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Social Work Education in Finland : Courses for Competency

Sanna Lähteinen & Suvi Raitakari & Kaija Hänninen & Anniina
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1 Introduction

This description of the competency produced by social work education sets out to answer the following questions: What is social work education in Finland like, what are the competency goals which the courses for the social work major pursue and what is the nature of the knowledge and skills that students receive in the process of becoming qualified social workers? Finnish universities place an emphasis on scientific research and on teaching that is based on such research. The universities are autonomous institutions and thus have the freedom to decide quite independently on the content of the programmes they offer. General guidelines are provided in legislation for the goals and structure of degrees in different disciplines but there is ample opportunity for universities to define the content and emphases of their programmes. Crucial in steering programme content are the target competencies defined for degrees and individual courses; these aims are decided by the faculties.

The impetus for the present publication lies in the observation, based on the degree requirements of different universities, that while the content and emphases in degree programmes in social work are rather similar, differences can be seen in how degrees are structured and in the content they emphasize. Similar course content is given different descriptions in different universities, which may make it difficult to identify core competencies in social work.

Given the many changes that continue to affect higher education and the environment in which social workers practice their profession, it is important to pause and take stock of the state of social work education in Finnish universities today. The aim in doing so is to consider how social work education should be developed if it is to provide the expertise and engage in the research needed to meet the pressures occasioned by the changes. In an effort to support the development of social work education, a decision was made to begin a process that would ultimately produce national competency goals for programmes in social work education and the core areas of competency to be produced by those programmes. The present report is the outcome of a joint effort of the six universities in Finland offering degree programmes in social work (University of Helsinki, University of Eastern Finland, University of Jyväskylä, University of Lapland, University of Tampere and University of Turku), undertaken as part of the work of Sosnet - Finnish National University Network for Social Work.

The aim of this publication is to bring visibility to the competency produced by the social work education offered in Finland and to provide insights that might serve to guide the future course of and strengthen university-level education in the field. These are worthy goals in light of the changes buffeting the higher education sector and society at large. The universities comprising Sosnet have committed themselves to developing the structures and content of social work education such that the competency goals and core competency areas of the education offered at the different institutions conform in the main with jointly defined goals. This aim in no way means that the universities need refrain from developing a particular profile for themselves or foregrounding divergent research emphases in their social work education and research as they do in other programmes.


2 Social work in the universities

2.1 Context dependent social work

Social work is a globally recognized scientific community whose members are actively engaged in national and international cooperation geared to developing research, teaching and professional practices. Social work is an internationally recognized profession and professional practice that is inextricably bound to the particular circumstances and history of the society in which it operates. Accordingly, its scope for action and the constraints on it vary from country to country. The societal and legislative tasks of social work vary and for this reason the qualifications required of those in the profession vary as well. Social work is always context dependent, that is, bound to a particular time and place.

Despite its dependence on context, the core features and objectives of social work are rather uniform when viewed in international perspective (Kananoja 2016, 27-29). The core areas of social work education and professional competency presented in this description are based on the following definition of social work approved by the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW):

Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledges, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.



The core features and objectives of social work are rather uniform when viewed in international perspectives.

In Finland a social worker is the only professional licensed by the social welfare system who is required to have a university-level education. The National Supervisory Authority for Welfare and Health (Valvira) grants, upon application, the right to practice a social welfare profession as a licensed social welfare professional to a person who has completed a master's level university degree. The degree must have included university-level studies in social work as the major subject or the student must have completed major studies or the equivalent in social work in addition to his or her university degree. (Act on Social Welfare Professionals 817/2015, §7; Professional practice rights for social welfare professionals 2017).

The work of a social welfare professional is divided among three responsibilities: social work, social counselling and care. These produce complementary competencies that find application in social welfare practices. Social counselling is the responsibility of graduates of universities of applied sciences who hold a bachelor's degree in social services, and care the responsibility of practical nurses who have completed the relevant qualification in vocational institutions. In the structures and responsibilities of social welfare, social workers have a number of legislatively mandated obligations. These are to provide professional leadership of social work, work with clients, act as experts in addressing the need for social support and services for individuals, families and communities, and monitor and evaluate the efficacy of that support and those services. In addition, social workers are responsible for providing social welfare services and making decisions on social welfare (Act on Social Welfare Professionals 817/2015, §9). Figuring prominently in the work social workers do is their role as public officials and the extensive discretion allowed them in making decisions and in exercising public authority.

