SOCIAL WORK THROUGH THE AGES:

THE CASE STUDY OF PORTUGUESE HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

Social Work is an academic discipline that promotes social development and change, social cohesion, empowerment, and human improvement. The values of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversity are essential to social work. Embedded in the social sciences and humanities but endowed with its own conceptual framework, social work connects people with social structures to respond to life's challenges and improve personal and social well-being.

The present study aims to explore and understand how curriculum design, reflects the emergence and institutionalization of Social Work within the framework of the Social Sciences and Humanities and the theoretical-methodological evolution of Social Work. To this end, it was necessary to explore and understand how higher education curricular proposals problematize the social construction not only of their theory, but also of their own methodologies and practices.

For that purpose, a documentary analysis was carried out covering all the curricular plans of higher education in Social Work in Portugal, between 2009 and 2015.

The results point to the existence of an articulation between qualification and the global standards for the education and training of the social work profession, which has repercussions on the definition of competences and the very status of the profession. There is a clear evolution not only in terms of professional competences, but also in the fields of activity. There is a consistent movement towards higher education in Social Work, together with the development not only of the profession itself but also of the social and human sciences.

Keywords: Social work, curriculum, curriculum design, profession, higher education.

1   INTRODUCTION

Social Work as a profession, emerged in Portugal after the context of the World Economic Depression (the late 1920s and the early 1930s) and the failure of the Portuguese first Republic in 1926. Out of this structural context emerged the institutionalization of a dictatorial regime, known as Estado Novo (New State) in 1933 which lasted until 1974.

In line to the European context of the first half of the 20th century, with the emergency of fascist ideologies, Social Work in Portugal was institutionalized and developed in a particular political and ideological framework. In fact, the Christian "social welfare" approach prevailed over the ideals of civil and political rights, which were ignored and opposed by the Estado Novo. [1][2][3][4].

The institutionalization of Social Work as a scientific field with the duty to train for professional practice began with the creation of the first training school in the Portuguese capital city (Lisbon) in 1935. It was a school that emerged as the result of an alliance between the State and the Catholic Church [5]. At the beginning of the training, the Social Work curriculum comprised three major areas: social education, social medicine and the practice in social institutions [5].

In 1939, not only the Institute of Social Service in Lisbon was officially acknowledged by the State, as well as that of Coimbra. Their plans of study had a duration of 3 years and conferred the professional title of Social Worker, which was exclusive to graduates in Social Service. The orientation of the training and the mission that was intended to be conferred on social workers took on a strongly doctrinaire, corporative, and conservative character.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the Portuguese dictatorial regime began to show signs of weakening, which linked with changes in the social doctrine of the Catholic Church, with emancipatory movements, created the ideal background for the emergence of a new orientation for Social Service training. In 1956, there was a revision of the public regulations for social service training, which officially became four years long. However, it was only in 1961 that studies in social service was recognised as a higher education offer. At this time, the orientation of professional training was revised not only in conceptual terms but also in terms of social service methods, following the trends of American social service and those of more developed democratic countries. [6][7]. Until then exclusively attended by women, it was only in 1961 that the first male students were admitted.

After the transition from a dictatorial regime in Portugal to a democratic regime (1974), a cultural and ideological change takes place, promoting a new stage of Social Work higher education, marked by the currents of Marxist ideals, assuming a strong influence of Latin American reconceptualization movement [8][9].

From the end of the 1990s until nowadays, the normative reference is guided by the Global Definition of the Social Work Profession (Deontological Code of Social Workers in Portugal, 2018). Social work is a practice profession and a scientific discipline that recognizes that interconnected historical, socio-economic, cultural, political, and personal factors serve as opportunities and/or barriers to human wellbeing and development [9][10].

Today, under the global standards for the education and training of the social work profession, advocated by International Association of Schools of Social Work [11], "with regard to standards regarding programme curricula, schools must consistently ensure the following:

> a. The curricula and methods of instruction are consistent with the school's programme objectives, its expected outcomes, and its mission statement.

> b. Clear mechanisms for the organisation's implementation and evaluation of the theory and field education components of the programme exist.

> c. Specific attention to undertaking constant review and development of the curricula.

> d. Clear guidelines for ethical use of technology in practice, curriculum delivery, distance/ blended learning, big data analysis and engagement with social media Schools should always aspire to develop curricula that:

> e. Help social work students to develop skills of critical thinking and scholarly attitudes of reasoning, openness to new experiences and paradigms and commitment to lifelong learning.

> f. Are sufficient in duration and learning opportunities to ensure that students are prepared for professional practice. Students and educators are given sufficient space and time to adhere to the minimum standards described herein.

