

# Research on the current state of the social work profession in Italy

*Carla Facchini, Milano, Annamaria Campanini, Calabria and Walter Lorenz, Bolzano (Italy)*

Social work training in Italy, at the instigation of the Italian professional Association of Social Workers, was delegated entirely to the universities in 1990. This has given the profession an enormous boost in terms of its public status, and at the same time an enormous task to find ways of utilizing the new opportunities. While the incorporation into the university sector underlined the scientific standing of the profession, its development is overshadowed by the absence of a specific disciplinary category that would give social work an independent base in the Italian academic system. The Ministry of Universities and Research until now has not instituted a category for academic appointments in social work and the discipline is represented vicariously by sociology. Professors responsible for teaching relevant subject areas are chairs either in General Sociology or in Sociology of Communicative Processes, and many social work courses are managed by other disciplines like politics, medicine, law or pedagogy. Not even the title of social work ('assistente sociale') appears in the academic qualifying award; instead the degree is called 'Laurea in Servizio Sociale', i. e. Bachelor in Social Service, which begs the question of the boundaries of this field. Several professions are currently contesting the ground of social services, among them social pedagogy, educators and care workers, sociologists and latterly also community nursing. Although there is a national register of title-holders of social work and being registered is a precondition for appointment to certain public posts of responsibility in social services the field of social services is undergoing profound changes.

It is therefore a significant development that the Ministry of Universities and Research has awarded a prestigious research grant to a consortium of professors of social work from four universities (Bolzano/Bozen, Calabria, Milan Bicocca and Pisa) under the directorship of Prof. Carla Facchini of Milan for the purpose of evaluating the current state of professional social work in Italy in relation to training and practice. The research programme forms part of the 'co-financed' projects meaning that the Ministry provides 70% of funding with the participating universities being obliged to contribute the remaining 30%. The scheme applies to research proposals of national importance and significance.

The research grant was awarded on the strength of the proposal which was evaluated by an international panel of peer reviewers. The national and international research profile of the consortium partners counted significantly in the selection process. Prof. Facchini has conducted previous research profiling the background and orientation of students of social work, Prof. Campanini of Calabria is Coordinator of the current EU funded Thematic Network of social work and chief organizer of the conference of the European Association of Schools of Social Work at Parma to be held 15-17 March 2007 and Prof. Lorenz was previously coordinator of the First Thematic Network of the Social Professions (ECSPRESS) and is involved in several regional and European research programmes.

The application was grounded in the following observations concerning the current state of social services and of social work in Italy and defines its objectives as follows:

'Social work is undergoing a significant set of transformations pertaining to the sphere of education and training, professionalisation, social services' organisation and modes of insertion in the labour market.

The research programme aims at building a sound basis for knowing and analysing ongoing changes in social work, with regard to three distinct but connected aspects:

1) The insertion of social workers' training programmes into the university system has

produced changes both on training programmes and methods and on career opportunities for social workers.

2) Social services' territorialisation and pluralisation, the move towards users' choice, the increasing complexity of needs and responses are likely to impact on the organisational and professional dimensions and on the role, position, expertise and profile required from social workers.

3) the recent transformations of labour market regulation – the recourse to “atypical” job contracts and to self employment – are likely to have an impact also onto social workers' employment conditions. This phenomenon should be looked at also in relation to the accessibility of managerial positions.

These three distinct but interrelated analytical perspectives deserve specific attention, given the poor level of information available at present. In Italy, in fact, there is no tradition in the study of social workers as a professional group, nor a structured information system on social professions. Existing knowledge is scarce, discontinuous and fragmented.

The research is articulated in one national survey and four parallel thematic researches implemented by each one of the units.

The national research, based on a survey conducted over a representative sample of social workers and a relevant number of in depth interviews, will explore the socio-demographic characteristics, educational pathways, employment conditions, organisational position, and tasks carried out by social workers in different sectors.

The local researches will focus on:

- A) The relationship between education and profession, through the consolidation and extension of the National Observatory of MA and BA social work students;
- B) The comparison of European educational models of social work, with specific attention to field placement.
- C) The re-definition of social workers' professional profiles along with the changes taking place in the social service system both on the demand and supply side, namely:
  - C1) the actors involved in this re-definition and the underlying logics
  - C2) the practices of this re-definition and the changing boundaries between different social professions

Qualitative and quantitative research methods will be usefully combined in the project. Specific attention will be devoted to the regional differentiations of the social workers' position in relation to changes in social policy and its implementation.

Finally, the comparative dimension is of specific interest and will represent an important added value, able to place ongoing changes in Italy in the frame of broader transformations taking place in Europe.'

The research project is financed for two years and should make a considerable contribution to the clarification of social work's professional profile in Italy. The last national survey was conducted by the national research institute CENSIS in 1998 on the 35000 registered social workers but since then important changes have taken place. In particular, it can be hypothesised that public social services are involved in a process of diversification and decentralisation which shifts the emphasis more towards giving non-governmental agencies a role in social service provision, with a concomitant reorganisation of professional groupings involved.

Likewise at the university level there is great uncertainty about the practice relevance of the basic degree programme the composition of which is defined by ministerial decrees in considerable detail leaving little room for adjustments to the changing requirements of the field. At the same time the relevant Ministry is dragging its feet over the re-definition of postgraduate curricula in the light of the Bologna Process. The current array of

'specialisations' at the postgraduate level under the old system of regulations does not conform to an overall plan of development of competence areas..

It is hoped, therefore, that the data from this research will provide important reference point for the future development of social work, and beyond that of the social professions in general in Italy. Apart from the overall national picture it will be interesting to analyse on the one hand different regional variations, as for instance in the Autonomous Province of Bolzano where the newly founded Free University educates both social workers and social pedagogues and, while being governed by Italian rules and regulations, nevertheless is strongly influenced by models of social work from other European countries as many lecturers on contracts come from abroad. On the other hand different components of the professional profile of social workers will be evaluated in greater detail, as for instance the placement component of the training in an international context, as well as the orientation of the academic programme towards the achievement of specific professional competences. Both aspects have great significance internationally as curricula and course regulations in social work everywhere in Europe are in a state of transition in the light of the Bologna Process and the Italian experience will hopefully have something to contribute to those developments.

*The authors work as professors at the following universities teaching social work students.  
For further details and indeed for observations and suggestions please contact:*

*Prof. Carla Facchini, University Milano Bicocca [carla.facchini@unimib.it](mailto:carla.facchini@unimib.it)*

*Prof. Annamaria Campanini, University Calabria [a.campanini@tim.eu.blackberry.com](mailto:a.campanini@tim.eu.blackberry.com)*

*Prof. Walter Lorenz, Free University of Bolzano, [wlorenz@unibz.it](mailto:wlorenz@unibz.it)*

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