



Common Social Work Education Standards in the Nordic Countries - Opening an Issue¹

Sigrun Juliusdottir and Jan Petersson, University of Iceland and University of Kalmar

The article analyses the option of common Nordic Standards for social work education in these countries. The option is viewed through the lens of trends in education in the different countries. In the article the notion of an Integrated Field Model is used to indicate the starting point for a common model of education. This model covers the field characteristics of Denmark and Norway and their current move towards a more research-based education. It also covers the research characteristics of education in Finland, Iceland and Sweden and their current move towards a new field connection based on research-oriented education. Some thoughts on international requirements on comparability and compatibility in this setting are addressed in the final section.

Introduction: The World, Europe and the Nordic countries

“A smaller and smaller world”, “globalization”, “europeanization” are some of the concepts which make citizens sometimes quite confused about their goals and values. This applies both to personal and professional life. There are both pros and cons in the increasing varieties and possibilities in education, in the labour market and in private life. In the midst of all diversities there is an increasing request for compatibility and comparability of organizations and connecting units. In this process there is also a call for a more critical examination of the quality of higher education and its competitiveness internationally as well as with other professional categories in the home country. The need for a more globally comparable education becomes more urgent and it motivates a critical inspection of how things are in the home country and their coherence to the closest neighbour countries, especially those who identify themselves as a special cultural area, like the Nordic countries do. This brings a new and more challenging task to organizers and co-operating committees, which deal with the education and training of social workers.

This examination should, however, have a critical tone. It is recognized that in the “global” world modern ideas travel very fast. They arrive as “super standards” that generally are not questioned, since they are viewed as keeping up with modernity in the organizations where they are incorporated as Kjell Arne Røvik (1998) points out. It is unwise not to adopt them. Many of us have probably witnessed how arguments that seemed to be local in our own country, have interpreters in other countries as well. Ideas come up, but it is hard to know how and from where. This is the feature of the super standards. Røvik argues that they also tend to become outmoded at an increasing pace. This has to be recognized in sorting out

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durable standards and solutions. Those based on broad experiences of shortcomings are generally more interesting to examine carefully than those based solely on ideological modernity. It is also recognized that modern authorities and statutory bodies in a more typical sense behave as organizations with the development of the 1990s. One aspect of this is a concern with the outward image of excellence rather than the inward performance. It includes the formation of grand goal documents (Brunsson et al. 1998). This is further accompanied by an increasing adoption of “new public management” reforms, which further tend to turn the perspective towards measurement and outcome rather than the qualitative side of what is going on within an organization (Christensen et al. 1999). “Standards” is one of the most powerful building blocks in this process of becoming alike and should also out of this concern be viewed in a sceptical manner.

This paper deals with the issue of common, compatible Nordic standards in Social Work Education. By standards we are primarily referring to a model for quality of content. In this meaning standards imply criteria for requirements rather than fixed forms or narrowing restrictions. Structures such as the educational context, compatible credit system and programme constructions are seen more as frameworks or means than goals. The pertinent question examined is whether the Nordic countries can be seen as an entity in this area. The way we approach this is to examine the external/international demands and find a possible common ground in the Nordic countries that could serve as a platform for working out these standards. As will be seen, our way to discuss this platform is through tracing trends in the Nordic countries and argue that standards should be worked out through the lens of what in this paper is called the Integrated Field Model. This model integrates research and field demands in a way that suggests a durable construction for standards.

The development of the new context

According to Sven Hessle (2001), the development of professional social work can be divided into four epochs; 1880-1950 shapes the period of “the roots”, the origin of a professional approach when attempts were made to construct and define own concepts and methods. The 1950s-1970s may be seen as the period of conflicts. The social workers fought between themselves about the question of working with individuals or on social matters, community work and politically, viewing these two lines as incompatible or antagonistic. During 1970-1990 the question of loyalty to the grass-roots ideology or professional, scientifically-based education (also argued as antagonistic views) came into focus. Social work was defined as a semi-profession and there were enormous differences in the quality of the education and the status of social workers in the international perspective. Since the nineties social work is developing towards a more holistic profession, formulating definitions of common main goals and academic standards in education in the different countries and cultures. Now, in this fourth epoch, it seems of utmost importance for the profession to acknowledge the different views, the different approaches and methods thus guaranteeing solid professional standards. We will later substantiate the view that the earlier mentioned Integrated Field Model meets these requirements.

