THE VOUCHER PROGRAMME AS A CHALLENGE FOR SOCIAL WORK TEACHING

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The study presents the experiences of introducing the so-called educational voucher system for adults over 45 years old in Ukraine. Based on the content analysis of academic documents, the survey of adult students and interviews with educators, the study examines motivation, learning process and self-evaluation of the social work training among students who already have a higher education. The research findings demonstrate that the students over 45 years old were motivated to get an additional university degree in social work mainly because of a need for self-realisation, and not because of market demands. In the survey, 20 out of 25 respondents claimed that they had an idea of what social work was as a profession prior to beginning their studies and hardly are going to work within the new profession. Adult students highly prize positive in-class atmosphere and prefer to study in a group of peers; they more or less easily adjust to the new learning environment. At the same time, teaching had to challenge the expectations of adult learners with learning arrangements that are non-traditional for them. The research adds another layer to the professional debate on the social work education model by focusing on 45+ students, competences and ethical behaviour mastering.

Keywords: adult learning; peer groups; social work; vouchers system.

Introduction

Many European countries, including Ukraine, are ageing societies. Research conducted in Ukraine shows that people over 45 have fewer chances to find a new job and their salaries are lower compared to younger generations (State Statistical Service of Ukraine, 2013).

At the same time, with the development of technology there is a demand for people with a diverse range of new skills and competences, thus the idea of lifelong learning emerged worldwide, as well as in Ukraine. Such learning constitutes dramatic shift in thinking about educational process, as it has challenged the traditional models and encourages continual re-training; it has also embraced issues about raising awareness among adults on how rich and stimulating a lifelong education can be (Brabandere & Iny, 2012) and challenges Universities' approaches to dealing with adult students who are working toward a second or third degree of the same level, for example, a Bachelor's or a Master's degree.

In 2013, following amendments of the legislation on employment, the Ukrainian Government introduced the so-called voucher system which is supposed to become a component of national policy reform at the labour market (Tkachenko, 2015). Voucher programme stimulates people over 45 years old to further their education, gives them an opportunity to fill in the gaps in knowledge or compensate for the lack of quality of the previous education, and it decreases educational inequality among generations. The programme combines monetisation of educational services while maintaining social orientation of the programme and increasing of the role of its members in decision-making (Yurovska & Yatskevych, 2016). The programme (sometimes called '*Programme 45+*') is operated by the State Employment Service and provides opportunities for the working people to get the professional undergraduate or graduate education at various types of educational institutions of their choice. This education is organised mostly in a distance learning format through correspondence with several in-class sessions, a traditional format in Ukraine.

The voucher system covers around 100 professions defined by the Order of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine (2013). In 2014, the list of professions was amended, and new professions were included. Social work was among the additional options for voucher adult education.

It is worth noting that social work is a new profession in Ukraine (as well as in all post-Soviet countries). It was introduced in mid-1990 and continues to develop as a practice and as an academic discipline with respect not only to international standards, but indigenous knowledge and post-socialist traditions of welfare provision (An, 2014; Ramon, 2000; Semigina, Kabachenko & Boyko, 2017).

However, longstanding debates around the models of social work education are specific not only to Ukraine, but to the global professional community. Several studies contest tensions between academic and practice models of social work education (Lyons & Huegler, 2012; Croisdale-Appleby, 2014), while *Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training*, adopted in 2004 by International Federation of Social Workers and International Association of Schools of Social Work (Sewpaul & Jones, 2004), are

rather broad and actually allow any model to be used as long as it is based on core professional values and professional identity.

At the same time, social work practice and education should be context-specific and flexible enough to reflect societal changes (Dominelli, 2010) and newly established global social work agenda (Jones & Truell, 2012). The emergence of innovative computer technologies and online models of education based on them add an additional layer to discussions on content and methods of social work teaching (Novik, 2012; Tsang, 2011). As for the lifelong education, it encourages academia to consider how to foster value-based social work competences in adults, sometimes regarded as 'non-traditional' students, with their stable mental models and perceptions (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011).

The shifting priorities of social work education and learning contexts point to the need of exploring several challenging dimensions of the Ukrainian voucher system for the education of people 45 and over: a model of social work training per se, a possible shift from a customary format of distance learning to more innovative approaches and the specifics of teaching adults to be trained as social workers. These issues are the focus of our research.

Research Methodology

The study is based on the system analysis applied to the educational process (McAllister, 2013; Thornton, Ocasio & Lounsbury, 2012). We consider adult students' motivation to get education as an input to the system, students' self-evaluation of knowledge and readiness to perform professionally as an output, while the learning format, methods, technologies, and behaviour of different actors within the educational institution are considered an educational process ("black box" of the system). Societal factors, including cultural traditions of learning, that could enable or distract from the learning process, are regarded as an environment.

