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SOCIAL WORK CURRICULAR DESIGN AND THE INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS FOR THE PROFESSION: ALIGNMENT AND MISALIGNMENT IN PORTUGAL

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Abstract

This paper aims to compare the learning outcomes for Social Work degree programs in Portugal with the Global Standards of Education and Training, established by the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW). In other words, this study intends to validate if, educational institutions that teach social work degrees in Portugal align their curricular design with the international standards for the profession.

Adopting a qualitative approach, the learning outcomes of all social work degrees in Portugal were semantically analyzed using content analysis underpinned by the grounded theory paradigm.

The results point to some misalignment between the learning outcomes of Portuguese higher education degrees in social work and the international standards and guiding principles in this scientific area.

Keywords: Social work, curriculum, curriculum design, profession, higher education.

1   INTRODUCTION

After the transition from a dictatorial regime in Portugal to a democratic regime (1974), a cultural and ideological transformation takes place on social work, as an academic and professional discipline (Monteiro, 1995; Martins, 1999, 2003; Mouro & Simões, 2001; Branco & Fernandes, 2005; Martins & Tomé, 2008; Carvalho & Pinto, 2014; Santos & Martins, 2016; Branco, 2018; Carvalho 2019).

Since then, the recognition of the Bachelor in 1989 and, later, the Master's (90's), and the PhD in 2003, as well as the multiplication of study programs, also in public higher education (only in 2000), reassured the role of Social Work in Portuguese academia (Carvalho et al., 2019; Carvalho, 2022).

In 1985, The Portuguese Association of Social Workers (APSS) was admitted as a member of the IFSW, with a main focus on dissemination of international ethical principles. The Deontological Code of Social Workers in Portugal refers to the "Declaration of Principles for Social Work", approved in Dublin, in 2018 at the General Assemblies of IASSW-IFSW, with the "Declaration of Ethical Principles for Social Work", approved in Adelaide, in 2004 and with "Ethics in Social Work – Principles and Values" approved in Colombo, in 1994.

From the end of the 1990s until nowadays, the normative reference is guided by the references of *Ethics in Social Work, Principles and Values* (1994) and by the Global Definition of the Social Work Profession (Deontological Code of Social Workers in Portugal, 2018) and the Social Work profession's core (IASSW-IFSW, 2020).

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Since the Maastricht Treaty, signed at the beginning of the decade of 90 (European Communities, 1992), several efforts were started to build a European higher education area. In result of these efforts, Bologna Declaration (1999) was undersigned (European Commission, 1999) by ministers in charge of education in 29 countries (including Portugal), assuring the creation of a common higher education area above Europe, up to 2010.

Learning outcomes, also stated as learning objectives, have been widely argued, especially within the project to create a European area of higher education (European Network for Quality Assurance, 2015).

While some stakeholders consider them a simple formality, others look upon them as a strategic tool to increase the teaching and learning quality (Ewell, 2006; Adam & Expert, 2008).

Considering that, currently, research about the field of Social Work Learning process, in Portugal, is still at an emerging stage , it is pertinent to carry out studies that address the issue of learning outcomes in undergraduate programs (Campanini, 2010, 2020; Ferreira, 2021; Kessl et al., 2022).

Under the global standards for the education and training of the profession (IASSW-IFSW, 2020), advocated by International Association of Schools of Social Work, in respect of program objectives and expected outcomes, Social Work schools should endeavor to reach the following:

Table 1. Global Standards for the Education and Training (IASSW-IFSW, 2020).

(i) Specification of its program objectives and expected higher education outcomes.
(ii) Identification of its program's instructional methods that support the achievement of the cognitive and affective development of Social Work students.
(iii) A curriculum that reflects the core knowledge, processes, values and skills of the Social Work profession, as applied in context-specific realities.
(vi) Curriculum design that takes into account the impact of interacting cultural, political, economic, communication, health, psychosocial and environmental global factors
(v) The program meets the requirements of nationally and/or regionally/internationally defined professional goals.
(vi) The program addresses local, national and/or regional/international developmental needs and priorities.
(vii) The provision of an education preparation that is relevant to beginning Social Work practice interventions with individuals, families, groups and/or communities (functional and geographic) adaptable to a wide range of contexts.
(vii) The provision of an education preparation that is relevant to beginning Social Work practice interventions with individuals, families, groups and/or communities (functional and geographic) adaptable to a wide range of contexts.
(viii) The use of Social Work methods that are based on sound evidence regarding the effectiveness of interventions whenever possible, and always promote dignity and respect.
(ix) Governance, administrative support, physical structure and related resources that are adequate to deliver the program.
(x) The conferring of a distinctive Social Work qualification at the certificate, diploma, first degree or postgraduate level, as approved by national and/or regional qualification authorities, where such authorities exist.

