Education for What? Exploring Directions for the Professionalisation of Social Workers

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Abstract

The complexity of the daily practice of social workers in the Netherlands has increased, while the social appreciation for their work has decreased. Stakeholders involved in social work practice agreed that a master's programme for social workers could be an important step to improve the quality of social work and enhance the professionalisation of social workers. However, stakeholders disagreed considerably on the objectives of this new programme. Hence, there was no focus for the programme or for its evaluation. In order to assess the purpose and intended goals of the master's programme in social work, a retrospective plan evaluation was conducted, consisting of a document analysis and concept-mapping procedure with thirty-nine stakeholders. The study resulted in a consensus-based conceptual framework in which practice development is considered the key domain of the programme. Practice development seems to fit the open domain of social work and meets the various and often ambivalent demands on social workers and their profession. It is regarded as a method in which the social worker with a master's degree has a new role and position in the interplay between clients, stakeholders and professionals.

Introduction

Social workers under pressure

Contemporary societal developments such as the increasing number of families facing multiple problems, the growing number of professionals involved in these families and the need for collaboration with several different disciplines, the emphasis on evidence-based practice and accountability and the shift from supply-centred towards client demand-centred services have challenged the daily professional practice of social workers (Duyvendak *et al.*, 2006; Potting *et al.*, 2010; Van Vliet, 2004; Wilson and Kelly, 2010; WRR, 2004). Furthermore, severe incidents, especially in youth care, have weakened the social appreciation of the sector and forced it on the defence (van den Brink *et al.*, 2009; Parton, 2011). These changes and challenges have consequences for the profession of social workers in the Netherlands.

Professionalisation

Duyvendak, Knijn and Kremer (2006) discuss that these developments could lead to a process of de-professionalisation but trends such as accountability, contracting and evidence-based work may also lead to a reverse process of re-professionalisation of social work and other professions in care and welfare. In both perspectives, however, social work is considered to be an open profession, vulnerable for consumerism, capitalism, bureaucratism and for struggles between professionals and managers over control (Abbott, 1988; Freidson, 2001; Noordegraaf, 2007; Schinkel and Noordegraaf, 2011; Spiers, 2005; Schilder, 2012). Social workers exert their profession in an ambiguous domain in which expertise is not isolated from decision makers, clients or other professions and this is leading to ambivalent positions (Noordegraaf, 2007). On the one hand, social workers have to enhance their professionalism through evidence-based work, ethical rules and registration. On the other hand, social workers have to abandon their professional identity when working in neighbourhoods together with volunteers, other professionals and social networks. In this situation, social engagement is more important than social work expertise (Schilder, 2012). Whereas Etzioni (1969) called social work a semi-profession, a profession that is not yet full-grown on its way to a classic profession, others argue that this classic professionalisation in which occupational domains try to establish professional control as well as occupational closure is no longer a good strategy

for social workers because it does not fit the open domain of social work and the various and often ambivalent demands on the profession and professionals (Metz, 2012; Noordegraaf, 2007; Spiers, 2005).

Amidst this professionalisation debate, fostering the quality of social work through improving social work education is considered a key challenge for the profession of social workers and the higher education system, in the Netherlands as well as in the UK (Wilson and Kelly, 2010; Wilson, 2011). Improvement of education is expected to have a positive impact on both the development of the profession of social work and the professional expertise of social workers themselves. At the same time, it is recognised that many problems go far beyond the scope of social work alone and that the overruling of the logic of professionalism by bureaucracy and consumerism is not restricted to social work (Freidson, 2001). In the Netherlands, where this study takes place, vocational organisations, the government, local politicians and other stakeholders such as educational institutions have acknowledged their share in the responsibility for dealing with and solving these social problems (WRR, 2004; Duyvendak *et al.*, 2006).

In 2005, the Dutch Association of Social Workers organised a round table conference for all relevant stakeholders (trade unions, vocational organisations, education, government, employers' organisations and expertise centres) to discuss strategies and interventions targeted at improving the quality of social work and the professionalism of social workers. One of the interventions that was broadly supported by various stakeholders was the implementation of a new master's programme for experienced social work professionals (van Pelt *et al.*, 2011). Although the number of graduates with a master's degree in social work increased rapidly all over Europe since the Bologna Declaration, this was not the case in the Netherlands, where an academic programme for social workers does not exist (Van Ewijk, 2010). Apparently, a new master's programme, instead of improvement of the existing bachelor's programmes in social work, was considered to be an adequate strategy fostering the professionalisation of social workers.

