

This is an **Accepted Manuscript** version of the following article, accepted for publication in *Social Work Education* and published online by Taylor & Francis, on 14 Jun 2022:

Langarita Adiego, J.A., Montserrat Boada, C., Soler Masó, P., Casademont Falguera, X. (2022). What do I need to work on? Perspectives of social work employers and graduates. *Social Work Education*, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2022.2088727>

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What do I need to work on? Perspectives of social work employers and graduates

Authors

1. Jose Antonio Langarita. Universitat de Girona (Spain). ORCID: 0000-0002-7911-3109
2. Carme Montserrat. Universitat de Girona (Spain) (**corresponding author**). ORCID: 0000-0001-5062-1903 carme.montserrat@udg.edu
3. Pere Soler-Masó. Universitat de Girona (Spain). ORCID: 0000-0002-8636-0925
4. Xavier Casademont. Universitat de Girona (Spain). ORCID: 0000-0002-3821-4245

Funding

This work ProspeCTsaso was supported by the INTERREG V A POCTEFA 2014-2020- EFA019/15.

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Abstract

One of the main concerns among students and employers in the field of social work is the suitability of academic training for work in social intervention. This article presents the participants' views regarding the most useful aspects of social work training, as well as the expectations and thoughts of employers and graduates regarding the work done by the latter in this field. To conduct the analysis, we used a mixed methodology based on surveys (n= 100) of graduates and employers and on focus groups with both target groups. Among the most important results is the need to establish mutual recognition between employers and trainers in the field of social work. Although employers mostly demand technical training, an excellent theoretical background is still relevant as one of the ways of building the discipline's corpus. This study also highlights the fact that university qualifications are not as important to employers as students' personal experience or internships done during their time at university.

Keywords

Social work, employers, students, university education, expectations

Introduction

Important studies have analysed the profession of social work and those who practise it in Spain (Barbero, 2002; Miranda, 2004; Sanz Cintora, 2001). Recognition of the profession as a university course, first as a diploma and currently, resulting from the reforms brought about by the Bologna Process, as a degree, have significantly improved the quality of professional training. In Spain, the profession of social work is regulated by Act 10/1982, of 13 April, which created the Official Associations of Graduates in Social Work, and membership of the association is obligatory for those wishing to exercise the profession. This development of professional training has been

accompanied by different debates in order to update it and adapt it to different social realities and problems. A peculiarity of the Spanish case is that social work shares its scope of intervention with other professions and professional profiles. These include the following professional figures: social educators (university graduates), pedagogues (also university graduates) and social integrators (who have completed pre-university professional training). In Europe, these professional boundaries are neither clear nor univocal, although there is a great diversity of training and professional profiles in the field of social intervention. The countries in the South - the francophone and southern models - both have more delimited figures, while in central and northern European countries they are all included under the more generic term social work. In the Spanish case, the fuzzy boundaries between the professions generate confusion at different levels, from the educational to the professional fields, since it is often difficult to clearly distinguish the borders between the different professions.

In Spain, the proximity of these professions undoubtedly affects the professionalization of social workers. The confluences and divergences between social work and social pedagogy/education have been analysed by Moreno, Fernández and Moyano (2018). Social work was first introduced as a university qualification in Spain in 1990, followed by social education a year later. The work carried out by Viana-Orta, López-Francés and Zayas (2018) concluded that the two degree courses had part of their syllabuses in common (sociology, anthropology and psychology), and another part with specific training, more focused on law and social services in the case of social work and on education in the case of social education. The studies by Moreno, Fernández and Moyano (2018) and Llena (2018) yielded similar findings, confirming that educational and pedagogical aspects predominate in the training of social educators, while that of social workers focuses more on social services and rights. The former authors therefore conclude that the ways in which the two differ (and hence the reasons why they must establish rigorous and consolidated connections) are the approaches they take, the methodological aims, the working tools and codes, and the fundamental ways of analysing the different realities in which they coexist in the daily exercising of their profession. Llena (2018) agrees with them, noting that these professions do not differ greatly, but do so enough to maintain their own identities and cooperate with one another.

The connection between social workers' university studies and their entry into the professional world and subsequent career is one of the most widely debated aspects of these debates for several reasons. One of the reasons seems to be the significant dropout rate among professionals, as explained by Curtis, Moriarty, and Netten (2012), due to a mismatch between training and the reality of professional practice. This also has a lot to do with the experience of the first years of professional practice and the relationships established with other people, both other professionals and recipients of services (Moriarty et al, 2011). Battaglia and Flynn (2020:6) analysed graduates' transition to the professional world and pointed out that "social work graduates have broadly mixed feelings about their preparedness for practice. Across the reviewed literature, graduates reported feeling confident in their knowledge, theory and understanding of communication skills. However, the review also showed that new social workers have been reported to feel less prepared for managing high caseloads, report writing, record keeping, time management and for specialist practice, due to the generalist nature of

their education". They point out that new social workers require support through induction, vocational training and quality supervision.