2   METHODOLOGY

Using a qualitative method, learning outcomes from Social Work study programs were semantically analyzed, by content analysis. Thus, the incidence and the typology of learning outcomes from Social Work study programs was explored. A content analysis of the learning outcomes identified in the proposals of all study programs submitted to accreditation by the Portuguese Agency for Higher Education Accreditation (A3ES) was carried out using the MAXQDA software (version 12).

At an initial stage of the accreditation process, HEI submitted an accreditation proposal to A3ES: "Request for Accreditation of a Study Cycle". In the description of each study cycle that is submitted, institutions must describe what are the "intended learning outcomes" they expect students will achieve at the end of a specific period of learning. Data analysis focused on information included in this question, and which is limited to 1000 characters learning outcomes included in all proposals of study programs submitted to accreditation in A3ES, from 2009 to 2014, were examined (n = 2890).

3   RESULTS

Six steps were taken to identify patterns (themes) within the data. This analysis followed a conceptual framework, in which technical and generic skills were included, such as specific knowledge, critical thinking, ability to innovate, problem solving, autonomous work or teamwork.

The results of Learning Outcomes in Social Work Higher Education (Figure 1) seem to privilege theoretical and general knowledge as an expected outcome for their graduates. The second most mentioned competence to acquire by Social Workers in their higher education training is ethics development and social responsibility. Personal development and Lifelong Learning, such as Critical Thinking seem to be also skills valued for most of the scientific field of Social Work.

Less than half of the Social Work degrees in Higher Education highlight as their learning objectives related to practical knowledge and information and communications technology, as well as work team and leadership and also planning, management and problem solving.

On the other hand, it is important to note that less than 34% of the academic offers seem to value communication skills and autonomy and entrepreneurship in the professional profile of Social Work graduates.

Only about 6% of these scientific field of Social Work considered it important to teach/learn skills related to creativity and innovation.
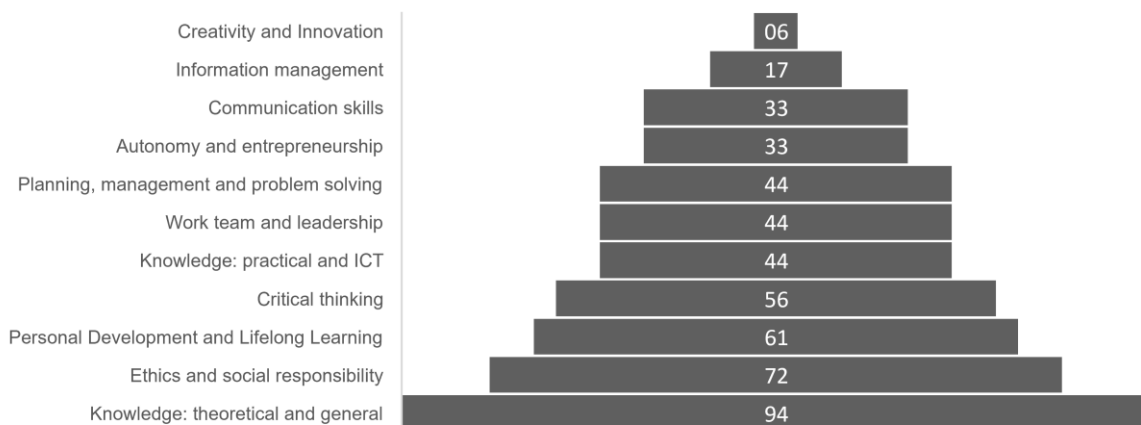

Figure 1. Learning Outcomes in Social Work Higher Education.

4   CONCLUSIONS

Under the global standards for the education and training of the profession, advocated by International Association of Schools of Social Work, in respect of program objectives and expected outcomes, schools should endeavor to reach specific objectives and expected outcomes.

For Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training it is important to ensure they support the achievement of the cognitive and affective development of students. Social Workers must show proficiency regarding self-reflective use of values, knowledge, and skills (Payne, 2005; Sewpaul & Jones, 2005; Pierson, 2012; Santos & Martins, 2016). In the Portuguese higher education system, these concerns are also highlighted, namely through the relevance given to knowledge acquisition and personal development and lifelong learning. In fact, it is also relevant that the program reflects the core knowledge, processes, values, and skills of the social work profession, as applied in context-specific realities (Ferreira, 2021; Carvalho, 2022).

However, recent results point out that Portuguese Higher Education institutions must reinforce several dimensions of learning outcomes for Social Work higher education students, namely the creativity and

innovation, such as the autonomy and entrepreneurial skills. Social Work does not operate in a vacuum, the program should take account of the impact of interacting cultural, economic, communication, social, political and psychological global factors.

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