This study aimed to contribute to the evaluation of the master's programme for social workers by exploring the implicit notions and expectations various stakeholders have about the purpose and the goals of the programme in the context of the changing nature of social work as an open profession and the challenging daily professional practice of social workers.

The Dutch higher education system

In 2002, the implementation of the bachelor–master system started in the Netherlands as a result of the Bologna Declaration in 1999. The higher education system in the Netherlands is binariousy in nature with a clear-cut distinction between universities and institutions for higher vocational education, so-called universities of applied sciences, that are best comparable

with German Fachhochschulen. At this moment (2013), fifteen Dutch institutions are offering bachelor's programmes (four-year, 240 European credits) in social work including a variety of specialised courses and/or specialisations. Each year, more than 11,000 students enrol in these programmes in social work (HBO-raad, 2013; Sectoraad HSAO, 2008). Since 2002, Dutch institutions for higher education are also allowed to offer so-called professional master's programmes directed at experienced professionals (two-year, minimum 60 EC). In contrast to master's programmes at universities, the majority of the professional master's programmes are not financed by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. At this moment, four institutes offer a publicly financed professional master's programme in social work in which 135 students participate (HBO-raad, 2013). The Dutch situation of professional master's programmes at institutions is comparable to the Swiss and German situation in which institutions for higher vocational education are also allowed to offer part-time master's programmes for experienced professionals (Westerheijden *et al.*, 2008).

This study: the case of the HAN

In 2008, HAN University of Applied Sciences was one of the two Dutch Universities of Applied Sciences that started a master's programme for social workers. Although different stakeholders agreed on the importance of a master's programme in social work as a strategy to improve the professionalism of social workers, they disagreed substantially on the purpose the master's programme should attain. Possible aims of the programme varied from narrowing the gap between policy and practice to contributing to the solution of complex social problems and inspiring professionals in the field of social work. This lack of consensus, illustrated by the great number of goals (over 150) that were formulated between the first initiative and its actual start, made it difficult to formulate clear educational goals for the master's programme. In addition, this situation also hinders the evaluation of the added value and impact of the master's programme as an instrument to enhance the professionalism of social workers and, in turn, improve the quality of social work. The goal of this study is to make a contribution to the evaluation of the master's programme for social workers as developed by the HAN. It does so by exploring expectations various stakeholders have about the purpose and the goals of the programme. By focusing on the goals of the programme (plan), we did not evaluate the curriculum of the master's programme as a whole nor specific parts of it such as the content, didactics or tools used (process), nor did we evaluate the effects of the programme (see also below). We present the results of a retrospective plan evaluation into the conceptual framework and key concepts underlying the goals of the master's programme as perceived by thirty-nine stakeholders involved in the programme. The study was guided by the following research

question: *Which dimensional structure is underlying the goals of the master's programme in social work, as perceived by relevant stakeholders?*

In the next section, we will first provide an overview of the method used, including document analysis and a concept-mapping procedure. We will then focus on the most important results, and continue with a discussion of the findings and the implications for future research.

Method

Research group and ethical considerations

Forty-two stakeholders were asked to participate in the study. In total, thirty-nine stakeholders, including students ($n = 11$), lecturers ($n = 7$), employers ($n = 11$), policy makers ($n = 7$) and experts ($n = 3$), agreed to participate. No clients or patients participated. All participants were involved in the development of the master's programme in social work or considered to be an expert in the field of social work. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study, including assurances of confidentiality and the possibility to contact the researcher if they had any questions. Participation was voluntary and the participants agreed that the results of the study were to be made public without their consent. The study was part of a Ph.D. project and was approved by the board of HAN University of Applied Sciences, the Netherlands.