The purpose of this study was to examine the peculiarities of teaching social work to adults by assessing the experience of the implementation of the educational voucher programme for people over 45 years old from the point of view of students and professors in Ukraine.

A mix-method research design was used to collect data. The algorithm of the study was following:

1. Content analysis of the social work voucher programme curricula, as well as 12-course syllabi, was conducted in November-December 2016 based on the Academy of Labour, Social Relations and Tourism (Kyiv, Ukraine). Curricula were assessed by the number of hours allotted to different learning activities and academic courses included in the programme. Syllabi were analysed with regard to course objectives, readings, teaching strategies, assessment methods, and course content.

2. Authors of the paper elaborated research instruments: (1) questionnaire which helped students to reveal their self-reflections and to self-evaluate the learning process and its outputs, as well as (2) the guide for semi-structured interviews with educators. The questionnaire had 22 open question and multiple-choice questions, while guide consisted of 10 open questions.

3. In January 2017 the survey was conducted among the students of the second group studying within the Programme 45+ in the Academy of Labour, Social Relations and Tourism (Kyiv, Ukraine) after they had already completed their studies. All 25 students from the group filled in the questionnaire. 23 out of 25 respondents were women, and 2 – men. These figures reflect the traditional composition of social work groups of any age in Ukraine. The average age of the respondents was 51.2, varying between 47 and 55. The survey was confidential and the questionnaires were anonymous, the consent was negotiated. All data has been codified.

4. The 15 semi-structured qualitative interviews with educators of the Programme 45+ were conducted in January-April 2017. 8 respondents from the Academy of Labour, Social Relations and Tourism and 7 – from the Open International University of Human Development "Ukraine" (Kyiv, Ukraine). The interviews were preceded with the confidentiality guarantees.

Key findings

Inputs: profile and motivation of adult learners. All students within the Programme 45+ already had a higher education. The analysis of the survey results shows that the majority of them gained a University Degree in Economics (7 out of 25 respondents) or Engineering (7 out of 25 respondents). 5 out of 25 respondents had pedagogical education and were trained as teachers (in Chemistry, Physics, etc.). Several respondents had degrees in Law and Medicine.

At the moment of receiving a voucher from the State Employment Service for the second higher education all respondents were employed (actually this is a legal requirement for the participation in such

programmes). However, only one person was working in the social services, the rest 24 were employed at other public institutions or non-governmental organisations.

During the survey, 20 respondents out of 25 claimed that they had an idea of what social work was as a profession prior to beginning their studies, while 5 said that they were not familiar with social work at all. At the same time, the majority of respondents claimed an interest in self-realisation (13 answers from 25 respondents), while the threat of unemployment – foreseen by the state policy as a major ground for the additional training within the voucher programme – was a stimulus only in 5 cases (see Figure 1).
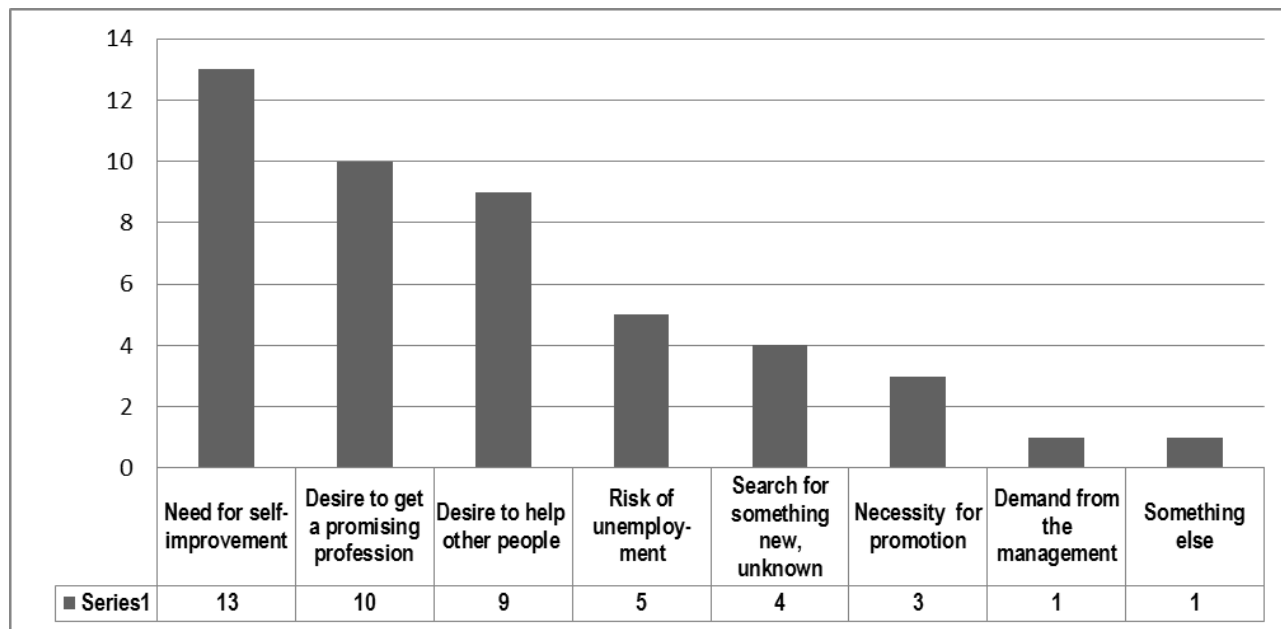

