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# Internationalisation of Higher Education Curriculum as a Strategy for Preparing Future Youth Workers

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**ABSTRACT:**

Educating future youth workers is a particular challenge for higher education. It results not only in the acquisition of basic knowledge and skills, but also in the implementation of the glocal perspective. In this aspect, the process of internationalization of higher education is a key element enabling optimal shaping of future youth workers' vocational identity.

The article presents an international strategic partnership project enabling such activities in the area of bachelor's studies. Its theoretical layer (Positive Youth Development) and intellectual outputs were presented. Moreover, learning, teaching and training activities, which are the result of the testing of the educational module, were introduced. The opportunity to participate in such international activities enables future social professionals to creatively approach youth problems at the local level using a broader perspective and mechanisms based not only on identifying risk and problems but also on resources and opportunities for positive development. The results worked out in the project can form the basis to develop learning, teaching and training activities for future youth workers outside partner universities.

**KEYWORDS:**

youth work, social professions, curriculum, higher education, internationalisation

## Introduction

Adolescence is a special developmental period of human life, perceived as a transition from childhood to adulthood, manifested by maturation (biopsychic dimension) and

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role taking (social and cultural dimension) (Lerner & Steinberg, 2011; Steinberg, 2011). Intensive changes experienced by young people are related to emotional tensions and constitute a set of specific individual characteristics which, combined with environmental factors (family, school, peer group), form the basis of their self-creation (Larson & Wilson, 2004). Despite numerous educational efforts leading to optimal integration with society, this process can proceed in a variety of ways and (in special cases) lead to adaptation problems (Marte, 2008). Such a specific situation is the core for reflection on contemporary youth work perceived as a variety of methods implemented by educators, social workers and leading to successful developmental supporting youth in their everyday activities directed onto future adult roles.

Vocational education is the crucial element of youth work. The contemporary labour market has rendered the implementation of vocational education of youth a unique challenge for teachers. The volatility of social reality: uncertainty (Dickerson, Milojevich, & Quas, 2019; Bauman, 2000), or living in risk societies (Schoon, 2007; Austen, 2009; Beck & Kewell, 2013) have caused that the expectations of the labour market towards young job seekers are undergoing radical changes. Visions of stable employment and a static job model preferred by parents exacerbate the ambivalent feelings of young employees, translating into increased migration processes (O'Reilly et al., 2015). This situation results in increased cases of undertaking odd jobs or part-time employment (Green & Livanos, 2017). These regularities are reflected in programs for employment policies and vocational education implemented on local, state and international levels (O'Reilly et al., 2015), it undertakes to build a skill of managing one's development (Clarke & Winch, 2007). Consequently, young people are inspired to be active, to undertake lifelong learning, not only in their workplace but also outside it (Smith et al., 2007). Hence, new paradigms are an important challenge for both workers' practice.

Building a professional identity by people entering the labor market is a special educational task in youth work, which also applies to higher education (Negru-Subtirica & Pop, 2017). The aim of this process is to build a sense of satisfaction, self-confidence and effectiveness in taking up new challenges (Hirschi, 2012), developing cognitive competences and reflective learning (de Bruijn & Leeman, 2011; Creed, Patton, & Hood, 2010). It is a multidimensional challenge. On the one hand, it concerns the competences acquired by future youth workers during their studies. In addition, it is an important starting point for work with young people, especially young people at risk. Growing up in an environment with limited infrastructure resources creates problems with the skilful use of environmental educational opportunities (Beckett & Herbert, 2008; Carlile, 2011; Carter, 2019). These, in turn, may limit professional aspirations or strategies for operating on the labor market (Jin & Rounds, 2012), which in turn affects the concept of oneself as an adult (Sargeant & Bond, 2015). As a result, young people's

educational career ends at a low level because they have to enter the labor market very early (Uggen, 2003). Limited opportunities also apply to social competences that enable skilful adaptation to the growing, diverse challenges posed by employers. As a result, these young people are at risk of falling into the NEET category, which in turn puts them at risk of exclusion and marginalization and increases the risk of engaging in criminal behavior (Rodwell et al., 2018).