> g. Reflect the needs, values and cultures of the relevant populations.

> h. Are based on human rights principles and the pursuit of justice."

But if the global standards for the education and training of the profession are clear and insightful, how was it operationalized in the academic scenario? Are these standards in fact being considered by higher education institutions that offer training in Social Work? The present study aims to explore and understand how curriculum design, reflects the emergence and institutionalization of Social Work within the framework of the Social Sciences and Humanities and the theoretical-methodological evolution of Social Work. To this end, it was necessary to explore and understand how higher education curricular proposals problematize the social construction not only of their theory, but also of their own methodologies and practices

2   METHODOLOGY

In Portugal, higher education programs are classified through the National Classification of Education and Training Areas (CNAEF) which considers 10 large groups, subdivided into study areas, which are further segmented into education and training areas. Social Work degrees have been classified as code 762, corresponding to the area of education and training related with Social Work and orientation, within the 6.th study area (Social Services) and in a largest group interrelated with Health and Social Protection.

This scientific area encompasses 30 courses, which only represents roughly 1% of all national higher education offers submitted for evaluation and accreditation to the national agency (A3ES) post 2009 (N= 2890 study programs). The present study focuses on all the academic offerings of the scientific area of Social Work, included in social services scientific area. In the Portuguese higher education system, Social Work is one of the scientific areas with the lowest number of study cycles, both equally offered in university and polytechnic subsystems.

In addition, an evaluation of all the references and guidelines given at the international level was made through a selection of directives available in the updated document "Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training" provided by the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW)[11].

3   RESULTS

When the analysis focuses specifically on study programs that are offered by these institutions, it is confirmed that there are 30 study programs in the scientific field of Social Work (SPSW). From this total number, only 3 of them have been created as a new program since 2009. All the remainder were in operation before the creation of the National Agency for Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education (A3ES), and cover the 3 different study cycles: 1st cycle of study conferring a Bachalor' degree; 2nd cycle of study conferring a Master' degree; 3rd cycle of study conferring a PhD degree.

The results indicate the existence of 16 higher education institutions (HEI) which offer, in Portugal, study programs in the Social Work field. Ten of them are Universities and the remaining 6 are Polytechnic Institutes.

Most of these HEIs are from the public sector (10 out of 16) and all the private HEIs are part of the university subsystem. In fact, all the Polytechnic Institutes that offer programmes in the scientific area of Social Work are public institutions. Only 3 universities have an academic offer with the three study cycles in Social Work (PhD, Master and Bachelor). Another 7 universities offer 2 cycles of studies (Masters and Bachelor) and another 3 offer only the 1st cycle (Bachelor). In the same line, the Polytechnic Institutes offer only the 1st cycle (licenciatura), although Portuguese law allows them to offer also the 2nd cycle.

In terms of geographic location, the majority (10) of HEI that have Social Work degrees in their academic offer are in coastal areas, with an especial emphasis of Universities (9/10). Only one HEI in focus is on autonomous regions. Concerning the geographic distribution along the country, the large number of HEI analyses are in the metropolitan area of Lisbon (5) and in the center (4). The remaining HEI are in the north (3), in the south (2) and only one in autonomous regions. It could be interesting to note that almost all of these HEI are recent ones in Portuguese Higher Education history. In fact, the clear majority (N=13, 81%) of them were created before 1965, and half of them were born before the eighties. For future reflection, it could be important to verify that only a quarter of these institutions have their internal system for quality assurance accredited.

