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*Giovanni Cellini**, *Marilena Dellavalle***

Author information

- * University of Turin, Department of Culture, Politics and society, Italy, Email: giovanni.cellini@unito.it
- ** University of Turin, Department of Culture, Politics and society, Italy, Email: marilena.dellavalle@unito.it

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Professionalism and Training Needs of Social Work Between Theoretical and Practical Knowledge

Giovanni Cellini, Marilena Dellavalle

Abstract: The evolution of policies is interconnected with that of professional practices, which require social workers to perform increasingly complex tasks. In this context, where gaining and maintaining a high level of professional knowledge and skills is essential for practitioners, social work education plays a crucial role. This paper presents the findings of a study consisting of two stages. The first focuses on the current educational provision in the 37 three-year bachelor's degree programmes in social work offered in Italian universities, through a survey of institutional documents mediated by the internet. Data were extrapolated from the documents in order to carry out a comparative analysis of the training needs indicated by the degree courses and the educational provision. In the second stage, fifteen interviews were carried out to managers of social services, academics, and social workers. Topics addressed by the qualitative analysis are the social worker's professional identity, the knowledge and skills needed by practitioners, and the relationship between professionalism and managerialism. Findings show that the bachelor's degree programmes provide a good theoretical grounding; at the same time, there is a need to "reinforce" social work education as a whole to ensure that skills that can be used in professional practice are acquired.

Keywords: Education, Social Work, Italy, University, Innovation

1. Introduction

The social work profession, which has existed in Italy since the 1920s, obtained fundamental recognition from the state in 1987 with the institution of “*Scuole dirette a fini speciali*” [higher education institutes for specific purposes] (SDFS) for social workers and, at the same time, gave the university the sole authority for training in the field. Such training had, until that time, been characterised by a mainly private system, in which, however, very innovative teaching methods had been experimented with and implemented. These methods were based on interdisciplinarity, student engagement and, above all, the co-existence of theoretical teaching and work experience, which constituted a connection with the training project worldwide (Fargion, 2009). In the context of such training, the internship held an essential role. After 1987, training in social work was adapted to changes established by the university reform regulations. These included, in particular, Law 341/1990, which stipulated the transformation of the SDFS into University Diplomas; the Ministerial Decree of 4 August 2000, which in the context of the so-called “3+2” training system instituted the three-year bachelor’s degree in social work and the Master’s degree (Planning and Management of Policies and Social Services); Ministerial Decree 270/2004 with which the three-year degree assumed the title “Social work” (class L39) and the Master’s degree that of “Social work and social policies” (LM87). These degrees enable access to the state exam for certifying the social worker profession and enrolment in the national professional register.

The establishment of social work in the university context is assessed for some positive effects that it has produced over time (Facchini & Tonon Giraldo, 2010): greater currency of the degree; overcoming the previous invisibility of social work disciplines; insertion of the latter among academic ones; opportunities for investment in research, which makes it possible to increase the scientific level of theoretical analyses and their dissemination. The lack of an autonomous disciplinary field of social work, which exists in other European countries, persists in the Italian university system, as a constraint limiting specificity and scientific development. This lack entails a chronic difficulty for social work experts to establish themselves in academic careers (Campanini, Dellavalle & Cellini, 2022).

The goals that distinguish the class of Social Work Degrees (L39), are defined by national legislation (Ministerial Decree 16 March 2007 - Minister for Universities). These pertain to the acquisition of a set of disciplinary and methodological knowledge, which is useful for planning and implementing interventions relevant to the profession. Of particular significance is the goal of possessing a culture that is interdisciplinary at its base, a necessary condition for understanding the characteristics of modern societies and collaborating in the construction of intervention projects, on both an individual and social

scale. This interdisciplinarity, which is essential to the theory-practice nexus (Dellavalle, 2014), is inherent to several fields: sociological, anthropological, ethical-philosophical, legal-economic, medical, psychological, and historical. The regulations also make explicit the goal of possessing a suitable proficiency in the method of social research and knowledge of at least one foreign language (a European Union language in addition to Italian). At the same time, the training path has the goal of helping students acquire a set of skills, relating to various fields: detection and treatment of situations of social disadvantage, both in relation to individuals and families, groups, and communities; communication and management of information on citizenship rights and on supporting individuals in difficulty; encountering and interacting with diversity, understood broadly (multicultural, gender, etc.). Complementing the attainment of these skills is the acquisition of specific abilities. These concern actions to prevent social disadvantage, promoting wellbeing, to promptly intervene, to support access to resources and services, and to operate with groups and within work groups. The internship is essential for the acquisition of these skills; it is mandatory, to be carried out with national or international public bodies and administrations, non-governmental organisations and those in the voluntary sector, or community organisations. In defining the goals, therefore, special attention is paid to the professional development of experience in the field, which is highly valued in the literature (Dellavalle, 2011; Raineri, 2015; Tognetti Bordogna, 2015), privileging supervision by social workers, accompanied by activities leading to the internship and analysis at the university training institute.

