Formal and Non-formal Education in Higher Education:

The MA Comparative European Social Studies (MACESS) as an example
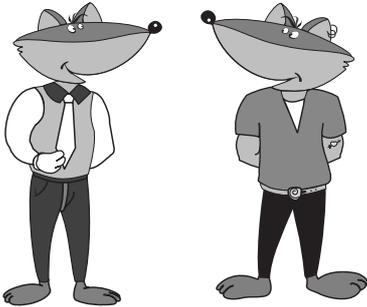
In the modern network society, people can obtain competencies and knowledge in different ways, through formal and non-formal education. According to Nol Reverda, this reality needs to be recognised by higher education. In the field of social studies, MACESS can serve as an example of good practice.

by Nol Reverda

Silicon Valley

One of the most important engines of the new economy is located in California, USA, and is called Silicon Valley. Silicon Valley consists of a concentration of highly qualified experts in the field of Information and Communication Technology. Together they are responsible for a substantial contribution to the growth of the American economy. There are about 7000 established companies, which employ 50 to 500 experts each. Although the operational systems are controlled by the big multinational enterprises, the middle and small businesses are mainly responsible for the supply of high standard innovations in the area of software programmes.

I will not go further into the technical details of hardware and software, since neither am I an expert on the matter, nor is it relevant to this article. However, from a sociological point of view there are two things about Silicon Valley which are relevant and worth some attention. First of all, Silicon Valley attracts its employees from all corners of the world: China, Japan, Korea, Russia, Australia, from West, Middle and Eastern Europe, and from Africa. They work alongside Americans of origin, who incidently, come from all over the United States. Thus, Silicon Valley rightly sees itself as representative of multicultural society, which finds its coherence in the common ICT field of interest and the shared values of enterpreneurship and innovation.

Secondly, in Silicon Valley, no company or business asks for proof of qualifications obtained; instead they ask for an extended curriculum vitae. People have to show that they are good enough in their field of expertise, and a CV offers more relevant information on this than an officially obtained diploma. Thus, in Silicon Valley one finds a broad and varied mixture of self-taught men and women and experts with a Harvard University degree in ICT, as well as every combination in between. In short, it is a mixture of experts with both formal and non-formal educational backgrounds.

Social professional work and practice (*)

Since the 1960s, social work has been professionalised through the emergence and growth of the welfare state in Western Europe. Care and support for those in need – children, young people, the poor, elderly, sick and disabled – gradually became a profession, replacing the old charity and voluntary work. Both the quality of the social professional work and the belonging to a professional group was expressed by the receipt of a diploma: if you obtained the certificate, you could join the party – if not, you stayed outside. Volunteers were replaced by professionals, and responsibilities and salary scales in the non-profit sector were directly linked to the level and quality of the obtained diplomas. Functions were only open for those, who could prove their eligibility for the job 'objectively' by certification. Consequently, volunteers were displaced and lost their status and prestige. In short, in the growing bureaucracy of the welfare state formal education replaced non-formal education.

Despite this process of supersession in the 'market of well-being and happiness', the volunteer never disappeared completely. Firstly, those countries which could not afford the development of a welfare state due to a lack of material resources, were, and still are, dependent upon the involvement, experience

and expertise of 'volunteers' in order to reduce the problematic consequences of the differences in material affluence, political power and legal security in society. Practice has enabled these volunteers to develop their expertise. Paolo Freire analysed the underlying principles of this type of work, and on the basis of his research, developed the concept of 'learning by experience'.

But in the affluent Western world too, the volunteer never completely disappeared. A great deal of the care for children, young people, the poor, sick, elderly and disabled was carried out by volunteers without status and prestige, and mostly women and those without registered work. Social professionals increasingly played the role of manager of projects, departments and institutes in the welfare state. They were involved in planning and finances, and volunteers were engaged to do the basic work. Although the existence of volunteers was ignored in the bureaucratic welfare state, and although their status was low, the welfare state's heyday was actually largely thanks to them.

The power and role of the welfare state bureaucracy is declining. Nation-states are decentralising, deregulating and privatising their policies and activities. State involvement is increasingly being replaced by the principles of a liberal economic market with its unlimited games of supply and demand. Traditional institutions are disappearing and being taken over by modern networks. The social professional worked within these traditional institutions mainly for the various target groups, on behalf of state policies. Nowadays, in our network society, they have to work with them, and active participation of the target groups is crucial for the quality and the results of the work. Expertise and competencies are no longer automatically granted by a certificate, but have to be developed continuously in an interactive environment: life-long learning has become one of the core characteristics of our society.

In short, from a sociological perspective, we notice a process of de-institutionalisation of our society. This de-institutionalisation creates problems – what is the future of social professional work without the ruling regulations of the state? What opportunities will arise?. The withdrawal of the state provided a renewed attention to and focus on civil society, to be rebuilt subsequently (Middle and Eastern European countries) or to be re-activated (Western European countries). Civil society needs talented people, who can function innovatively and are capable of reconstructing it. Talented people who are competent and qualified to meet these challenges are not only those with certificates and diplomas, but are also those who, through non-formal education and practical experience, have become experts in their field. Thus, our network society increasingly needs social professional workers with an extended curriculum vitae, showing the appropriate mix of formal and non-formal education. It is in this way that social professional work starts to look somewhat like Silicon Valley.