In Finland social worker is the only professional licensed by the social welfare system who is required to have a university-level education.

2.2 Research and science as the basis of social work

The three fundamental tasks of universities are research, teaching and social impact. University teaching in all areas is based on well-researched knowledge. As social work education is the only social welfare profession requiring a university-level education, it has a crucial responsibility as regards the creation of research-based knowledge in social welfare and systematic development of the field. Indeed, in international perspective, social work education in Finland has a strong basis in research (e.g. Juliusdottir & Pettersson 2004, 568–570; Karvinen-Niinikoski 2005). Consistent with this focus, one of the tasks of social work education is to give graduates the skills needed to produce research- and science-based knowledge.

In Finland social work education takes the form of a broad-based degree in the social sciences. The programme leading to qualification as a social worker consists of a bachelor's and master's degree in the social or political sciences in which social work is the major subject. The scope of the degree is 300 credits and it is designed to be completed in five years. The bachelor's and master's degrees include 200 credits of studies in social work as the major subject; graduates complete 30 credits of this total through a placement in practice education, which includes theoretical studies.

In addition to the studies for the major, the degree programme comprises a minor, as well as courses in research methods, languages and other subjects. The degree programme as a whole has been designed to provide students with sound skills and a broad-based education. The studies offered as minors play a key role in the programmes, as they allow students to complement their studies in the major and pursue themes reflecting their particular interests and the direction they may take in working life (The direction of higher education in social welfare 2017, 19).

The degree programme in social work is based on a combination of academic education informed by science and research and learning in a working life context. The aim of the education is to give graduates sound overall theoretical and scientific competency and research skills as well as to equip them to successfully function in what is an expert profession. Students draw on research knowledge and theory to familiarize themselves with the social phenomena present in clients' everyday lives, the effectiveness of services and interventions and social impact. A thorough knowledge of scientific concepts and theories is essential for the development of a professional identity and building the competency required in working life. Upon graduation, those holding a master's degree in social or political sciences have an extensive social scientific knowledge base as well as the basic skills needed to work successfully as a professional social worker and social expert. They also have the skills required to pursue doctoral studies and make a contribution that will further research in the field of social work.

After completion of a master's degree, a social worker may continue studies leading to the licentiate and doctorate degrees. Universities also offer specialization education for those holding a university degree. These are long-term programmes geared to professional development and furthering expertise. Specialization education (70 credits) is offered in four fields within social work.