	Need for self-improvement	Desire to get a promising profession	Desire to help other people	Risk of unemploy-ment	Search for something new, unknown	Necessity for promotion	Demand from the management	Something else
■ Series1	13	10	9	5	4	3	1	1

Figure 1. Motivation for additional education under the Programme 45+
(N; respondents were able to pick more than one answer)

It is worth mentioning that all 25 respondents attended more than 50 of all classes and passed the graduation exam.

The interviewed professors from the two Universities stressed the high level of motivation and activity in adult learners. According to educators the difference from younger students could be easily defined, as 45+ adults are: "more open to communication and curious", "more responsible and organised", "more empathic and sensitive", "oriented toward receiving information in a systemic way, toward the discussion of study materials, and ideas and concepts that are new to them, rooted in their own professional and life experiences".

Process: methods of teaching and learning arrangements. The content analysis of the syllabi and interviews with educators indicated that the main methods of adult teaching were: lectures, seminars, practice classes (particularly, utilising the methods of small group discussions and training), independent work based on studying research and methodological sources, consultations with teachers, and preparation for testing. Internship at social institutions wasn't a part of the programme. Thus, the voucher study programme in Ukraine mostly followed the tradition of fundamental academic knowledge, and to a lesser degree – practical, hands-on experience of interaction with clients.

The interviews showed that during class all educators used a mix of various teaching methods and techniques: mostly lectures, seminars, practical classes using interactive methods, namely, situational learning, work in small groups, heuristic discussions, group discussions, project presentation by students, etc. Our own teaching experience confirms these findings, while at the same time we observed certain rigidity among the students toward participation in non-traditional interactive work that was unusual for them.

According to the respondents among 45+ students, the most acceptable learning methods to master social work courses were lectures, practice classes in groups, and group discussions; the least desirable ones were test preparation and reading recommended literature.

At the same time, both students and teachers noted a need for individual consultations with each student, an increase in the practical application of study content, specifically, internship for 45+ students at various social services, and work with different groups of clients.

There were homogeneous groups formed out of the voucher programme students at the Academy of Labour, Social Relations and Tourism. These students were not mixed with other age groups or with students majoring in other disciplines (even for classes in general subjects). By doing so the organisers meant to better meet the needs of this particular age group of students.

The homogeneity of the 45+ group was evaluated by students and educators as an asset for successful training. The survey demonstrated that it was this approach that the students valued most highly, which, in their opinion, gave them an opportunity to adapt quickly to the learning process.

The learning process had a format of traditional distance learning which included an introductory orientation session, exams, and state certification.

The content analysis of the curricula and syllabi shows that the 2-year academic programme: (1) has 4,284 academic hours and 119 credits of ECTS; (2) 11.4% of all hours were classroom work, and 88.0% of hours were allocated for homework; (3) homework consisted mostly of studying of recommended literature and report writing. Final testing that would have evaluated the students' level of knowledge was not a part of the programme. Instead, at the completion of the whole course, the students took a standard oral examination in front of the members of the examination board.

Outputs: self-evaluation of the training programme and its lessons. In their self-reflective questionnaires, respondents gave a general assessment of the study process for such criteria as: organisation of the study process, study content and fullness of courses, connection of the study materials with practical application, stimulus toward the independent study. The data analysis made it possible to establish an assessment of 9 out of 10, which is a high indicator of the degree of satisfaction with training for all four criteria. At the same time the answers to the question "To what degree have your expectations been met regarding the social work study programme?" were "Fully satisfied" for 15 respondents out of 25, while "Satisfied partially" – for 9 respondents.

Two-thirds of respondents assessed their knowledge of all subjects as high, and one third – as average. While assessing their own professional skills acquired during their studies, respondents noted that they were able to: determine the professional appointment of social workers, identify clients' social problems, utilise the methods of social work to complete practical assignments, as well as use various forms of assessment of the results, etc.