Higher education

De-institutionalisation does of course affect the traditional ivory towers of universities and colleges. For a long time higher education could work with fixed standards of student admission and quality control. Courses were delivered in a set amount of time, with set programmes and according to the established regulations the outputs were predictable. However, this cannot continue in the same way in a modern network society. Higher education is partly privatised and has thus become dependent (mainly in the field of research) on the liberal market economy, accepting the influence of non-academics on the objectives of science and research. Whether higher education likes it or not, it has to

descend from its ivory tower and open its doors. Furthermore, if people can obtain their qualifications in various ways (formal and non-formal), higher education has to differentiate its admission policies and flexibilise its curriculum. In short, pre-determined and rather static standards and regulations do not meet the needs and demands of a network society anymore. Here, the MA in Comparative European Social Studies (MACESS) can be seen as an example of 'good practice'.

MA Comparative European Social Studies: MACESS

MACESS is a one year postgraduate course, validated by the University of North London, under the auspices of the Hogeschool Maastricht, and delivered by Walter Schwimmer, Secretary General of the Council of Europe. MACESS offers the opportunity to conduct a comparative study and research in the field of social professional practice and policy. Successful completion of the course is awarded by a British masters degree (MA). MACESS was established in 1994 and has co-operated since then with an extended network of 28 universities and colleges throughout Europe for programme delivery and development.

The course structure currently consists of four compulsory core modules and five optional modules (from which each student must choose two) and a dissertation. The core modules are:
▷ European institutions and policy, providing students with the opportunity to gain knowledge and understanding of the main institutions, treaties and policies of Europe
▷ Comparative social policy, equipping students with theories and models to compare and critically analyse the provision of welfare in a European context
▷ Comparative social research, introducing different research traditions and methodologies in Europe and preparing the dissertation
▷ Social professional practice in Europe, enabling students to explore theories, methods, traditions and innovations within the social practice in different areas of Europe.

The optional modules are:
▷ Management of change, enabling students to understand processes of change in a dynamic Europe
▷ European network development, enabling students to conceptualise the complexity of linkages and networks in national and international social professional work
▷ Marginalisation and social exclusion, providing students with the opportunity to understand processes of social exclusion and inclusion
▷ Political philosophy and welfare, deepening students' theoretical knowledge of the underpinning assumptions in European welfare provision
▷ European welfare law, enabling students to study the impact of the European judicial systems on social professional practice.

Finally, students have to conduct comparative research, resulting in a dissertation on a topic of relevance to the social professions in a European context.

Student admission policy

MACESS attracts students from various countries of wider Europe (not only EU), most of whom have graduated in social work, social pedagogy and youth and community work. The course resembles a traditional postgraduate programme eligible for students with an appropriate background.

From the beginning we were aware of the fact that historically, for one reason or another, not every country in Europe offers a formal qualification in social professional work. Furthermore, we realised that even in those countries where such a qualification is offered, competent applicants may have followed an alternative route to develop their competencies. Therefore we added the phrase 'or equivalent' under the criteria for pre-education in our admission policy. We are convinced that students without the more traditional educational background may also be able to perform at a high academic level. These students are normally invited to submit an extended curriculum vitae, which forms the basis of an admission interview. Reviews of students' results have shown that these students do not perform better or worse than those with a formal educational background. Thus, we have actually formalised informal education.

Let me give two examples, which seem relevant to the context of this magazine. In 1996 we accepted a student whose formal education consisted of the completion of general secondary education and of a one-year course in journalism. In addition, she had obtained some certificates in secretarial work. She spoke fluent English and French, and had a passive knowledge of Spanish and Italian. She had been active in youth work as a young person, and her extended experience included her role as European Secretary of the International Movement of Catholic Students and Vice President of the Governing Board of the European Youth Centre and the European Youth Foundation of the Council of Europe. She was interviewed and proved to have obtained an outstanding expertise in the development of activities and projects, in management, in writing papers, in (intercultural) debates and argumentation, and in the theoretical underpinning of her work. In short, her work experience had provided her with the sort of competencies comparable to those of a traditionally educated social worker. We accepted her on the course and at the end MACESS provided her with the concepts, theories and academic ways of thinking that she was looking for.

The second example relates to a student who after grammar school attended a faculty for economy and trade for one year. She then left university and accepted a job in the IT business to programme software and build IT networks. In the meantime she became involved in youth work, both the running of youth activities and the management of teams of international experts on youth issues and NGOs. She attended courses in management of volunteers, leadership skills, intercultural learning, team building and so on. She became President of the WAGGGS All European Task Force, and co-operated with the Council of Europe in about seven projects. Furthermore, she was involved in projects to improve the living conditions of children and young people in Middle and Eastern Europe through the strengthening of civil society. Thus, she obtained competencies which made her an excellent applicant for MACESS (and an excellent graduate) without having attended the traditional formal-educational route.

Conclusion

Clearly, the admission policy described above emerged because we are convinced that our 'modern' society needs talented and competent people to meet the challenges of social exclusion and inclusion in Europe. The recognition of competencies is the relevant point here, rather than the way people have acquired their qualifications. Learning is a process, which can be realised in various ways: inside and outside the school walls, in informal networks, in public and private environments, on the job, etc. What counts in the end is the result of this learning process, and it is about time that not only the ICT sector but also the social professional education and practice started to realise and recognise this fact. The inspiring policy formulated within the Partnership of the Council of Europe Directorate of Youth and Sport and the European Commission to promote the recognition of non-formal education is an important step forward towards this goal, and has the full support of MACESS.

(*) Social professional work and practice is a concept which refers to all practices for the support, empowerment and care of other persons, both in a formal and non-formal context. For reasons of clarity, I identify 'social professionals' with 'formal education', and 'volunteers' with 'non-formal education' in this article.

Literature:

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