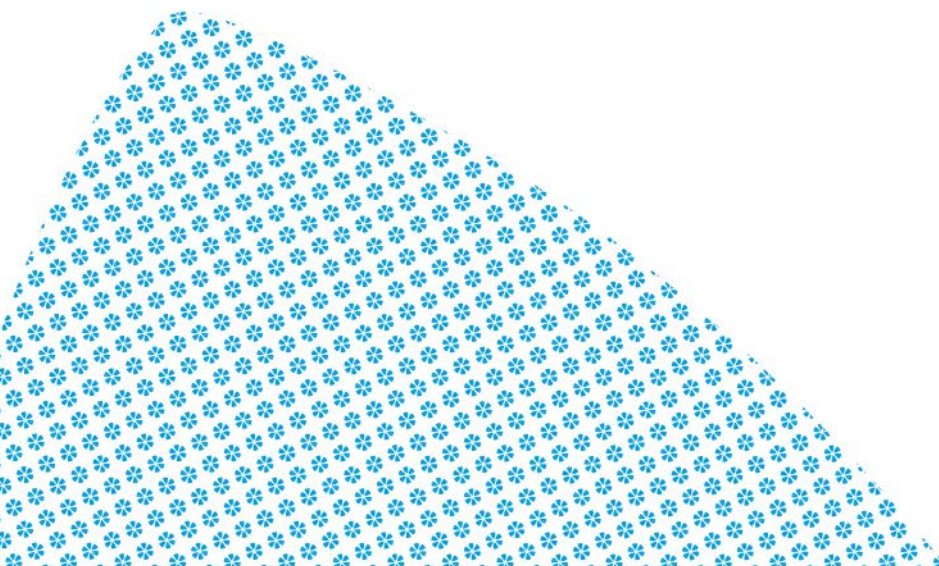


2.3 Learning in working life contexts

One element that figures crucially in the degree programme is the period of practice education, which students complete in working life. The experience is informed and guided by research. The education of social workers requires that courses be arranged in the context of working life. This is a statutory requirement (Government Decree 794/2004, §15). Cooperative relationships between the universities and professionals in the field are well established, as this work has been developed systematically over an extended period of time.

Learning through practice education in working life contexts refers to teaching that adheres to the curriculum and is carried out in practice in the field, in teaching and research centres and when seminars, simulations and lectures are offered that are vital forums for teaching the professional skills required in social work. The studies making up practice education are integrally connected with the theoretical and scientific teaching in the subject. In this module, professional practices, theoretical knowledge, a research-oriented approach to one's work and knowledge production combine to form a competency in social work that develops in keeping with the principle of cumulative and dialogical learning throughout the student's education (Karvinen-Niinikoski et al. 2007, 36; Tuohino et al. 2012; Paavola 2012). Through interactive relationships in working life, students gain work experience and topics to explore in their theses and researchers acquire data; at the same time, practicing social workers take part in seminars at the university and have opportunities to act as lecturers for a change. Increasingly, efforts are made to integrate experts by experience into education and research.

Both the bachelor's and master's programmes include courses to be completed in working life contexts. In keeping with an agreement made among the institutions in Sosnet, the courses are generally 30 credits in scope and are divided among basic, subject and advanced studies as each university has determined (Tuohino et al. 2012). A variety of course titles are found depending on the university and course, examples being Volunteer Work, Practice I and II, Clinic I and II, Practical Teaching and Counselling, Professional Skills and Client Work Skills and Social Work Placement.



3 Social Work Competency

3.1 Competency Objectives

As Finnish universities are autonomous institutions with regard to defining the content of the programmes they offer, the mechanisms steering their work allow for considerable flexibility. The most important guidelines for what is taught are the competency objectives for the degrees and courses offered; these aims are approved by the university faculties.

Attainment of the competency goals produces a broad-based social scientific expertise for successfully pursuing structural as well as individual-, family- and community-oriented work with clients and acting in the capacity of expert. The objectives are built on the principle of cumulative learning whereby students deepen their knowledge and skills as studies progress, beginning with basic themes and culminating in topics that deepen their expertise.

The sections that follow set out the core competency objectives of the social work degree programme at different levels. These goals reflect the salient content of the teaching at each level as well as the central aims as regards students' knowledge and skills. The teaching given also takes into account programme content designed to strengthen competencies throughout the student's entire degree. These include the ethical principles underpinning social work, the formation of a professional identity and mastery of working methods and research skills.

Basic studies

The central goal of basic studies in social work (25 credits) is that the student should form a conception of social work as a social scientific discipline and a professional activity. The studies focus on the factors affecting wellbeing, the system of services and the fundamentals of scientific research.

The central competency objectives of basic studies are the following. Upon completion of the module, the student:

- is able to situate social work as an academic and scientific discipline and as a national and international practice as well as to grasp the relationship of social work to the other social sciences.
- has a mastery of the basic concepts and foundations of social work and knows the principal areas of research in the discipline.
- is able to examine analytically the environment in which social work operates, the range of functions it has, social deprivation and the system of services.
- is familiar with the ethical principles underpinning the profession and research.
- achieves a basic foundation necessary for building a professional identity and for understanding social problems analytically.
- has a grasp of the foundations of applying and producing research knowledge and understands social phenomena in terms of scientific knowledge.

