

Insider-outsider view of social work curricula in Estonia - should one competence of future social workers be policy literacy?

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1 Introduction

Social work and social policy are, in some countries, identified as separate study areas, both disciplines having their own curricula. Recognising social policy or social work as a separate discipline is connected to the academical tradition that every discipline has a concrete place at university. In hierarchical terms, social policy is seen as an academic discipline and social work as a sub-discipline or sub-sub-discipline within sociology, social policy, social sciences or health (van Ewijk, 2018). In Estonia, social work has its own clearly framed position in academia and applied sciences, but social policy has always either implicitly or explicitly been incorporated into the social work curricula. In other words, social work has its own curricula, and this is directly related to the Estonian National Qualification Framework (Est QF) for Social Work. Social policy on the other hand, is represented in different curricula such as social work, public administration, political sciences, youth work etc. and in only one or two courses.

The history of the social work profession in Estonia dates back to 1935, when social work assistants could obtain a four-year education at the Home Economy Institute. After the second world war broke out and Estonia was occupied, social work education and its professional development was interrupted for 50 years.

During the last thirty years, social policy has always been a part of social work studies. On the one hand because the first programme leaders of the 1990s, when social work studies started again, were in close contact with Finnish and Swedish universities, where social policy had a remarkable role and on the other hand, due to the transition times during which politicians from (local) government, ministers and some parliament members influenced the social work curriculum development process.

In terms of competences, in-depth knowledge about various social policies subfields in Estonia and other welfare states and how social workers can and have to participate in the social policy process are necessary. In addition, academic universities rely on research skills that require excellent awareness and knowledge of the societal and political context. This requires from the social work curricula, in addition to social work core courses, research skills and theoretical knowledge of various disciplines including social policy. Not to mention that social work knowledge competences are influenced by psychology, sociology, law, pedagogy etc. On the other hand, the social work's core element in terms of signature pedagogy (Shulman, 2005) is fieldwork, which in our opinion is tightly connected to the mixture of and to the complex knowledge mentioned above. To conclude, the variety and a number of

competences needed for professional social work are demanding in terms of curriculum development.

Despite this, the social work curriculum in Estonia has not been analysed in terms of how much and how social policy is represented in social work curricula. Are social policy competences merely superficial and students can name welfare states models and become aware of main social problems or is this a truly political literacy that the social work students gain? Competences in social policy have not always been in the focus of social work education. Only over the last fifteen years the political role of social work has been more on the agenda (Mullaly & Mullaly, 2007; Gal & Weiss-Gal, 2013; Ferguson, Ioakimidis & Lavalette, 2018; Pawar, 2019) and even more in terms of teaching social work students (Marston & McDonald, 2012; Schwartz-Tayri, Malka, Moshe-Grodofsky & Gilbert 2020). At the same time, it has been difficult for social work to adapt to the political ideology because neoliberal thinking marginalises the position of social workers in society (Spolander, Engelbrecht, et al., 2014).

Estonia is also a neoliberal country, where social work is perceived as managerialist and compelled by New Public Management. The contemporary history during 1991–2020 of Estonian social work and social policy could be summed up with three major periods: the re-establishment of social work education, practice and legal framework; accession to the European Union combined with the re-structuring of social services and the strengthening of the managerial role of the social work profession; the stabilisation period of the social work profession and a period for new trends such as eco-social work, and community work.

Not only is problem-solving or liberal/neoliberal social work discourse (see Payne, 2014) the dominant feature that influences social work education, the reforms in the educational system itself are too (Michel-Schertges, 2019; for example, special issue in European Educational Research Journal in 2012). The way in which higher education is transformed following the 'Bologna process' challenges the social work curricula even further into making choices between so-called professional courses and interdisciplinary courses. In other words, for social work education the last decade has been a challenge in trying to balance between the continuous efforts to maintain the professional competences in the curricula while at the same time integrating 'interdisciplinarity' and 'internationality' within the curricula.

The other side of the story is the composition of the social work curricula – social policy has a scarce role in social work curricula in terms of compulsory social policy courses. Therefore, we see here two battlefields – the social work curriculum development according to the Est QF for Social Work versus the needs of the students and social work field. *Our study aim is to explore the past and present knowledge of curriculum development, to get an insight into how to continue with social work education.* Analysing the position of social policy courses in the BA curricula and interviewing programme managers we could see the reasons why social policy has played a particular role in the social work curricula.

2 Context for social work curriculum development

Social work has a short, contemporary history in Estonia compared to countries with a history of social work spanning a hundred years. Social work studies started at the higher education level in 1991, when Estonia regained independence and without having had a professional social work education for fifty years. During the first republic and up until 1940, social work education was developed as in all western countries but its development was interrupted during the fifty years of the occupation (Kiik & Sirotkina, 2005). The Soviet regime denied

the existence of any kind of social problems in the Soviet Union and, therefore, there was no official need for a profession such as a social worker nor for their education. Due to this denial period, social work had to be rediscovered, but there was no local educated academic staff, no educated fieldworkers or legislation for social work. Since 1991, social work as an academic discipline has existed at two universities – Tallinn University (TLU) and University of Tartu (UT). At Tallinn University at the BA, MA and PhD level and at the University of Tartu at the BA and MA level.