Another relevant trend is the analysis of what scientific departments shelter Social Work education. Figure 1 shows that, in Portugal, only 3 of 16 HEI are specific to Social Work or have specific departments to encompass study programs in the scientific field. Educational departments seem to be also relevant host institutions for Social Work Education, since they represent around 27% of the courses offered in the scientific area of Social Work. The remaining higher education courses in Social Work are integrated in departments of Human Sciences (13%) and Social and Political Sciences. Occasionally, the Social Service courses are also offered by Departments of Management and Technology, Economic Sciences and History and Philosophy.
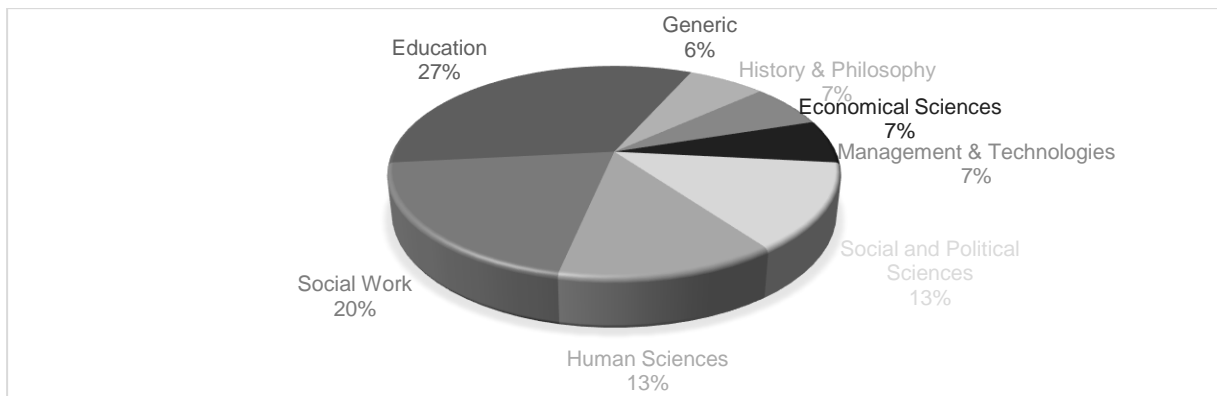
Figure 1. Scientific department shelter Social Work education

When the analysis focuses specifically on study programs that are offered by these institutions, it is confirmed that there are 30 study programs in the scientific field of Social Work (SPSW). From this total number, only 3 of them have been created as a new program since 2009. All the remainder were in operation before the creation of the National Agency for Assessment and Accreditation of Higher Education. The majority of this SPSW (N=24, 80%) are from universities. In terms of the higher education sector, the distribution of SPSW is relatively balanced, with 16 SPSW from the public sector against 16 from the private one. Half (N=15, 50%) of the SPSW are offered in the metropolitan area of Lisbon, 8 (26,7%) in the center of the country, 4 (13%) in the North and only 2 in the south and one in the autonomous regions. Thus, the vast majority (N=22, 73%) of the offer of SPSW are in coastal areas. From these 30 SPSW, 18 are undergraduate degrees, 9 master's degrees and only 3 PhD studies. As it was said before, the present research study only encompasses the undergraduate degrees, which will be analyzed next.

At an initial stage of the accreditation process, HEI submitted an accreditation proposal to A3ES: "Request for Accreditation of a Study Cycle". In the description of each study cycle that is submitted, institutions must describe what are the "intended learning outcomes" they expect students will achieve at the end of a specific period of learning. Data analysis focused on information included in this question, and which is limited to 1000 characters learning outcomes included in all proposals of study programs submitted to accreditation in A3ES, from 2009 to 2014, were examined (n = 2890).

From those documents, 50,8% correspond to 2nd study cycle (master's degree) proposals, while 34,8% refer to 1st study cycle (bachelor's degree), and 14,4% to 3rd study cycle (PhD degree). For this specific study, all data were considered as binary variables, in which the value 1 represents the existence of one or more occurrences of learning outcomes related to the eleven criteria for a social development perspective were drawn from the literature to form an analytical framework. On the other hand, 0 corresponds to the absence of the learning outcomes related to the referred eleven criteria advocated by the International Association of Schools of Social Work.

The analysis focuses specifically on study programs that are offered by these institutions almost all 94,4% seems to privilege theoretical and general knowledge as an expected outcome for their graduates. This option is in line with the first global standard for education and training recommended by the IASSW-IFSW, which states that social work curricula should consider Knowledge of theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledges.

The second competence most mentioned by the Portuguese HEIs to be acquired by social workers in their higher education is the development of ethics and social responsibility, which also reflects one of the global standards for education and training recommended by the IASSW-IFSW, which advocates clear guidelines for ethical use of technology in practice, curriculum delivery, distance/ blended learning, big data analysis and engagement with social media. However, less than half of the courses offered in Portugal refer to the importance of acquiring technology mastery skills.

Personal development and Lifelong Learning as well as Critical Thinking also seem to be competencies valued by most of the Social Work scientific field. This trend is also in line with the global standards for education and training recommended by IASSW-IFSW: "Help social work students to develop skills of

critical thinking and scholarly attitudes of reasoning, openness to new experiences and paradigms and commitment to lifelong learning".

However, less than half of the undergraduate degrees in Social Work in Higher Education highlight practical knowledge as learning objectives, which seems little in view of the importance given to this perspective in the global standards for the education and training of the IASSW-IFSW, which give much evidence to the need to Integrate theory, ethics, research/knowledge in practice. The same guidelines also state that social workers should have sufficient practice skills in assessment, relationship building, empowerment and helping processes to achieve the identified goals of the programme and fulfil professional obligations to service users.