Design of the study

To assess the impact of the master's programme in social work as a strategy to enhance the professionalism of social workers, we used programme evaluation as the design for our study (Donker, 1990; Posavac and Carey, 1997; Pawson and Tilly, 1997). Programme evaluation can be defined as 'a systematic assessment of the operation and/or outcomes of a programme or policy, compared to a set of explicit or implicit standards, as a means of contributing to the improvement of the programme or policy' (Weiss, 1998, p. 4). Programme evaluation consists of three phases: plan evaluation, process evaluation and effect evaluation. Although the master's programme had already started, the aim of this study was to analyse the conceptual framework and key concepts, as perceived by various stakeholders, underlying the goals of the educational programme as formulated at the start of the programme. Plan evaluation gives us insight into the (often implicit) plan and underlying notions that guide the design of the master's programme. This knowledge can be used as an input for both the process and effect evaluation of the programme. Therefore, a retrospective plan evaluation (Donker, 1990; Swanborn, 2007) was conducted, consisting of a document analysis and a concept-mapping procedure.

Concept mapping (Trochim, 1989; Trochim and Kane, 2005) is a type of structured *group* conceptualisation in order to develop a conceptual

framework which can guide planning or evaluation. Usually, six different steps or phases are distinguished: (1) Preparation, (2) Generation of statements, (3) Structuring the statements, (4) Representation of the statements, (5) Interpretation of the maps and (6) Using the maps (Trochim, 1989). In this study, we used an augmented procedure, as the preparation and generation of the statements (in this case, goals of the master's programme) were conducted using document analysis. Step 6 (Using the maps) will take place in the following study of the programme evaluation and therefore it is not described in this article.

Procedure and instruments

Preparation and generation of statements (phases 1 and 2)

To prepare and generate statements for the concept-mapping procedure, all possible goals of the master's programme in social work, as formulated in different documents written from the early beginning to the actual start of the programme, were gathered and analysed. The following documents ($n = 50$) were analysed: the minutes of the round table conference organised by the Dutch Association of Social Workers (see above), the position paper of the Netherlands Association of Applied Universities, the need analysis for the programme made by the Expertise Center for Vocational Education and Labour market, a research report on the profile of the master's programme in social work, recommendation letters from employers in the field of social work, trade unions and the Dutch Association of Social Workers, letters of application written by potential students, documents (proposal and report) for the accreditation of the master's programme and a blueprint of the curriculum. Phrases and formulations in these documents referring to the goals or expected results of the master's programmes in social work were selected. Examples of phrases are: 'The aim of the programme is', 'We would like the master's programme in social work to reach', 'We expect the following results', 'The master's programme in social work is important because of'. In total, 177 goals were gathered which were condensed into sixty goals by two researchers who independently clustered overlapping or similar goals. In Table 1, an overview of the sixty selected goals is given. The condensed goals were reformulated using the same format: 'The aim of the master's programme in social work is . . . 'and printed on separate cards. These cards were used for the concept-mapping procedure, which will be described in the following section.

Structuring the statements (phase 3)

A priority and similarity rating was used to structure the statements. First, the participants were asked to rate the sixty cards (goals) based on perceived

Table 1 Means and standard deviations of the sixty possible goals for the master's programme (*N* = 39)

Aim	Description	Mean	SD
4	To enhance the quality of practice	4.31	1.00
19	To develop and apply new knowledge in social work	4.21	1.06
33	To stimulate professionalisation	4.18	1.17
18	Innovation of the profession	4.03	1.06
3	To contribute to the solving of complex social problems	4.00	1.24
32	To stimulate development of the profession	3.92	1.11
9	To direct the primary process in complex client situations	3.87	1.13
11	Profundity of the profession	3.85	1.18
12	To enhance the efficacy of social work	3.85	1.18
1	To narrow the gap between policy and practice	3.77	1.31
34	To enlarge professionalism of social workers	3.72	1.30
10	To stimulate applied research	3.69	1.41
37	Further development of professional practice	3.67	1.26
7	To bridge the gap between science and practice	3.67	1.46
14	To improve the primary process of social work	3.49	1.19
30	A better profile of the profession	3.44	1.24
35	To equip social workers for additional tasks which are broader than their own craft	3.36	1.14
25	To stimulate social workers to look and act beyond the boundaries of their own job and profession	3.36	1.24
36	To contribute to the formation of the profession	3.36	1.35
6	To increase the educational level of social workers	3.33	1.24
50	Improved equipment of social workers because of the growing and changing demands to social work organisations	3.23	1.26
40	To be an impulse for social work practice	3.18	1.43
27	To enhance knowledge sharing within the social work sector	3.13	0.92
47	To fill up the lack of academic tradition in social work	3.13	1.57
56	To use and enlarge the knowledge and experience of social workers	3.08	1.11
15	To equip social workers for project management	3.08	1.47
46	The revaluation of the craftsman	3.05	1.34
16	To improve the external profile of social work organisations	3.03	1.35
17	To prepare social workers for a role as advisor to the board and management	3.00	1.26
13	To stimulate the accountability (both financially and in substance) of professional performance	3.00	1.30
42	To learn social workers to think beyond client perspective	2.97	1.27
28	To legitimate social work	2.95	1.47

