

# POTENTIALITY OF SOCIO-EDUCATIONAL STUDY PROGRAMMES' IMPROVEMENT AT LITHUANIAN UNIVERSITIES

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## **Abstract**

The article deals with the attitude of the students of socio-educational (social education/work) study programmes of different Lithuanian universities towards their chosen study programmes in the aspects of subject blocks, modules and practical placements. In order to identify the students' assessments the written questionnaire survey (Jankauskaitė, 2009) has been applied, using the half-closed type questionnaire. The survey was attended by Bachelor students of socio-educational (social education/work) study programmes of Lithuanian universities (N=193).

**Key words:** *the quality of higher education, the quality of studies, study programmes.*

## **Introduction**

For a number of years in Lithuania like in other European countries the reform of education and science has been carried out. When Lithuania entered the European Union a tendency can be noticed that the development of higher education increases, knowledge in the society becomes critical, and changes take place very quickly. Interest in the manifestation of the quality of studies both in Europe and in the world encourages to develop discussions and research in this direction between the countries, within the country and in the very higher educational institutions (Bartuševičienė 2006, Žakevičienė 2005).

Training of social educators/workers as new professionals, which began in our country's higher educational institutions 10-15 years ago, still awaits a more comprehensive research and assessment. On the other hand, the research on the quality of higher education is complicated and contradictory. So far the area of the quality of higher education has not been researched so much. The carried out studies and observations most often would analyze and underline funding problems, shortcomings of in-service training system, international cooperation, the issue of "brain drain"; however, concrete study programmes, the quality of their preparation and perspectives have been little tackled (Pukelis, 1999; Čižas, 2002).

The changing environment of Europe also encourages the development of new academic researches and study trends. The Bologna Declaration, adopted in 1999, later Prague (2001), Berlin (2003), Bergen (2005) communiqués implemented quite a number of innovations into the European system of higher education. The system of higher education of Lithuania, including training of social educators/workers, is regulated by the Law on Higher Education

of the Republic of Lithuania (2000), the Laws on Science and Studies (2001), Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (2006) and other related documents.

Experts, scientists, members of academic community analyze the system of higher education, its quality, the demand of programmes under development and their perspectives in quite different aspects.

The conception of higher education, methodological approaches to the conception of training an integral personality and a contemporary educated person are analyzed, the dispersion of the culture of the quality of studies, quality assurance and evaluation are discussed. (Valiuškevičiūtė, Druskytė, Mikutavičienė 2004, Kleimerienė, 2005). Bitinas (2000), Donskis (1993), Duoblienė (2007) express a philosophical approach, discussing classical and liberal education, their advantages and shortcomings, discuss the tendencies that have showed up in the development of higher education: classical, based on educational traditions, professional, expressing the tendencies of decomposition of the system of scientific knowledge, and modern, which is dictated by the needs of knowledge and information society.

Foreign scientists so far do not take active interest in higher education of Lithuania, in training of social educators/workers, but Alkin, McNeil (2002), Rossi, Lipsey, Freeman (2003) and others analyzed the assessment of the quality of study programmes in many aspects. The carried out scientific researches enable the comparison with higher education of the nearest neighbours or the EU states, the generalizations and the results of which show that the system of higher education of Lithuania is not yet stable and should be improved in many areas.

Thus, though the researchers take interest in contemporary problems of higher education, the assessment of the quality of different study programmes is missing. Deep analysis of the quality of socio-educational study programmes that encompass social education and social work takes place during sporadic certifications of social educators/workers, discussing their training problems; however, a more comprehensive analysis of study programmes is missing (Alifanovienė, 2004; Buzaitytė-Kašalynienė, 2002; Jankauskaitė, 2009; Kvieskienė, 2001; Leliūgienė, Giedraitienė, Rupšienė, 2006). Therefore, in order to analyze socio-educational study programmes in the Lithuanian universities the quantitative analysis of the students' attitude as of the internal assessment component has been carried out. The article covers certain aspects of the internal assessment of study programmes because the quality of studies is a complex construct. The assessment of the quality of study programmes in the aspect of their organization and implementation based on the students' opinion on the one hand should be treated as an advanced way and on the other hand only as a partial way that does not cover the whole. *How do the students of the university social education/work study programmes assess the programme which they study themselves? What forms of studies, blocks of modules do they value most? What shortcomings and improvement possibilities do they envisage?* These problem questions highlight the space of the research. Submitting and improving study programmes, their creators should consider the students' opinions.