The aforementioned dropout rate among professionals may also be related to the complexity of social work itself - as a helping profession, it requires rigorous theoretical, methodological and technical knowledge, as well as appropriate teaching methods (Báñez 2004). Thus, Barrera, Malagón and Sarasola (2014) stated that the most important consideration in the education of social workers is not just the transmission of theoretical knowledge, but also training students how to apply this knowledge in social intervention procedures. For their part, Ballesteros, Viscarret and Úriz (2013) highlighted the need for reflection in university social work training in Spain. They showed that training can meet the needs of the "market" and also include reflective functions essential to the profession. This means that social work training must prepare future professionals to occupy the jobs that society needs, while also taking into account that this professional work must be carried out within a framework of reflective practice that is coherent with the social justice ideology inherent in social work, as well as the best ethical and methodological criteria.

Among the most recent contributions to the debate, Lynn Glassburn (2020) presents an analysis of the literature on social work students' transition to the professional environment. According to this author, four areas of contribution can be detected in the research: a) those that focus on preparation for the world of work and employment; b) those that focus on the usefulness of professional guidance; c) those focused on job satisfaction; and d) those that emphasize the factors that influence this transition. Important contributions have been made in all these areas, especially in the last decade, with evidence being provided of the need to better connect and articulate social work training and professional practice.

These studies on the training of social work professionals and their entry into the world of work provide interesting results with regard to improving and optimizing training. It is essential to take into account the opinions of students who have finished training, as well as the opinions of employers, in order to ensure that training responds to current needs. Barrera et al (2014) concluded that some of the aspects that need to be reviewed are traditional educational issues in the training of social workers, such as greater knowledge of intervention models, education in management and legislature, and techniques and methodologies applicable to social work with groups aimed at families, planning, communities and personalized social work. In other studies (see Tham and Lynch, 2014), students demanded more hands-on training at university to help prepare them to meet the demands of the real context in which they will later find themselves. Carpenter et al (2015) adopted a similar stance when they stated that the biggest challenges for these professionals are likely to be the volume and complexity of the work they have to do, especially when compared to the experience of protected, supervised practice during training. Several authors have proposed providing support or tutoring during the transition period (Bradley, 2008; Donnellan and Jack, 2015; Hay et al, 2012; Hunt et al, 2016;), allowing new graduates to acclimatize to the responsibilities of the new job. Indeed, some professional associations do offer recent graduates a supervision and support service in the first years of professional practice.

As well as practical preparation for social work and relationships with people, Bates et al (2010) argued that these professionals require a mix of teaching methods and the opportunity for face-to-face debates as optimal strategies for learning. Making an even more demanding proposal, Barbosa (2018) proposed an empowering pedagogical model and called for training that brings teachers and students close together, with students actively participating in all phases of work and cooperative pedagogy, consensus and intense communication.

The aim of this study is to detect and delve further into the main aspects that affect the employment of social work graduates, from the perspective of both recent graduates and employers. Employers' opinions are consulted as a contrast to graduates' perceptions of their training. Our interest lies in these professionals' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of their training, but also employers' assessment of it. Holden et al (2002, p.116) defined the idea of self-efficacy as a resource for measuring professional development thus: "Self-efficacy is more than a self-perception of competence. It is an individual's assessment of his or her confidence in their ability (to) execute specific skills in a particular set of circumstances and thereby achieve a successful outcome". In the absence of comparative data on perceived and actual performance (O'Connor et al, 2001), this information may prove very useful when putting into context and interpreting the results provided by recent social work graduates.

Materials and methods

Objectives

To determine and conduct an in-depth analysis of aspects related to social work graduates' entry into the world of work from the perspectives of recent graduates and of the institutions and centres that employ them. It is based on two research questions: What aspects of training are most useful for the job? What are the employers' and graduates' expectations and levels of satisfaction with respect to entering the labour market? Accordingly, the main objectives of the study are:

- To analyse which aspects of training are most useful for employment from the perspective of both recent graduates and employers.
- To determine employers' and graduates' expectations and thoughts regarding the work done by social workers.

Design

Within the framework of the project ProspecTsaso EFA019/15A, which analyses the entry of social work degree graduates into the world of work, a mixed methodology design was used, combining the collection of quantitative data - by means of a questionnaire aimed at graduates and employers - and qualitative data - via focus groups, also conducted with both groups.