Several Nordic researchers of the development of social work have stressed the importance of acknowledging the pluralistic nature of social work as well as both the generalist view and the need for expert knowledge in the age of competencies (Juliusdottir 1999). Stressing the connection between theory and practice, policy and research is the other cornerstone for social work to build on today (Egelund 1990; Uggerhøj 1995; Egelund 2000; Juliusdottir 2000 a; 2000 b; Karvinen et al. 1999).

The different associations of social workers in the United States, in Canada and even in England have formed their special interest groups and associations around certain expert fields or specialist areas based on certain standards. Examples of these are social work in schools, social work in court, clinical/health social work, etc. (Encyclopedia of Social Work 1987).

It is now obvious - and actually may be a question of survival - to look at the diversities within the profession as a strength. Sven Hessle expresses this similarly:

“Also, social work is contextual by nature, and this calls for an unbiased attitude and a constant willingness to negotiate in a range of a conflict-filled area of tension” (Hessle 2001, 4). Only such a standpoint will bring social workers an acknowledged and respectable status among other disciplines in the universities, among other professional categories and clients in the field and in society. It is in this context that the organizers of education have to work. To state this in another way: There are few doubts that an “intelligent” trade-off between field and research demands as well as between the specialized and the generalized profile is at the heart of the issue.

Europe and the Nordic Countries

The Ministers of Education in the European countries (including the Nordic countries, NC) have during the last decades been studying the structure and development of European higher education, stressing the universities’ central role in developing European cultural dimensions. The Sorbonne declaration from May 1998 emphasized the creation of the European area of higher education “as a key way to promote citizens’ mobility and employability and the continent’s overall development”. This perspective was already expressed in their Bologna Magna Carta Universitatum of 1988 (Ministers of Education in the European Countries 1999). There it was also stressed that European (incl. Nordic) universities’ independence and autonomy ensure that higher education and research systems continuously adapt to changing needs, society’s demands and advances in scientific knowledge. This last sentence applies markedly to the basic assumptions of social work.

The work of the group of European Ministers mentioned above has been a process of describing, analysing and comparing higher education in general. This includes a project of providing an outline and overview of learning structures and a comparative analysis of the different systems embodying these structures. On the basis of this it has made recommendations for constructing a European area of higher education. The purpose should be achieving greater *compatibility and comparability of the educational systems* (incl. NC). Another important objective in this connection is increasing the European countries’ international competitiveness. It is seen as necessary to ensure that the vitality and efficiency of any civilization can be measured by the appeal that its culture and education has for other countries.

More concretely, the co-ordination of the European policy is thought to be implemented in reaching the following objectives in the new decade: (a) an adoption of a system of *easily readable and comparable degrees*, (b) an adoption of a system based on two main cycles, *undergraduate* (3-4 years, depending on the kind of study) *and graduate* (master of 1-2 years/ doctor), (c) an adoption of a *system of credits* - ECTS system - instead of expressing length of time and contents of study in terms of years or semesters making it more exchangeable between countries, (d) promotion of *mobility* for students, teachers, researchers and administrative staff. In this connection the co-ordination or the *organization* (starting and

ending) of the academic studies in semesters is facilitating, (e) promotion of co-operation in quality assurance, (f) promotion of European (incl NC) dimensions regarding: curriculum development, inter-institutional co-operation, mobility schemes and integrated programmes of study, training and research.

These general demands are valid for all fields of education and a factor that must be dealt with also within social work education. There are also demands made for the social work education more specifically. In 1996 the *Council of Europe* presented a report of the analysing work of *The Steering Committee on Social Policy* which had worked on *The initial and further training of social workers taking into account their changing role* (Council of Europe 1996). Initially the authors of The Steering Committee stress the overall importance of empowering social work education in a changing Europe where “the pace of social and economic change has suddenly accelerated from a leisurely jog to a sprint. Inevitably, many of those who cannot keep up with the suddenly accelerated pace, or who are trampled down by it, end up in contact with the profession of social work. That is as it should be: because that is one of the primary reasons why this profession exists. Yet, the profession of social work is not a variety of magic; often its practitioners and those who educate them are nearly as disoriented - or even frightened - as anyone else. In fact, sometimes social workers are even more disoriented and frightened than the general public, because they experience more quickly than most the gap between social reality and the institutional and financial arrangements which society provides to deal with it”.