In the context of the historic steps and the training goals just referred to, this article aims to investigate the offering and training needs, through the presentation of a research on the three-year degrees currently offered in Italy. We ask: what are the distinctive characteristics of the training offering of Italian universities? Is there coherence between pre-established training objectives, which distinguish the study path, and the content of the courses themselves? Attention is concentrated on some elements that distinguish courses: defined disciplinary fields; the importance attributed to social work disciplines; professional development content; and the theory-practice connection.

The research focused on the Italian national context. This can be considered a limitation; however, we believe that the contents may be of interest in the international debate on social work education and useful for promoting comparative analyses.

2. Method

The research is divided into two parts. The first, carried out in the 2020-2021 academic year, is based on an observation of institutional documents

obtained via the internet and, thus, of spontaneous, or “natural”, products (Cardano, 2003, p. 64), prepared for ends other than research. This includes “sign” documents, i.e. those created specifically to channel messages, and of situated products, in that they show the effects of the context and circumstances in which they were produced and used (Arosio, 2013). Since mediated by the internet, we can position these documents in the context of media texts, i.e. those documents that originate from communicative processes in the strict sense. Starting from the assumption that, on the internet, the documents can be used in contexts of qualitative, quantitative, or integrated reflection (Ibidem), both quantitative and qualitative elements were taken into consideration in the material collected. In studying the documents, the brief profiles and study programmes of each degree programme in social work were analysed. These were accessed, respectively, through the *universitaly.it* portal and on the universities’ institutional websites; from these documents, the numbers of university training credits (CFU) attributed to the modules’ disciplinary fields and to the internships were extrapolated. The brief profiles have an indisputable advantage in terms of comparisons, since they offer a standardised structure, equal for all degree programmes. These indicate: the “basic”, “core”, and “other training activities”; the disciplinary fields and the training credits attributed to them; the modules in each field, and the related scientific area. On the other hand, the study programmes can only be accessed from the institutional websites of the individual universities; in some cases, they are not easy to view and can only be reached through numerous navigation steps. In contrast to the brief profiles, however, the study programmes enable the display of the division of modules per course year; in addition, they include the number of credits attributed to individual modules of similar activities, for which, in contrast, in the brief profiles, only the overall number is included. After having concentrated on the brief profiles and study programmes, we made a qualitative documentary analysis of the module programmes for the social work disciplines, as representing - together with the internships - the specific and professional development nature of the degree programme. To this end, a reading grid was prepared that focused on: subjects covered, goals, and recommended reading. Through the analysis of programme texts, for which we also used the Atlas-ti software, points of difference and points in common between the degree programmes were identified. All the documents refer to the student cohorts for the 2019/2020 to 2021/2022 academic years. In this contribution, we chose not to discuss the internship in depth, since this is an issue that is rather complex about which a specific and separate analysis seemed suitable; some results of this are published in Campanini, Dellavalle & Cellini (2022).

The second part of the research consists of a qualitative study concentrated specifically on training needs; fifteen semi-structured interviews (Bichi,

2002) were conducted. By theoretical sampling, some important basic characteristics were identified for the purposes of the study. For the definition of the sample, the following characteristics were considered jointly: role played (manager, social worker on the frontline, representative of the professional Association, academics); sector in which they work (public social services, non-profit, university); seniority of service. With reference to this last characteristic, it was considered important to pay attention also to the representations of social workers who have been working for a short time (1-3 years), therefore they have a recent knowledge of the training system that was analysed in the first part of the research. The academics, professors in the social service degree courses, were identified considering their prestige in the national panorama, and the other interviewees work in the reference territory of the University of Turin (Piedmont). The issues addressed in the qualitative analysis were the following: representations of the professional identity of the social worker, in terms of significant functions and activities of the role; the experience of the interviewee in their relationship with social workers; knowledge and skills necessary for social workers; the relationship between professionalism, managerialism, and bureaucratisation (Tousijn & Dellavalle, 2017); the level of social worker education; and future prospects for the profession in social services. It could be observed that fifteen interviews are a limited number to describe reality in a meaningful way; however, qualitative research through interviews (unlike quantitative survey through questionnaires) does not have as a qualifying characteristic the construction of a representative sample. There is certainly a need to cover the variety of situations, but not to reproduce on a reduced scale the characteristics of the population (Corbetta, 1999, p. 409). It is therefore considered that the fifteen interviews are sufficient or at least interesting not only to support but also to enrich the results that emerged from the documentary analysis.