Sample and data collection tools

- *Characteristics of the graduate sample that answered the questionnaires*

A closed-ended questionnaire was sent to graduates who had completed their studies no later than 3 years earlier (N=175). A total of 41 were returned, of which 90% were from women. On the whole, the graduates:

- had entered university after post-compulsory education: 63.4%
- were working at the time of answering the questionnaire: 95.1%
- had found work during the year following graduation: 72.5%
- had been required to have a social work qualification for the job: 66.7%
- were employed in the socio-educational sector: 67.5%
- would choose this career again: 70.7%

The questions were divided into blocks: personal and academic data; first job profile; current job, latest job or unemployment profile; training variables (skills). These last variables were taken from questionnaires used by the Catalan Agency for Quality in the University System (AQU, 2014).

The aims of the questionnaire were as follows: (i) to obtain a description of the recent graduates' employment situation; (ii) to encourage them to participate voluntarily in the graduate focus group; and (iii) to prepare the script for the focus group and be able to analyse all emerging topics in greater depth.

- *Characteristics of the graduates participating in the focus group*

Ten people participated - nine women and one man - with characteristics similar to those of the sample as a whole, the idea being to form a heterogeneous group in terms of current employment. The discussion lasted around 90 minutes and addressed the following topics: the functions performed at work; the relationship between those functions and prior training; the criteria that, in their experience, are used for graduate selection and recruitment; difficulties they may have had in gaining employment; prospects of professional development or promotion; evaluation of their university training; and proposals on how to improve this training.

- *Characteristics of the sample of employers who answered the questionnaires*

The online questionnaire was answered by 59 organization managers (it had been sent to N=334). The questions were divided into blocks: profile of the organization; recruitment criteria and difficulties; training and skills; and collaboration with universities. The respondents can be characterized as follows:

- 50.8% were from public institutions and the rest were mostly from private non-profit organizations.

- Just over half of the employers (59.8%) worked with children, followed by families (27.12%). Programmes for the elderly, migrants, people with disabilities and community action were each run by the same number of organizations (22%), followed by mental health and drug addiction programmes. Organizations were able to select more than one area of intervention.
- Most employers had hired recent graduates in the previous six years (72.8%) and almost all considered it important that they had specific qualifications (97.6%). However, 60.47% of employers said that they had encountered difficulties in hiring the right people for a particular job.
- *Characteristics of the employers who participated in the focus group*

This focus group comprised seven participants (six women and one man). They had all answered the questionnaires and were selected based on the heterogeneity of their organizations and their willingness to participate. The session lasted for 90 minutes and was recorded, with the consent of the participants. The topics were as follows: criteria for selecting and hiring graduates; evaluation of the university training received by the people they hire; difficulties in finding candidates with suitable profiles; mobility and job stability; difficulties hiring graduates in the labour market; in-organization training; and improvements desired from universities.

Data analysis

To analyse the quantitative data, basic statistics were calculated using SPSS v25, i.e. mean and standard deviation, and significant differences were obtained by comparing means tests: the paired-samples T-Test was used to compare employers' answers - contrasting the importance they attached to skills that recent graduates needed in the workplace and how satisfied they were with the level of these skills. For the qualitative data, the NVIVO v10 data processing package was used, thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) allowing us to identify the main topics. This was followed by a coding and categorization procedure based on an inductive examination of the text, and a subsequent inter-judge reliability analysis was used to look for consensus in the final results.

Ethical considerations

Quantitative data collection was anonymous. Qualitative data collection was voluntary, and participants signed an informed consent form. The confidentiality of the data was guaranteed, in line with the ethical guidelines of the project and the university, as well as in accordance with Act 3/2018 on data protection and digital rights.

RESULTS

The results of the research have been organized into an initial analysis of the statistical data, followed by one of the qualitative data:

Statistical data

In the questionnaires addressed to the graduates, they were asked to assess the extent to which their training was suitable to their workplace by means of the following question, on a 10-point scale (1 = not at all useful; 10 = totally useful): *How useful do you think the training you had at university is for work?*

Table 1 shows the results, with mean scores of below 8. The highest scores were for skills related to professional attitude and ethics, the ability to work in a team as part of interpersonal skills and the ability to work independently as part of personal management skills. The remaining scores were below 7. At the lower end of the assessment were instrumental skills related to languages and IT and cognitive numeracy skills. Scores for theoretical and practical training were around 6.

