

Academic Training and Competence Analysis of Social Work

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Summary. In this paper, we present a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the competences and employability of graduates in Social Work. Our approach follows the methodological lines of the Credits project, which includes the statistical analysis of interviews with experts, such as teaching staff and entrepreneurs, mail questionnaires, focus groups, and the textual analysis of documents. Our target is the entire population of social workers in Tuscany. We expect to create indicators of the competences required by the job market, verify the efficacy level of education and training, and create an interactive systematic relation between academe and the labour market.

Keywords: Academic training, Competences, Social work.

1. Competence and performance

In the following, we refer to *competence* as a new concept and not as a derivative of the Latin term *competentia*, which applies to the sphere of jurisdiction. The English word *competence*, as Chomsky (1969) used it in linguistic epistemology, is to be considered a developmental process of knowledge, while *performance* names what is put into action. *Competence* is the acquisition through experience, on a knowledge basis, of the ability to act (Smelser & Baltes, 2001).

The transition from university to work has been the object of several scientific studies (Dolton *et al.*, 1993; ISFOL, 1994; Mariani & Tronti, 1994; ISTAT, 2000; Biggeri *et al.*, 2001; Fabbris 2003) and the relationship between graduates' competences and professional roles has been the object of a number of empirical research projects (La Rosa, 1984; Carli Sardi, 2002). These studies helped to interpret and link individual, institutional and market factors with the elaboration and experimentation of particular learning models.

The need of worker's knowledge and the interactive relationships with the organisation take us back to Likert & Murphy (1938) definition of the worker as a person with 'emotional maturity' so that it is necessary to take into consideration a set of psycho-social processes which may change his or her cognitive structure, motivation and capacity for action. The question concerns all formative agencies, from school to university, from profession to workplace, be it a public institution, a private company or a professional office.

Wittorski (1998) has broken down the competence as a function of work into components of the training process. The components are cognitive, affective and social, each of which concerns actions which imply a number of dimensions which are cross-occupational, subjective, inter-subjective, objective, thus defining a complex concept of competence, measurable through a set of indicators and evaluation procedures.

The core components of competences have been sufficiently theorised (Boyatzis, 1982), but there is a certain fragility going from description to definition and to identification¹.

From the theoretical point of view, competences are not just behaviours, even though they may be expressed through individual behaviour. Competences are the expression of knowledge, abilities, and attitudes that express a potential capacity of the individual that can be realised and powered within a work context. Therefore, knowledge, experience and motivation refer to specific contexts.

We want to draw the attention to the competences that are necessary to realise a "regulated profession". They are different from the professional business skills because the work contexts are different and vary according to economic activity and size of the company.

In the following, we will refer to the professional profile of the *social worker*. This profile has been under consideration since the first normative law of study programmes in Social work². A syllabus was first organised during the period from 1960 to 1970 in six "special university schools". In the last years, a ministerial norm regulated the training of social workers with rigid curricula, until the university diplomas and the current three-year first-level programmes were born (Carli, 1996). The common denominator in all these phases has always been the distinction between knowledge (*savoir*), expertise or skills (*savoir faire*) and attitudes (*savoir être*).

The relationship between education and competences has generated a vast multidisciplinary literature with an applied psychology perspective.

¹ The links between professions and the market have been studied by Sarchielli (1993), Levati & Saraò (1998), Ajello (2002). Advanced statistical methods for the analysis of competences have been experimented by Buscema *et al.* (1999), Authier & Levy (2000), Fabbris (2003), Bolasco (2003).

² A programme in Social work was first formulated by Senator Ossicini, professor of Psychology at the University of Rome "La Sapienza".

We can identify three basic models:

- a) an individualistic approach (Spencer & Spencer, 1993), which refers to the cognitive sphere and personal abilities, and also takes into account “achievement”;
- b) a systemic–relational approach (Barney 1991), which refers to the job system, and so to skills and technologies, with a strong base of competences;
- c) a mixed model, which usefully combines personal and environmental characteristics with experience, similar to Piaget (1972) pedagogic conceptualisation.

In the present analysis, we adopted the last model. We will test it by examining both the social worker’s route from university to the workplace and documents that identify, on the one hand, the training system and, on the other, standards of recognition and testing.

We used the data gathered by CREDITS-EST (Schmidt & Michelotti, 2002) project that examines the subject matter in the Social work study programmes. In order to detect the subject contents on the syllabus, we analysed official programmes and consulted various documents, such as the norms for the thesis production and project work, and the English language requirements. The aim was to gain an understanding of the competences (basic, technical-specific and cross-occupation) and the partition into academic subject fields.

The result of such an analysis was a list of contents that we submitted to the judgement of some teachers and people responsible for other training experiences. They were asked to rate – on a 1 to 5 point scale – the items according to the importance for future social workers (see the following scheme).

