Social Professional Education and Work in The Netherlands[1]

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Background

The origin of social work in the Netherlands goes back to the late 19th Century and the efforts of religious groups to relieve the needy and oppressed. It is founded in the work of nuns, priests, brotherhoods, vicars as well as middle class women doing charity work for the poor. Overtime, and similarly to many European countries, social work has developed into a predominantly female profession.

The real expansion of social work and social policy followed WWII. In the fifties, the Social and Christian Democratic coalition government increased state responsibilities for social welfare, which led to the shaping of a welfare state. Overall, the role of the government was mainly limited to the distribution of material compensation for the loss of income (e.g., unemployment, disability) and to the provision of a subsistence level. It subsidised efforts while Catholic, Protestant and socialist organisations implemented them. In the sixties, social policy and provision in the Netherlands developed into a social democratic type welfare state (Esping-Andersen, 1993). Influenced by the gradual introduction of neo-liberal principles of the nineties, the Dutch welfare state has since developed into a mixed typology that combines social democratic and conservative/corporatist welfare regimes.

The implementation of social policy is a shared responsibility amongst local and provincial governments, employers, trade unions, NGOs, the market and citizens; a development that

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[1] This is an updated version of the article in Campanini A., and Frost E. (eds) (2004), *European Social Work: Commonalities and Differences,* Roma, Carocci.

has led to differences in the area of social provision. Although general social provision laws and regulations are based at the national level, they are put into practice at lower levels of government and have a significant impact on client groups.

There is a focus on flexible social services as opposed to the former approach of fixed provisions based on fixed standards and procedures. Flexible services (e.g., multi-functional organisations for child and youth care) relate to the individual needs of clients and adapted care (e.g., client-linked budgets) is common in the provision of social services. Flexible social services also imply a more market-oriented approach promoting user involvement, user participation and client-centred social work as a way to ensure quality in the social system. Interestingly, this market-orientation and flexibility contradicts the introduction of quality control mechanisms that focus on standardisation and protocol.

The Emergence of Social Work Education

Social work education has a long tradition in the Netherlands. The first school of social work was founded in Amsterdam 1899 and is the oldest one in the world. The education of social workers was later concentrated in 'social academies' where curriculum focussed on intervening and improving the welfare of the poor. The main subjects concentrated on improving material conditions, supporting parents and children, decreasing illiteracy and promoting education. Altogether, the ultimate aim was to improve the mentality and moral standards of the poor.

These moral standards were related to the various religious and ideological movements that coloured the social and political stage in the Netherlands in the early twentieth century. Catholics, Protestants, Socialists and later Humanists were organised in 'pillars', a construction of Dutch society in which the various ideologies could institutionalise their

interests at a social, cultural and political level. This pillarisation influenced social work education and led to the establishment of Protestant, Catholic and Socialist schools of social work in the 1920s.

More schools of social work were founded after WWII due to industrialisation and growing state interest in social policy. The number of students increased significantly in the sixties and seventies, resulting in about 40 independent 'Social Academies' in 1983 (Cornelissen, 1996). By the late eighties, a process of scale enlargement in higher professional education occurred. The Dutch government reduced the number of independent *hogescholen* (universities of applied sciences) from about 350 to 44. Today, these institutions offer programmes in seven broad professional sectors namely, economics, health, art, agriculture, technical studies, teaching, and social welfare. Social work education is located in the latter sector which counts about 50,000 students at 18 different *hogescholen* (HBO Raad, 2006a).

Worth explicit mention is that The Netherlands has a binary higher education system that divides education into professional education provided by *hogescholen* and academic education provided by traditional universities. Two thirds of all higher education students in The Netherlands attend *hogescholen* which is equivalent to about 365,000 students (HBO Raad, 2006b).

Social Work Education Curricula

The 1960s approach to social work education was limited to three traditions namely, case work, group work and community work. These approaches developed quickly into independent courses and programmes, which resulted in a huge diversity of curricula, and programmes based on the various social and cultural needs. Time has seen a decline in the traditional social work approaches, or theories (e.g., critical theory, behaviourism,

psychosocial theory) and newer ones (e.g., systems theory) have emerged. Current social work theories embody a much more pragmatic approach to education based on the identification of targets and the means to reach them. The Dutch approach is typified by the notion that the client should be met in his/her natural environment: deinstitutionalisation. It focuses on measures of prevention and self-empowerment, which together allow for more evidence-based methods.