24	To stimulate the personal development of professionals	2.95	1.41
48	To stimulate knowledge circulation between the social work section and higher education	2.90	1.33
55	To enable social workers to perform functions and tasks outside the primary processes	2.90	1.33
26	Improved co-operation in multidisciplinary teams	2.82	1.05
38	To offer carrier opportunities to social workers	2.79	1.26
22	Having a labour market instrument: to preserve personnel for the social work sector	2.76	1.29
54	To offer social workers the opportunity for learning and development	2.74	1.16
59	To support professionals in the practicing of their daily work	2.74	1.18
8	To strengthen chain care	2.71	1.22
5	To offer an adequate supplementary programme to professionals with a bachelor degree in social work	2.69	1.24
51	To improve the way social workers work with the client system	2.67	1.08
60	To improve the support and guidance of colleagues	2.62	1.22
39	To adjust to the quality demands and quality policy of the sector	2.56	1.37
21	To strengthen social cohesion	2.46	1.48
58	To reinforce the organisation in which the professional is working	2.44	1.31
57	To inspire professionals and give them new energy	2.44	1.35
49	The specialisation of social work	2.44	1.47
53	To reinforce the social work approach against the medical approach	2.31	1.59
2	To supply educational programmes in this domain	2.23	1.20
44	To be able to offer a subsidised master programme to the sector	2.21	1.44
23	To supply a labour market demand	2.18	1.28
41	The improvement of outreaching work	2.15	1.25
45	To improve the living climate in neighbourhoods	2.13	1.31
31	To strengthen the political lobby for the social professions	2,10	1.29
52	To make up leeway towards the medical professions	2.10	1.55
43	To influence the quality of bachelor programme in a positive way	1.92	1.16
20	To contribute to the realisation of government policy	1.92	1.27
29	To improve the performance of colleagues with a bachelor degree	1.62	0.88

importance, using a Likert scale (1 = not important, 5 = most important). They had to make five piles, each of them consisting of twelve cards, and rate these piles based on perceived importance. The participants were then asked to sort the sixty cards based on similarity between the goals, making piles of goals which they felt were similar. The participants were not told how many piles they were supposed to make, only that they were not allowed to make more than twelve piles. Finally, the participants were asked to label each pile after they conducted the similarity rating.

Representing and interpretation of the statements (phases 4 and 5)

Multidimensional scaling techniques (SPSS version 14) were used to represent the data of the similarity ratings. An expert meeting was organised for the interpretation of the results. Of the thirty-nine participants, eleven attended this expert meeting, representing all different stakeholders' groups. During this meeting, led by a facilitator and observed by one of the researchers, the results of the analyses (see below) were discussed and interpreted. The findings from this meeting were reported by one of the researchers and sent back to the eleven participants. No additional comments or suggestions for revisions were made by the participants.

Results

Table 1 shows the priority (means) and standard deviations for each goal for all the participants. No significant differences between the different groups of stakeholders were found, even though there are differences between *and within* the groups. Students for example differ in their motivation for getting engaged in the programme. The document analysis showed that, during the development of the master's programme in social work, the total number of objectives increased, because stakeholders became aware of the objectives mentioned by others (e.g. they read the position paper made by the Dutch association of institutions for higher vocational education), adopted them and added more aims.

The findings show that goals referring to improving the quality of practice (4), the development and application of new knowledge in the sector (19), professionalisation of the social work profession (33) and innovation of the profession (18) are perceived as the most important ones ($m \geq 4.0$). A wide range of goals seem to be considered neither important nor unimportant by stakeholders (m between 2.0 and 3.0). Inspection of the standard deviations shows that the goals 47 ('To repair the absence of an academic tradition in social work'), 52 ('To make up leeway towards the medical professions') and 53 ('To reinforce the social work approach against the medical approach') seem to be the most controversial ones as perceived by the stakeholders ($sd > 1.50$).