Above mentioned features of socio-ecological risk in development during adolescence and emerging adulthood are crucial in reflection on contemporary youth education aims and strategies and vocational identity is an important youth work challenge. It is connected with career decidedness (Wanberg & Muchinsky, 1992) and is perceived by the authors as a future orientation and prospective action during emerging adulthood (Taber & Blankenmeyer, 2015), which enhances the probability of success in professional work (unlike the situation where individuals indicated the status of identity diffusion or moratorium). These identity statuses inhibit the formation of vocational identity (Laughland-Booy et al., 2017).

Based on the mentioned contemporary requirements of the labour market and socio-cultural resources available for the young European generation the aim of the article is to present an internationalised higher education curriculum prepared for interdisciplinary work with future youth workers. The curriculum (with additional intellectual outputs) is the effect of the international collaboration between five universities from four countries. Analysing project documents and outputs in our article we describe its theoretical background, curriculum structure and content plus prepared educational material useful for students and teachers as well as testing and evaluation procedures.

## Internationalization of higher education through Erasmus+ strategic partnership

Internationalisation of higher education (IHE) is currently a common trend and is widespread all over the world. This phenomenon is an attempt to respond both by the politicians and academies to the challenges arising from the ongoing globalization process and its consequences (Beck, 2012; de Wit & Altbach, 2021). Globalization is understood as "the reality shaped by an increasingly integrated world economy, new information and communications technology, the emergence of an international knowledge network, the role of the English language, and other forces beyond the control of academic institutions'' (Altbach et al., 2009, p. 7). These other forces may include e.g. armed conflicts, migration or pandemics, which even if occur locally, have an impact on a global scale. All those phenomena and processes determine the role

that higher education should play in preparing future youth workers peole to cope with the consequences of constant global changes as well as global labour market requirements on local, national and internatioanal level.

One way to respond to global challenges in the area of employment and an increasing importance of knowledge is to undertake actions for making higher education more international. In a broad sense, IHE is perceived as a process of changes that integrates "an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education" (Knight, 2004, p. 11). The internationalisation of the curriculum at universities plays an important role in the process of IHE in general, which is related to the preparation of social work students to cope with the constant changes and global market challenges. Internationalisation of the curriculum requires universities to incorporate "international, intercultural, and/or global dimensions into the content, learning outcomes, assessment tasks, teaching methods, and support services of a program of study" (Leask, 2009, p. 209). On the one hand, these activities contribute to a broader, multidimensional and deeper exploration of the issues raised at universities, on the other, using more adequate methods in activities aimed at solving problems that are of social, economic or political importance.

The process of internationalization of higher education is supported by political decisions and actions. They are related to the establishment and implementation of numerous cross-border research and teaching programs. These activities result in the promotion of mobility of students, academics and administrative staff, as well as in supporting partnership cooperation between universities.

The internationalization of higher education in Europe mainly takes place through the implementation of the European Union (EU) policy. These strategies and policy assumptions are reflected in the activities of individual academic institutions in Member States in order to deal with glocal trends and challenges. An example of such activities may be the establishment and implementation of different research and educational programmes in Europe.

Over the last 30 years, in particular the Erasmus programme, has played a key role in disseminating and giving a more strategic approach to the processes related to internationalization of higher education in Europe. These programme assumptions contributed to building a coherent approach (formation of international norms, standards and systems) as well as to identify the stakeholders in the internationalization process, which was then reinforced by the Bologna Process.

Signing of the Bologna Declaration in 1999 initiated the process of building the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Its aim was to create a comparable system of academic degrees and titles, but also to make European higher education more prestigious and competitive as well as more adequate to the requirements of the global labor market. International cooperation, including mobility promotion, top quality cur-

ricula, joint research and building strategic partnerships, became important elements in the development and improvement of the quality of European higher education. These assumptions were reflected in the e.g. Communication of the European Commission from 2013: "European higher education in the world", in which it was indicated that for top quality education, universities should encourage international mobility of staff and students; offer innovative curriculum, provide excellence in teaching and research; and build strategic partnerships with other institutions.