Subject studies

Subject studies (55-60 credits) are a stage in which the student deepens his or her knowledge of and ability to apply theory, research and practice. The courses focus on the skills, processes and methods needed in working with clients as well as legal issues in social work. The studies also provide a firm grounding in how to analyse and research the phenomena which social work addresses and how to impact these. The subject studies include opportunities for the student to apply skills in producing social scientific research, for example in connection with the bachelor's thesis, and link research to social work practices.

Following completion of the subject studies, the student

- is familiar with and understands inequality, the problems people encounter in different life situations and phases as well as the structural nature of and underlying reasons for these.
- has a command of the basic skills needed for macro-level, structural social work and micro-level, interactive work with clients; he or she also has the capacity, with proper guidance, to apply these skills, to reflect on his or her own abilities in relation to the demands of working life and to develop as an expert.
- is able to analyse clients' situations, determine the appropriate measures and service processes and to apply social work methods.
- has a thorough knowledge of the legal bases of social work as well as the principles underpinning the operation of the social security system and is able to apply these.
- has a mastery of the basic skills required for social scientific research and is able to apply these. He or she has a firm grasp of the bases of scientific, critical and analytical thinking, comprehends the ethical principles underpinning science and research and understands the necessity of working ethically in academic and workplace communities.
- achieves qualification to work temporarily in the profession of social worker.


After completing subject studies and the placement they include, the student has the right under section 12 of the Act on Social Welfare Professionals (817/2015) to work in the profession temporarily, for at most one year. When doing so, the student works under the direction and supervision of a fully qualified social worker.

Advanced studies

After completion of basic and subject studies and the bachelor's degree, the student moves on to complete advanced studies (100-120 credits), which are part of the master's degree. Advanced studies focus on combining the theory and practice of social work and research in the subject as well as strengthening the student's social work expertise through work in which he or she engages with individuals, groups, communities and society at large. The student has the opportunity, for example when doing the master's thesis, to deepen his or her knowledge and skills relating to the special issues of social work he or she has chosen. The focus of advanced studies is on independent mastery of the research process and on developing an ability to combine theory, practice and research knowledge in a range of tasks requiring expertise in social work.

The central objectives of advanced studies are the following. Upon completion of the studies, the student

- is capable of working in demanding professional practices and serving as an expert in multi-actor networks.
- has a firm grasp of the scientific and theoretical foundations of social work and is able to apply these in work with clients and in work as an expert.
- has the capacity to evaluate clients' life situations and needs for support and to work systematically to promote clients' wellbeing.
- has the knowledge and skills needed for structural social work and advocacy work geared to pointing to and dismantling societal practices and legal provisions that create injustice, poverty and disadvantage.
- has the basic skills needed to work as a professional social work manager, the leader of organizations, networks, working groups and a change leader.
- deepens the know-how needed in work with clients and work as an expert through research in a chosen area of social work, in particular the master's thesis.
- is able to carry out the research process successfully from beginning to end, applying his or her knowledge of relevant theory and research methodology and demonstrates his or her capacity for thinking analytically and ethically.
- is able to acquire and manage data independently, draw scientifically sound conclusions, has a command of the techniques of scientific argumentation and is capable of combining theory, practice and research knowledge in a variety of expert responsibilities. The student achieves the knowledge and skills needed to pursue doctoral studies.



The competency objectives reflect the salient content of the teaching at each level as well as the central aims as regards students' knowledge and skills.

3.2 The expertise produced by the degree programme in social work

The preceding section described the objectives of the degree programme in social work at different stages in the education. In progressing through the studies for the bachelor's and master's degrees the student also deepens his or her knowledge and skills, starting from foundational aspects of social work as a scientific discipline and social work practice and culminating in the development of a deeper expertise through theory, practice and research.