Please, assign a number to each according to the following scale:
1=totally irrelevant 2=not relevant; 3=relevant; 4=very relevant; 5=extremely relevant)

Principles and foundations of social service

Social service as a multidimensional profession
The relationship between Welfare State and the development of social service in Italy
The profession of social worker: social and institutional mandate, Objectives and functions
The philosophical and value basis, ethics and attitudes
Ethics and attitudes
Theoretical and methodological basis of work: models
Working instruments and techniques: relationships, working with groups, documentation, and administrative work.

We applied the same procedure with recent graduates who did not have work experiences as social workers, again with the aim of collecting their relevance judgement about competences. A group of working professionals

was sampled for comparative reasons from the Tuscany Register of Professionals. As a whole, the register contained 1,600 names in the year 2003.

A mail questionnaire was sent to on a random sample of 600 graduates, which produced a 70% return without any reminder³. After a check for validity and completeness, an exploratory study of 200 randomly selected subjects was carried out.

In order to maintain a correspondence with the academic classification, both traditional and general areas were grouped according to competence classification into the basic, technical-professional and cross-occupational. The analyses carried out on the different viewpoints are presented in Section 2.

2. The exploratory analysis

The competences that the teachers felt they offered, those that the graduates felt they had acquired, and those that the professional social workers believed they should possess are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Average scores given to competences by new graduates, university teachers and social workers.

Subjects	New graduates	University teaching staff	Working graduates	Total
Principles and fundamentals of social services	4.20	3.84	3.25	3.87
Public institutions legislation	3.53	3.54	4.06	3.69
Private institutions legislation	3.26	2.80	1.38	2.63
Political economics	3.07	2.92	1.88	2.69
Sociology	3.40	3.08	4.06	3.55
Hygiene	4.15	3.50	1.94	3.40
General psychology	3.52	3.59	5.00	3.97
Social statistics	4.20	3.75	3.44	3.91
Social history	3.40	3.75	1.56	2.89
Computer science	4.05	3.50	4.06	3.97
English (as a foreign language)	2.93	4.50	3.44	3.31
Administrative law	3.44	3.33	2.63	3.19

³ The mail questionnaire contained 180 items relating to socio-demographic and family items, school and university curriculum, previous experience and present working situation, specific knowledge, updating, competences used and deemed necessary, evaluation of training etc., and standard scale items relating to personality, scales measuring attitude (Krech *et al.*, 1962) such as willingness to work in a public body, values and other psychological factors.

The teaching staff and the graduates' evaluations are close to each other. One can discern a slight tendency of new graduates to rate lower than teachers the individual components of the knowledge/competences, and, on the other hand, higher scores are given by the teachers to general principles such as the juridical aspects of social work and research methodology.

The professionals, on the other hand, rate either higher or lower the competences. One can see convergence on the juridical-economical issues and the fundamental technical-specific areas, with little standing out for the competences relative to specialist subjects (e.g. historical approaches).

The question raised by the specific analysis refers to how much the competences indicated by those working in the field as being necessary or important reflect the necessities of the social work and in which proportion they are a factor of personal utility which could be less representative.

Table 2. List of identified *transversal* competences and related academic subjects

Computer skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Knowledge of and ability to use the PC for activation or use of information systems ▪ Knowledge of and ability to use word-processing software 	Information technology Methodology of social research
Foreign language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Threshold level of English or French for the understanding of documents and articles or for interacting with the public or colleagues when an interpreter is not available ▪ Exchange of simple letters with particular reference to the English language 	P.E.T. Language test Erasmus programme.
Dissertation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Methodological abilities and research skills using a variety of sources ▪ Knowledge of a specific sector ▪ Ability to create a document to report objectively and correctly expressed ▪ Abstraction skills 	Dissertation
Practicum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Specific knowledge of the institutional sector ▪ Ability to relate to colleagues and outside institutional skills ▪ Communication skills on a number of levels ▪ Carrying out of administrative tasks ▪ Prioritisation of problems presented by members of the public ▪ Use of information technology ▪ Use of specific professional techniques (interviews, reports, meetings, assessments, projects) ▪ Reading the community and local area ▪ Awareness of attitudes and behaviour of individuals and groups with reference to professional values and principles (tolerance, democracy, etc.) 	Practicum

Table 3. List of identified *professional* competences and related academic subjects

Methodologies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Recognition of the rights of citizens as being protected by essential levels of help (UEA/UEAS) and ability to define them ▪ Ability to organisational innovation of traditional services and of expansion ▪ Use of planning methodology ▪ Knowledge of and correct use of staff and line of the Service ▪ Ability to express and communicate on a number of levels of the institutional organisation and to manage outside information ▪ Ability to analyse and evaluate the needs of groups through direct research processes ▪ Ability to use methods of quality control 	<p>Organization of Social services</p> <p>Methodology of social research</p> <p>Thesis</p>
Principles Ethics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Activation of promotional functions with respect to individuals and the community ▪ Use of interdisciplinary work and team work ▪ Use of networks ▪ Respect for the ethical code with respect to the public and colleagues. 	<p>Methods and techniques of the Social services</p> <p>Principles and fundamentals of Social services</p> <p>Social policy</p>
Work with people Relationship skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ability to recognise “the person” and support with individualised programmes of aid ▪ Sharing of the objectives of efficacy of the services and interventions with adequate documentation and checks ▪ Ability to share with other services efficiency and economy with respect to institutions with documented and checked use of resources ▪ Capacity to produce administrative documents taking direct responsibility; knowledge of own and those depending on administrative management ▪ Ability to produce specific professional documents for the use of the public and the services ▪ Ability to work with projects with scientific planning and methodology 	<p>Methods and techniques of Social Services</p> <p>Organization of Social services</p> <p>General and developmental psychology</p> <p>Practicum</p>

After this explorative analysis, we included in the structure of the questionnaire the contents that are shown in Tables 2, 3 and 4.