In the questionnaire, employers were asked about the degree of importance they attached to skills recent graduates needed in order to perform their duties in the workplace, and how satisfied they were with the level of these skills - what they would expect or like from the graduates in terms of their training and what assessment they made of the reality, on a scale of 1 to 10 (Table 1).

A first observation is that the mean levels of satisfaction were much lower than the employers' expectations, in some cases reaching statistical significance (*). The employers' higher expectations focused on: *professional attitude and ethics*; the ability to *work in a team and to act in new situations*; *communication skills* and *cognitive skills* related to *analysing complex situations*; and the *ability to develop new solutions and to make decisions*. The employers gave all of these a score of around 9. In all cases, the level of satisfaction with what they actually see was significantly lower, although mostly above 7. This finding is in accordance with the overall level of satisfaction of those employers who have hired a social work graduate, which was 7.26 (SD 1.33).

Language and numerical skills are at the other extreme. They were the only ones that did not disappoint employers, as the importance they awarded them was very low. This is consistent with a low level of satisfaction and in line with the students' belief that these are skills that have very little use for social work, as Table 1 shows.

Table 1. Usefulness of training for the job according to the views of graduates and employers.

Skills	According to		
	graduates	employers	
	Usefulness	Importance	Satisfaction
Attitude and professional ethics			
Responsibility at work	7.85	9.6	8.5
Analysis of the ethical implications of professional actions	7.5	9.0*	7.9*
Interpersonal skills			
Teamwork	7.7	9.3*	8.3*
Leadership	6.3	8.0	7.3
Negotiation skills	6.55	8.5	7.4
Personal management skills			

Working independently (deciding on tasks, methods, use of time)	7	9.0	7.5
Ability to learn and act in new situations	6.85	9.2*	7.9*
Efficient collection and selection of information	6.8	8.6	7.6
Assessing the sustainability of own actions	6.65	8.6	7.3
Instrumental skills			
Analysing the sociocultural characteristics of the disciplinary and personal environment	6.9	8.1	7.5
Communication skills: speaking; writing; presentations; and reports	6.85	9.0*	7.8*
Situating knowledge in its epistemological and historical framework, without fragmentation	6.35	7.4	7.2
Languages	4.55	6.5	6.7
Basic IT skills	5.8	8.1	8.1
Cognitive skills			
Analysis of complex situations, designing strategies to solve them	6.8	9.2*	7.6*
Ability to generate new ideas and solutions	6.75	9.0*	7.7*
Analysis of problems and solving them	6.55	8.9	7.8
Ability to take decisions	6.45	9.1*	7.6*
Numeracy skills	4.75	6.7	6.6
Theoretical and practical training			
Theoretical training	6.35	7.8	7.4
Practical training	6.15	8.7*	7.5*

(*) $p < .001$ (Paired-samples T-Test) (only comparing employers' answers)

Table 2 shows the factors deemed most important by employers when hiring recent university graduates. Employers attached great importance to internships in the job's specific field, having worked as a volunteer and having experience in the associated area of work. They did not, however, value the reputation of the university or academic studies or internships abroad.

Table 2. Important factors in the recruitment process of recent university graduates

	Mean	SD
Internship in the sector while studying	8.49	1.84
Voluntary work in the sector	7.28	2.29
Experience in the associated field	6.23	2.45
University's reputation	3.74	3.03
Having lived abroad for academic purposes	3.58	3.23
Having a qualification from a foreign university	2.47	2.64

Qualitative data

The graduates' view regarding the useful aspects of training for the job

The results of the focus group show that, when asked to assess the training on their degree course in relation to the world of work, the graduates emphasized the importance of spaces for reflection, the positioning of the profession and group discussions. This may be related to the higher scores on the questionnaire for professional attitude and ethics skills.

I'm not the same person now, having finished the degree, as I was when I enrolled. I've changed enormously – it's really clear to me. (...) Because now I can call on the resources that my degree course has given me.

Some members of the group also valued certain personal management skills positively, such as the ability to work independently and the capacity to learn and act in new situations, some cognitive skills, such as the ability to analyse complex situations, and some instrumental skills, such as the ability to analyse sociocultural characteristics and communication skills.

I see it positively. For me, for example, something I really value is that it has given me a lot of tools for reflection, you know? I wouldn't have said so a few years ago, but the curriculum lector¹ is... For me, it was key in the end.

However, there were also graduates who felt that they had not been able to acquire more instrumental or cognitive skills and who felt very limited at the beginning of their professional career.

I used to do a lot of street work at the weekend, accompanying social workers, and I've found that it always focuses a lot on overly basic social services. We did community social work here as well, but I felt, I don't know, that maybe I needed more tools to get out on the street. That is, something more practical and less institutionalized.