In order to focus a broad and complex research, in this article we concentrate on the first part. In the section on the discussion of the results and conclusions, however, connections will be proposed between the first part of the research and the results that have so far emerged from the interview analysis, with specific reference to the perception of the training needs.

3. Results

3.1. Three-year social work degrees at Italian Universities

Considering the data relating to the 2019/2020 academic year, in Italy, there are 37 Degree Programmes in Social Work, in 18 regions out of 20 (none in Basilicata and Valle D'Aosta; 2 of the 3 least populated regions in Italy). In some regions, there are several degree programmes: 5 in Lazio, 4

in Sicily, 3 in the Veneto and Tuscany, 2 in Lombardy, Piedmont, Trentino-Alto Adige, Emilia-Romagna, Marche, Apulia, and Calabria. At the “Sapienza” University of Rome alone, there are two different degree courses in Social Work. The number of courses does not seem to be proportional to the regional population. Consider, for example, of the most populated regions, such as Lombardy, Piedmont, and Emilia-Romagna, which have 2 degree courses each, i.e. the same number that is recorded in regions with many fewer inhabitants (e.g., Marche and Calabria).

Although the name is not the same at all universities (“Social work”, “Social work sciences”, “Social work sciences and techniques”, “Mediators for intercultural and social cohesion in Europe”, etc.), the degree programme that trains social workers, allowing access to the state qualification exam, is identified by the specific and unique degree class L39. In 4 cases out of 37, the degree course is “inter-class”, involving differentiated paths that allow one to graduate in social work or in another discipline: in 2 cases, the L39 class is grouped with L40 (Sociology); in 2 cases, it is combined with L19 (Education).

Every degree programme belongs to a university department, which differs according to the institute. Specifically, the reference departments may be classified thus: 24 out of 37 in the political-sociological area (14 Political Sciences, 10 Sociology/Social Sciences); 4 Humanities; 2 Law; 2 Economy; 2 Psychology; 2 Education; and 1 Philosophy. In this diversity of knowledge areas, the prevalence of the political-sociological area seems coherent with the training needs linked to the multi-dimensional perspective of social work, which works on the interdependency between user, organisation of belonging, and community (Sicora, 2013), with the aim of promoting and supporting links between them. The social worker, in fact, operates in the welfare system through the relationship with the person, in the organizational structures of social services, where there is a strong presence of professionalism (Freidson, 2001); he also performs the function of promoting and organising formal and informal institutional resources, within the reference social context, and the function of understanding and studying the region for planning interventions. This multi-dimensional nature of the intervention (Dellavalle, 1995) presupposes the ability to understand and analyse society and the policy framework in which the social service operates.

Access is free in 24 degree courses out of 37 (64.86%), while in 13 (35.13%) an entry exam is required for a pre-set number of students to be admitted, which varies from institute to institute; it goes from a maximum of 150 places (Roma Tre University) to a minimum of 40 (University of Bolzano). The issue of “student caps” or “planned numbers” has been, and still is, the subject of debate in training institutes. Historically, many social work schools were characterised by a system that privileged a limited number of students,

which considered the availability of services to accommodate students in internships and the employment opportunities after graduation. With the structuring of the study path within the universities, which occurred gradually, there have been significant changes. The overall tendency has been that of growing the student base, which, however, has created a series of problems in relation to the professional development value of the degree courses in social work; one of these problems may be the difficulty of placing too high numbers of students in internship posts.

3.2. Activities and disciplines of social work degree courses

The “basic” and “core activities” are defined by national regulations (Ministerial Decree of 16 March 2007), which establish the minimum number of degree credits for each disciplinary field. “Similar activities” and “other activities”, according to the university autonomy principle, are, in contrast, established and regulated by individual degree courses; therefore, for those courses, threshold values are not stipulated.

Based on legislation, the curriculum of the L39 degree class must comply with some minimum requirements for basic activities, core activities, and the internship. Specifically, out of 180 total credits for the degree programme, the basic activities must include a minimum of 36 credits, the core activities a minimum of 54 credits, and the internship a minimum of 18 credits. Each of these training activities concerns various disciplinary fields, to which one or more modules, and the related number of credits, correspond. It should be remembered that each module belongs to a scientific area identified by the alphanumeric code established in national legislation. For social work disciplines, there is no independent scientific area; they are included within general sociology (SPS/07).