As mentioned above, the data of the similarity ratings were analysed using a multidimensional scaling technique (Meerling, 1981; Kruskal and Wish, 1993). Figure 1 shows the results of this analysis. The findings show that the sixty goals form eight non-overlapping clusters within a two-dimensional space. To interpret the content of these clusters, the above-mentioned expert meeting was held in which the participants were asked to discuss and interpret these findings and to label the clusters. In trying to make sense, the participants analysed the goals within one cluster and compared these with the goals within different clusters. Based on the discussions, the clusters were labelled as follows.

Cluster 1: Knowledge sharing. This cluster deals with the sharing of knowledge between different parties that are involved in social work, such as (local) government, employers, professionals, experts, educational institutions. The master's programme in social work has to narrow the gap between these parties and stimulate change of perspective.

Cluster 2: Knowledge development (of the professional). According to the participants, this cluster refers to the development of practical knowledge, important for knowing how to operate in the primary process of care. It also refers to the explication of knowledge which is considered important for the legitimisation and status of social work as a profession.

Cluster 3: Complex problems solving in practice. This cluster is about what stakeholders called 'the core business of social work': to deal with and solve complex problems in an efficient and effective way. Cluster 3 also refers to the current objectives of social work.

Cluster 4: Organisational development (improving social work practice within organisations). In this cluster, the organisational level stands to the fore. It deals with enhancing the quality of social work practices within organisations for social work.

Cluster 5: Development of the profession. According to the participants, this cluster refers to the development of the profession. The development of the profession is understood as the need to increase the knowledge base of the social work domain in order to improve social work practice. Some of the present stakeholders considered craftsmanship to be a better label than the development of the profession, but a majority preferred the latter.

Cluster 6: Formal and informal multidisciplinary co-operation. Co-operation with other disciplines forms the core of this cluster. Cluster 6 refers to the way social workers with a master's degree have to deal with complex problems, by collaborating with professionals from another discipline. This co-operation also includes the participation of social workers in formal and informal networks, such as families and volunteers, outside their own organisation.

Cluster 7: The development of craftsmanship, also called mastery. Social workers with a master's degree have to develop meta-competencies and are able to think and act beyond the boundaries of their own profession.
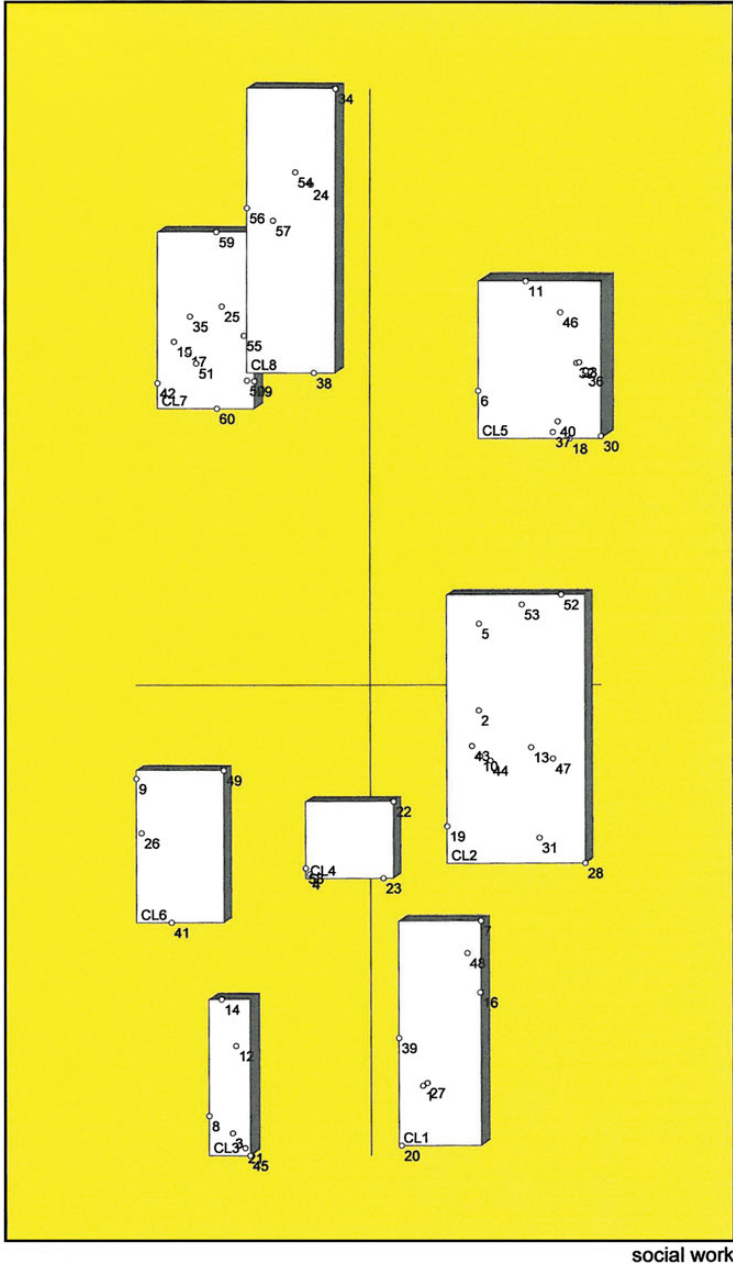
Concept Map