In various parts of this report the modern role of the profession is outlined and it is stressed how it requires a high quality of theoretical education as well as practical training, taking into account the dedication to the human rights dimensions of social interaction and a special sensitivity to problems of minorities. Also the self-understanding of social work as a profession and science must be another key factor. The Steering Committee states: “Social work thus is and should be further developed as an integral part of the social sciences and as a cutting edge of social policy. This should be adequately reflected in its status in society and the recognition awarded. One key dimension of establishing the role and status of social work in societies is to identify the place of the profession in educational and academic systems”.

Nordic Social work Education – many faces and phases

It is argued within the IASSW (IASSW/IFSW 2002) that calling for *minimum* standards might lead to a development that lessens ambitions and makes them maximum standards. It is therefore feasible that the term *minimum* be left out altogether. The debate within the IASSW also clearly advocated that the general document to be produced by the IASSW should be accompanied by national or regional standards. The document should serve as a means for global compatibility, but not as a means for oppression of national and regional diversity. This proposal leads us to the normative cause of standardization from the Nordic horizon. The ideas on standardization brought forward here are based on the tracing of traits and trends developing in the Nordic countries

In the report from the Steering Committee mentioned above the similarities and diversities of the education of social work in 24 countries was described and analysed. A striking gap was found between the different countries. All the Nordic countries were included in the study and it may be surprising for the European reader to see how different they are when compared, although belonging to the same Nordic welfare society and a closely related cultural area. This will also be evident in the coming presentation of traits and trends in the Nordic countries.

The NASSW/NSHK (The Nordic Association of Schools of Social Work/Nordiska Socialhögskolekommittéen) initiated in 1964 has the main purpose *to enhance the education of social work in the Nordic countries* through co-operation and exchange of experience and educational programmes. This Committee has worked with the opening question of comparability of the education for some time². This paper, which partly is a result of the committee's discussions, is an attempt to present some aspects and arguments for working at a more integrated or even standardized structure of social work education in the Nordic countries. From a more specific point of view, this paper is aimed to specify a platform for discussions. Much of this concerns the problem of commensurability between a vocationally based orientation with ties to universities and an academic orientation with ties to the field. This further relates to the issue of a choice between educating either specialists or generalists. Looking at social work education through all its stages (BA, MA, PhD and continuing education of other kind) we conclude that it is superfluous to discuss such dichotomization. We should instead understand that there are different ways in which social work education in its broadest meaning is in fact attaining this.

The focus will now be aimed at the following three parts. The first part tries to summarize some traits and trends in the Nordic countries. It ends up with the notion of an Integrated Field Model as a point of departure from which standards can be discussed. Next, the arguments put forward are related to what is said more specifically in the international debate on social work education. It is argued that when these claims are examined they can be used to unfold some concrete dilemmas that have to be solved even if the broad lines in the Integrated Field Model is held on to as a common platform.

Traits of a development

There is no coherent model of social work education in the Nordic countries, as we already have pointed out. Although belonging to the same regional and cultural area the development, policy and current status of the schools are quite different. The basis for these differences has of course historic roots and socio-cultural explanations. These factors, however, are not the issue here. Instead we look at differences as current facts. A two-fold split is used to provisionally differentiate between the current positions of education for social workers in the Nordic countries.

The education in Denmark and Norway is oriented towards vocational training and is less than 4 years long. The teaching staff with scientific skills is mainly recruited from the social sciences with specialized competence from the diversified non-social work departments. The overwhelming majority of the teaching staff has practiced social work (in the Norwegian case more than 90% of the present social work lecturers have more than three years of field experience as social workers) and the overwhelming percentage of these also present merits of post-graduate educational training. We could characterize it as the *Specialized Field Model* of education when describing its orientation. Its main benefit is the multi-dimensional approach to special social problems and phenomena. The education is positioned outside the university system or with loose ties to it. The academic teaching staff face the demand to encompass knowledge of social work into their other academic profiles as political scientists, sociologists etc. The professionals with acquired field knowledge have a strong position in the model and

² In the committee there is a certain agreement on factual developments, but there is a disagreement on the valuation of these. There is a sceptical attitude towards academization among the Danish and Norwegian representatives and a sceptical attitude towards "political" influence among the Icelandic, Finnish and Swedish representatives.

the view of research is to tie it close to fieldwork, where normative issues are often raised. At the same time the connection to research is made secondary to the field relevance of the education. In this model the teachers are in the first place teachers of social work and then (possibly) become researchers. The relation to the field is basically a bottom-up perspective and its demands on the curricula are pronounced and discussed from this perspective.