The programme produces broad-based knowledge and skills for work with clients and working as an expert at the individual, family, community and societal levels. The underpinnings of the student's expertise are academic skills in applying and producing research-based knowledge and in the ability that these processes foster to think critically and from a variety of perspectives. In Finland, completion of the degree programme in social work provides general qualification to work as a social worker. During one's studies, the aim is to gain solid expertise enabling a master's graduate to work in a variety of professional responsibilities. Those graduating from the programme go to work in a wide range of organizations in the state, municipal and third sectors as well as in the private sector. They also work in a wide variety of workplaces, including social and health centres, hospitals, schools and substance abuse clinics. The background provided by the master's degree in combination with well-planned grounding in the work involved, work placements and further education ensure the expertise required to successfully carry out one's responsibilities in a particular area of social work.

Students who complete a master's degree with advanced studies in social work go on to function not only as social workers but as experts on social issues in research, government, education and development, in managerial and supervisory capacities and in work monitoring and evaluating social impacts.

Social work is a profession whose practitioners work at the interfaces of societal structures, social problems and difficult individual life situations. Their work requires them to analyse problems at the individual, family, community and societal level as well as to identify and promote solutions that will prevent and have an impact on problems. On the one hand, social work involves engaging with clients who require special support and find themselves in difficult life situations and, on the other, social advocacy to improve clients' position and life conditions. At its core social work involves reconciliation of different societal and individual interests in an ethically sustainable manner, defending human rights, strengthening people's social functionality, alleviating suffering and enhancing wellbeing and equality.



Figure 1 below captures the knowledge and skills in social work gained through completion of the social work degree programme. This expertise/knowledge is described in terms of a number of component dimensions. As a rule, social workers need to invoke all of these dimensions simultaneously in their work. In addition to mastery of these components, successful performance of responsibilities might also require expertise in a specialized branch of social work. In practice, the relative importance of the different areas will depend on the type of tasks the social worker is called on to perform and the organization in which he or she works.

Figure 1 *Component dimensions of the expertise gained in social work education.*



The degree programme in social work can be seen as equipping the student with the following dimensions of expertise:

- **Social scientific expertise:** Part of the core of the knowledge and skills produced by the degree programme is societal expertise. The essence of this is a rational view of the human being as part of a society, its communities, institutions and systems. Social workers are capable of analysing complex and conflicted human lives and social phenomena. The essential aspect societal expertise is the ability to understand the connections between client situations and society, that is, an understanding of how the phenomena addressed by social work are situated in the relationship between an individual and society.
- **Research expertise:** In Finland social work has been developed on the strength of research, meaning that the expertise created in the course of the degree is based on theoretical and research knowledge. A social worker's knowledge and skills have their foundation in scientific thinking and reasoning, the acquisition of knowledge, argumentation and academic writing. The degree programme equips graduates with the skill needed to analyse and produce research knowledge on the phenomena that social work addresses, clients, practices and the system of services as well as the impact of their work.
- **Ethical expertise:** A crucial feature of social work is that it is firmly grounded in values and expertise relating to values and ethics underpins all of the activities which social work encompasses. Essential to ethical expertise is the reflection on professional power as well as an understanding and consideration of the sensitive, personal and human nature of the phenomena encountered. Social workers are required to have an ethically robust command of interactive and psychosocial work as well ethically sustainable professional discretion in demanding client situations.




At its core social work involves reconciliation of different societal and individual interests in an ethically sustainable manner, defending human rights, strengthening people's social functionality, alleviating suffering and enhancing wellbeing and equality.

