master of Arts in Social Studies delivered at Zuyd University in Maastricht and validated at London Metropolitan University. This difference is largely credited to its research-orientation. While the programme has received some of the merit it deserves, its existence is a constant struggle because of what it is not. As a Joint European Master Programme, it is *not* really embedded in the Dutch higher education system or in the English institution. It is an 'extra' offered by the partner institutions. MA CESS is *not* recognised in the Dutch higher education system and MA CESS graduates generally do *not* get the degree recognised in their national education system. Lastly, the students do *not* habitually mix with the Dutch students in the regular social professional degree programmes in the institution. This is the strife of Joint European Master Programmes of every kind (EUA, 2004).

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

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