Figure 1. Results of the similarity rating: goals related to clusters.

This is organised and initiated in the environment of the professional. Cluster 7 contains goals that refer to this kind of issue.

Cluster 8: Professional development. This cluster contains goals that address the extent to which social workers need to be self-directed learners. The central theme in this cluster is the responsibility social workers should have to initiate and steer their own professional learning and development. It differs from cluster 5 in its focus on the individual development instead of the profession's as a whole.
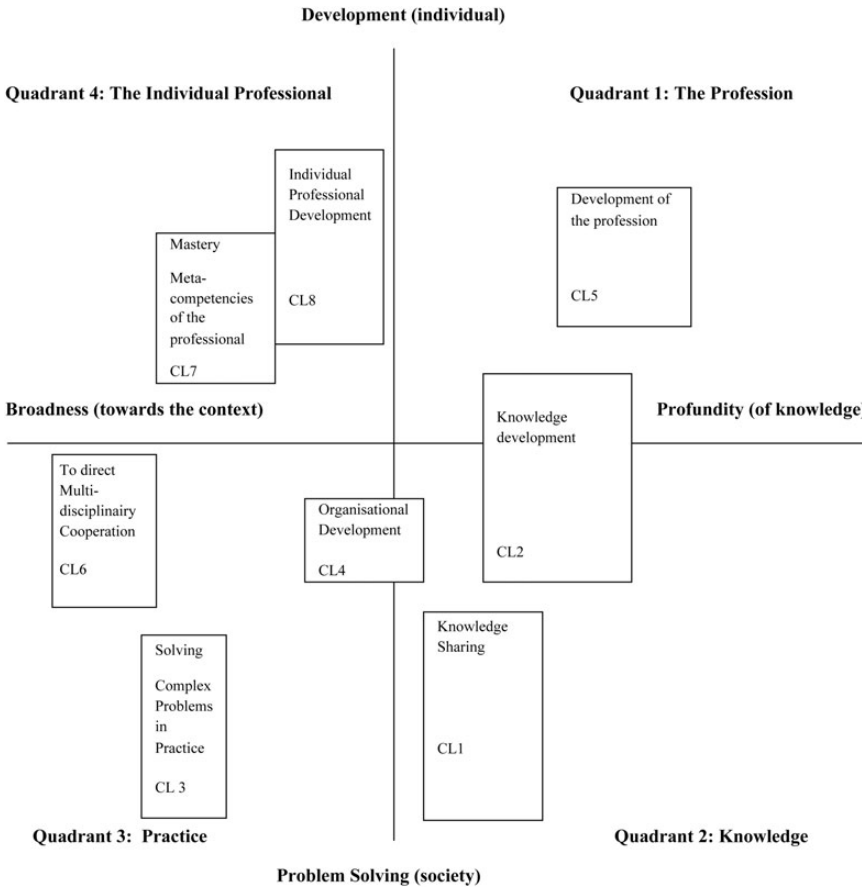
Next to the labelling of the clusters, the participants of the expert meeting were asked to interpret and label the underlying two dimensions. Figure 1 shows that the eight clusters are distributed alongside two dimensions. On the first, horizontal, dimension, multidisciplinary co-operation (cluster 6) and development of craftsmanship (cluster 7) are positioned on the left side of the dimension, while development of the profession (cluster 5) and knowledge production (cluster 2) are positioned on the right side of the same dimension. Based on these findings, the participants of the expert meeting interpreted this dimension as 'broadness' versus 'profundity'.