The restructuring of social work education initiated in the nineties has continued into the new millennium and dwells on the typology of offered programmes, namely specific (e.g., traditional social work, social pedagogical work, community work) versus generic social work education. National discussions depict a move towards the latter type with the aim of ensuring a more straightforward, recognisable social work education programme for potential Dutch students and essentially, for the recruitment of international students. Recently, the social welfare education sector commissioned a working paper to specify the common competencies required for all bachelor level social work graduates (Sectoraal Advies College HSAO, 2004). This working paper coincides with the discussion of a second report dealing with professional profiles in the care and welfare professions in The Netherlands (Vlaar, 2006). Together, the reports support the argumentation for a more integrated, recognisable bachelor programme to reduce the ambiguity for potential students as well as the costly content overlap of current programmes.

Zuyd University[2] is an example of the changing face of social work education. In 2002, it offered six social work bachelor programmes and by 2006 the three remaining social work programmes (social pedagogical work, traditional social work and community work) were

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[2] The Dutch association of *hogescholen* translates '*hogeschool*' into 'university of applied sciences.' *Hogescholen* also use English designations like university, college, institute, academy, university of professional education, or school of...

integrated into a broad social work programme which still allows the opportunity for specialisation based on the student's selected 'major' and 'minor' module combination. Upon successful completion of the programme the title granted is a Bachelor Social Work.

The 2002-2003 introduction of the 3-cycle degree system (Bachelor, Master, Doctorate) was relevant for accompanying the Bologna process but less so for social work education in the Netherlands. While it created the *possibility* to develop Bachelor and - for the first time - Master programmes in social work, in practice the Dutch binary system distinguishes between professional and academic disciplines and degrees which impede (international) student mobility. The accompanying national funding regulations maintain that financial support for developing a Master degree programme is restricted to traditional universities. With minor exception, this implies that a *hogeschool* requires own funding to start-up a professional Master of Social Work. In relation to the last of the 3-cycle degree system, there is no possibility to do a doctorate degree in Social Work in The Netherlands. A graduate social worker with academic pursuits may wish to continue with a doctorate degree at a traditional university but in a related field only, e.g., sociology, cultural sciences, health sciences or psychology, since social work is not an existing discipline at a traditional university.

Post-graduate social work courses are quite successful at schools of social work. These provide social workers the opportunity to gain new or supplementary skills in the field. Such courses are well-liked by working professionals interested in further specialisation.

There are few entry requirements in social work higher education. Applicants must have completed secondary education and possess either a senior general secondary education diploma, a senior secondary vocational education and training diploma or a university

preparatory education diploma. An interview with perspective students is customary. Previous professional experience in social work is not an entry requirement which is said to contribute to the relatively young student composition.

The first year in social work education is meant as a year of orientation, selection and consultation. It contains an introduction to the profession and relevant subjects: psychology, sociology, law, philosophy, social and economic history, creative play and other expressive work. The following three years continue with project-based work and include subjects like methodology and theory in specific areas of social work, economics, philosophy, law, social legislation, organisational development, research, statistics and information technology. The subjects provided are integrated in the competence-based learning approach. Altogether the 4-year social work education programme bears the Dutch tradition of practice-oriented social work education. There is limited emphasis on policy and even less so on research.

The Meaning of 'Social Worker'

Unlike in some other countries in Europe, social work is not a contested profession in the Netherlands. It has its own rules and procedures as a profession, i.e., on distance kept from clients, on objectives and outcomes and on added value thereof. The Dutch social worker is an intermediary between the vulnerable and their best possible level of participation in society. The social work profession is still mostly financed by the state (decentralised to local/regional governments) and provided by private, independent social welfare organisations. It is influenced by factors of any modern society, i.e., quality control measures, increased case loads, competitive market mechanisms, outreach measures, generalist approaches, and managerialism.