In contrast to this model Finland, Iceland and Sweden could be positioned under the *Integrated Research Model*. This indicates that they are leaving the traditional model. Such education shows some other distinct features. Education is tied more closely or belongs to the university system and the academic emphasis is stronger. This is also shown in the length of study, which is positioned more clearly in relation to the length of academic career programs (BA, MA etc). This educational model is striving at, and in some cases already attaining, an identity in its own academic subject Social Work. In this model teachers are to an increasing extent recruited on the basis of their academic merits in social work (not other academic disciplines). To the extent that the traditional social sciences subjects are relevant to education the demand on the teachers goes the other way around, i.e. skills in social work have to be extended to skills in sociology, political science, etc. In this model lecturers are in the first place researchers, or experts in some core areas of social work, and secondly teachers. The relation to the field is turned around to become more top-down. This should be understood partly through the idea of academic freedom (not meeting certain needs), and also from a more sceptical view towards the demands from the field for normative research – the norm rather becomes a demand for critical research³. This has led to new challenges to the processing of experiences of field practice.

Also the teachers with basically field knowledge in the education are meeting increasing demands of having academic merits above their graduation as socionoms⁴ and the formal demands on new teachers move away from merits of knowledge and skills in practical social work to knowledge and skills in theoretical social work. While the former model had the ideal of professionally-focused work penetrating education, this model finds its rationale in education penetrating professionally-focused work.

This can be summarized in the following stylized way:

³ A typology is characterized by drawing stylized distinctions. This means that when we talk of this model as based on critical thinking, this is a word that adheres to an academic approach. It does not say that critical thinking is not a feature of the Specialized Field Model. Nor can we say that the looser connection to the field means “a priori” less knowledge of issues relevant to the field in the Integrated Research Models. The typology however suggests some differences in the starting points in education – no more than that.

⁴ Socionom is the professional title for social worker in Finland, Norway and Sweden.

The Specialized Field Model	The Integrated Research Model
<i>Education profile</i>	<i>Education profile</i>
Vocational – BA	University degree – BA/MA/PhD
Shorter	Longer
Personal development	Academic training
Specific job positions	Broad work enrollment
Linked with other programs	Specific
Teachers → researchers	Researchers → teachers
<i>Relation to field</i>	<i>Relation to field</i>
Bottom-up	Top-down
Useful	Critical
Friendship	Mutual scepticism
<i>Relation to government</i>	<i>Relation to government</i>
Labour market demand - Planning	Academic autonomy - Freedom

This model approach is of course a stylized one. The limitations of reality face elements of both models. Still there are some insights to be gained from sketching such sharp contours. This is further the case since we firstly believe that general demands for change in Finnish, Icelandic and Swedish education have been in the direction of an Integrated Research Model. Much of these dynamics have been caused by the search for a core of social work as a major subject, which has been a strong demand within research. The importance of autonomous research in social work is emphasized by a number of those Nordic researchers and educational administrators who have written about the professional development of social work, its identity and differentiation from /cooperation with other disciplines (Nygren 2000; Jakobsson 1995; Juliusdottir 1996, 2000).

We can further note that the other two countries Denmark and Norway are showing signs of breaking away from the old model and moving towards the other model, with increased demands for research affiliation. However, a process approach indicates primarily that shifts in models are always done at a specific time under specific circumstances and that a shift at a later point may imply omitting to copy less successful parts in the early movers' design. This opens the door for a new analysis of what is and ought to go on, with steps that are both alike and non-alike.

Let us first sketch out some specific advantages of the two models before we proceed to this issue:

The Specialized Field Model

High legitimacy in the professional field.

Focus on the student's personal development.

Students' acquired abilities directly useful to specific social work positions.

The Integrated Research Model

Critical and theorized outlook on social work from an autonomous position.

Improved professional status and increased capability of taking part in debating social issues.

Moving towards a better paid profession.