Even though the nineties are described as very inspiring and based on intensive cooperation with external stakeholders, small distinctive teams were formed inside the country and with international partners. The random process of forming the academic teaching teams, including programme leaders, led to the unplanned process of curriculum development and determined the pathway and the transformation of the social work education and profession over the last thirty years. The randomness of this process itself was inevitable and unavoidable, in Estonia as well as in all other countries which, after the collapse of the Soviet Union (re)established social work education (Lorenz, 2021). The first social work academic educators trained themselves primarily in Finland which belongs to the same language family and is geographically close to Estonia, not to mention the close contacts Estonians and Finns have with each other. Social work and social policy academic education have been influenced therefore mainly by teaching materials from Finland and also from Anglo-American countries. In the nineties, many textbooks in English were given to the universities as charity donations and subsequently it became custom to teach using either books from the United States or from the United Kingdom. We are aware that books from Finland, Sweden and Germany were also represented in the training of social workers, but Anglo-American books played the dominant role. However, these textbooks do not take into account the Estonian society and the context. Even after thirty years, only a limited numbers of textbooks exist which link social work and social policy with Estonian local context and society. Not only do textbooks play a central role in training but also in the motivation and training skills of lecturers and other stakeholders taking part in teaching activities (Schwartz-Tayri, et al 2020). Many social workers in Estonia take part in professional networks influencing the legislation in the field and govern the decision-making processes at local or state level. Alumni of the university are invited to the lecture to supplement the competences needed in social policy and social work.

2.1 Higher education reform and social work

The development of social work education has had several turning points in the 30 years following the collapse of the Soviet Union. We could identify three key processes: the reestablishment of social work education and social work as a profession (1991–2001); the Bologna process (2002–2012); the free, higher education and internal higher education and universities reforms in Estonia (since 2013). These processes have changed the position of social work education, the structure of the curricula and the role of social policy within it.

The first period, after the collapse of Soviet Union, could be described with words and phrases such as (re)discovery of social work education and its profession, developing social protection schemes and legal framework and acquisition of know-how from neighbouring countries, particularly Nordic countries such Finland and Sweden (Mikkola, 2004). In this period, universities had academic freedom in defining social work education and were also seen as experts in social work and social policy with local and international knowledge.

When the Bologna agreement was introduced and implemented (2002), social work education had two levels at UT (BA and MA) and all three levels at TLU. This required substantial cutback decisions from universities and from programme leaders in the list and content of (social work) curricula (Tulva & Pukk, 2005) and four-year education on BA level was replaced with three-year education. The dilemma was to either teach more general courses or to focus more on target-group-based courses.

The third period in higher education in general is associated with free higher education and again with cutbacks. The political concept of “free higher education” in 2013 made universities financially dependent on the state and on the political situations in the country. Prior to this reform, the state financed only a fixed amount curricula and study-places in each higher education establishment. Universities however, had the freedom to provide more curricula and study-places than in the agreement with the state. These curricula and study-places were financed with out-of-pocket payments by the students themselves. Following this reform, the universities lost the right to provide study-places in the Estonian language with out-of-pocket payments by students. The study places with out-of-pocket payments are only allowed for curricula in foreign languages. The second set of cut-back is related to the smallness of Estonia and the substantial decrease in birth-rates over the last 30 years – less study-places are financed in higher education and no duplication. The state finances only study-places for one profession/curricula and only in one university – distinction and confrontation is demanded from universities and curricula. These processes and financial dependencies of universities have led to internal reforms at universities and significantly reduced cooperation between the universities. Thus, universities have reduced the amount of the curricula, but at the same time increased the interdisciplinarity within the curricula.

2.2 Social policy in social work curricula

By reestablishment of social work education, the first question was: is social work an applied science or an academic discipline. There have been two separate paths and over the last 30 years there have been two to three curricula in social work as an applied science while, in two universities, social work education has been developed as an academic discipline. In this study we focus solely on social work as an academic discipline. Similar to other Baltic and CEE countries, the first years of social work education were based on enthusiasm (Matoušek & Havrdová, 2021; Kašalynienė, 2021). The role of teaching social work relied on local educators who themselves had no academic or practical background in social work (at UT educators had their background in sociology and psychology and at TLU educational sciences and pedagogy) and on guest educators mainly from Nordic countries, particularly Finland but also from the Netherlands and the U.S. Over the years, the discussion of social work education has involved the balance between the academic lectures and internships, and social work core courses including social policy vs interdisciplinarity.

The compulsory social policy courses have always been a part of the social work curricula, but UT used the word “social policy” also in the title of its curricula and of its department. The role of social policy has particularly in the rhetoric of TLU, where the MA curriculum was in (2000–2020) titled as “Social work and social policy”. However, the role of compulsory social policy courses at BA level has changed over the years in connection with various educational and university reforms. Opposite to expectations, the ECTS for social policy courses were increased in both University curricula after the implementation of the Bologna agreement (2002). At UT, the role of social policy courses has been stable after the Bologna process (one course, 6 ECTS), although the university reforms have excluded social

work and social policy from curricula titles at BA and MA level from 2015. On the other hand, at TLU the role of compulsory social policy courses has been reduced some years after the Bologna process. From more than 9 ECTS (2003–2016) to 4 ECTS. The reduction could be associated with internal reform at TLU and introduction of obligatory university-wide-courses for every BA level curriculum.