The Dutch Association of Universities of Applied Sciences (HBO Raad) identifies eleven social welfare education programmes, three of which are listed below as specific social work professions. The remaining eight programmes are less relevant to core social work business and in some *hogescholen,* programmes like creative therapy, social advocacy and personnel and labour management have been shifted to other professional sectors altogether.

Traditional social work

This type of social work commonly forms part of (private) social work oriented institutions financed by government. Quite often social workers are employed by institutions (e.g., child protection services, probation agencies, hospitals, schools, elderly homes) to investigate home situations, to assess support needs, to write-up reports on behalf of institution. Concerns about relationships, material matters, abuse and addiction are commonly addressed in this area of social work.

Social pedagogical work

This type of social work is largely based in residential surroundings such as psychiatric hospitals, homes for the mentally ill, child and youth homes, refugee centres and elderly homes. Lately, the move towards semi-residential settings (e.g., half way homes) and outreach work has brought these social workers closer to neighbourhoods and communities. The type of social work done is largely related to organising the living conditions and the daily activities of a specific target group.

Community work

This type of social work is found in government sponsored local and regional institutions to deal specifically with community development and work. Much of the work is project-based and targeted at specific groups. They aim to activate people in communities based on specific

needs of the community and the current political interests in the area. They address issues like employment, public safety, neighbourhood development, etc.

The Social Work Profession

Social work is a recognised and well-accepted profession in Dutch society. As a profession, it is in a natural state of change that accompanies social concerns as they appear and as they demand new approaches. Today, the social worker is going out to clients with the aim of working with them in their own environment. Working in the home and in the community has taken significant precedent over the residential settings of the recent past. There is a move towards generalist approaches in the profession given the poor results yielded by interventions limited to one social aspect. The social worker is in need of becoming a substantially versatile professional given an increasingly complex society; one that is multicultural and multidimensional, one that requires a multidisciplinary social work education in which competence-based learning is the outcome. Furthermore, the aim to establish an integrated approach to welfare provision is a challenge that calls for on-going dialogue and co-operation with (local, regional) stakeholders, including schools, the police, health services, and local government.

The profession places significant attention on prevention. The task of the social worker is one to empower the client with instruments to gain confidence and to participate more optimally in society. Emphasis is placed on the development of actions that prevent personal, relational and social problems. Client groups are being 'activated' to optimise their strengths and to become enabled to move forward independently. Finally, the client's situational context is a focus. The previous focus on *the individual* to resolve a problem shifted towards *the individual's communication and interaction processes* as a focus for problem resolution.

From a legal perspective, Dutch law does not protect the social work profession. The interests and standards of social professionals are entirely covered by professional bodies such as the Dutch Association of Social Workers and the Professional Association for Social, (Ortho) pedagogic and Assistance Professions. The latter is a 2004 merger of three social welfare professional bodies: social pedagogues, activity leaders and therapists and pedagogues. These bodies uphold a professional code of ethics to which members automatically subscribe with appropriate channels to address (client) concerns about professional conduct. Such concerns however need to be linked to the respective code of ethics.

The Social Worker and National Policy

The Dutch welfare state has undergone considerable social and care reforms mainly between 2003 and 2006. Welfare reform has had the explicit intention to decrease the financial burden on the social system and specific goals were thus set to reduce the number of citizens making use of the system, especially those on sick leave. On the whole, the level of social protection has declined and the weakest groups tend to lose the most (van Oorschot, 2006) given the explicit shift towards individual reliance and responsibility. The Dutch reform advanced by the Ministry of Welfare, Health and Cultural Affairs promotes the idea that everyone should be able to play a role in society based on equality and participation. Employment and employability are the chosen vehicles to do so. The idea is strictly interpreted to mean more 'older' people, ethnic minorities and long-term unemployed in work settings; it means improved day care facilities to get women to work more; it means encouraging job-creation and training for young people. All in all, this is the familiar 'welfare to work' movement inherent all over Europe.

Essentially, the government's reform programme coincided with a period of disillusionment in Dutch society. It was a time of deep economic recession; the 'no to Europe' campaign was victorious; there were unprecedented sentiments of xenophobia and intolerance and not least of all, prolonged political cynicism.

The restructuring of policy was formulated into interventions and characterised by van der Laan and Ploem (1998) in a manner that is still relevant:

- The nature of care provisions changes from intense, specialised and individual service-oriented care towards a less intense generalised and network of care services approach.