Considering both the basic activities and the core ones, the minimum numbers of credits for the different disciplines are the following: sociological 24; psychological 21; social work 15; law 12; historical-anthropological-philosophical-educational 9; medical 6; and political-economic-statistical 3.

The prevalence of the sociological and psychological areas seems clear and reflects the “historical” relationship between social work, sociology, and psychology (Bortoli, 2001). The current presence of both the psychological and sociological orientation represents the balance between overcoming the customer-professional level typical of psychological consultancy and the attention to the socio-structural origins of a large part of the individual problems put before the social worker, in the different areas of intervention. Right from the origins of the profession, the goal of social workers was to identify individual needs but in real-life context and, therefore, the intervention had to proceed on two tracks (Ibidem). In addition, the insertion of the social

worker in the social services system reflects the positioning of social work interventions in social programmes and, in general, in the welfare system.

In light of these considerations, one can understand the placement, in the Italian university training system, of the social work disciplines in the area: 14 “Political and social sciences” and in the macro-area: SPS 07 (general sociology).

As far as regards the other areas stipulated with the associated credits, a certain heterogeneity should be noted; disciplines that are very different from each other are identified (in the legal, economic, anthropological, historical, and medical field). It should be remembered, in any case, that social work, historically, has not developed as an eclectic approach nor as an encyclopaedic body of knowledge, but as a new disciplinary unit that is being built to give answers that respect the intrinsic unity of the individuals and the complexity of their problems (Bianchi, 2005).

With reference to the data drawn from the brief profiles of the degree programmes on the *universitaly.it* portal, all the university institutes attribute, to the basic and core activities overall, a number of credits greater than the minimum threshold (see Table 1). In fact, compared with a minimum threshold of 90 credits (sum of the basic and core activities threshold) the national average is 115. The national average of credits attributed to the legal, sociological, social work; political-economic-statistical, historical-anthropological-philosophical-educational disciplines is significantly above the minimum threshold. The data on political-economic-statistical disciplines stands out: the average of credits is more than double the threshold value. In contrast, as far as regards psychological and medical disciplines, the average of credits currently attributed is only slightly above the minimum established threshold.

In an overall consideration, one can read the intention of the training institutes to “strengthen” the essential disciplinary nucleus of the degree courses, on which the study programmes are constructed, in these data. Psychology, to which, in any case, a significant number of credits is attributed, is the exception.

Although the internship is not an object of exploration in this analysis, we believe it is important to also highlight the credit value attributed to it, slightly above that of the threshold value (see Table 1). These data, in line with what has been revealed by previous research (Tognetti Bordogna, 2015), should be read together with that on social work disciplines. Although these seem disproportionately minor compared to the others, it should be considered that the internship is directly connected to them, involving a constant connection between practice and the theoretical-methodological dimension of the social work disciplines (Dellavalle, 2014), including through classroom workshops.

Table 1: Basic and core discipline credits - credits currently attributed and minimum thresholds

BASIC AND CORE DISCIPLINES	NATIONAL AVERAGE OF CREDITS	THRESHOLD VALUE OF CREDITS
SOCIOLOGICAL	29.27	24
PSYCHOLOGICAL	21.94	21
LEGAL	17.86	12
SOCIAL WORK	20.27	15
HISTORICAL-ANTHROPOLOGICAL- PHILOSOPHICAL-EDUCATIONAL	11.54	9
POLITICAL-ECONOMIC-STATISTICAL	7.86	3
MEDICAL	6.21	6
INTERNSHIP	19.03	18

Considering the credits attributed to the different disciplines (basic and core), in the 37 degree programmes in Italian universities, significant differences emerge, except for modules in the psychological and medical disciplines. A detailed, quantitative analysis of data relating to the core and basic activities in each of the 37 universities is not the subject of this work. It is, however, essential to highlight how, for different disciplines, some training institutes require a number of credits equal to or very close to the minimum thresholds, others a much greater number, in particular for the political and historical disciplines. In contrast, for the psychological and medical disciplines, the credits are substantially the same at all universities.