2.3 Social work and social policy in curriculum development process

Academic staff at both universities is small, each employing about ten lecturers. In both universities there are about 200 students in undergraduate studies. Over the years, lecturers at the university have changed slightly. Lecturers and professors trained in psychology, pedagogy, philosophy and other fields have started and created the curricula in social work. These lecturers did not have neither theoretical nor practical experience in social work but, over the years, some new lecturers have joined the universities with many of them having experience in social work and academic career opportunities while working in higher education. It is possible to obtain a doctoral degree in social work at Tallinn University. The University of Tartu has two lecturers with a doctorate in social work and in Tallinn University there are six PhD lecturers including professors in social work.

In developing social work curricula at the universities, there are two types of regulations that frame social work education and which set the borders for professional education in a broader social sciences perspective: higher education standards and the statutes of the university and other documents regulating university level teaching. In terms of professional education, the international definition of social work, the Estonian National Qualification Framework for Social Work and the opinions of employers, students and alumni are considered.

The international and local documents guiding the development of the social work profession have had an influence on the development of social work and social policy curriculum. In 1996, the first Est QF was adopted in close cooperation with academia and practice ending up with the last updated version of the standard in 2020 (Occupational Qualification Standards: Social Worker, 2020). Even if the Est QF did not have a direct impact on the curriculum development process, the intention was to develop practice and theory hand in hand.

In Est QF social work and social policy are becoming more intertwined year after year. The social policy knowledge in Est QF is not only associated with an in-depth understanding of various social political systems such as social insurance, family policy, active labour market schemes etc, in order to do individual case work and/or to inform individuals about social protection systems and services. Crucial for professional social workers are policy practice skills (Wyers, 1991; Gal & Weiss-Gal 2014) and analytical awareness of person-in-environment (Weiss-Gal, 2008) and in-depth knowledge about the various social systems including social services and organisations. So, the social worker should not only be a professional who works in a standardised way with clients/target groups (Sønneland, 2021), but is also an agent in social policy at organisation, community and society level (Kiik, 2006; Krings, Fusaro, Nicoll & Lee 2019). Furthermore, social worker competencies should also involve, for example, advocacy, lobbying, strategic planning of social work and social policy, and analysing individuals and target groups in society (see e.g., Cummins, Byers & Pedrick 2011; Lustig-Gants, & Weiss-Gal, 2016). This requires, from social work education and curricula, an in-depth teaching not only in social policy, ideologies and social protection system but teaching and associating core social work and/or social policy courses with policy practice, diversity and changes in society, contemporary complex social problems, social justice etc.

Apart from Est OF, the universities have to follow the study “Estonian Labour Market Today and Tomorrow” (OSKA, 2018). This document aims to predict how the education and training supply meets the future work needs of different professions and skills. It has stated that the Estonian labour market will need only a limited number of professional social workers in the future and the emphasis should be on educating professional care workers. The care worker education and curricula are part of secondary vocational education and care workers have a separate Est QF. Thus, the study OSKA (2018), does not directly affect the content of social work curricula neither at BA nor MA level but can be associated with the financing of social work education in academia.

3 Theoretical concepts

Living in an information lead society it is important to understand what factors are shaping the development of the profession. Many social work textbook writers (see Thompson, 2015; Payne, 2014) have seen social work as a complex professional activity to define. Regardless of the complexity of social work and social policy there are core components of the profession that determine the professional identity and, according to Shulman, (2005) defined as a signature pedagogy.

Signature pedagogy (Shulman, 2005) refers to the teaching and learning practices in concrete professions, they are the core elements to define the profession in curricula. According to Shulman (2005), for social work education it has been field practice that shapes the character of social work. The curriculum development process is tightly connected with signature pedagogy. In other words, a social worker’s professional competence – how to think, how to perform and how to act is influenced by the training i.e., by curricula. But social work’s signature pedagogies involve central forms of teaching and learning that go beyond the fieldwork as well (Larrison & Korr, 2013). We agree with Larrison and Korr that across the curriculum thinking and performing like a social worker, development of the professional self and characteristic forms of teaching and learning are necessary to socialise social workers into the profession. Even more, within the Estonian context, social work and social policy skills and knowledge are combined not only in forms of lectures and seminars but in field placement as well, forming a whole curriculum.

The coherence between social policy and social work is indicated in Est QF (2020) at the baccalaureate (level 6) and master (level 7). For example, a level 6 social worker should “keep up with future trends: demographic change, community-based services, new technologies, new generations, policy change, silver economy”. At activities level, a “social worker on level 6 plans the development of the field at the local level, making proposals for the development and/or amendment of development plans and action plans.” Social work and social policy linked also in the International Definition of Social Work (IFSSW, 2014) in which it is stated that interventions in social work “transcend the micro-macro divide, incorporating multiple system levels and inter-sectorial and inter-professional collaboration, aimed at sustainable development”. To conclude, signature pedagogy helps us to understand how important the professional reflection and social work specific teaching and learning methods are in the training process. But at the same time, complex claims toward the social work profession unveil how the micro-macro competences are intertwined and why they should both not be neglected in curriculum development.