One of the forms of internationalisation under the Erasmus+ programme are Strategic Partnerships (currently called Cooperation Partnerships). The aim of these projects is to implement and disseminate innovative activities leading to high quality learning, teaching and training activities in the field of higher education. Actions undertaken within strategic partnerships may concern improvement of the curricula by the development of innovative courses, educational materials, methods of learning and teaching, which can be used in other institutions, not only those participating in the project. The implemented partnerships should result in improving the quality of education by modernizing the curricula of partner universities, as well as its adequate response to social and economic needs resulting from the current situation related to global challenges and expectations of the labour market

According to strategic partnerships assumptions, in the presented SP Young project, the curricula at partner universities were modernised by developing an innovative interdisciplinary Course Module: "Integrative Work with Youth" at BA level. The aim of the study programme was to train students as future professionals for having specific skills and knowledge for supporting youth and becoming integrated youth change agents for Positive Youth Development (PYD). Moreover, the implementation of this course contributed to the internationalization of the curriculum at partner universities and outside. It was accomplished through developing the course, as well as digital teaching tools for the Course Module – a Study Handbook "Youth Participation and Solidarity" and Youth Work Reader available for other HEIs in the EU and then implementing them in learning, teaching and training activities of future youth workers.

## Project description

Social Professions for Supporting Youth in a European Solidarity Context (SP YOUNG) is an Erasmus + Strategic Partnership Project involving five universities interested in collaboration in youth development, prevention and youth education. University of Bialystok (Faculty of Education) was the coordinator of the project, and partners: Malmö University (Faculty of Health and Society), Klaipeda University (Faculty of Health

Sciences) Latvian Christian Academy and University of Warsaw (Institute of Social Prevention and Resocialization) created international and interdisciplinary team working through thirty five months (from 01.10.2019 till 31.08.2022) on youth in Europe issue.

The project was based on the existing mostly bilateral relations between the partners. It allows to integrate the experiences of teachers from partner institutions who deal with the youth work issue from various theoretical and practical perspectives. In addition, it enabled multidimensional activities including data analysis, common work on scientific texts and the preparation of useful educational materials enabling the optimal implementation of the content of the project in work with students based on different mixed work methods (from lectures to workshops).

The objective of the project was to collaboratively improve the existing study programs in partner universities with innovative interdisciplinary course module. The aim of the module is to promote positive asset building where young people are resources for critical strategies, and to work out the methods for training students to become integrated youth change agents for youth work (based on the internationalisation experience). It was related to preparing an interdisciplinary educational module for partner universities in which youth work is seen primarily as a strategy for defining, developing and strengthening the resources of the young generation, enabling them to enter adulthood in an optimal way. In particular, it came down to defining the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values relevant to the education of students of social professions in their future work with young people. Project content especially increases responsibility and participation in civil society, by developing skills and attitudes from anthropological perspective, pays attention to PYD context and takes into account European youth policy.

Supporting educators was the SP YOUNG key horizontal priority. This priority was selected as a form of innovative international cooperation in the area of developing a teaching model addressed to students of social sciences. It aims to strengthen attitudes and values in order to prepare them for youth work in a more integrated form. The course module was designed by taking into account the directions of the future development of the EU, strengthening innovative methods and solutions in the field of inclusive understanding of the methods of solving social problems. This assumption gained a new meaning during the project, due to the reorganization of social life as a result of the pandemic increased a number of additional mechanisms based on isolationism and exclusion. In effect it gives an additional value to the adopted horizontal objectives of the project.

Key educational competences were an additional aspect of the project's priorities. In accordance with the adopted assumptions, the developed content oscillated around two issues: related directly to knowledge (digital skills, learning to learn, literacy related to foreign language fluency) and „soft competences" (personal, cultural

and social skills). Both elements were taken into account during the implementation of each of the outputs. It can be concluded that based on the implemented activities, their perception by the project team and feedback from the project evaluation the second topic met with a special response and positive perception by project users.