When answering an open question "What did you like best in your studies?" the majority of the respondents noted their teachers' professionalism and positive attitude, accessibility of the study materials, and the use of interactive forms of learning.

During the interviews with the teachers it was determined that although respondents assess the learning results positively, the teachers think that preferably those with social work experience should be encouraged to participate in such a programme. In other words, the majority of the student body should be those who do not have social work education but have work experience at institutions within the system of social security and social protection. The results of student questionnaires confirm that that would make sense – in spite of high motivation to study it is far from everyone who sees opportunities to apply their new knowledge or plan to ever be employed in the field of social work.

The conducted research has revealed a number of challenges caused by non-academic factors. The majority of teachers noted certain problem areas: some older students did not possess enough computer skills which limited their ability to use network resources (some of them had no computer skills whatsoever).

Another challenge is that there is basically no professional social work association in Ukraine which could determine the list of skills for specialists of different levels; there is no professional external audit of the level of knowledge among social workers, no social work licensing, nor any licensing examinations. This results in a too broad of a learning framework and enables universities to form their own curricula which may not address the market demands and may not be in high demand in practice.

Discussion

Modern academic literature stresses the effectiveness of interactive learning methods since they promote both cognitive development and mastering of practical skills, as well as the development of knowledge implementation skills and form professional competence. The following forms of learning have been determined as important for social work: reflective diaries, experimental learning, long-term internship at a social institution to gain pre-determined competences, etc. (Lyons & Huegler, 2012; Skills for Care, 2014; Tsang, 2011). All in all, teaching social work to adults should be oriented toward activist and pragmatic type of learning, rather than reflective-theoretical, and also toward the concept of open learning (Iilyoshi & Kumar, 2016).

Our experience, as well as other studies (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011; Osteen, 2011), provide evidence that forming a peer study group could keep the motivation level high.

Our research revealed contradictions between what andragogy postulates regarding the effectiveness of different learning methods (Knight, & Wood, 2005; Cummings, Chaffin & Cockerham, 2015) and evaluations by our students who liked lectures the most. That is adult students who had already studied at universities and institutes back in the Soviet times, when no critical or interactive learning methods had been used, valued higher the methods that were traditional for them.

At the same time, it should be noted that this is the evaluation based only on emotional experiences and impressions which does not indicate the depth of absorption of the study material, or internalisation of values and principles of social work. However, this evaluation may show a certain tendency to a consumer attitude toward learning and a lack of readiness for independent work which other studies confirm (Murray, 2011).

Our research confirmed the findings of other researchers about the difficulties of transition to non-traditional forms of learning. We can also note psychological unpreparedness for the new forms of learning both among middle-aged students (the same findings were presented by Horvat, Dobrota, Krsmanovic and Cudanov (2015)) and teachers who lack modern pedagogical skills (Semigina, Kabachenko & Boyko, 2017), and sometimes even the capacities to modernise the learning process (overcrowding in classrooms, lack of equipment such as computers, projectors, Internet access, etc.).

All in all, universities have to adopt a prospective approach, focusing on longer-term possibilities of involving middle-aged people into their academic fields. They have to produce more adaptive programmes and, at the same time, dare to challenge the expectations of adult learners with learning arrangements that are non-traditional for them and, if necessary, replace the old paradigm of the 'in-class/homework model' to embrace that much of learning goes through the properly guided practice.

Conclusions

Teaching in the realm of the European tendency for 'greying' population requires an understanding of the peculiarities of lifelong learning in adults.

The research findings show that the students over 45 years old were motivated to get an additional university degree not because of market perspective or the threat of unemployment, but mainly because of the need for self-realisation. Thus, their assessment of training is based more on the emotional and volitional sphere, affectionate satisfaction, and not on the perspectives of using the professional knowledge they gained. Adult students value positive attitudes, respect toward their pre-existing experience, being in homogenous groups of peers, not with younger students.

We can also conclude that the 45+ adults prefer the teaching/learning methods they are used to. The innovative practices, however desirable, have to be introduced gradually, and with regard to their skills in utilising of new technologies within the learning process. The value-based social work competences still have to be more critically reviewed by the universities teaching social work to adults, and the appropriate way to shift the students' mindset from passive to pro-active learning has to be found.

The traditional in Ukraine, theory-based approach to higher education, including education in social work, has to be replaced with a practice-based model. It has to be in line with the international standards for such training, evidence-based 'best practices' of social work education, and should reflect the peculiarities of teaching adults who have a relatively high motivation to get new competences, are pragmatic, and willing to understand how knowledge can be immediately applied in real life situations.

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