The similar activities and the other activities are worth some consideration. These include modules that, in some cases, may be optional for the student, belonging to various disciplinary fields: linguistics, sociology, psychology, education, medicine, and law. IT and/or geographical disciplines may also be required. In some institutes, the similar activities include professional development subjects (e.g. "Analysis of social work practice") and workshop activities in the social work area, such as those leading to the internship, sometimes also with a significant number of credits. These subjects and activities, in fact, strengthen the social work disciplines included in the core activities. Foreign language modules (in some brief profiles inserted among other activities) are attributed a rather low number of credits, which varies from 3 credits (the minimum stipulated by legislation) to 6, in any case not significant compared to the other disciplines. In addition, only one

foreign language is required in some courses. These data may be read in two ways. Foreign languages are necessary in a path that offers current tools for interpreting society, not limited to the national reality, and must be part of an ideal “box of tools” for the social worker. Not requiring at least 2 mandatory, foreign languages, with a number of minimum credits above that of the current threshold value, may be interpreted as neglecting the international dimension of social work, which, in fact, distinguishes the historical roots of the profession and that, in the last decade, has received growing attention in research and ongoing training events aimed at social workers (conventions, conferences, Social Work Day). In addition, it should be emphasised that, abroad, scientific publications, mainly in English, are increasing.

Finally, a couple of comments on other activities; these include optional modules for students, activities for the final assessment, and, above all, internships, which must include a minimum of 18 credits. As mentioned, for the internship too, the national average of credits (19.03) is above the threshold value (18); it should, however, be highlighted that the number of credits may differ among the 37 universities for internships as well. While some are limited to ensuring the minimum credits, others require a greater number of them (the value stands, in any case, at between 18 and 22 credits, except in one case, in which it rises to 24).

An overall consideration of the brief profiles takes in the diversification of the scientific areas in the various fields; as an example, the legislation requires the following scientific areas for the sociological disciplines: general sociology - SPS/07-; sociology of cultural and communication processes - SPS/08-; sociology of economic and labour processes - SPS/09-. This entails a significant differentiation among modules given in each training institute (not only in the sociological field). In some cases, there are also modules focused on very specific issues, such as, for example, that of family mediation (“Sociology of the family and family mediation”) or of normalisation (“Sociology of normalisation”). Special diversification, which is, in part, also heterogeneity, is clearly found in the wider fields, which integrate several disciplines: historical-anthropological-philosophical-educational and political-economic-statistical ones.

As mentioned earlier, in addition to the brief profiles taken from *university.it*, the degree study programmes, accessed on the university websites, were also taken into consideration. Compared to the brief profiles, which are standardised and homogeneous in their division into different areas, the study paths accessed on the websites present a certain degree of heterogeneity, beginning with their location on the institutional sites. Some were easily and directly accessed from the degree programme pages; others were in files that were accessed via links; others were included within course regulations; and yet others were found in the degree programme brochures accessed via

links. From the analysis of the study programmes, it is possible, finally, to draw brief considerations on the placement of modules in the courses' three years: in each year, it is possible to identify basic discipline modules, in particular in the legal, sociological, and social work fields; the name and content of the modules, however, may be very different between degree programmes (it has been said of the different "sociologies"; there are also different "laws").

3.3. General considerations on the social work disciplines

Compared to the thresholds indicated by national legislation, it should be highlighted how, in all degree courses, a number of credits significantly above the minimum of 15 is required for the social work disciplines. This piece of data seems to represent a widespread need to reinforce training in the so-called "professional development" subjects, which are of vital importance for gaining experience in the field, beginning with the internship required in the course of study. Passing the exams in these subjects is, in fact, preparatory to undertaking the internship itself. It should be noted that, in a small number of institutes (6 out of 37), sociological modules were inserted in the social work disciplines, such as those on social research methodology.

The social work disciplines do not, it must be reiterated, possess an autonomous disciplinary field, being inserted in the large "container" of general sociology (SPS/07). This means that a specific and strong characterisation of social work may be lacking in the modules. The absence of an autonomous discipline also means that teachers do not necessarily belong to the professional community of social workers.

We can schematically divide the social work discipline modules in the following way: those that treat the principles, history, and code of conduct of the profession (the most frequent name of the module is "Principles and foundations of social work", normally required in the first year); those on the methodology of social work (most frequent name: "Methods and techniques of social work"), which may be concentrated in just one year or divided across 2/3 years, the distinguishing focuses of which include the methodological procedure of social work, the helping relationship, and professional tools. For a complete vision of the professional development training content of the degree programme, you must consider the complementarity between the above-mentioned modules and the different supplementary teaching and analytical activities, many of which are connected to the internship, included in all degree programmes, and distinguished, in particular, by the goal of connecting theory/practice and the methodology/practice link. The workshop activities connected to the internship represent one peculiarity of social work training. In these laboratories, not only social work teachers, but also those from other disciplines, may be involved. The contribution of various teachers seems to encourage the student to develop a multi-factor

vision, which is useful for coping with problems and situations and for constructing professional behaviour that is coherent with the global approach principle.