The same trend can be noted in the importance of the profile of social work graduates integrating communication competences, in which less than half of the courses offered in Portugal refer to them.

On the other hand, the IASSW-IFSW argues that social workers should have sufficient knowledge of related occupations and professions to facilitate interprofessional collaboration and teamwork, but only 44% of Portuguese courses in this area refer to these competences as their learning objectives. Whereas it is important to note that less than 34% of the academic offers seem to value the competences of communication and autonomy and entrepreneurship in the professional profile of Social Work graduates.

Only around 6% of these academic offers in Social Work considered important the teaching/learning of skills related to creativity and innovation.

On the other hand, in the content analysis of the learning objectives of the Portuguese higher education courses in the area of Social Work, it was not possible to find information that matched six of the Global Standards for Education and Training (IASSW-IFSW, 2020), namely:

- The assumption, identification and recognition of strengths and potential of all human beings.
- Facilitate and advocate for the inclusion of different voices, especially those of groups that have experienced marginalisation and exclusion.
- Understanding of the roles of social work in policy planning, implementation, evaluation and in social change processes.
- Understand the relationship between personal life experiences and personal value systems and social work practice
- Sufficient knowledge of related occupations and professions to facilitate interprofessional collaboration and teamwork
- Understand how social determinants impact on people's health and wellbeing (mental, physical, emotional and spiritual).

4 CONCLUSIONS

Portugal is a peripherical and a relatively small country. Concerning the geographic distribution along the country, the large number of HEI analyses are in the metropolitan area of Lisbon and in the center. To be remarked, almost all are recent ones in Portuguese Higher Education history. In fact, most of them were created before 1965, and half of them were born before the eighties. For future reflection, it could be important to verify that only a quarter of these institutions have their internal system for quality assurance accredited. Another relevant trend is the analysis of what scientific departments shelter Social Work education. The results show that, in Portugal, only 3 of 16 HEI are specific to Social Work or have specific departments to encompass study programs in the scientific field. Educational departments seem to be also relevant host institutions for Social Work Education.

When the contents of the learning outcomes presented by Portuguese higher education in the area of Social Work are compared with the global standards for education and training recommended by the IASSW-IFSWA, significant matches are found. However, there are themes of the global standard for education and training recommended by the IASSW-IFSWA that are not mentioned by Portuguese higher education institutions when defining the professional profile of graduates in Social Work.

Thus, both the Portuguese academy and the IASSW-IFSWA privilege knowledge of theories of Social Work, social sciences, humanities, and indigenous knowledge. The development of ethics and social responsibility is one of the competences most mentioned by Portuguese HEIs to be acquired by social workers in their higher education, which also reflects one of the global standards for education and

training recommended by the IASSW-IFSW, which literally defends clear guidelines for the ethical use of technology in practice, curriculum delivery, distance/blended learning, big data analysis, and engagement with social media. However, less than half of the courses offered in Portugal refer to the importance of acquiring technology skills.

Personal development and lifelong learning, as well as critical thinking, also seem to be skills valued either by most courses in the scientific area of Social Work in Portugal, or by the global standards for education and training recommended by the IASSW- IFSW.

Considering the importance that the IASSW-IFSW global standards for education and training attach to the need to integrate theory, ethics, research/knowledge into practice, it is noted that only less than half of the degrees in Social Work in Higher Education emphasize practical knowledge as learning objectives. Indeed, social workers must have sufficient practical skills in assessment, relationship building, capacity building and helping processes to achieve identified program objectives and fulfill professional obligations to service users. The same trend towards valuing the IASSW-IFSW that is only aligned with around 45% of Portuguese courses can be seen in communication skills, teamwork, autonomy, leadership, entrepreneurship, creativity, and innovation.

On the other hand, the Portuguese higher education courses in the area of Social Work seem, in their learning outcomes, not to value critical aspects that international entities advocate as central to the training of social workers. Valuing the strengths and potential of all human beings, understanding the roles of social work in the planning, implementation, evaluation of policies and in the processes of social change and social determinants impact on people's health and well-being (mental, physical , emotional, and spiritual) are significant examples of this difference.

Hence, the results point to the existence of an articulation between qualification and the global standards for the education and training of the social work profession, which has repercussions on the definition of competences and the very status of the profession. However, there are still areas of knowledge and practices that the Portuguese academy should highlight in order to better correspond to international guidelines within the scope of teaching/learning in higher education of the social worker profession.

Nevertheless, here is a clear evolution not only in terms of professional competences, but also in the fields of activity. There is a consistent movement towards higher education in Social Work, together with the development not only of the profession itself but also of the social and human sciences.

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