On the second, vertical, dimension, professional development (cluster 8) and development of the profession (cluster 5) are positioned at the upper part of the dimension. On the lower part of the same dimension, the clusters complex problem solving (cluster 3) and sharing knowledge (cluster 1) are positioned. On the basis of these findings, this dimension was labelled as 'development of the individual' versus 'solving of problems in society'. The combination of the two dimensions led to the identification of four quadrants.

Using the interpretation of the clusters and dimensions, the participants of the expert meeting were also asked to interpret and discuss the four quadrants. The following four labels were used to interpret the quadrants: the Profession (quadrant 1), Knowledge (quadrant 2), Practice (quadrant 3) and the Individual Professional (quadrant 4). Together with the two dimensions, the four quadrants constitute the framework and key concepts underlying the possible and intended goals of the master's programme in social work (see Figure 2).

Conclusion and discussion

In this paper, a retrospective plan evaluation was used to assess the (intended) goals of a new master's programme in social work. Stakeholders (thirty-nine) participated in a concept-mapping procedure and were asked to rate sixty goals on the basis of importance and similarity. A group of the stakeholders (eleven) discussed the results in an expert meeting. The findings showed that the sixty goals represented eight different clusters distributed over four different quadrants. The participants labelled the four quadrants as the Profession, Knowledge, Practice and the Individual Professional. Each quadrant reflects a key conceptual theme underlying the goals of the

Development (individual)

Quadrant 4: The Individual Professional

Quadrant 1: The Profession

Individual
Professional
Development

Development of
the profession

Mastery

Meta-
competencies
of the
professional

CL8

CL5

CL7

Broadness (towards the context)

Profundity (of knowledge)

Knowledge
development

To direct
Multi-
disciplinairy
Cooperation

Organisational
Development

CL6

CL4

CL2

Knowledge
Sharing

Solving

Complex
Problems
in
Practice

CL1

CL 3

Quadrant 3: Practice

Quadrant 2: Knowledge

Problem Solving (society)

Figure 2. Two dimensional structure underlying the goals of the Master's Programma according to stakeholders.

master's programme in social work and these concepts can also be perceived as the development themes in the professionalisation of social work(ers). The four quadrants were based on a two-dimensional structure that constitutes the basis of the consensus-based conceptual framework. According to the participants, the two dimensions refer to the 'broadness (towards the context)' versus 'profundity of knowledge' and the 'development of the individual' versus 'solving problems in society'. This framework serves as a useful perspective for evaluating the master's programme and helps us in framing the next phase of our programme evaluation. Hence, the method used in this study, a combination of document analysis and a concept-mapping procedure, proved to be very useful to conceptualise implicit notions and ideas about the professionalisation of social workers and the master's programme. It can also be concluded that consensus is reached amongst stakeholders in a contested field. As stakeholders are the ones that decide on the continuity of

the programme ([Robson, 2011](#)), they were deliberately involved in this study and will be involved in the next phase(s) of the evaluation study as well.

The most remarkable finding of this study has been the shift in focus from development of the profession towards development of practice. In the first phase of the concept-mapping procedure, the majority of participants gave priority to the goal of further professionalisation, meaning that the master's programme should strengthen the profession by more knowledge and skills. In the final plenary discussion with stakeholders, the goal of practice development has become more important, meaning that the master's programme should introduce new skills to those social workers following the master's programme in order to give them the expertise of taking a different role in the interplay between stakeholders and other social workers. According to the clusters in this quadrant, practice developers are conceived as social work professionals who are able to realise an improvement in social work practice within and outside their own organisation. In doing so, they have expertise for problem solving of complex client situations, are aware of social developments, are able to operate in different contexts and can co-operate with professionals from other disciplines.