It has been stated that social workers should be a wise friend to the client (Woodcock & Dixon, 2005). In this context we mean client as an individual, a group, a family, a community or a society. To understand what is going on around us we need to understand the context and

reflect upon it, i.e., how we see, explain and perceive the context, as well as to understand the social political and ideological positions that are influencing and shaping social work (Woodcock & Dixon, 2005,) or approach the environment (Healy, 2014). The best contextual knowledge is demanded because the world is more ambiguous and complex, uncertainty is growing (Woodcock & Dixon, 2005). Therefore, we see that the complexity and the contextualisation (Payne & Askeland, 2008) together with the concept of signature pedagogy, are a starting point for our theory building to analyse the data. Being in the crosswinds of different discourses, social work has been influenced not only by discourses of other disciplines (e.g. pedagogy, politics, sociology, medical sciences, psychology) but also by its own discourses as described by Payne (2014) and amended by van Ewijk (2010) and also by social political discourses such as welfarism, participationism, consumerism, managerialism and professionalism (Asquith, Clark, Waterhouse, 2005) keeping in mind that the complexity of the context gives us an opportunity to analyse how up to date the curricula is.

The social work definition from 2014 (IFSW, 2021) sets very coherent horizons for social work such as collective action, responsibility and changes in structures, not only in people's lives. Alongside these movements we can follow changes in many countries where social work has not been successful because it does not correspond to the changes in society and often there is a lack of political literacy and advocacy skills that are necessary for social work (Pawar, 2019).

Nevertheless, the competences in social policy can be either deep or superficial; political literacy should be the aim we would like to accomplish with social work training. Shaw (2018) describing the competences of social work research defines political literacy as following:

“Political literacy requires educational and practice leaders who possess familiarity with various formal and informal processes by which people engage in political issues at different levels of governance as well as an understanding of how to act as empowered participants in the processes that influence, from international down to local decisions and politics.” (Shaw, 2018)

Signature pedagogy, Est QF, discourses and being able to influence decisions in social policy set the scenery for social policy in social work curriculum development aims. They help to define the core of the social work and social policy that should be included at the minimum level.

4 Research process

Grounded theory is used in many fields including social work and education aiming to interpret the concepts derived from data and theoretical concepts to “examine established concepts afresh” (Charmaz, Thornberg, Keane, 2017). Our research focus is on people's subjective opinions, experiences and interpretations covering the years from 1991 to 2020. Thus, in our article we follow the paradigm of social constructivism, which assumes that every person – including research participants and researchers – seeks to understand the world by creating subjective meanings for their experiences in interaction with other people and through historical and cultural norms affecting their lives (Creswell & Poth, 2018: 24). Constructivist grounded theory is inductive and comparative (Charmaz, 2014) meaning that the data and theory are constantly interacting. Not to mention that all people participating in this research co-created the phenomena of “social policy in social work curricula”. Our own

role has been active throughout the research process and during our constant reflection of the process itself (Charmaz, 2014).

We were interested in the representation of social policy in social works curricula because being lecturers of social work and social policy we seldom see how students do not want to be responsible for (or even informed about) structural changes or macro level social work. Being part of an international social work academia, we realised that the same problem is addressed in other universities as well. This made us curious about the situation and we began to analyse where the problem is hidden. First of all, in analysing social work curricula during thirty years, we saw that social policy has a very modest role in terms of compulsory courses in social work curricula. Secondly, Est QF for Social Work stipulates competences related to social policy that are very broad and universities have difficulties in covering all topics and activities needed for professional social work, as well as social policy competences. To get a better picture about curriculum development we saw that the next step in our research would be to analyse the experiences of programme leaders.

4.1 Aim and research questions

Social work history has a tremendous influence on the planning of future activities. To understand experiences of past developments of the social work curricula could help to develop more coherent curricula for the future and to consider all stakeholders' claims. In spite of the mistakes and the success stories, academia can play an important role as leaders in shaping the practice of social work. Our research aims to establish an explorative overview about the position of social policy in social work curricula over the past thirty years. To fulfil the aim of the research we ask the following research questions:

How do social work curricula interrelate with social policy topics in the perceptions of social work curricula leaders?

How are social work and social policy perceived by programme leaders in the social work curriculum development process?

4.2 Research activities

In process of our research, we followed Kathy Charmaz (2014:14) actions outlined in Table 1 which reflected as a journey starting from a thorough analysis of curriculum descriptions. We discovered that the proportion of social policy studies is very small and ending up with the new concepts like policy literacy skills and signature pedagogy in interpreting the curriculum development process.

Table 1.: Research process according to actions (Charmaz, 2014) during the research.