Cases of modules with combined names emerged from the research. Examples include, “Social policies and techniques of social work”, in which the issues belonging to the disciplines of social work are joined with those of a different discipline: one of the goals of the module mentioned above is, in fact, exploring the political-social content, methods, techniques, principles, and foundations of professional community social work. This example seems representative of the risk of a possible overlap of content and, thus, of a lack, for the social work disciplines, of defined spaces in the context of study programmes.

Similarly to what was just highlighted, it is possible to trace cases in which social work discipline content is “set out” in the name of the modules, but, in the related programmes, the subjects seem only partially connected to the above-mentioned disciplines and professional content. One example is that of a module on the Principles and foundations of social work (Bologna) that covers: the migration phenomenon and social work: knowledge and skills, reflectiveness in social work with foreign families; intervention with vulnerable children and families; violence against women and the cycle of violence. It covers content, for which, moreover, the bibliographic references do not include social work literature, which is very different from that mentioned above, historically included in the module (history of the profession, code of ethics, etc.).

From the data that it was possible to find in the documentation available online, it emerged that, in most degree programmes, the social work discipline teachers are social workers. With the proviso that in 10 degree programme websites out of a total of 37 it was not possible to access data on the social work discipline teachers, because they were missing or not freely accessible, the modules on social work methodology were run by teachers belonging to the profession in 22 degree programmes. In addition, it needs to be underlined that the majority of social worker teachers are contract professors, i.e. categorised as external collaborators and not employees of the universities.

3.3.1. Reflections on module and programme goals

Access to the module web pages requires, in some cases, rather laborious navigation, through different steps between the website pages. In 3 out of 37 cases, despite thorough exploration of the degree programme sites, it wasn't possible to access the programmes online.

The goals of the programmes relating to the social work disciplines concern the acquisition both of knowledge and skills. Connecting knowing and knowing how represents one of the features of these disciplines.

Regarding the content of social work disciplines, one element to underline is the attention of all degree programmes to the principles and foundations of the profession and, in particular, to the historical roots of social work. Such attention takes into consideration the origins of social work, especially in Anglo-Saxon contexts, and is concentrated on the historical-political-cultural journey that led to the birth and development of the profession in Italy. Portraits of some “pioneers” of social work (Bortoli, 2015), high-profile figures, for the depth of their culture, their contribution to thought, their concrete commitment to actions promoting the value of the profession are, among other elements, part of the analysis of the social work trajectories.

The module on social work methodology is aimed at helping students acquire basic elements for the progressive development of a skill acquisition journey. The acquisition of a unitary method (Bianchi, 2005), characterised by content that can be used in all operating areas and areas of intervention, is a common and well recognised goal. At the same time, in each degree programme, the social work teachers require focus and exploration of specific operating areas, such as, for example, that of protecting children. This choice seems to respond to the need to hold the unitary nature of the social work method together with the particularity of the operating areas and, thus, to confront the risks of an approach far from the reality of professional experience.

In an overall assessment, it can be said that the social work disciplines present basically homogeneous and coherent content among the 37 social work degree programmes. This is confirmed by an analysis of the recommended bibliographies that, except for rare cases, include publications belonging to social work literature (now consolidated in Italy), the authors of which belong to the profession and, at the same time, carry out research and teach at the universities.

One element that seems worthy of attention is the presence, in the literature, of few specific monographs on the tool of documentation and on professional writing, an issue that is usually addressed in methodology manuals. Learning how to write professionally, which is central to internship paths and workshop activities connected to them, seems to be based on knowledge and skills learned in practice rather than in theoretical study.

4. Discussion of results and conclusions

The research has highlighted some particularities in the training offerings of social work degree programmes at Italian universities. As has been seen,

except for the psychological and medical disciplines, there may be significant differences in the number of credits attributed to modules, which also derive from the disciplinary particularities of the departments in which the courses are held. In Italian universities, there are no social work departments and the social work discipline credits are decidedly lower than others, especially those of sociological disciplines. The prevalence of other disciplines over social work ones is a structural fact that derives from the university legislation in force in Italy; the individual universities, therefore, have little discretion for increasing the “weight” of the social work disciplines in their study programmes.