Shortcomings in personal management training were also mentioned, especially in relation to how to manage emotions, self-care, frustration and how to prevent burnout.

The issue of controlling emotions in certain situations, and knowing how to manage them yourself, I think is something that is missing from the degree course. More importance should be given to how we feel in those situations.

With regards to theoretical and practical training, the graduates agreed that the practical training was insufficient, especially the period of internships allowed for on the curriculum. They basically criticized the fact that there was only one internship period in four years and that it came in the final year. This meant that they were only able to familiarize themselves with one area of work, and that only in the final year of the degree. They were also aware that this could be a way of finding employment, of connecting with the local environment and a useful tool for research.

¹ The *curriculum lector* is a teaching project aimed at ensuring that students read key social work literature.

I think that doing an internship only once limits you a lot and you find it very difficult, not least because it's for only six months and you only get to choose one internship option, and that already limits your choice...

Some graduates went further and proposed improvements or aspects they believed would represent a positive change for undergraduate studies, such as being able to work on projects linked to the local environment, which would be more practical, useful and connected to reality.

As regards theoretical training, graduates were aware of the **general nature of the degree** and therefore talked about the desirability of doing a Master's degree or other courses that would allow them to specialize in specific areas and subjects not covered by the Bachelor's degree course. Some valued the general nature of the degree positively, stating that it provides an overview and does not lead to premature specialization, while others saw it negatively, because they ended up with little knowledge in certain areas.

Maybe you have this more on a Master's degree. Because the basic degree cannot give you specialized training in anything (...). But there are other areas of work that would be left empty. And that's why I think the Master's degree option could fill those needs.

The employers' view regarding the useful aspects of training for the job

The employers agreed that supporting interns involves extra work, which is often neither appreciated nor rewarded, and that professionals cannot always take on the task of acting as a tutor. When it comes to hiring graduates, employers do focus on this part of graduates' academic background, however.

Practitioners usually say that this part is exhausting, tiring, but it's also a dialogue, in a way, with a person who is fresher and so on. We let them participate in pretty much everything.

With regard to the usefulness of the rest of the degree training, employers mentioned many shortcomings in instrumental skills. This was especially true of communication skills, which they observe in interns, but are especially noticeable once graduates start working, when students interact with users, for example. Although they thought this may often be due to fear, shyness or insecurity, they believed it was also due to a lack of communication skills. Some of the participants in the group were concerned that graduates did not know what to do when they were in front of the people they were caring for - that they had little knowledge of interview and observation techniques.

But when they have to have a relationship with the user, that is, sitting at a table, doing an intervention, we have found that up close they have this fear of being face to face or doing the intervention. Okay, it's understandable that there are users who are more impulsive and might be difficult if you don't have experience, but there are users who shouldn't present a problem. We have found that these communicative skills are missing.

Others saw basic shortcomings in instrumental skills, such as not knowing where to start when writing a social report. Above all, however, they were concerned that graduates did not have

basic technical knowledge. They especially complained about graduates not knowing how to write and summarize information, that they had problems drafting reports:

They say: "And where do I start? How do I write a social report?" Well, they should know how to write a social report... We've come across things like this in some cases, the sort of knowledge that you say: "This should be basic".

However, there were those who said it was difficult for graduates to know how to do this well straight after graduation, as it was something that is learned with experience and that they needed to be corrected as they went along:

And when you make a mistake while being supervised and are told: "You're not being objective here, look, here you put..., here you don't use the conditional, here you do". I found out that when I finished my degree, I had no idea how to write a report - I knew the model, the capsule, the date.

Employers also believed that recent graduates had not mastered assessment techniques and, even less, service impact assessment. This is required in organizations' technical reports today and students do not have this knowledge. However, some participants accepted that this is not a limitation found only in training, but also in their own service.

I certainly think that nowadays teams, and possibly graduates, are very weak in this area, and we get complaints about this, the issue of impacts. It's one thing to pay attention, do the service and therefore do what you've been asked to do, but what they want is for you to analyse everything.

Similarly, employers demanded that graduates have a solid theoretical basis, and proposed collaboration between organizations and universities to improve research processes:

Before seeing families and intervening, you need to have a very solid foundation, because otherwise you'll get lost. So I don't know if you people in academia and research, who know a lot about that, and are able to collaborate with organizations, perhaps you could also communicate that knowledge, those research results regarding what's being done.

On the other hand, employers valued personal management skills such as initiative and proactiveness. They acknowledged that graduates are often expected to have skills that even people with many years' experience are yet to acquire.