- **Interaction expertise:** The phenomena addressed in social work are situated in the relationships between people and in communities, which requires that social workers have expertise with regard to interaction, intercultural communication and the constructed nature, values and ethics relating to social reality. The principle of engaging with clients in a humane fashion is the foundation of interaction expertise. Social workers have the skill to encounter difference, difficult and demanding situations in a manner that is ethically sustainable and seeks to dismantle problems.
- **Working methods expertise:** Client work requires a solid command of methods, in particular the skills needed to carry out an assessment. This means a comprehensive evaluation of the situation, psychosocial support for those involved, offering any interventions and social support deemed necessary and social advocacy.
- **Legal expertise:** One of the cornerstones of social work is a sound knowledge of fundamental and human rights as well as a commitment to furthering and safeguarding their realization. Social workers should be familiar with the legal environment of their work and their role as people exercising public authority. Social work requires a thorough knowledge on the legal decisions made as part of client processes. It is a social worker's responsibility to ensure his or her client's legal protection and to assess the impact of the legal decisions made as part of his or her work.
- **Service system expertise:** A social worker must have an understanding of the links between risks that materialize in life situations and the phenomena which social work addresses. He or she must then be able to work with this in the context of service system and develop approaches and a system that will meet clients' future needs. In practical client work, it is essential that a social worker have comprehensive command of the information on the system of services and benefits and that he or she be able support his or her client in accessing the system of services and making use of it in a manner required by the client's life situation.
- **Development and change expertise:** Social change gives rise to social issues that call for innovative solutions. A social worker has expertise in dealing with change, a capability based on his or her analytical and research-based understanding of the service system, legislation and complex life situations. The profession requires a readiness to develop innovative, forward-looking working methods, procedures, working methods and service processes and to network with partners to develop new approaches. Knowledge and skills in the areas of development and change have an integral connection not only to structural social work but also to research expertise.
- **Leadership expertise:** After completing a master's degree, social workers are capable of managing and directing client processes. In this capacity they take primary responsibility for client situations and, in particular, for providing comprehensive assessments. In addition to applying the profound knowledge and skills that handling client situations and client processes demands, social workers are required to have a solid mastery of the processes and content areas pertaining to management, finances and administration.
- **Structural social work expertise:** One distinctive feature of social work is that it requires social workers to be able to identify the processes and problematic situations in society that lead to exclusion and deprivation. This work calls for skill in producing knowledge on these problems and to propose solutions to them. Structural social work requires an understanding of the ways in which the political system functions and how to influence these. Social workers bear a responsibility for improving the situation of the less fortunate members of society. Structural social

work often involves social advocacy, with social workers required to have the skills to contribute to social development as well as to engage in the public debate on the function, aims and scope for action of social work and on the social position of clients.

The responsibilities arising from legislation and practices can be handled with sound professional skill when a social worker has sufficiently profound understanding of all the dimensions of expertise. These responsibilities include the assessment of the need for services, cooperation among multiple actors, management of client processes and social work, decision making, ensuring that fundamental rights and the legal protection of clients are realized and structural social work. Other areas of responsibility include producing knowledge on social inequality, welfare deficits the conditions for and obstacles to a good life and the dissemination of knowledge to political decision makers. Drawing on the knowledge and skills gained as part of their profession, social workers must be able to form a view of how to develop and manage social work. The knowledge and skills social workers acquire through their basic education should provide them with the capacity to develop their expertise in what is a constantly changing working environment.



The knowledge and skills social workers acquire through their basic education should provide them with the capacity to develop their expertise in what is a constantly changing working environment.

4 Conclusion

Social welfare and health care today are undergoing rapid changes, ones impacting not only the environment in which this work is done but also the structure of the services it is designed to deliver. Under such circumstances efforts to ensure all citizens wellbeing, participation and a secure social position heighten the need for professionals to have a broad education, social scientific understanding enabling analysis of complex wholes, and sound research skills.

The report points out that social work has responsibility for coordinating the production of research knowledge and the development of services. This task makes clear the need for university-level social work education firmly grounded in science and research. The future will see a heightened need for social workers' knowledge and skills and the contribution they can make to advocacy and adjusting to change as well as to rapidly changing legislation, leadership, the economy, technology and demonstrating impacts. It is becoming increasingly important to invest in basic research and in producing anticipatory and evaluative knowledge that can inform sustainable welfare policy choices. In other words, the aim is to create a capacity for innovation and development. The strength of expertise in social work in the future will be its establishing itself as both a discipline in the social sciences and as a field of expertise on social issues that is integrally attuned to the deprivation and malaise present and experienced in society and has research-based knowledge that may offer solutions to problems associated with these conditions.

