

VOCATIONAL COMPETENCE FORMATION FOR SOCIAL WORK SPECIALISTS

Valentina Kyrylenko, Katerina Kolchenko

*Open International University of Human Development "Ukraine"
Kyiv, Ukraine*

Abstract

In the present article vocational competence and professional expertise formation is analyzed. Definitions of "competence" and "expertise" are compared. Levels of professional expertise formation and ways of achieving it during academic training are explored. A research among bachelor's and master's degree students ("social work" graduates of Open International University of Human Development "Ukraine") is described.

Key words: *competence, expertise, social work specialist, vocational competence, professional expertise.*

Introduction

A brand new system of social protection of population is rapidly developing in modern Ukrainian society, and that means rapid modernization of existing higher education system in order to supply appropriate staff.

Education of social work specialists in Ukraine began only in 1990s at B. Grinchenko Interregional Institute of Pedagogical Staff Retraining for comprehensive institutions (first social pedagogues graduated in 1998), but at the beginning of the XXI century almost every higher education institution in the country was training social workers or social pedagogues. As studies of history of social work development show in the mid 90s some job descriptions that were new to post soviet countries have been added to the manual of managerial, specialist and other employee positions – "social work specialist", "social pedagogue" and "social worker". Although it may seem that employment market is now full of such specialists, it is not the quantity but quality that matters. That is why training of highly skilled social workers remains quite a pressing question.

It is worth mentioning that people without obvious social problems as well as socially unprotected population groups resort to the help of social workers. That is why education institutions training social workers should help them form vocational competences necessary for helping potential clients along with providing them with theoretical knowledge and practical skills.

As scientific studies suggest, social workers' readiness to professional activity should not be separated from formation of their vocational competences during training (Гайдук, 2007;

Топольницька, 2000), although the problems of continuous and systematic formation of those competences and expertise were not properly covered. Accordingly, as practical experience suggests, young graduates do not possess substantial professional expertise for working with certain categories of clients, i.e. are incompetent in certain areas of their professional activity.

The subject of the research is vocational training of social workers at Open International University of Human Development “Ukraine”.

The aim of the research is to improve ways of the formation of such vocational competences for future social workers, which would help them work effectively with various categories of clients from social institutions.

The objectives of the research are:

- to define the level of the formation of vocational competences for students of University “Ukraine”, future social workers;
- to define ways of formation and improvement of various vocational competences for students, future social workers.

The methods of the research:

- Theoretical analysis of the scientific literature on the theme in question.
- Diagnostic, i.e. interview with students and their instructors in order to define the level of competence formation.

Theoretical analysis

In most scientific studies on various professions the term “competence” has narrower sense than the term “expertise”. While some sources use the terms “competence” and “expertise” as synonyms (Равен), other scholars distinguish between them: “competence” usually means a person having certain qualities and conditions, however without a guarantee of their effective application, and “expertise” is a specific measure, which can be mastered based on respective competences, and which combines certain competences that make person a qualified specialist (Bowden).

Several scholars (Мижериков, Єрмоленко, 1999) define competences as personal abilities of an employee, his/her qualification, which allows dealing with certain scope of job-related issues. Analysis of scientific studies shows that practitioners view professionals as bearers of certain competences:

- technical competences;
- communicative competences;
- adaptive competence;
- technological competence;
- integration competence.

In pedagogy literature expertise is considered a general integral ability based on knowledge, skills, experience and values received through training (Капская, 2006), as ability to perform professional duties properly, as “an ability to absorb knowledge and master skills, which help actively use academic achievements in a new working environment in order to provide efficient service or perform a job assignment” (Соловей, Спицин, 2006); as specific abilities helping to solve typical tasks of everyday life (Бодалев, 2001), in other words expertise is the result of acquiring vocational competence.