Researcher's actions (Charmaz, 2014)	Description of our research process	Remarks about the process
Data collection and analysis are simultaneous focusing on action and process	Analysing change of credit points for social policy in curricula from 1991–2020; First two interviews, initial coding	Few courses about social policy; Initial codes like “enthusiasm”, “complicated process” vs “interesting process”, “teamwork”, “lecturers’ profile” guided us to interview more people to get more opinions about the process (curriculum development) and SW and SP representation in curricula
Comparative methods	Education policy analysis, interviewing, researcher's team meeting memos, reflection diaries.	Extensive period of meetings and individual on desk research, codebook, document analysis, writing. Insider and outsider role
New concepts based on data	Contextualisation–tensions in curricula between social work and social policy	Social work and social policy – intertwined or separate disciplines
Inductive abstract analytic categories through systematic data analysis	Initial coding Selective coding–comparing data to data and category to category	Discovering signature pedagogy and political literacy and translating the categories of core elements for social work and social policy into theoretical terminology
Repeating first three actions	Additional four interviews (theory sampling), contextualisation–analysing educational policy	Contextual background goes more complex – europeanisation and periodisation of social work development
Theory construction	Curriculum development is a pathway to balance core elements of social work and social policy and deconstruction of social policy into smaller units/skills	Extensive period of conceptualising and construction of main concepts
Is there something else in the categories?	Internal and external circumstances influencing the core elements in curricula	Internal and external world of the curriculum development process

4.3 Interviews with programme leaders

The interview is considered to be “a convenient way of overcoming distance in time and study past events by interviewing people who participated in previous times” (Peräkylä & Ruusuvoori, 2011:529). Interviewing people who know the most about curriculum development was a challenge for the interviewees and for us. They are former or present heads of departments or chairs of social work, social work curriculum managers or programme leaders whose experience of leadership extends to 20 years, and the memories of curriculum development are stretched over the past thirty years. To avoid the role conflicts that may affect the outcome and the quality of the interview, we involved a social work master student, Marie Vildersen, to conduct the interviews. She has previously studied social

work as an applied science and has worked as a social worker in a municipality for several years.

Curriculum development is administered by a chair of social work or a bigger structure for instance a department. Before the Bologna process, the curriculum was designed by a head of the department in collaboration with the team followed by “the programme leader and the team” model. The person who runs the programme is known as a curriculum leader, coordinator or curator. The stakeholder's team may include employers, alumni and associations of the professional organisations. We looked at the social work curriculum development from the perspective of programme leaders who were very opened to sharing their experiences of curriculum development processes. Although curriculum development is foremost teamwork, we see programme leaders as key people who have to lead and organise teamwork. We interviewed all six programme leaders, two interviews were done to establish initial coding and the last four for selective coding, who have been or are connected to the BA and MA programmes of social work at both universities.

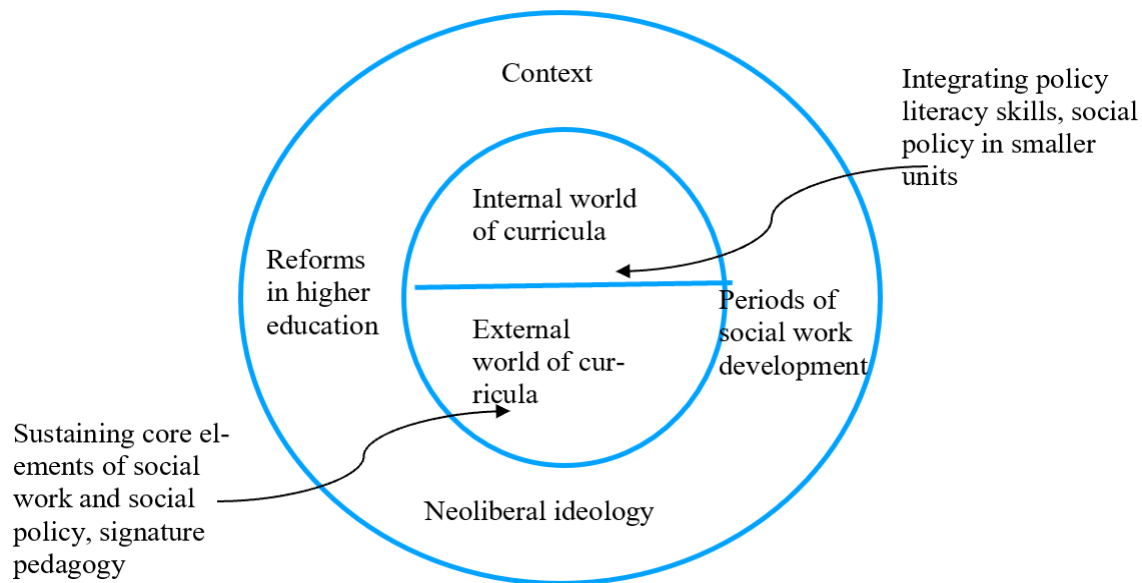
4.4 Researcher's reflection

In conducting the research, we encountered sensitive topics regarding the power that determine our view on this study. First, we see ourselves in a dual role, being insiders and outsiders or young generation (newcomers) as we are called at the university. On the one hand, we are the lecturers in social work and social policy at Tallinn University, who recognise that social work and social policy are interrelated and are not separable. Conversely, we are exploring the experiences of our colleagues and of ourselves. We define ourselves as the second generation in a team of social work academics, having had experience in studying social work and social policy at different universities, having gained working experience in the field and belonging to the international community of social workers and social politicians. We were born during the Soviet era, but our actual career has been conducted during the times of the Estonian Republic. The previous description of second generation in social work academics applies to most of the new team members starting in 2010. Therefore, analysing the position of social policy in social work curriculum is a sensitive topic for us as well as for the interviewees. Constant reflection during the research supported our role as researchers not forgetting the “insiderness” and “outsiderness” and we “try to make sense of our own life experiences and place them into a meaningful theoretical framework appropriate to the academic framework we work in” (Arthur, McNess & Crossley, 2016).