Looking at these points they, certainly to some extent, should not be seen as antagonizing features in a combined education/research model for Social Work. Rather they comprise the essential features of an idealized model. Let us provisionally call it the *Integrated Field Model*. This model is at the center of some trends that can be used as the common platform. Using the term *integrated* model relates to the fact that the move towards a coherent platform of Social Work as an academic base, and skills of the academic professionals as well, is a key word for curriculum development. The notion of integration here is used to subsume the research orientation. The use of the term *field* model suggests that a high legitimacy in relation to the field is important – a relation that the Specialized Field Model should not lose and the Integrated Research Model to some extent has to re-conquer.

	Social sciences	Social work
Field	Denmark Norway	
	Integrated Field Model	
Research		Finland Iceland Sweden

This brings us to place the Integrated Field Model at the middle point in the chart above. It leaves us with two different challenges for the member countries. For Denmark and Norway it demands that a *reflexive academization* take place. The term reflexive suggests that what is brought in from the Integrated Research Model should be questioned and evaluated thoroughly in the process of breaking up. One example that this process is already on its way

is given in Norway. Through his article “The Struggle around the Identity of Social Work” professor Pär Nygren (2000) initiated a debate on identity and research trying to convey that a platform for social work research should be formulated in Norway⁵.

On the other hand Finland and Sweden might have to redefine their relation to the field and make a partial retreat. Let us talk of this process as a process of *responsive cooperation*. This new trade-off positioned in the middle should be seen not only as an idealized version but also as a realistic apprehension of ongoing trends in education; the most modern ones. It is also close to actual trends seen in all of the Nordic countries, however, being initiated from different positions. Today words like *evidence-based* social research and *knowledge-based* social work (a modern concept in the Integrated Research Model) as well as *competence-based* education (modern concept in the Specialized Field Model⁶) unfold new closer ties between research and the fields which are at the core of the Integrated Field Model as it is defined here. This meets the demands of the Steering Committee (p. 4 above) for “a high quality of theoretical education as well as practical training”.

But it is just not evident in a new discourse and through the rhetoric. A new cooperation between research/education and the field is a dominant feature of changes taking place in the Nordic countries in a sort of corporatist model. The foundation of the Nordic FORSA⁷ collaboration which now has been established in all the Nordic countries may be seen as a catalyst in the development of a common scientific platform. Its conjoint research seminars have served as a forum for highlighting fruitful endeavours and various research activities. Further, the Nordic Forsa serves as a meeting place for researchers and practitioners, thus empowering a more theoretically-based professional identity in Nordic social work.

A characteristic feature of the development of social work education in Finland is the belief in institutionalized coordination— within the education system as well as in relation to the field. This is seen, for example, in the establishment of SOSNET - a network for collaboration between the universities in, for example, granting and coordinating the different specializations in the PhD and licentiate programs. As to the relation to field work a new concept is brought in through the building up of so-called Competence Centers. The establishment of these centers is the result of an investigation initiated by the Social and Health Care Ministry in 1999. The first nine centers (one Swedish speaking) already constructed have been economically favoured and are now rapidly developing. The centers will, in their aim to tie practice closer to research and education, offer both appraisals of public programs and additional professional training as a development of practice teaching— also on a clinical basis. This development is also seen in Denmark and Norway. In accordance with suggestions in a recent evaluation of the Danish social work education the Danish Ministry of Education acknowledged in 2002 a reform including *inter alia* an extension of the study programme from 3 to 3 1/2 years with social work as a core subject qualifying for a Bachelor degree. The education in connection with the Ministry of Education (Social Ministry) in Denmark is also planning for a second stage platform to be worked out. This is to be coordinated through Centers for Further Education (CVU). These centers should be multi-disciplinary across the social, health and pedagogical sciences. The centers will open the door

⁵ Nygrens article was followed by contributions from Solem & Walloe (2000), Oltedal (2000), Wahlin-Weihe & Qureshi (2001), Hansen (2001) and Fossestoel & Nyhus (2001).

⁶ This is fetched from a program sketch from the school in Utrecht, the Netherlands.

⁷ FORSA is Forskning i Socialt Arbete (Social Work Research).

for the schools to join the academic environment and speed up the process of acquiring research competences in building up expertise within social work. The CVUs besides forming a new dialogue and solution with new partner, also should be viewed as a part of Danish reflexive academization.