**Research aim** is to identify how senior Bachelor students studying socio-educational (social education/work) studies assess the chosen study programmes.

**Research subject** is the peculiarities of university Bachelor socio-educational (social education/work) study programmes from the *standpoint of senior students*.

**Research methods** – to identify the students' attitude the semi-standardized questionnaire was employed. It was prepared considering the programme implementation quality criteria, set by The Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education. The questionnaire consists of the blocks of questions that disclose students' motivation choosing the studies, attitude to the abilities and competencies developed by social education/work study programmes, assessment of the studied modules, their volume and the opportunities of improving the studies. To process the research data *SPSS-PC 11.0* and *Microsoft Excel 2003* programmes were employed;

besides, descriptive statistics and nonparametric methods of statistical analysis (to calculate reliability (*p*) *Kruskal-Wallis* test was used) were applied.

**Research sample** – the respondents of the quantitative study were senior Bachelor students of socio-educational study programmes (social education/work) (N=193).

#### **The analysis of the research data**

In order to get information about the respondents the questionnaire contained questions about their gender, university, year of studies and speciality. The demographic research data disclose that the respondents' distribution by universities is very similar: of Šiauliai University 21,8% of the respondents, of Klaipėda University 26,9% of the respondents, of Vilnius Pedagogical University 28,5% of the respondents and of Vilnius University 22,8% of the respondents. The distribution by specialities is not very homogeneous (social education 60,1%, social work 39,9%, but there is a big difference in the respondents distribution by gender. The obtained data show that largely socio-educational study programmes (social education/work) are chosen by women (94,3%). Men constitute only 5,7% of the respondents. It can be concluded that such choice of study programmes may be determined by subjective factors: the manifestation of the society's attitudes, the received salary, the prestige of the specialities, etc. In order to find out the actual reasons of this phenomenon it would be possible to carry out a separate and deeper analysis. In the further analysis it has not been possible to use the demographic unit of gender because the difference of the frequency of men-women is too large.

It should be noted that the submitted data and the interpretations of the analysis of the students' attitude should not be made absolute and should be perceived only within the limits of the carried out research as a possibility to model changes and encourage the efforts of university academic communities. During the research it was important to perceive general peculiarities and manifestation tendencies of the development of socio-educational programmes, and not the deficit or surplus of separate universities; moreover that in the current situation a clearer strategy for the development of national social and educational sciences and studies is missing.

It is supposed that students' motivation to study the chosen programme is an important indicator in the assessment of the study programme. It may be assumed that the assessment of the study programme can depend on the entrants' motives and at the same time on the requirements raised to the chosen study programme. In order to find out what determined the respondents' choice to enter the study programme of socio-educational studies (social education/work) eleven possible choices, encompassing several motive groups, were offered:

- entered being influenced by external factors (the encouragement of people round about, the opinion formed by the media, open day events, etc.);
- entered being influenced by internal factors (the wish to help, like to solve problems, etc.);
- entered being influenced by subjective factors (studies closer to home, accidental entrance, etc.)

The obtained data show that quite a number of students chose social education/work programme accidentally (35,7%). Other more frequent choices were determined by the very students' resolve (24,3%), the wish to have the diploma of higher education (21,7%), the possibility to study closer to home (21,2%) and parents' encouragement (7,7%). The factors that influenced the students' choice least are the opinion formed by the media (4,1%) and the ones that are related to the encouragement of people round about (of learners – 5%, of friends – 4%, of teachers – 1%).