4.5 Categorisation and looking for concepts

During initial coding we discussed codebooks created by three researchers. Because the first two interviews were very different the list for initial codes was long and confusing. After completing four further interviews we began to identify the categories for periodisation of social work development and perception of social work in relation to social policy in curricula. Additional research about educational policy and overall context that shaped the higher education was required. Regular meetings for the research team were helpful to deconstruct the meaning of social policy in the curricula into smaller units. First of all, we did not see the role of social policy in curricula but after comparing the data and reading other social policy-oriented research we realised that social policy is represented in curricula in smaller units such as skills. Social work was seen as the main frame for social work studies contributed by other disciplines and within social policy. Visual map of the concepts found during the research is pictured on the Figure 1.

Figure 1.: Concept map



5 Research findings and discussion

The results and discussion are divided into two main sections, the perception of social policy in social work curricula and the process of curriculum development. We particularly noticed the difference between the team-leaders of Tartu and Tallinn and their views. Our aim was not to compare the two universities (cases) and to make conclusions on how they differ or are similar, but we ended up with some comparisons because we saw here two different approaches to curriculum development. Excerpts from interviews are included to illustrate research findings and are numbered as follows: I1, I2 etc.

5.1 Perception of social policy in social work curricula

Social work curricula were different in Tartu and Tallinn in terms of the name of the curricula and of its content. For us, the competition between the two university curricula has been evident since the Bologna process but we realised, after analysing the interviews, that the rivalries date back to the nineties. Both universities designed a unique curriculum to emphasise the priorities of the social work profession.

Definition of social policy in social work curricula – conceptual remarks

In the Estonian language we have one word, 'poliitika', for the concepts of both 'politics' and 'policy'. Sometimes we had difficulties interpreting the interviewee's thoughts, but the context of the interview helped us to understand the programme leaders. Though social work

is seen as a discipline with many definitions, we realised that the same is true with social policy. Macro-level social work and community work are often taken as social policy while community work is defined either very broadly or by referring to international documents such as “Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development” to justify the place of community work in the curricula. Discussions around the topics in social work and social policy are not evident. Some interviewees think loudly and interpret the concepts as they understand them as following:

“if I look at university as a whole then teaching politics should be the field for political sciences/.../students should make a choice between whether they want [to study] public administration or any other politics that they can choose from the political sciences curricula or choose to study social work”. (I6)

Social policy – social worker's role in it

During the data analysis, we arrived at the conclusion that the process of the curriculum development has been similar but the way how social policy is seen, discussed and presented in the curricula at these two universities differs.

Social policy is seen as having two possible ways of interconnecting with social work. These interpretations by the programme leaders can define the role of professional social work. Consecutively, the working methods of social workers depend on the approach how to act as a professional. Firstly, social policy is a regulative frame for social practice i.e., legal documents from Parliament and Ministry of Social Affairs which “*gives frame to the social work, introduces you to the rules and regulations*” (I6). In this case the social worker has a passive role in society and policy practice by informing clients and interpreting legal acts, ending up with the manifestation that “*our aim is to offer well-functioning social workers who could work on organisational level or local government*” (I6) – social work as a standardised way of working (Sønnenland, 2021:226). In addition, such reflection on learning has nothing to do with understanding critical thinking or the so-called philosophy of social work (see Larrison & Korr, 2013).

A second way is to look at social work and social policy as fully integrated disciplines within the curriculum. Identifying social policy as “*completely intertwined*” (I1, I2, I4, I6TLU) with social work also gives social work an active role in social processes. And even more, gives you an intellectual challenge: “*do we know social processes and how we interpret them*” (I2UT). In this case, social work and social policy both have an influence on society. Social policy knowledge is seen as following:

“finding connections as to why we do or act and plan interventions as we do in the field of social work or social policy/.../if you don't understand what affects family relationships, what can influence you as a parent, how can you be a good [social worker] in the field of child protection” (I4).

The links between the social issues in local context and the ways how academia can respond to them by teaching to think independently and analytically are closely connected. The responsibility of academia is seen as teaching social workers at being agents who guide the processes in social work.

These two opposite views of what is the role of social policy in social work curricula could be seen in the context of what is or should be the role of social work in society. As Sønnenland

(2021:226) has pointed out, social work as a standardised way of working with individuals vs social work as an ability to work with individuals and analyse the situation of individuals in their social and political context.

Who teaches social policy and how?

The aforementioned interpretations are the personal impressions of programme leaders and one way to interpret the curricula. In contrast, for social work students, the content for the courses and therefore also of how social policy and social work are interconnected is defined by the lecturers who teach specific courses in social policy but also core courses in social work. In the mixed context of contemporary interdisciplinary higher education and academic freedom, we can state in the words of one programme leader that social policy skills are fragmented and are seen as small units.

“within every [core social work] course it is possible to also teach social policy [elements and skills]”. (I5, I6)

This directs the focus onto questions such as who the persons (lecturers) teaching social policy are and onto the core courses of social work and, what and how do they teach.