The latest evaluation of social work education in Sweden showed reflections around a move towards the Integrated Field Model. It was stated: "In contrast to what is often brought up as a critique of the social work programs the evaluation does not indicate a lack of scientific knowledge or familiarity with relevant research as a feature of the programs. *Rather, the professional aspects are the critical points*" (our translation). More precisely, the contents of the education are directed towards 'personal development' and self-awareness, and philosophical and ethical reflections should be developed further. Furthermore, a new social work experimental education entity is planned in Sweden, where the ties between local communities and the education should be very close, also as regards research. In Iceland a four year social work study program is situated at the University of Iceland. It is closely linked within the faculty of social sciences but constructed as an autonomous core subject. It has strong research orientation but linked (through formal contracts) with the field (Juliusdottir et al. 2000 a; 2000 b; 20002). There is an increasing demand from the field to enhance the theoretical knowledge and skill to prepare students for professional responsibility in specialized social work areas⁸.

The idea that there are some strong tendencies for the Nordic education models in the countries to move towards the Integrated Field Model is also strengthened if one recognizes a last strong tendency. This is the tendency of related education programs to line up under the umbrella of a *broadened but enhanced concept of Social Work*. In the Swedish case the more professional education of social care is integrated with the social work education. Social Work is *broadened* as the "parent" discipline, while in Norway the tendency is that Social Work is *enhanced* as the "parent" discipline for the social, pedagogic and health orientations. In the Netherlands, at the school in Utrecht, the education is today positioned as belonging to the Specialized Field Model. This enhancement is now an outspoken strategy. The first point in their strategic development plan talks of a "growing cooperation between several types of education for social professions into a more cohesive social work approach" (van Eijken 2000)⁹. This implies that there is a tendency for Social Work to become a stronger discipline in itself not only through defining a research area but also through a new position in education. This, however, also leads to an example of how far the standardization task should be brought. In this tendency of convergence there seem to be two education models for achieving the new integration with dominance for Social Work. This is seen in Sweden where the social work orientation (as a specific education) and the social care orientation will have a common base (2-3 year curriculum) and end in specific and differing in-depth studies, i.e. an *opening* model, while the school at Utrecht (referred to above) in their strategic plan discuss a *closing* model. The coordination of their three distinct orientations - social work, social pedagogy and cultural and social education - is to be incorporated in their curriculum by starting with the specific (separate programs) and ending (at year 3 and 4) under the broad heading of an enhanced Social Work concept. The two models suggest that at the moment

⁸ This is according to a recent change in the legalisation of authorization in social work, including acknowledgement of four specialized areas in social work.

⁹ This point is highlighted also through a formulation of this kind: "Social Work is no longer the prerogative of professional workers alone, but an essential dimension of the professional outfit of people working in different areas."

there are two trends – either starting with the broad and moving to the specific, or starting with the specific and moving to the broad. Also that the different approaches should be understood by tracing the line-up under Social Work to two different starting points. This meets (though differently) the demands of the Steering Committee (p. 4 above) for “the self-understanding of social work as a profession and science” as a key factor.

The presented reflections are our background for the Nordic standardization issue. Before we continue, however, to look into the standardization issue in more detail it may be helpful to look at the issues through the international standardization debate. This in itself requires a thorough inspection of the issue.

Endeavours to enhance and coordinate social work education

The IASSW has stated requirements to be fulfilled to become a member of the organization (accreditation). In the *World Guide to Social Work Education* from 1973 and from 1984 the requirements of the education programs are listed (IASSW 1973). The program must have the objective of preparation for social work; at least two years; include theoretical as well as field practice; have full-time staff members and full-time students; have a library and available teaching material; students should be selected on the basis of defined admissions requirements related to the academic standards of the program; assessment for a qualifying award should be based on all aspects of students’ performance in the educational program.

From another point of view, the guide also serves the purpose of providing information necessary to identify differences in national educational systems and the patterns and content of social work education. By providing this type of factual information it also facilitates comparative study of the education and of its development over time, and may thus serve as a first basis for creating *general standards* for the education on an international level

The IASSW and CSWE (Council on Social Work Education) now publish on the one hand *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* (EPAS) last edition by CSWE 2001, and on the other hand we have the *Handbook of Social Work Education* (2002). From these publications it is easy to see how strongly (minimum) standards are stressed and although diversities are acknowledged the requirements for quality of any educational programme are described. It should, of course, be recognized that the pressure on schools and their organizations to form an opinion is obvious since external actors certainly have been concerned to make such demands on the education.