In Italian universities, particular attention is placed on the basic theoretical training of future social workers, considered as a prerequisite for reading and understanding the complexity of social phenomena, historical processes, and, in general, for providing an indispensable set of knowledge in order to be able to carry out the profession. The theoretical bases, with a multidisciplinary nature, which characterise the social work courses of study, seem to have been consolidated over time. This also emerges from interviews carried out in the second part of the research, especially those with service managers. These managers, among other things, have a long experience in the welfare system and may observe the experiences of younger social workers, those who “have more thorough training (...) as professionals draw more on theory and, thus, if they have little experience, they are, however, strengthened with theory and also have good strategies for implementation” (int. 3 – manager, public social services). From the perspective of the academics interviewed, however, the solidity of the theoretical foundations is not taken for granted and needs to be further strengthened, since in professional practices, “there is always the risk of losing theoretical knowledge and acting on common sense (...) or a bureaucratic doing, with standardised answers” (int. 11 - academic).

In order to comprehend the professional practices in the complexity of social work, multidisciplinary theoretical knowledge is necessary. In this sense, the differentiation between disciplines (and the related degree programme modules) seems to represent an asset rather than a risk factor linked to heterogeneity and eclecticism (Ferrario, 1998) which would represent a distortion of the training paths, especially of their professional development content. The so-called “generalist perspective” is one of the building blocks of social work (Vandekinderen et al., 2020); the professional practice inspired by this perspective is coherent with one of the fundamental training goals, i.e. the acquisition of a holistic vision of service clients’ situations, which concentrates attention on different areas of life, such as, for example, the material economic and living situation, education, work, physical and mental health, and social relationships. Although one could highlight a clear ten-

dency in social work, both at the international level and in Italy, to divide social work into specialised areas and functions (Campanini, 2020a, 2020b), the historically generalist roots of the profession still influence the training paths.

In this overall framework, there are training needs that, in the Italian university context, should be reviewed. In all the interviews, the necessity of reinforcing the social work disciplines, which, as has been seen, are disproportionately minor compared to the other disciplines, is evident. In particular, the need to give more space to the social work methodology is felt, in order to allow social workers starting to work in the field, to effectively manage the helping relationship and to face the high emotional load: “young social workers are sometimes more fragile than elderly; on the helping relationship, some fragilities are inherent in the beginning of the profession due to inexperience, but there are some fragilities that derive also from the course of studies; there is the need to reinforce the process of development of relational skills” (int.10 – manager, public social and health service). This point of view is very similar to that of social workers who play the role of representatives in the professional Association and who, therefore, have a position as a privileged observer and an overall vision of the profession in the different fields of intervention: “we need a greater basic training in the social work disciplines (...) that also confronts fragility on the emotive-relational level” (int. 6 – councillor of the regional Association of Social Workers). The focus, anyway, cannot only be on social work disciplines and the internship. There is also the need to reflect on the goals of other disciplines, particularly that of acquiring skills to interpret the context in which social work operates; from this perspective, “it would be necessary to explain why that discipline is useful for social work (...) merely by way of example: the law module should not be for training future lawyers” (int. 1- academic). There is, in addition, a need for greater experimentation, through which students can gather “the professional implications of the theoretical multidisciplinary aspects” (int. 2 – manager, public social services).

The goal of connecting theory and practice, an issue that is widespread in the documents analysed in the first part of the research (especially in the module programmes) and in the interviews, requires more opportunity for experimentation in practice, in the services system: “the goals are written in the course pages, but then (...) they are goals that are too distant from reality” (int. 7 – young social worker, public social service). The increase in credits (and therefore in hours) for the internship, which all the interviewees hoped for, should be considered in relation to the need to strengthen the whole training path. A proposal of law in this direction, never approved, had been supported by the National Association of Social Workers; it was about the design of a course of studies that should have allowed the access

to the qualification to the practice of the profession only at the end of a five-year degree (instead of three), in order to provide the new generations of professionals with more effective knowledge and tools to operate in the welfare system and a specialisation in certain areas of social work. We find in the literature a criticism of this hypothesis; it has been highlighted that the improvement of social work training does not depend so much on the quantity of the years of study that allow access to the profession, but on the quality of the training: “Quality and quantity are, however, two theoretically overlapping but distinct dimensions for the planning of training courses. A very high number of hours does not necessarily correspond to an excellent training result” (Fazzi, 2014: 67). In interviews, this need to extend current training, in consideration of this growing complexity, was widely shared. Such complexity, for a long time at the centre of the global interest of professionals and scholars (Adams et al., 2009), characterises the social context in which social work operates: “three years aren’t enough to prepare students, considering, as well, that the younger generations of social workers must cope with an increasingly complex world” (int. 6 - councillor of the regional Association of Social Workers).

Another critical observation refers to two issues in which the Italian context deviates from the Global Standards For Social Work Education & Training (IFSW, 2020):

1. the absolute lack of social work departments with a Head or Director who has demonstrated administrative, scholarly and professional competence, preferably in the profession of social work;
2. the lack of educators¹, adequate in number and range of expertise, who have appropriate qualifications, including practice and research experience within the field of social work.