We can identify neoliberal views in education where the way how you teach is more important than what you teach. The feedback collected from students about courses consists mainly of teaching methods and study outcomes and does not involve the content of courses. Therefore, programme leaders can only state that the way how lecturer can attract students is important.

“if you like the lecturer you like the course because if the lecturer loves the discipline students will love it” (I6) or *“if [only] we could attract a very interesting person with a social policy back-ground who can engage students very, very much”* (I2).

Furthermore, most programme leaders stated that questions about the content of social policy courses and competencies should rather be directed to at concrete lecturers of social policy courses, students and/or alumni. In other words, the knowledge in the field of social policy has depended on academics who teach social policy indicated by programme leaders as *“they know what and how they teach and how to attract students”* (I6).

They are seen as substantial team members *“practitioners in the social policy field and as scientists or [name] who are sociologists or even human geographers but also involved in social policy lectures”* (I4). Even though the team is composed *“of persons who work here”* (I3, I2, I4), the knowledge is divided between social policy and social work academics.

To conclude, we indicate that the ambiguous role of programme leaders both in developing the curricula and simultaneously grasping the key elements of all courses is as challenging. This role is even more demanding because teams are small. Particularly in small countries and/or with newly established social work education, it is extremely complicated to find social work and/or social policy professionals with a PhD, who are able and willing to contribute to social work education in academia.

5.2 Process of social work curriculum development

Programme leaders have academic education from social work at least at either master or doctoral level but they have limited social work field experience and even less in the field of

social policy. In Estonia, universities are not extensively involved in social policy development and modification as experts. Therefore, programme leaders are concise and modest when talking about social work and social policy competencies and put emphasis foremost on external actors and reforms, norms, rules which transform curricula and social work education. One interviewee stated that there are not, and have not been, many programme leaders who themselves are social policy experts, commenting that situation as following:

“there are not so many fans of social policy among social work curriculum developers, among lecturers/.../if lecturer of social policy leaves then it is a difficult decision also about the balance of social work and social policy disciplines in curricula” (I2).

The background of the programme leaders can define the direction of curriculum development. In other words, even if a social work master's degree or doctorate is undertaken, it is crucial how social policy and social work are represented in theory and practice.

Becoming a curriculum developer or programme leader has been a different process for all of them. We can see programme leaders who executed the leader's tasks since the beginning of the social work programme and others who started their work in the 2000s. This means that many of them started their career as programme leaders and in parallel are studying social work, yet have an education of sociologist, psychologist or pedagogy and they are required to develop completely different areas in social work and social policy or in other words *“the team was made up of people from nearby fields” (I3)*. In contrast, when the social work field was described sometimes as alienated from academic social work education, the critical reflection about one's own preparedness to run social work and social policy curricula was not evident explicitly. The beginning of the building up of the social work curricula in the nineties was a chaotic process, as people not only found themselves accidentally 'doing social work' within the field but also universities started the curriculum development process with motivated and enthusiastic persons who found themselves in this field unexpectedly and bringing with themselves the paradigm of the discipline they had been studying and/or of their teaching competencies. The aforementioned process is recognizable in other countries (i.e., Denmark, Latvia, Lithuania) as well, especially those countries where social work is not a discipline acknowledged by the academy as a three-level education (BA, MA, PhD) of social work.

The role of programme leaders has changed over the years and is nowadays perceived either as a developer of the profession and the curriculum or as an administrative task. The perception is not only a personal paradigm here but is connected to the neoliberal and NPM changes at university, especially with the Bologna process mentioned by other academics (Michel-Schertges, 2019) and it comes up in our analysis, the distinctive role of programme managers over the years:

“now there is a new word [curricula] an administrator was previously a programme leader. .../Now I only monitor, that everything works” (I3, I6).

Programme leaders as administrators define the requirements of the labour market, Est QF, the international definition of social work and the administrative NPM rules from universities and higher education policies as crucial limitations to academic freedom in developing social work education and the profession in society.

Curriculum leaders who perceive themselves as developers of the profession and acknowledge that “*new ways of working are needed*” (I1) as one curriculum developer says, can actually see bureaucratic barriers as a means to achieve the aim – to establish the curricula in cooperation with stakeholders. The keywords are cooperation and agreement between academic freedom and the requirements of the labour market and higher education NPM. This enables universities to maintain the promoter position in social work education and profession. The developers describe the work as programme leaders with pride and enthusiasm stating that “*...and she [previous programme leader] started the programme development, back then I did not deal with it/.../ from this time [2002] I dealt with this programme in more detail*” (I4). However, the existing or previous social work curriculum is the one they are not informed about, and they are confronting “their own” curricula with the previous one or another one. In other words, it means that, in the long run, the far-reaching vision of where the social work education and profession could lead to is chaotic. This makes it challenging in society to discuss who is a professional social worker and what are the (future) work skills required from a continuously changing labour market and complex society.