## Project Participants

There were two groups of participants engaged in the project: teachers and students of social sciences. The teachers were recruited at the level of partner institutions, taking into account their interests and the possibility of optimal implementation of activities under the intellectual outputs. The implementation of comparative analysis assumed the recruitment of teachers expert in the collection and analysis of data and familiar with the subject of youth work. Curriculum was linked with recruitment of teachers with experience in conducting classes with students (first phase) and involved in themes tests plus activities within the Summer School (second phase). In turn, the handbook is a continuation of thinking about the recruitment of teachers according to the criteria of the curriculum. On the other hand, teachers involved in the work on the reader were recruited on the basis of an open call addressed to teachers from partner institutions, taking into account the assumptions of curriculum and handbook, which enabled the selection of authors of manuscripts, taking into account the highest standards requirements of scientific texts.

Another target group were the students of undergraduate studies in the field of social sciences (education, social work, social pedagogy, sociology etc.). Recruitment of students involved in testing the educational module took place at the level of partner institutions, taking into account two criteria (BA level students and those interested in the broad context of youth work, with fluent English) and declaring participation in learning, teaching and training activities in a form of the Summer School (they were qualified through selection organised by teachers at partner institutions).

## Project Content

The aim of the project was to improve the study programs of partner universities in the field of youth work based on assumptions of positive contexts of knowledge about personal and sociocultural resources (including PYD).

During the implementation, the following activities were performed:

1) Comparative Analyses were carried out using the innovative methodology of Integrative Theology. This was to establish the anthropological dimension, to understand how positive youth development, participation, solidarity values become (or can become) a key element in the development, implementation and evaluation of youth policies at the national and international levels. Additionally, the ways in which they are incorporated into the curricula of social professions in the partner countries were analysed. Based on the analysis of data from basic journals, articles and other publications, the anthropological foundations of young people's problems were determined, which resulted in publishing the report: "Discourse of Cross-Border Situation (Comparative Analysis)". It provided the basis for constructing the curricula of social professions in a more integral way.

2) Development and implementation of the Course Module: "Integrative Work with Youth" for undergraduate students at partner universities to educate students as future professionals with specific skills and knowledge to support youth. The aim of this course is to strengthen the competencies of students of social professions for integrative and holistic work with youth. This empowers future youth workers to support and educate adolescents as active members of social groups, local, national and transnational (European) communities. Moreover, the course aims to form the basis for a deeper understanding of the development and specificity of EU countries' approaches to knowledge, skills and attitudes to be incorporated into youth work. An additional aim is to reflect on the relationship between theory and practice in youth work and to implement innovative methods to strengthen European solidarity among young people. This course consists of 5 sections (youth policy and general characteristics of youth, social exclusion vs inclusive education, (un)employment vs wellbeing, prejudice vs tolerance and risk and protective factors) and 13 detail themes that promote students' reflective learning and the gradual development of holistic strategies while supporting their clients in multiple complex social contexts.
   This course includes the crucial issues to the development of a professional role, such as relations with clients and the need for a professional ethical approach and the educational area. Additionally, attention is paid to ideological connections and interrelationships between contradictory or incompatible situations, different institutional and systemic logics, and positions from both a short-term perspective, as well as long-term customer-oriented approach.

3. The project assumed the development of digital teaching tools for the course module in the form of two publications: handbook and reader. The first book: „Youth Participation and Solidarity. Handbook for Students and Teachers of Social

Professions" (Bielecka, 2022) addresses various areas and contexts of contemporary youth functioning from social, cultural and political perspectives. It also presents a catalog of various risk and protective factors that affect the development of young people, as well as ways, strategies and methods of dealing with contemporary threats from local to global scale. What distinguishes this publication is its diagnostic and methodical approach from a broad international perspective. The chapters in this publication are clearly structured and contain: theoretical assumptions, examples of good practices, questions for discussion and tasks for students. The handbook may be inspiring for conceptualising as well as conducting courses even outside partner institutions, related to different social issues. As a result it contributes to the development of knowledge and skills among students participating in the course module.