There were also participating employers whose assessment was positive, especially appreciating the fact that graduates finish their degrees quite well equipped with cognitive skills - the importance of knowing how to deal with complex situations, of applying the knowledge they have acquired. Knowing specific information about a particular field was not so important, because that can be found easily.

People are anxious because they think "I don't know how to do this, I don't know how to do that ...". And they think that if they have a catalogue of resources, they will already know how to manage basic social services (...). But the important thing is to listen, the positions

you adopt, how you go about things, how to deal with the complexity of a family and then, obviously, resources. And my opinion of that's fairly good - we're happy with the people we've hired.

Although some participants mentioned the graduates' lack of in-depth knowledge of the work, in terms of the type of necessary documentation, of how to distinguish between different benefits and resources, etc., others in the group were less worried about that, because they think it is easy to pick up and also because it is knowledge with a best-before date, in the sense that it changes very often.

I'm not worried about the resources and benefits, I'm completely unconcerned that they don't know about them. I know that might seem a bit contradictory, but because they can find the information easily, that is, knowing how to provide care is as easy as... Also, as this varies so much.

Finally, they expressed the idea that training goes beyond the degree and that graduates need to continue training, especially if they are in a very specialized field. This coincides with what the graduates said.

You have a base and from that base, if you are in a specialized centre or working on a very specialized project, you have to keep your knowledge about it up-to-date or you have to learn.

The graduates' expectations and thoughts regarding entering the labour market

The graduates in the focus groups said that employers place a lot of importance on being able to show that they have previous experience. This was a problem for many of them because, as recent graduates, they did not have any previous experience.

I've been asked for experience everywhere, and of course, I don't have any experience, because I only finished my degree a year ago. I have a lot of experience of courses, volunteering, all that sort of thing...

The graduates' expectations often clashed with the excessive burden of administrative tasks – which was not what they were expecting or hoping for when they chose social work.

I think they need to improve this a lot. Well, at least in my experience, you know? It's like you do a lot of tasks that an administrative person could do...

What students considered administrative tasks, employers tended to interpret as specific knowledge, such as filling out documentation to receive social benefits.

Another aspiration often not reflected by reality when the graduates started working was the need for progress in the field of community social work, which is underdeveloped; this clashed with their expectations as recent graduates.

And I would add that there needs to be a lot of commitment to the issue of community, to the community approach. And well, this is where I still have enthusiasm and hope. There's a lot of this area that still needs to be opened up... and improved by social workers.

Graduates were also disappointed by the confusion of the roles of social worker, social educator and social integrator. They talked about the tendency to hire them as social integrators rather than as social workers, because that is cheaper for the employer, even though they often do the work of a social worker. Apart from having graduated in social work, half of the participants in the group had a qualification in social integration, so they knew what they were talking about. They also criticized the confusion between social work and social education and said they often ended up doing the same tasks as social educators.

On the other hand, they knew I was a qualified social worker but preferred to hire me as a [social] integrator. Also because of the salary.

This contrasts with how employers were not very satisfied with students' ability to innovate; the students, on the other hand, saw the work context as precisely what stopped them from doing so. In their opinion, there were older people who followed work paradigms from the past and who needed to be brought up to date. The employers and graduates agreed in demanding that the out-of-date image that society had of social work professionals as dispensers of resources be fought against and overcome.

There are a lot of old people, and, above all, they are burnt out and very paternalistic... It's difficult for them to open up...

Another aspect discussed by graduates but not mentioned by employers was that of the possibilities of promotion, albeit after gaining more experience over time. Although there were those who were fairly pessimistic, others were more hopeful.

I have high hopes that this will change. (...) I mean, maybe, over time, I'll want it too, maybe move up a category, or be more appreciated.

Finally, graduates said that knowledge of languages is not valued highly. They foresaw that this might change in the future, as demand is growing, even if it is now in its incipient stages.

Look, I've been to places, and they haven't asked me for languages anywhere.

I find that, if you look at immigration, you'll be asked for languages.

The employers' expectations and thoughts regarding entering the labour market

The employers in the focus group agreed that cross-disciplinary skills were very important: *the ability to reflect and critically analyse a situation; the flexibility to adapt; the ability to take initiative; teamwork; empathy; the ability to set boundaries; and conflict resolution.* The expectations they had when looking for candidates with these profiles were not always met.

But sometimes in a recruitment interview you can't see this capacity for criticism, these more cross-disciplinary skills, in the candidates that apply, because they supposedly have

theoretical or technical knowledge based on it (...) but a certain proactivity to say what your professional position towards your job is, what your work methodology is... that is sometimes hard to find.