6 Conclusions

The situation is very paradoxical comparing the curriculum development process during the last thirty years and the situation at which we have arrived today. Interdisciplinarity was strongly represented in the nineties when the curriculum was created. Curriculum leaders and lecturers were from different disciplines, and it could be assumed that this would become the strength of small teams in the future. The research results show that curriculum leaders are loyal to their first educational background and furthermore, they all have constructed their own understanding of social work as an academic discipline which often does not involve interdisciplinarity within the frame of social work or social policy. They often define social work and social policy as separate disciplines and ignore the possibility that courses in the social work curriculum could involve interdisciplinarity i.e., social work core courses could already involve appropriate aspects of social policy and at the time also, for example, of community work and/or psychology etc. At the same time, the programme leaders are aware that students, Est QF for Social Work as well as future social work skills in a complex society require from social work education the interdisciplinarity of theory and practice. The question remains of how to integrate the various interdisciplinary competencies into the so-called traditional academic social work education (e.g., environment and eco-social approach, ICT knowledge, globalisation and global approach) while at the same time preserving the uniqueness of social work as a profession and academic discipline.

In summary, in the curriculum development the crucial key words are interdisciplinarity, definitions of social work and policy, and the teaching methods and personality of academic staff beyond teamwork, various regulations and stakeholders. If the programme leaders define social work and future competencies in various and sometimes controversial ways, then we could assume that the individual lecturers and practitioners in the teaching process also do so. Therefore, not only should the programme leaders have the future building and interdisciplinary understanding of the necessary skills and competencies in the social work profession and, accordingly in the academic social work curriculum, but of the entire academic staff in the teaching process. It would be necessary not only to link the curriculum to the regulations and Est QF in social work but also all the courses in the curriculum with each other. Furthermore, the linking and integration of interdisciplinary skills should be an important component in each general and core course in the social work curriculum. This,

however, requires interdisciplinary knowledge of future skills for the social work profession, not only from programme leaders and regular academic staff, but also from guest lectures and practitioners involved in the teaching and internship process. The challenge is to link not only the curriculum in general but the various disciplines and topics between and within different courses in the social work curriculum.

Therefore, future challenges in the academic social work are not only related with curriculum development and programme leaders, but relevant among others is, how to link, in an interdisciplinary way, separate courses and how to increase the cooperation between academic staff, including guest lecturers and practitioners, in their teaching methods and in their interdisciplinary knowledge of social work, beyond their specialisation and core topics. This requires not only that social work students would have to learn interdisciplinary skills, but also that the academic staff has to broaden their interdisciplinary skills beyond their first educations and core teaching courses. On the other hand, the results of this study emphasise the need for future research in teaching academic social work, not only in curriculum development and in the role of social policy, pedagogy or psychology etc within the curriculum, but also in how the various disciplines are integrated into the social work curriculum courses beyond the titles and how individual lecturers use teaching methods and interdisciplinarity knowledge to link various disciplines and courses. In other words, how does the whole academic team and each member separately define the future competencies of social work and their own core topics in an interdisciplinary way.

Cooperation between the universities has been and will be a dream in the context of constantly finding a niche in the higher education market or, in other words, in the obligation of being unique in terms of universities as well as separate curricula. In a neoliberal and competitive society, where resources are scarce, universities are looking for the market of their competences or as (Michel-Schertges, 2019:5) puts it:

“This [Bologna] process created the platform on which the competition between rival institutions takes place. The “game” has been established and is accepted by the participants.”

The desire to rely on the rules and regulations in the higher education system on one hand and the adoption to the role of the 'service provider' on other, made curriculum leaders vulnerable in terms of stakeholders claims and the complexity of the context. Even though universities and social work, together with social policy, have inevitably agreed upon the NPM leading rhetoric which forced some programme leaders to burn out and lead to disappointment in their role. To proceed from this point, we, as second-generation university lecturers, 'see the light at the end of the tunnel'. Being at the same time in the double role of insider and outsider we realise how important the relationships between team members in the context of curriculum development are. Even more, we reflect on the signature pedagogy, stating that not only fieldwork is shaping the competences of future professionals but also the constant conscious attitude of how much, in our own work, social policy and social work are interrelated and how we ourselves contribute to the development of the curricula. To conclude, we can be proud of the three-level education of social work at the university and the changes in higher education which has led universities to find creative solutions to sell competences for the market. In addition, we still see that the Est QF for Social Work and the reforms in higher education give new possibilities to social work and social policy education.

Combining social work and social policy in one curriculum has been a challenge for both universities. Social policy on the one hand, is seen as a possibility to introduce students to the regulations and measures promoting future social workers into navigating the problems of vulnerable groups by knowing the frame the social policy. On the other hand, social policy practice skills are seen as necessary skills but are sometimes neglected because social work has the priority in the curricula and social work and social policy are not integrated into courses. Programme leaders are shuffling between two fields, separating and confronting them instead of merging them and giving priority to what is seen as policy practice.

7 Limitations and future research

We are aware that the timeline, which stretches over thirty years affects our research results and that curriculum developers now have different perspectives and reasoning (change of the narrative) when looking back at their experience and memorising the events. Combining interviews with analysis of the curriculum structure made a coherent dataset for this article. We are aware that only mechanically looking at social policy courses we can overlook the lectures where social work is combined with social policy and policy practice, therefore we plan to study the descriptions of the courses and conduct interviews with the main lecturers of social work core courses including social policy. Nevertheless, to get a full understanding about the social policy position in social work, it is also necessary to interview university lecturers and make questionnaires for students and alumni. Furthermore, we could state that the development of social work curricula and the role of programme leaders needs additional in-depth research in Estonia as well as in other countries.

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