As early as 1967 (Council of Europe 1967), The Committee of European Ministers made a resolution on the *Role, training and status of Social Workers* emphasising the importance of: recruiting an increased number of well-trained social workers to meet the new and constantly changing needs; stressing the close interdependence between the function, the training and the status of social workers. In order to fulfil the (at that time) international definition of social work: “*social work is a specific professional activity which aims at favouring a better mutual adaptation of individuals, families, groups and the social environment in which they live, and developing the self-respect and self-responsibility of the individual, utilizing the capacities of persons, interpersonal relations and resources provided by the community*” and practice social work professionally the following recommendations were made: In each country a study of the functions of social workers should be kept under review and further developed; regarding the complexity of human problems and the interdependency of their components it is important to work in contact with other professions; focus should be on the preventive as well as remedial aspects of the different branches of social work as better knowledge (of the

needs and existing means) helps to avoid difficult problems; social workers should be responsible for helping communities to initiate services; social workers should participate in social research; social workers should contribute to the development of social policy, pointing out needs and giving opinions on means designed to meet them; social workers should play a constructive role in the implementation of social measures at both central and local level.

In the quoted resolution there are also a number of recommendations on “The goals of the schools of social work” and how to ensure the quality of the education, i.e. the following: Governments should consider *adequate equipment* for the schools of social work, which possibly calls for training at various levels; curricula should cover the *same body of knowledge*; as practical training is essential. Governments should encourage social agencies and institutions to contribute by providing facilities for ensuring supervised practical training; sufficient number of both full-time and part-time teachers; a period of general training ought to precede *specialization* of social workers; linking advanced training with the universities.

Finally the resolution touches on “The status of social workers”. Among other things mentioned are measures to be taken to protect the respective titles of professionally trained social workers; granting them career advancement and fair salaries; they should enjoy a high degree of independence in performance of the professional functions; the delicate and confidential nature of social work should be recognized and respected by the employer; Governments should favour measures and developments that may enable social workers to take employment in the territory of another European member country.

With regard to the described social changes, it is pointed out that the strong expectations for social workers to solve severe social problems with minimal resources are unrealistic now. Also, it is pointed out, “the usually too heavy caseload is not met with enough professional support and opportunities for further development”. Thus, only social workers who are furnished with efficient and appropriate professional tools, achieving respect and being honoured by the society, are able to deal with the issues that are indisputably on the agenda of post-cold war Europe. This means, the authors claim, that only academic education consisting of solid theoretical knowledge, training in the field and developed self-understanding will make social workers of the future (COE 1967).

Also modern authorities in social work have entered the debate. In a new publication on “International Standard-setting of Higher Social Work Education” (Payne 2001) Malcolm Payne also outlines how social workers can use different means to identify and maintain standards. First, he points out that the tradition in social work of *critical reflection and internal debate* towards improvement makes social work as a profession academically, personally and professionally satisfying. Second, he points out the importance of written requirements or statements about social work in shaping its own standards instead of getting them from elsewhere. Third, as social workers are a part of the local, national and international academic community, being in communication is inevitable, and to some extent in competition, with one another. This means that we cannot stay isolated. We benefit from the interaction and the reflective effects of it, as well as from following the main trends. Fourth, some kind of external scrutiny serves as a support in keeping up standards or keeping sight of acknowledged goals. One way of forming professional standards is working on them as a process, e.g. by examining the students’ process from intake to graduation. What kind of people are admitted to the education program? What criteria do we want them to fulfil at graduation? This can give useful information on how we can learn from this, make developmental justifications and correct the goals.

In the concluding part of the report the following is stressed: At the same time that this is the overall purpose to attain within the framework of the different institutional competences, the full respect of the diversity of culture, languages, national education system and the university autonomy is acknowledged in consolidating the European level of higher education.

The thema groups concluded the work on these ideas with *The Convention of European Higher Education in Salamanca*, March 2001. It can be summed up in the following items that the European universities and their organizations are obligated to consider:

- to renovate and rejuvenate higher education
- redefine it on a European scale
- promote the employability of graduates and mobility of students/staff
- further the compatibility between institutions and curricula
- assure quality on the European Higher Education Level
- be more competitive, not excluding cooperation
- address the specific difficulties of universities in certain parts of Europe.