The obtained results are somewhat unexpected because the major percentage (78%)

of students entered the socio-educational study programmes guided by subjective factors: accidental, the wish to have a diploma of higher education, and studies closer to home. The statement having the majority of choices (N=69) “I entered accidentally but I like” enables to assume that students have too little information about socio-educational programmes (the type of studies, of a prospective job) or there is an impression that it is quite easy to enter these study programmes, therefore, they are included into the entrance sheet. On the other hand the entrants are provided with the conditions to enter the speciality, which does not motivate them because the entrance sheet contains twenty entrance opportunities. Often a young person is not yet self-determined as to entering one or another speciality.

The accomplished study of the means (M) on what determined the choice of the study programme by universities enabled to compare the respondents’ answers between the universities and every statement separately based on the opinion of the students of particular universities.

The presented data disclose that Šiauliai University students’ choice to study social education study programme comparing with Klaipėda University was mainly determined by the very students’ self-determination and wish to help others ( $p=0,03$ ). In the opinion of Klaipėda University students their choice was mainly determined by accident. Though the students of Vilnius Pedagogical University and Vilnius University gave the same or similar significance to the internal motivation factor – their self-determination – as well, it can be concluded that the entrance of the vast majority to socio-educational study programmes was determined by the subjective factor – accidental, i.e. low level of motivation.

Statistically significant ( $p<0,05$ ) is one of the internal motivation factors “I decided myself”, which determined the students’ choice to enter the socio-educational study programme because, comparing the universities, all respondents, except the ones of Klaipėda University, indicated it as one of the most significant factors. The variant “the possibility to study closer to home” was mainly chosen by Klaipėda University students.

In order to find out how students assess competencies and abilities provided by study programmes they were given statements, disclosing the development of knowledge, general abilities, practical abilities, knowledge application abilities, a personality’s and intellectual, creative powers in the study programme. Students’ assessments disclose the areas which in their opinion are most significant and are insufficiently developed training social educators and social workers.

Students think that mainly the chosen study programmes provide with knowledge ( $M=3,36$ ), a bit lower assessment is given to the development of general abilities ( $M=3,19$ ), personality’s development ( $M=3,03$ ), and the development of intellectual, creative powers ( $M=2,87$ ). The respondents gave lowest assessments to the development of knowledge application abilities ( $M=2,77$ ) and the development of practical abilities ( $M=2,66$ ) though these abilities are among the most significant and necessary for the prospective specialists. The obtained results enabled to generalize that the programmes the students study provide with knowledge, develop a personality and critical thinking but little develop knowledge application and practical abilities. Hence, the universities are more orientated to rendering of theoretical knowledge but little develop the ability to apply the acquired knowledge and abilities in the practical activity.

The attitude of the respondents of different universities to competencies and abilities, developed studying social education/work study programmes, is presented in Table 1:

**Table 1.** The comparison of the assessment of the provided abilities and competencies by universities (M, p)

University	Šiauliai University	Klaipėda University	Vilnius Pedagogical University	Vilnius University	P value according to Kruskal-Wallis
	Mean (M)				
Provide with knowledge	3,52	3,42	3,16	3,36	0,14
Develop general abilities	3,40	3,19	3,04	3,18	0,09
Develop practical abilities	<b>2,95</b>	2,75	2,47	2,50	<b>0,02</b>
Develop knowledge application abilities	2,83	2,88	2,55	2,84	0,10
Develop a personality	<b>3,31</b>	3,13	2,75	3,0	<b>0,01</b>
Develop intellectual, creative powers	<b>3,19</b>	2,94	2,53	2,89	<b>0,002</b>

Šiauliai University students assess provided knowledge best ( $M=3,52$ ), and the development of knowledge application abilities – worst ( $M=2,83$ ). Klaipėda University students evaluate provided knowledge best ( $M=3,42$ ), and the development of practical abilities – worst ( $M=2,75$ ). Vilnius Pedagogical and Vilnius University students also give the greatest significance to rendering of knowledge ( $M=3,16/M=3,36$ ), and assess the development of practical abilities worst ( $M=2,47/M=2,50$ ).