The correlations between the judgements expressed by the workers about their training and those concerning their work situation proved to be helpful (Table 5).

Table 4. List of identified *basic* competences and related academic subjects.

Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Awareness of the socio-political context of the country and with reference to Europe ▪ Ability to identify social phenomena to be found in physiological and pathological forms in a specific local area (community), including social-health problems ▪ Acquisition of and adaptation to new principles (for example, recently the idea of “federalism”, “universalism” of the services) 	General sociology Sociology of the family General psychology Social medicine Political systems
Legal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Public institutional contexts ▪ Pluralism of the service providers ▪ Updating of Health and Social service legislation at the national and regional levels ▪ Acquisition and updating of general welfare norms through use of published material or more competent colleagues ▪ Acquisition of and adaptation to new principles 	Public institutions legislation Private institutions legislation Penal law Administrative law
Statistical and economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Ability to trace statistical documentary sources in order to become familiar with demographic and socio economic characteristics of an area ▪ Ability to produce database spreadsheets and/or to carry out directly surveys to document a report, a plan, to produce summarising data 	General economics Applied economics Statistics

One can see a very high value assigned to the adequacy and satisfaction for technical skills with reference to the standard of the university training. One reason is that many of the teaching staff also have roles as management in the social work and thus corroborate the transfer of the academic knowledge into expertise by the graduates in their practical experience, with the help of supervisors and the integration of seminars and experimental theses.

For the same reason, it is possible to explain why the basic and cross-occupational competences received lower consideration from those at work, even though they were judged as important and useful for work.

This may depend on the fact they are fragmented, often of single value and above all characterise “the other” so much, so that the common response from all graduates was that any other graduate could not carry out their job.

3. Conclusions

What has emerged from this first analysis illustrates a clear transfer of the academic training into professional action.

Table 5. Matrix showing the correlation between the evaluation of training and the evaluation of competences

		Basic training and acquired technique	Acquired specialised competences	Practical-professional acquired experience	Importance of the basic subjects for work	Importance of professional subjects or work	Adequacy of the professional training received from University	Average of basic competences	Average of professional and characteristic competences	Average of the transversal competences
Basic training and acquired technique	<i>Pearson p-value</i>	1.000	0.815 0.000	0.707 0.000	0.281 0.036	0.185 0.169	0.786 0.000	0.162 0.225	0.222 0.094	0.090 0.500
Acquired specialised competences	<i>Pearson p-value</i>		1.000	0.873 0.000	0.365 0.006	0.242 0.072	0.817 0.000	0.137 0.308	0.163 0.226	0.062 0.647
Practical-professional acquired experience	<i>Pearson p-value</i>			1.000	0.237 0.079	0.158 0.242	0.698 0.000	0.108 0.420	0.146 0.273	0.069 0.605
Importance of the basic subjects for work	<i>Pearson p-value</i>				1.000	0.402 0.002	0.381 0.005	0.278 0.038	0.195 0.151	0.092 0.500
Importance of professional subjects or work	<i>Pearson p-value</i>					1.000	0.376 0.005	0.298 0.025	0.233 0.081	0.238 0.075
Adequacy of the professional training received from University	<i>Pearson p-value</i>						1.000	0.233 0.087	0.261 0.054	0.139 0.310
Average of basic competences	<i>Pearson p-value</i>							1.000	0.705 0.000	0.586 0.000
Average of professional and characteristic competences	<i>Pearson p-value</i>								1.000	0.764 0.000
Average of the transversal competences	<i>Pearson p-value</i>									1.000

By examining groups of basic, cross-occupational and specific competences, we identified a professional profile of the social worker, within a public and institutional dimensions, with a strong orientation towards the rights of citizens, and responsible for the governance of the care processes in terms of social and health services. He or she receives the support of specific professional methodologies, but also of procedures, technical instruments such as the computer, of professional skills and finally the ability to plan and evaluate scientifically.

The profile outlined does indeed correspond to the aims of the training with advances in some competences for example the use of computers with information systems, administrative procedures, basic foreign language skills for communication, attention paid to research methods for all documentary sources and their production; for other dimensions they appear somewhat restricted compared with multidisciplinary training curricula.

On this topic, it seems that the economic dimension is not clearly defined across the competences despite a need to manage budgets and estimate economies. Limited are also the specialist skills and useful further training for particular target populations, e.g. immigrants.

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