- Care is brought closer to the community in terms of the service itself and the control thereof. Homecare becomes central.

- The needs of clients are parallel with the demands of consumers. The aim is to establish contracts between financiers and service providers with a sense of balance between supply and demand.

- Care management moves away from over-reaching state regulation towards a market orientation. Output budgeting is used to encourage care providers to fulfil policy aims.

Most social workers in the Netherlands work in the community as general social workers. The approach works well in the decentralised system of service provision. Local authorities look to social workers to tackle a list of local social concerns related to social exclusion, poverty, debt, crime, etc. The time and money spent to respond to so many policy challenges however is great and may call for a need to identify social work priorities rather than attempting to respond to all social policy interests (Van der Laan and Ploem, 1998).

The European dimension

The very nature of life in a modern European society implies a certain *europeanisation* or *internationalisation.* The target groups that social workers encounter vary in ethnicity, history, and practices. In the Dutch context, this includes people originating from Morocco, Turkey, Suriname, the Antilles, Iran, Irak, Somalia, Ghana, Afghanistan and China rather than the predominantly all-Dutch target group of the early 1970s. Today non-western migrants make-up about 10% of the population in The Netherlands. And, while the local context remains very important in the practice of social work, it is a context composed of several ethnicities. Furthermore, it is difficult to conceive that European states could be beyond the impact of supranational structures in relation to their own national social policies and practice. The current processes of modernisation and globalisation entail an undeniable degree of interdependence among states.

European programmes like ERASMUS, SOCRATES and MUNDUS enhance the European dimension in social work education. In addition, several efforts have been made to host foreign students wishing to conduct practical social research in The Netherlands. Further efforts include the use of European case studies in curricula, the greater availability of cross-border social work literature, the establishment of modules like 'international' social work, teaching parts of programmes in English and the promotion of 'international weeks' in curricula. A more current achievement is the Euregion Meuse-Rhine *hogeschool* partnership which awarded the first 'Euregional social work' diploma in the spring of 2006.

The belief in the added value of a European dimension in higher social work education led to the development of a Master of Arts in Comparative European Social Studies (MA CESS). The programme delivered by Zuyd University Maastricht and validated by the London Metropolitan University was set up in co-operation with a Socrates network of 36 higher

education institution all over Europe. Most of its contributors are (teaching-) staff from the participating institutions and invited experts on specific subjects. MA CESS is for graduate social professionals, e.g., social workers, social pedagogues and care workers and offers the opportunity to conduct European comparative research in social professional practice and/or social policy.

Current challenges

The history of social work in the Netherlands has developed gradually from its initial concentration on social problems like poverty, to dealing with individual psychosocial problems (rather than basic needs) during the prosperous welfare state years. Now the Dutch are in a *managed care* period where social work professionals are largely being told their aims and target groups. A great deal is determined by the organisation providing the funding for social work (van Riet 1999). Today's social professionals *also* require know-how to contend with bureaucracy, controllers and to be accountable for measured actions which implies that social work education ought to accompany the changing context of the profession.

The continuously growing, complex social changes and challenges in Dutch society are creating situations where more people are at risk of social exclusion. The social worker needs to acquire new competencies to discover - alongside the client – the best way towards empowerment and a meaningful (re-) integration and participation in society. Social work competencies need to reflect today's market-oriented society and the dilemmas faced by the profession caused by this reality. Finding a balanced working approach that combines efficiency, effectiveness and assistance to those in need is no simple task. The social workers' context is more complex and it becomes necessary to look beyond individual cases and towards a professional contribution to the well being of citizens and welfare on a whole.

Social workers need to learn continuously through practice and to move within a learning and information society. The ability to adapt working methods and to deal with change becomes critical to both practitioners and educators alike. Thus, increased co-operation between professionals in education and in social work practice can lead to more well-prepared social workers capable of mastering their profession in challenging times. Increased co-operation in the Netherlands has led to substantial experimentation in methodologies and approaches and has resulted in the implementation of project-based learning in social work educational programmes. The approach is very student-oriented and emphasises the students' ability to develop the competencies necessary to practice and develop the social work profession today and tomorrow.

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