Statistical significance was noticed in the statements “develop practical abilities” ( $p=0,02$ ), where Vilnius Pedagogical and Vilnius University respondents are distinguished by lower assessment. Like in the statement “develop a personality” where Vilnius Pedagogical University students give lower assessments ( $M=2,75$ ) compared to others and in the statement “develop intellectual, creative powers” where a particularly high statistical significance is observed ( $p=0,002$ ) due to different distribution of the students of all four universities.

During the study it has been sought to find out how the respondents of socio-educational studies assess study methods used in study programmes (practical placements, seminars, laboratory, independent work, term papers and final papers). Research data enable to state that such study methods which are based on rendering of knowledge (lectures) and can be related to the form of accounting (independent works: independent preparation for the lecture, papers, essays, etc.) or to the testing of knowledge are assessed by the students best.

Worst assessments are given by the students of socio-educational study programmes to such study methods which are related to practical activity, application of knowledge and abilities in everyday scientific and practical activity. Such assessment shows that the universities are more orientated to rendering of theoretical knowledge and insufficient relating of theory and practice, which students name as one of the most significant matters in the process of studies. Because the universities, unlike colleges and vocational training centres, are more orientated to theoretical, scientific activities in order to meet students’ needs of practical competencies and abilities, the university academic communities should think how to organize more effective practical placements that encompass consolidation of knowledge in the practical activity. The respondents’ attitude to study methods used in study programmes is presented in Table 2:

**Table 2.** Assessment of study methods by universities (M, p)

Share of the volume	University				P value according to Kruskal-Wallis
	Šiauliai University	Klaipėda University	Vilnius Pedagogical University	Vilnius University	
	Mean (M)				
Lectures	2,29	2,25	2,25	2,20	0,95
Seminar works	<b>2,36</b>	1,81	1,98	2,14	<b>0,00</b>
Practical-laboratory works	2,24	<b>2,25</b>	1,81	1,83	<b>0,00</b>
Independent works	2,24	<b>2,27</b>	1,92	1,90	<b>0,00</b>
Practical placements	<b>2,12</b>	1,73	1,88	1,73	<b>0,00</b>
Term, Bachelor papers	2,20	<b>2,31</b>	1,94	1,85	<b>0,00</b>

As it can be seen from the given data (Table 2) Šiauliai University students assess seminar works most favourably (M=2,36), and give lowest assessments to practical placements (M=2,12), independent works (M=2,34) and practical-laboratory works (M=2,34). Klaipėda University students give highest assessments to writing of term and Bachelor papers (M=2,31), independent works (M=2,27), and lowest – to practical placements (M=1,73) and seminar works (M=1,81). Vilnius Pedagogical University students gave highest significance to the lectures (M=2,25), and lowest – to practical-laboratory works (M=1,81), practical placements (M=1,88) and independent works (M=1,92). Vilnius University students gave highest assessments to the lectures (M=2,20), seminar works (M=2,14), and lowest – to practical placements (M=1,73) and practical-laboratory works (M=1,83).

Analyzing the assessment of the given study methods, different opinions of students studying university socio-educational study programmes also showed up. Though statistically significant difference has not been identified (p=0,95), in analyzing the assessment of lectures in separate universities differences show up. As to other study methods, statistically significant differences of opinions have been identified (p=0,00). Seminar works are best assessed by Šiauliai University students (M=2,36), worst – by Klaipėda University students (M=1,88). Practical laboratory works are best assessed by Klaipėda University students (M=2,25), similar assessment is also given by Šiauliai University students (M=2,24), worst – by Vilnius Pedagogical University students (M=1,81). Independent works are best assessed by Klaipėda University students (M=2,27), worst – by Vilnius University students (M=1,90). Assessment of practical placements distinguishes by particularly distinctive differences of opinions: Šiauliai University students gave one of the lowest assessments to this statement (M=2,12), but these are the highest assessments compared to other universities. Lowest assessment of these methods were given by Klaipėda and Vilnius University students (M=1,73). Writing of term papers, Bachelor papers is also differently assessed by the respondents: highest assessments are given by Klaipėda University students (M=2,31), and lowest by Vilnius University students (M=1,85).