The discussion about “global qualifying standards” has stimulated further the idea of national as well as regional standards. As the Nordic countries make up a specific region regarding cooperation (i.a. student and staff exchange programs and movement of social workers from one Nordic country to another) and Nordic conventions the idea of common Nordic standards regarding acknowledgement of credits and grades have been initiated in the NSHK. It is in accordance with the encouragements of the IASSW to “facilitate and support the development of standards”. It is also in accordance with the *ultimate purpose* of global standards that is, to ensure human rights and empower clients. A prerequisite for that is the reinforcement of the professional power of social workers through generally improved professional status only attainable through global qualifying standards (Sewpaul 2002).

The Nordic countries towards compatibility and comparability – ending remarks on standards

Above, attention has been drawn to similarities and differences in social work education in the Nordic countries. We have further combined traits with trends in order to sort out where we might find a starting point for discussing compatibility and comparability within this region. The ending stage in such a process would be the formulation of common standards. In the discussion within NASSW/NSHK we have found that we have not yet arrived at this operational stage.

At the moment the education in Denmark and Norway differs from that in Finland, Iceland and Sweden. We have, however, recognized converging developments in all countries, towards what we call an Integrated Field Model as a starting point for the discussion on compatibility and comparability. This development seems to synthesize the differences in the Nordic countries (specialist/generalist education, professional/academic orientation) and it is done through processes of reflexive academization (Denmark, Norway) and responsive corporation (Finland, Iceland and Sweden).

Before turning to the closing remarks on compatibility and comparability we have to clearly state once again that ideas of standardization and variation have to be defined with care. As stated by Malcolm Payne (1997), social work is a socially constructed activity. With that in mind the development of social work education has to allow for a certain amount of regional autonomy and diversity while regarding common professional and ethical standards.

As to *compatibility* the term is closely related to common standards. Compatibility is much associated with free movement of students, teachers as well as professionals. It must, as we see it, be built up around the international definition of Social Work as a basis for curricula and research areas. The idea of compatibility will lead us to discussing similar or coordinated guidelines and procedures for intake as well as common grading scales and common education skills to be promoted. Let us recognize some points. Should quotas for intake of students with basically field experiences be allowed? Where should the threshold for academic requirements be positioned? Are interviews to become a part of a standardized intake procedure? Or if we look at education skills: Should the Nordic schools make use of a coordinated theoretical base for the undergraduate education, i.e. 1-3 basic textbooks be used by all schools? Should a similar basic knowledge of research methods and techniques be established? Compatibility on these last two points will of course enhance the free movement of students on different levels as well as of teachers. But the question is whether these items are to be compatible or only comparable.

Comparability allows for diversity and difference. It requires, however, that differences should be transparent and have basic components of similarity within them. Basic issues such as protection of the professional title and its contents as well as accreditation rules of schools must, if not brought to coherence among the Nordic countries, be clearly stated to allow for comparability. The demand for increased professionalization and academization of social work education in the Nordic countries follows at the moment two different lines of thought. Denmark and Norway at the moment work towards a 3+2 year professionally oriented basic and furthering education as a standard, while Iceland, Finland and Sweden argue for a 4 year academic professional education with strong research orientation. It is probably hard to come to one solution regarding this in the near future, not least because the differences are rooted in different historical contexts. We should, however, understand that differences might also convey similarity. This means that even two prototypes of this kind can contain and should contain some basic components that at least reveal some minimum common standards. It should be noted that the modern instrument of quality assurance will help to serve as a tool in any discussions on standardization, and is a major instrument in allowing for comparability.

The issue of standardization is here to stay and so are operational discussions on compatibility and comparability. It is our hope that this paper can serve the purpose of enhancing the discussion on Nordic standards.

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Author's Address:

Prof Dr Sigrun Juliusdottir / Ass Prof Jan Petersson
University of Iceland / University of Kalmar
Faculty of Social Science / Department of Health and Behavioural Sciences
Oddi Sturlugata / Höskolan i Kalmar
IS-101 Reykjavík / SE-391 82 Kalmar
Iceland / Sweden
Tel: ++354 525 4268 / ++46 (0)480 44 6703
Fax: ++354 552 6806
Email: sj@hi.is / jan.petersson@hik.se

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