Hence, competence as a necessary complex of knowledge, skills and experience that allows acting or performing certain functions effectively, and expertise – a general ability of an organism to work effectively, based on the life experience, theoretical knowledge and practical skills are considered. Thus it may be concluded that competence begets specific skills and allows applying them to the job-related situation at hand.

Analysis of sources shows that the term “expertise” is mostly used by psychologists, while pedagogues speak of “competence”, so there is no common opinion on the question. Besides, the notion of “vocational competence” is rarely studied, and Ukrainian scientists believe that vocational competence embraces personal abilities of workers, their qualification, knowledge, experience or scope of problems, job assignments within workers’ scope of duties, performing which they use their knowledge and skills mastered (Яркина, 1998). Competence is declared in job descriptions and other legal documents of organizations. At the same time, knowledge and skills of graduates must match requirements listed in speciality description (concerning academic level). Thus, expertise indicates to what degree worker’s professional skills were formed during his/her university training.

Hence, competence is a specified measure, a quality indicator of knowledge and skills acquired by students during their training and how they are used in practice. In other words, vocational competence of a social worker is a combination of interrelated personal traits, his/her qualitative characteristics as an agent, whose activity reflects integral nature of university education and personal readiness to perform his/her duties, i.e. level of formation of professional expertise, which reveals his/her attitude towards the subject of professional activity.

In books on management psychology it is stated that expertise is a worker’s ability to efficiently perform certain kinds of work in terms of speciality (s)he was trained for and achieve high results due to skills mastered. As Markova puts it, professional expertise is nothing else but a combination of personality traits and readiness (knowledge and skills formed during training) for professional activity, and also experience and attitude to work, i.e. development of person’s attitude towards his/her future activity.

Solovey and Spitsyn single out the following expertises crucial for education field specialists: communicative, healthcare, social and labour, informative (Соловей, Спицин, 2006). Nagach names three basic groups of expertises: key, basic, special (Нагач, 2008), the latter being oriented on solving professional tasks. There are also social, motivational and functional expertises. Some scholars insist on considering life expertise, which should be viewed as a process of gaining experience (that comes with age), as an ability to apply knowledge, as an ability to adapt to the new life conditions, and life success.

A notion of “expertise” includes cognitive, motivational, regulatory and attitude components (Зимняя, 2004). Usually the following kinds of social workers’ expertises are singled out: functional (production), in particular professional knowledge and practical skills; intellectual expertise (analytical thinking while fulfilling one’s functional duties); situational expertise – an ability to quickly find a correct solution; social expertise – communication skills, expertise to plan one’s working time efficiently.

Thus it may be said that expertise is a combination of acquired theoretical knowledge, practical skill, learning of social norms, values, certain attitude to one’s job, ability and readiness to self-development.

Teaching aids offer the following features of pedagogical expertise: pedagogical skill, communicative skill, pedagogical techniques proficiency, innovation activities (Соловей, Спицин, 2006). Then what are the features of social workers’ professional expertise? It is assumed that professional expertise of a social worker includes the following competences: general scientific, personal-social, economic, organizational and managerial, vocational, special (Капская, 2006). It could be stated that features of social workers’ professional expertise should be psychological expertise (readiness and ability to perceive information, understanding of a case, ability to analyze situations, reflection) (Сохань, 2003), social expertise (ability to establish communication, relationship, exchange of information); pedagogical expertise (observation, situation explanation, establishment of interdisciplinary connections), technological expertise (use of social work technologies), life expertise

(knowledge, life experience, life-management skills (individual life plan)), performing of existential and social roles, readiness to self-development (Нарач, 2008), healthcare expertise (Соловей, Спицин, 2006), technical expertise. One can master these expertises by combining theoretical knowledge with skill practice, but several aspects of social professional activity require narrow specialization. At the same time, social workers must possess interdisciplinary, basic and special knowledge, personal qualities. During training this can be achieved by combining knowledge from various disciplines and practical component of social workers' vocational training.