4. The youth work reader was another important SP YOUNG intellectual output (Dychawy-Rosner & Sawicki, 2022). It has a form of theoretical comments leading to deeper reflection on topics included in the course module and the handbook. There are eleven texts grouped in two chapters. First chapter (Youth in Societies – Structural Conditions and Challenges in Welfare Measures) is focused on general social, cultural, and economic factors of relevance to young people's well-being and vulnerability, i.e., to some extent, the structural factors and social change in focus. From a feminist research perspective, this part can illustrate a society that can be seen as clearly gendered in the structures and outcomes but in which young people also take an active position to struggle for social change. Second chapter is a youth perspective on contemporary experiences, challenges and risks. Authors described local problems (perception of base values by Latvian youth, alcohol use in Lithuania, everyday life of unaccompanied minors in Sweden) and wider perspectives (youth at risk, delinquency, Positive Development as an educational perspective). Such theoretical perspective gives an opportunity for deeper and universal analysis of the course module content.

5. Learning, Teaching or Training Activities were the final stage of the SP YOUNG activities. Up to 10 BA students and 2 teachers were selected for participation in the Summer School from each partner university, who presented appropriate knowledge in the analysed issues and/or were involved in testing the course module at the partner university level and whose language competences enabled effective work in international groups.

As part of the preparation for Learning, Teaching or Training Activities each student participated in the thematic classes, in the partner institution, collected the material

and made it available using online tools (Edmodo in particular), to be used in mixed classes during the Summer School. The second area of activity was the preparation of a cultural evening scenario by students from national groups, introducing the history, tradition, culture and knowledge about their societies. This was to help Summer School participants to get to know each other better. For the participation in Learning, Teaching and Training activities, students were guaranteed to receive up to 5 ECTS credits.

## Project Impact

The result of SP YOUNG project participation was an internationalisation of compulsory curriculum at partnering universities. Participating students and teachers had the possibility of a deeper social diagnosis of youth problems in the context of PYD from an international perspective. A significant benefit of the project was the exchange of best practices and innovative methods of acquiring knowledge during the implementation of the curriculum in the field of youth work, enabling the reading of not only new challenges for youth development, but also an in-depth reflection on the possibilities of action at the local level and based on the network of interpersonal connections developed in the course of the project and interinstitutional. As a result, the implementation of the project enabled the development of competences and professional skills in higher education in social, educational and cultural studies in the field of youth. The program became a base for the implementation of the PYD idea in Central and Eastern European countries, which was possible and based on the intellectual outputs of the project.

All project outputs (Comparative Analysis, Course Module, Handbook and Reader) were prepared in an electronic version (open access) and are available on the project website (http://young.uwb.edu.pl/). They can be used without any limitations. Additionally, the handbook and the reader were published in print (500 copies each). They have been distributed among partner institutions and are spread as free copies at national levels by partner institutions. The distribution includes not only people from partner institutions involved in the project, but also libraries, institutions and academic teachers whose interests coincide with the topics discussed in the outputs. This solution enables free promotion of the project content outside the participating institutions.

Experience gained from the project implementation is used by teachers during preparing and conducting classes in subsequent editions of work with students. This indicates the implementation of the results in the future at the level of partner institutions. The dissemination and promotion of the project results through the website

and by all those who participated in SP YOUNG provides an excellent basis for all the results to be used in the curricula as a part of an international educational process as well as in youth work practice.

## Conclusions

The SP YOUNG project is an important example of the practical implementation of the idea of internationalization in higher education. Participation in this international initiative enables future social professionals to approach local youth problems with a broader, pan-European perspective. In addition, based on the theoretical background, it is a tool for working with youth based on resources and positives – two important elements that are still so often overlooked and misplaced in youth work.

Regarding the educational dimension, the program is an important tool for shaping the vocational education of future youth workers. The indicated volatility of the labor market, global problems and challenges experienced by young people mean that a person should develop a flexible attitude in approaching professional matters, and this assumption was successfully implemented in the project.

Many conditions regarding social issues have changed during implementation of the project. The most important issue turned out to be the phenomenon of social exclusion and measures to respond to this problem. Using practical, methodical solutions that would aim at inclusion, such as inclusive education. There is an interesting proposal to expand these issues addressed from the perspective of human and child rights.

In addition, the context of the affairs that significantly determined the functioning of young people during the project implementation (COVID, war in Ukraine, economic and migrant crisis) are the contexts in which the research, diagnostic and methodological approaches developed in the project can be used in the near future, not only in partner countries. Moreover they are an important starting point for the youth workers activities in the future.

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