The foregoing sections have set out how the core of a social worker's competency lies in his or her command of the knowledge and skills needed to assess a person's social situation as a whole as well as how he or she is able to cope on a daily basis and the resources required when encountering crises and difficulties. Special expertise on social issues includes the skills needed to examine individual-level problems with an awareness of the wider context of macro-level phenomena and structures, such as legislation and the system of services and benefits. In this respect, social work's remit extends to locating causes of social disadvantage and working to eliminate them. Indeed, expertise on social issues requires social workers to have the capacity to examine social problems in individual and societal perspective simultaneously.

With the changes that have occurred in the provision of services, social workers are increasingly called upon to work as members of multi-actor and multidisciplinary working groups, a role in which they examine holistically the situations their clients face. Where social and health care services produced are integrated, it is important to recognize the differences between, and the differing remits associated with the professions in the two sectors. One requirement for working successfully with other professionals is a strong professional identity and clearly defined responsibilities; however, such collaboration also requires flexibility and respect for other professionals' knowledge and skills and their work. Integration does not mean a blurring of the roles and responsibilities of professions but a coordinated and timely addressing of a client's needs.

In collaborative efforts between different professional groups, a social worker has responsibility for directing the client process and for the official decisions taken and solutions adopted. In this capacity, a social worker exercises public authority stemming from his or her status as a professional and public



official in order to promote his or her client's wellbeing and interests in society. In relation to other responsibilities in the area of social welfare, social work highlights the importance of a scientific foundation for the work and research skills but also sound knowledge and skills in the areas of structural social work, working methods and social justice. The special nature of social work in comparison to other master's degrees in the social and behavioural sciences lies in the expertise it provides in client-orientedness and social advocacy.

In developing social work, it is crucial to acknowledge the differences in knowledge and skills between groups of professionals and to be able in practice to tap to the full the expertise available. This represents a substantial challenge for the future but also an opportunity to achieve an integration of expertise and seamless cooperation that best serves the interest of the client. In the years to come, efforts should be made to continue the work done in this present report, among other forums, to clarify the responsibilities and competency social work encompasses and the direction the profession should take in the changing environment in which it operates. As social work is demanding and ethically challenging expert work, it is important to recognize that a clear definition of responsibilities and mastery of the knowledge and skills that the profession requires contribute to wellbeing in the workplace. Accordingly, in the future it will be crucial to highlight practitioners' obligation to undertake further education. This means focusing on opportunities for solid and accessible induction and training in the workplace as well as supplementary, further and specialization education offering social workers opportunities to deepen and update the competency they achieved when completing their university qualification. Competency and expertise are life-long undertakings; success requires a firm commitment on the part of social workers themselves, universities, working life and educational policy as well as a robust vision of the changes to be encountered in the future.

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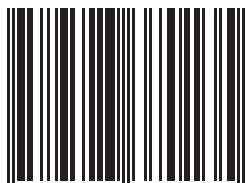
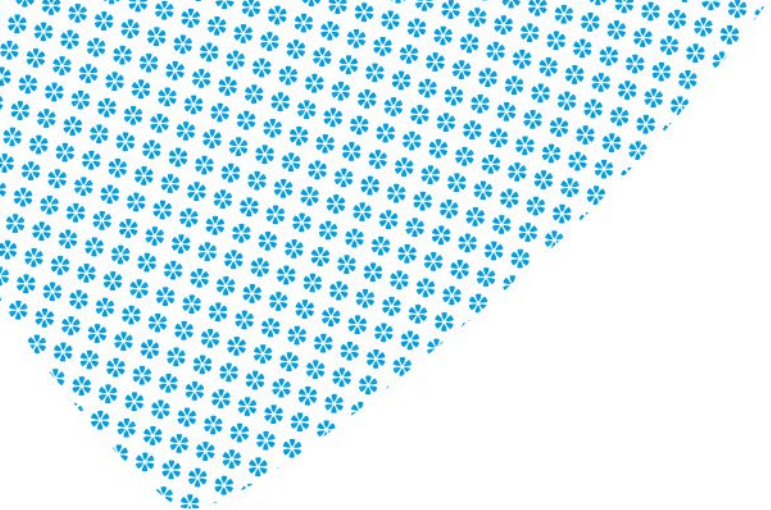
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