Results of the research

The present experiment included social work students of the 4th and 6th years of study (graduation years), both full- and part-time. Out of total 102 students, 36 students were getting Master's degree and 66 – Bachelor's degree.

In order to analyze the readiness to professional activity and the level of expertise formation a "List of professional expertise formation records" was developed. Indicating rates in points is recommended: low level of expertise formation – 1 point, mean level of expertise formation – 1.5 point, high level of expertise formation – 2 points (Table 1).

Table 1. List of professional expertise formation records

Expertise	Expertise feature
Psychological expertise (X_1)	Information (situation) perceiving
	Information (situation) understanding
	Information (situation) analysis
	Reflection
	Communicative skills
Social expertise (X_2)	Connection establishment
	Relationship formation
	Information exchange
	Managerial qualities
	Responsibility
	Quality-oriented
Pedagogical expertise (X_3)	Result-oriented
	Organization of supervision
	Establishment of interdisciplinary connections
Technological expertise (X_4)	Explanation of Information
	Use of social technologies
	Use of psychological technologies
Life expertise (X_5)	Use of pedagogical technologies
	Personal expertise
	Life experience
	Life-management skills
Healthcare expertise (X_6)	Performance of life and social roles
	Readiness to self-development
Technical expertise (X_7)	Healthy way of living
	Ability to use technical resources
	Preparation of accompanying documents
	Awareness of job safety measures

In practical activity a component of innovation expertise that indicates social workers' ability to find innovative ways out of the situation in question can be singled out.

Average value of every expertise listed should be calculated. General expertise of a social worker can be calculated as follows:

$$K_x = (X_1 + X_2 + X_3 + X_4 + X_5 + X_6 + X_7) / 7$$

Information concerning professional expertise of potential social workers should be taken from three sources: testing the students themselves (self-analysis), surveying the group concerning expertise of a certain student, inquiring the instructors conducting seminars and practical trainings. The results obtained are compared and the average value is calculated.

Table 2 presents the results of professional expertise formation for social work graduates, received from two sources: instructor's evaluation, student's evaluation.

Table 2. Professional expertise formation

	4 year	6 year	4 year	6 year
	instructor's evaluation		student's evaluation	
Psychological expertise (X_1)	22,4%	21,5%	16,7%	4,7%
Social expertise (X_2)	24,3%	8,1%	5,3%	3,3%
Pedagogical expertise (X_3)	11,2%	14,7%	1,4%	2,7%
Technological expertise (X_4)	7,5%	5,2%	11,2%	7,3%
Life expertise (X_5)	5,1%	34,5%	5,1%	28,5%
Healthcare expertise (X_6)	4,5%	3,8%	12,3%	7,3%
Technical expertise (X_7)	25%	12,5%	50%	43,5%

From the data above the conclusion can be made: instructors mark level of expertise formation lower than students themselves. For example, 43% of part-time Master's degree students rank their computer and paper work skills as high or rather high. Special attention should be paid to extremely low results on healthcare expertise. Its basic feature is readiness of social workers to advocate healthy way of living by personal example. For example, only 1% of smoking social workers are willing to give up.

The final results will not be presented in detail, it just should be noted that 19% of full-time and 13% of part-time students showed high level of professional expertise formation, mean level – 77% and 84%, low level – 4% and 3%. The analysis was based on three components: instructor's evaluation, student's evaluation, group mates' evaluation.

53% of part-time students found it difficult to establish interdisciplinary connections in order to solve the given problem.

An independent decision to become a social worker should be singled out as a specific feature. It is characteristic of 100% part-time students and 94% full-time students. The remaining 6% either followed family advice or acted according to the leftover principle.

Academic performance analysis showed that only 6% of students have low rating of approximately 3.2 (out of maximum 5).

Detailed analysis of field practice results and academic performance during seminars reveals low rating of readiness to practical social work for only 8,5% of students. This group of students has not chosen their target group yet.