At the same time, employers also attached great importance to knowing how to manage the basic emotions necessary to develop these skills. Some of the graduates with previous experience already had them, but this was not so in all cases:

They have good stress management skills, emotional self-control, quick decision making, an ability to set boundaries and positioning.

They provided examples of how they have incorporated identification and assessment of cross-disciplinary skills into recruitment interviews, as can be seen in this example:

In the more recent recruitment processes (...) we have tried to make the interview a skills interview, so that there might be (...) other types of questions that have more to do with the management of their emotions - "What worries you most, for example, at work?" - so we can also identify difficulties when it comes to being able to intervene or manage stress.

In addition, most people thought that specific knowledge of a topic or area could be acquired with internal training, but skills such as emotional management, the ability to set boundaries and detach yourself from situations, and empathy were very difficult to acquire:

So that can be worked on, knowing what an addiction or a dual pathology is, with internal training, that can be worked on. Skills of this type (emotional management) can't be worked on with internal training; it's very difficult to do that.

Some services develop mechanisms to help graduates integrate into their new workplace and to give them the support they need. But sometimes new professionals do their own thing and do not feel motivated to form part of the team, not identifying with the group, and this makes it difficult for them to learn.

Employers also said they would like graduates to have a positive view of the population they have to work with, as some of them come with a very pessimistic or blame-placing attitude. They also often detected a lack of a more community-based approach, an aspect the graduates themselves attributed to the employers.

The employers appreciated finding people with some experience, because they work more independently and do not need the support they referred to. They especially valued experience in working with associations, because these employees tend to be more actively involved in projects thanks to their experience. They are also more adept at resolving conflicts. For example, the employers highly valued experience in the field of leisure, as some of the skills needed to work in the social field can be gained there:

You notice when people come from a leisure environment, for example (...) ...they already have the necessary tools when it comes to arguing their point and executing a project or choosing a position in certain situations, they find solutions quickly.

This is also compatible with the employers' suggestion of internships as a way for organizations to hire recruits, as well as references from other services:

The internships they have done in our organizations also serve as recommendations for other organizations, because sometimes you know that they have done the internship in a certain place... and you call and ask: "What is this person like?"

As for the difference between social work and social education, the employers said that social workers perhaps do more work with the family, or in the field of dependency and with the elderly, while social educators work more with children and young people. But they were aware that this is a purely organizational distinction. They acknowledged that it is often not clear as an issue, either in the case of degrees nor even in social services legislation, and that ultimately in the services where both of these professional profiles coincide, the criteria they agree on are organizational in nature. Additionally, there are services that hire indiscriminately and mainly take into account the person's skills levels, and not so much what kind of degree they have:

But it's true, I have to say, that it's an operational definition, so to speak... but, well, it works.

They also discussed recognition for the profession in organizations with both professionals and volunteers. The employers thought that social work professionals need to know how to differentiate themselves from volunteers, defend their role and say why a social worker is needed.

Discussion

The data obtained in this study reveal three key areas for discussion. First of all, regarding the usefulness of training, it should be noted that employers often hire a qualified social worker as a legal requirement, since certain jobs in the social intervention sector are regulated and can only be done by certain professionals. However, different social intervention professionals may be hired when this specific requirement does not exist. Specific qualifications are less relevant and professionals with various social intervention profiles are recruited, namely those of social worker, social educator, psychologist, pedagogue, social integrator, and socio-cultural worker, but sometimes combined with other social and humanities backgrounds such as sociology, philosophy, law or criminology. In these situations, the choice of the person hired is not so much related to their degree, but has more to do with previous experience, often through internships carried out as part of a university course, experience in associations or voluntary work in that organization or in organizations in the same sector. Also, in these situations, the cost of hiring is another element that stands out in the study, so that when there is no specific degree requirement, some graduates are hired for posts in lower professional categories but with responsibilities and tasks typical of those of a university graduate. For employers, the value of training is relative, which is demonstrated, for example, by their indifference towards which university graduates attended or by practical experience being prioritized over training when recruiting.