The notion of practice development alters our view on professionalisation in at least two ways. First, it acknowledges that social workers will not be able to deal with all new societal developments in the same way. Even if all social workers seem to be equal in their expertise, some social workers are more equal than others because they have supplementary expertise and responsibility in resetting the professional scene and organising the field around them. Second, the implicit notion of the ideal professional has been changed; instead of being a professional who combines available knowledge and current practice, like, for example, the reflective practitioner ([Schön, 1983](#)), there are at least two ideal social workers: a social worker practising social work and a social worker with meta-cognitive skills enabling them to turn knowledge into practice and vice versa.

It could be possible that the shift from development of the profession towards practice development is related to the group of participating stakeholders. The topic of professionalisation is generally most popular within the professional group itself ([Abbott, 1988](#)), whereas other stakeholders are more inclined to deal with the context of professionalisation and opt for realistic strategies, leaving room for other actors and disciplines. In other words, problem solving in society is more important than professional expertise and, in order to solve these complex problems, social workers need other competencies, such as multidisciplinary co-operation and binding with different contexts. This also implies that the core of the profession is changing. Another explanation could be that the stakeholders have become aware that the problems are so extremely complex that differentiation within the discipline of social work is necessary and urgent.

The importance stakeholders attach to development of practice as a key issue for the programme seems to reflect the open character of the social

work profession. In order to deal with different and ambivalent societal demands on social work, generalisation and specialisation, managerialism and professionalism, expertise and social engagement (Schilder, 2012), social workers need to solve complex client problems in co-operation with professionals from other disciplines and have to work for and with informal networks consisting of families, neighbours and volunteers. Being aware of social developments and problems and having flexible general skills have become very important competences to succeed as a social worker next to in-depth knowledge and specific social work expertise. The goals that are clustered within the quadrant of Practice seem to refer to these competencies. These findings suggest that the stakeholders involved in our study acknowledge that attempts to professionalise social workers and improve the quality of social work need to focus on linking social work to organisational and outside realities and on creating legitimacy (the added value) in changing times (Noordegraaf, 2007).

Finally, it could be argued that the shift described above is the result not only of a changing perspective on the complexity of the current social problems we are faced with, but also of a changing perspective on the role of social work in Western societies more generally.

Limitations

Despite its relevance and importance, this study has several limitations. First, the key concepts and dimensions in the framework are defined in a very general way, as the context of social work has not been specified. In other words, the framework could also reflect another master's programme. As practice development is considered to be the most important theme in the framework, it is necessary to explore and describe practice development in social work in the following study/studies.

Second, the results might be biased, because the participating stakeholders and the group of participants in the expert meeting represent only a small part of the total group of stakeholders involved in the master's programme. On the other hand, nearly all relevant stakeholders of the programme in Nijmegen were involved and they represent all relevant positions: students, lecturers, employers, social work professionals, experts and managers/policy makers. This suggests that saturation should have been reached.

Because this study is done within the context of one institution, it could be questioned whether the results are specific to this particular context. As a number of the stakeholders/participants in this study are also involved in the programme of the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences, the presented analysis is also relevant for this institution. The same can be said for the programme that is offered in the North of the Netherlands (a joint degree), although this master's programme has been developed at a later stage and some of the persons involved in Nijmegen and Amsterdam were

no longer present. Moreover, as the social developments, public demands and ambivalent claims on the profession are similar in the whole of the Netherlands, the result of the presented analysis are also valuable to other institutions that are considering offering a master's programme in social work in the future.

This study is a pilot, with one group and one research strategy. We did not compare the master's programme for social workers with other educational programmes for social workers in the Netherlands. This makes it difficult to generalise the result to other courses and programmes for social workers in the Netherlands. On the other hand, the study can be considered a good example of an alternative way for evaluating educational programmes in which the focus lies on the external value on the programme. In doing so, utility instead of reliability and validity has been the most important quality criterion for the research project (Verschuren, 2009; Robson, 2011).

Finally, the results of the study reflect one type of professional learning and development: how formal education relates to professionalisation. What the contribution and added value of other types of professional learning, including informal learning, learning on the job or lifelong learning might be, have not been taken into account. So, the meaning of the framework with its four quadrants and underlying dimensions for other types of learning is not clear.

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