Having analyzed the conditions and results of all kinds of field practice for the

experimental group, it can be suggested that during introductory field practice it is important not just to make students familiar with various population groups, but also explain the peculiarities of working with them.

Another feature of the experimental group is participation in student scientific and research work, which accounts for 14.7%.

Professional employment may be considered yet another feature. The results are: 81% of part-time students and 12% of full-time students, including students working as volunteers in various social services.

The main question remains: what are the ways and methods of formation of social worker's vocational competences and expertises? This question deserves additional coverage, just a short answer will be presented.

So, what makes a good social worker? As analysis of pedagogical studies suggests, first of all, pedagogical technologies, that is a complex of educational methods interconnecting teaching and studying activities, become the main factor of key competence formation.

The second component should be student's aspiration for independence, self-development and self-improvement, which, in turn, requires more practice.

Conclusions

Reorientation of the modern higher education, especially for social field, towards the European standards means training a competent worker, who clearly understands his/her social responsibility to client and society, can define and perform professional tasks, is ready for self-development and plays crucial role during his/her social work with client. Acquisition and refreshment of knowledge gained at university is a necessary requirement of high qualification and expertise of social field specialist, thus training a competent worker is an actual task of higher school. Also the social worker training system should take into consideration conditions in which future specialists will be working.

According to the analysis of the results 19% of full-time and 13% of part-time students showed high level of professional expertise formation, mean level – 77% and 84%, low level – 4% and 3%. Thereby the conclusion can be made that professional expertise is a measure of social worker's vocational qualities, which are based solely on theoretical knowledge received and are developed through practical skills during the training.

Thus it is extremely important to involve students in voluntary work with various population groups from the very first year of study, as it will help them choose their future specialization. Students also must be involved in research activity, as it helps to develop analytical skills and theoretical thinking, also to helps form scientific approach skills it is reasonable to organize scientific-and-research practice, during which students will be able to collect empirical data for carrying out creative and individual tasks on major disciplines.

References

1. Бодалев, А. А. (2001). *Психология новой эры: компетентность или беспомощность. Режим доступа*. Internet access: <<http://psy.1september.ru/2001/47/45.htm>>.
2. Гайдук, Н. М. (2007). Соціальна робота: Практична підготовка студентів на освітньо-кваліфікаційному рівні «бакалавр». In Н. М. Гайдук, Л. Є. Клос, С. Г. Ставкова, С. Я. Беляева (Eds.). *Навч. посібник*. Львів: Видавництво Національного університету “Львівська політехніка”.
3. Сохань, Л. В., Сохань, І. Г., Несен, Г. М. (2003). *Життєва компетентність особистості*. К.: Богдана.
4. Зимняя, И. А. (2004). *Ключевые компетентности как результативно-целевая основа компетентностного подхода в образовании*. М.: Исследовательский центр проблем качества подготовки специалистов.

5. Мижериков, В. А., Эрмоленко (1999). *Введение в педагогическую профессию*: [учеб. пособие для студентов]. М.: Педагогическое общество России.
6. Нагач, М. В. (2008). *Підготовка майбутніх учителів у школах професійного розвитку в США* (Автореф. дис. на здобуття наук. ступеня канд. пед. наук: “Теорія і методика професійної освіти”). Київ).
7. Соловей, М. І., Спіцин, Є. С., Кудіна, В. В. (2008). *Професійно-педагогічна підготовка майбутнього вчителя в кредитно-модульній системі організації навчання*. К.: Ленвіт.
8. Капської, А. Й. (Ed.) (2006). *Соціальна педагогіка Підручник*. К. Центр навчальної літератури.
9. Топольницька, Г. М. (2000). До питання про професійну компетентність учителя. *Науковий вісник Південноукраїнського державного педагогічного університету імені К. Д. Ушинського: зб. наук. праць*, 5–7, 130–140.
10. Яркіна, Т. Ф. (1998). *Соціальна педагогіка и соціальна работа в контексте міжнародного співробітництва*. М.: АСОПіР.