The analysis of the data of this block of study enable to confirm the previous generalization; the universities, training social educators and social workers, are more orientated to the delivery of theory, rendering of knowledge but they lack the development of practical activity, practical competencies and abilities.

In order to find out the students' attitude towards the dynamics of the development of study programmes, the possibilities of changes and their improvement, the respondents were asked what they would change in the study programme if they had an opportunity.

The obtained data show that what students lack most is teaching materials (49,7%), premises for individual work (37,3%) and more seminar classes instead of general lectures (33,7%). The respondents would like to change the existing situation in the areas of writing tests (5,7%) and individual accounting (7,3%) least.

Thus, it can be generalized that the students are most dissatisfied with teaching materials: they lack teaching books, conspectuses and handouts. Besides, the changes in the improvement of physical environments are treated as a priority: the students lack premises for individual work, tutorials because at the moment the lecturers consult students in common rooms or departments, dean's office premises that are intended for general use. Anyway, there are respondents who chose the answer "I would not change anything" (10,9%); it means that part of the respondents are satisfied with the existing situation.

The expressed students' assessments are sufficiently subjective and determined by their personal needs and the resources already possessed by the universities. The data of the students' interview show that Šiauliai, Klaipėda, Vilnius Pedagogical University students lack teaching materials most. Vilnius University students are more orientated to the increase of the number of seminars; this shows that the students particularly lack practical activity. The students of all universities would least change the order of test writing and accounting. The research on the students' attitude about the possibilities to reform and improve study programmes would probably provide academic communities of the faculties and departments with useful information on what could be improved in the areas of preparation of studies, order of accounting and creation of physical environments.

### Generalizations

- Training of social educators/workers as new professionals, which began in the higher educational institutions of our country 10-15 year ago, is not yet sufficiently studied; therefore, it is important to look at these study programmes from the inside, in the eyes of academic community, so that it is possible to assess the advantages and model the changes. It is evident that the data of the analysis of the students' attitude and interpretations should not be made absolute and should be perceived only at the level of the carried out study as the possibility to model changes and encourage the efforts of university academic communities. During the research it was important to perceive general peculiarities of socio-educational programmes and not the deficit or excess of separate universities, moreover that in the current situation there is a shortage of a clearer strategy for the development of national social and educational sciences and studies.
- Research results force to become more attentive because the vast majority of the entrants to socio-educational study programmes entered guided by accident, the wish to have a diploma of higher education and studies closer to home. This enables to think that students have too little information about socio-educational programmes or there is an image that it is not difficult to enter these study programmes at all; after all, the entrants are provided with the conditions to enter the speciality, to which the student is little motivated because the entrance sheet contains twenty entrance possibilities. Often a young person is not resolved regarding the entrance to one or another study programme, often students list even such study programmes which are of little interest to them and to which their future is not related.
- The analysis of students' assessments enable to state that the students give best assessments to such study modules which are grounded on rendering of knowledge (lectures), worst – to such study methods which are related to practical activity, application of knowledge and abilities in the scientific and practical activity. Such

assessment shows that the universities are more orientated to rendering of theoretical knowledge and insufficient linking of theory and practice, which students name as one of the most significant matters in the process of studies. It is evident that the universities, unlike the colleges or vocational training centres are more orientated to theoretical, scientific activity.

- Research data show that the students are most dissatisfied with the shortage of teaching materials for studies: they lack teaching books, textbooks, teaching studies and handouts. The improvement of the educational environments of the universities is also indicated as a distinctive deficit: students lack premises for individual work, tutorials. One cannot but agree that these shortcomings are important for the quality of studies because the teaching materials are necessary for the development of knowledge and individual tutorials are particularly necessary for students while preparing accounting and final works.

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