This diversification leads to the value of the analytical, reflective and critical abilities of graduates being minimized and their losing their distinctiveness during recruitment. In Spain, the transition from the diploma qualification to the degree that stemmed from the Bologna Process made a

social work degree equal to those of other scientific disciplines and also led to an increase in the study of cognitive and instrumental skills as part of the degree course, thus favouring the development of social intervention theory and increased knowledge of research methodology and critical analysis. The graduates in the focus group deemed this theoretical training to be relevant to professional practice. They valued these skills positively in terms of personal growth and social interpretation when working. They considered that critical analysis and the need to be rigorous in what they say are very beneficial in professional practice. Employers also valued these skills positively, but did not know how to assess them, which has caused them to tend to give preference to technical management skills and institutional knowledge. Employers demand better instrumental skills. This situation generates at least three elements for debate: (i) it demonstrates the need for a greater consensus (and dialogue) between academia and employers regarding the training needs of social workers, in which theoretical knowledge is balanced with the demands of the labour market; (ii) it shows that specific value needs to be given to the cognitive and instrumental skills that lead to professionals' critical and analytical skills; that is, it shows that employers and graduates should accept that social intervention professionals need to have analytical, research, and critical skills - these types of skills being fundamental for the growth of the discipline and for encouraging the structuring of social intervention based on reflection and methodological rigour; (iii) and, with regards to the perception of graduates' lack of basic knowledge, such as writing a social report correctly, it must be verified whether difficulties lie in the recent graduates themselves or, as pointed out by Caparrós et al (2017), in the need for systematization of the discipline to allow for better knowledge transfer and a better connection between theory and practice.

Secondly, it should be noted that the aspects where statistical and discursive significance between expectations and satisfaction was found to be greater are those that had previously been considered difficult to evaluate or were not taken into account when the candidate was chosen. This is the case with the ability to analyse complex situations. In the same vein, some of those elements that are highly valued in the academic environment have no value in the recruitment of new professionals, as is the case with international experience or knowledge of languages. Again, we find that those skills that are considered important academically tend to have little impact on employers' expectations, unless they work with migrants.

How new professionals manage their emotions is of major concern to employers. They see this as something that cannot be solved, when in reality the management of emotions is also something that is learnt not only through theoretical knowledge but also through professional experience. This shows employers' lack of knowledge regarding the resources that social work has as a theoretical-practical discipline, such as supervision, as well as their ignorance of recommendations made by various studies (Ionescu and Neagoe, 2019; Minzhanow et al, 2016). Improving the relationship between employers and social work trainers not only serves to negotiate training needs but can also help generate spaces for the exchange of good practices and the implementation of innovative actions that can improve social intervention. At the same time, the satisfaction of graduates' expectations clashes with the reality of professional practice, as they often consider that professional practice lacks real social work due to the administrative burden in which they feel they are immersed.

Conclusions

A recurring theme in social work is the appeal for dialogue between the professional and academic environments. However, this study reveals not only a need for dialogue, but, above all, for mutual recognition. This is why measures are needed to enable trainers to learn about labour market trends, but also to help employers stay up to date on the theoretical and methodological discussions that engage the academic social work environment. Employers must acknowledge the practical value of the theoretical knowledge addressed during the training period.

The results of this study coincide with those of the work conducted by Bates et al (2010), where a significant portion of students stated that they did not feel prepared in instrumental areas of social work practice. The employers we worked with strongly agreed with this opinion. Beyond the fact that it may be very useful for social work graduates to finish their studies with a good command of communication, assessment, interview and writing techniques, it must be acknowledged that the ideal environment to put these techniques into practice is in the workplace, this being the context where solid, applied mastery of them can be achieved. It is therefore important to find real practice spaces that permit the rehearsal and consolidation of this technical training. Social worker training must include excellent theoretical training that gives meaning to the selection and application of these techniques and goes beyond technical training. This is what makes Barbosa's (2018) reflection so interesting, since it shows that although specialized technical training makes training competitive in the labour market, it can also neglect the development of skills essential for democratic health and a constructive approach to the world's current problems. There can be no doubt that this more conceptual and reflective formative dimension must be included in university training, because it is more difficult to achieve solely in the context of professional practice.

The results of this study show that university qualifications are not as relevant for employers as experience. The academic environment must provide students not only with theoretical knowledge, but also experience that brings them closer to professional practice. This generates a tension between theoretical training and practice in social work studies. However, it is a tension that can be resolved through curriculum design, as well as other actions, such as links with volunteer offices, collaboration with associations and the organization of events aimed at professionals, employers and students.

One final element open for debate is the role played by other stakeholders, such as professional associations or the users of social work services. Recently, several studies have emphasized the active role that users should take when benefitting from services (Beresford, 2019). With regard to the hiring of intervention professionals, not only the professionals' academic training and demands should be taken into account, but also the demands of users. This reveals the need for more longitudinal studies to examine the links between preparation, career plans and retention (Moriarty et al, 2011). Discussions in recent years have placed an emphasis on users as legitimate participating agents in institutions; this should also apply to recruitment. Thus, although it has not formed part of this research, the role of service users - as legitimate agents with their own interests - must also be unequivocally incorporated within this dialogue.

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