Although it has been argued in the literature that experience as a social worker does not in itself ensure the effective improvement of the quality of training for the profession (Fazzi, 2014), our interviewees consider it appropriate that the study, research and teaching of social work should be entrusted to tenured educators in universities with the background suggested by Global Standards; “we need to pay attention (...) if the number of social workers in the university is small, who is going to teach there?” (int. 1 - academic). At present, the Italian context consists of a total of about twenty of these figures; it follows that the prevalence of social work teachers is assigned on contract or, in small numbers, entrusted to scholars of other disciplines. The prevalence of contract teachers poses a dilemma: while on

¹ In the Global Standards the term “social work educators” has been adopted, to represent the different terminologies used to describe the people providing the education (i.e., academics, faculty, instructors, pedagogues, teachers, tutors, lecturers etc.).

the one hand, they have specific knowledge and experience, on the other hand, as they usually have another job in the social services and outside the university, they have understandable difficulties in concentrating on study and research. We agree with those who believe that, since the disciplines of social work are theoretical-practical, they should be taught by teachers who have a background in social work; however, in order to guarantee a valid university education, it is necessary that this background be accompanied by a solid scientific preparation, built up in research and in scientific and didactic courses.

Rethinking training, therefore, implies a rethink of social workers' access to academic careers and attention to the quality of teaching. From this perspective, we need to confront the lack of post-degree paths (beginning with PhD), which are needed for academic careers, so as not to base degree programmes on an improper use of contracts with professionals external to the university.

The aspects that have emerged so far highlight widespread needs for innovation, so that the content of courses of study cohere better with training goals. The prospects for innovation do not, however, involve "delete" the present, but rather reviewing qualitative and quantitative aspects of training, which are also attentive to rediscovering knowledge and skills, that have built up the culture, theoretical knowledge, and practices of social work (Ramos-Feijóo et al., 2020). This could also be encouraged by greater attention, in training, to the international aspect of social work and to improve the learning of foreign languages, which have a rather low number of credits in the study programmes. In the interviews, the need for such attention emerged: "foreign languages need to be strengthened (...) but it should be a sectoral teaching, it should not be the English I learnt in high school, I must study the English I need in my working environment; maybe more than increasing the number of hours, it is necessary to improve the quality" (int.13 - young social worker, public social service). The acquisition of tools for interpreting reality, in addition, requires attention not just to the number of credits, but also to the content of programmes and to the discipline teaching methods. Innovating is striving not to train a bureaucrat-social worker, concentrated only on service procedures and merely executing policies, but a professional who is "reflective, who knows what they do, because they do it, i.e. who learns from their own experience, who re-reads it, processes it, and, above all, interrogates themselves on the sources of their knowledge, asks themselves what knowledge they are using to interpret problematic situations" (int. 5 - manager, public social service). Innovation implies, that is, a continuous process of rethinking professional practice, which entails the overcoming of purely performance-based and monetary logic (Cellini & Scavarda, 2017). The future scenario, therefore, can be one of innovation as

a tool for disrupting bureaucratisation (Ramos-Feijóo et al., 2020), which is observed in many aspects of social intervention; this perspective appears to be directly connected to a dynamic process of adapting and updating social work training, which involves universities and the professional community.

Several proposals can be identified to address this process. Regarding the educational activities aimed at linking theory and practice, the educational objectives, the training quality indicators, and the minimum supply criteria should be defined at a national level, in cooperation between the Ministry of the University, the institutional representatives of the educational establishments and the professional community, in particular for the internship and the activities supporting the link between theory and practice. This would make it possible to overcome the current differences and imbalances, favouring the adaptation of the Italian training system to the indications of the Global Standards which, among other things, call for the promotion of collaboration and knowledge transfer between the various training sites, as well as between training, practice, and research.

It would also seem appropriate to carry out a periodic evaluation not limited to individual degree courses but extended to all 37 three-years degree courses, through a comparison of issues such as the effectiveness of teaching methods, evaluation criteria, the improvement of spaces and tools, and increasing use of technology (which has aroused much interest in remote learning, imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic). In this elaboration, it is essential to consider not only the teachers' point of view, but also that of the students (whose opinion, in Italy, is one of the quality indicators laid down by the National Agency for the Evaluation of University Teaching).

Finally, it is essential to promote comparisons with other countries through inter-university research groups and international networks that produce comparative studies on social work education. The results of these studies can contribute not only to highlighting the specificities of training courses at international level, but also and above all to promoting innovative processes and enhancing training effectiveness.

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