

# **BUILDING A SOCIAL EDUCATION CURRICULUM BASED ON PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCIES. THE EXPERIENCE OF UNIVERSITY OF GIRONA <sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

*This article describes the process of adapting Social Education studies to the European Higher Education Area undertaken by a team of the teaching staff at the University of Girona (Spain). The aim of the experience is to build a curriculum based on the competencies recognized as such by professionals in the field of social education in our region. The article specifies the development of the various phases, each involving the active participation of professionals and teaching staff from the universities. To conclude, main characteristics of the curriculum are highlighted.*

## **Introduction**

The University of Girona, like all other European Universities, is making steady progress in the process of transformation leading to the construction of the European Higher Education Area, first put forward in the Sorbonne Declaration and then further developed in the Bologna Process, the Prague Communiqué and the Lisbon Strategy.

Social Education studies in Spain have a relatively short history. In 1991, legislation was enacted to establish official degree courses in Social Education in Spain. The Bachelor of Social Education course at the University of Girona (UdG) began in the academic year 1993-94, with the first graduates entering the job market in 1996. In the fifteen years since it began, a stable nucleus of teachers has been consolidated who have implemented various improvements relating to the professional placement, the organisation of innovative didactic experiences interrelating theory and practice and interdisciplinary work.

At the gateway to European convergence, the challenge is to adapt the training given to future social educators to the directives of the European Higher Education Area by *building a curriculum based on those competencies that are recognised as fundamental by the professionals working in the education sector*

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*in our region and responding in this way to the requirements of educational practice arising in the main workplaces of the teaching community.*

The study presented in this article has been carried out with the following objectives:

1. Identify and prioritize those competencies of social educators which will have to be developed in subsequent degree course.
2. Analyze the competencies and break them down into their main components (knowledge, skills, attitudes), in order to facilitate the establishment of methodologies and learning strategies.
3. Design block content on a modular structure aimed at developing the prioritised competencies.

The study was carried out in 4 phases:

- Phase 1: Defining the process of entry into the job market by social education graduates in our region. Careers, characteristics and implications for training (2005 - 2006)
- Phase 2: Defining the professional competencies of social educators (October to December, 2006).
- Phase 3. Analysing the professional competencies of social educators: identifying the components of these competencies (January to April, 2007).
- Phase 4: Drawing up the proposals for the basic approaches of the degree in Social Education (April to November, 2007).

### **Procedure followed in the design of a curriculum based on professional competencies**

In this section special emphasis on the last two phases will be made.

#### **Phase 1: Defining the process of entry into the job market by social education graduates in our region. Careers, characteristics and implications for training (2005 - 2006)**

A wide and profound knowledge of the social realities in our region, and of the parameters that currently shape the professional sector, are essential reference points for the training activities that will help graduates to respond better to the needs of social educational intervention and, in this way, enable them to contribute to improving the quality of this intervention offered by the Social Education Services in our region.

In 2005, we began a study into the job situation of Social Education graduates for the period between 1993 and 2005. The results of this study confirmed that, in the social education sector in our region, there is excellent career potential for Social Education graduates: job opportunities are high, as is job mobility within the sector. The *most common areas of work*, the *characteristics of the post* (working conditions, job mobility, and functions of educators in the workplace) and *professional recognition* for social educators (Fullana *et al*, to be published) were identified.

This study provided us with significant information on the professional realities of social educators, which in turn allowed us to identify the first courses of action in terms of training.

- **Phase 2: Defining the professional competencies of social educators (October to December, 2006).**

In order to shape the training objectives into subsequent programmes for the Social Education degree, a greater knowledge of the professional competencies was needed.

Not only is it difficult to define what exactly a professional competency is, it is also difficult to identify these professional competencies in a specific profession. In a field as diverse and heterogeneous as social education, identifying competencies becomes highly complex. Our study and its methodological approach were based on the following two considerations:

- Professional competencies cannot be determined without bearing in mind the opinions, based on professional experience, of educators currently working in the field. That is to say, full participation by professionals must be sought in approaching the problem.
- Agreement among professionals on what the competencies are can help us to identify which ones - despite the diversity in the field of social education - are essential or central and, therefore, must be incorporated into their professional training.

To carry out this study, the Delphi method was chosen. This method allows analysing the state of opinions on a specific theme, relying on the opinion of a group of people considered to be experts on that theme. This method also allows each expert to give their opinion independently of the opinions of the others, while it allows them to arrive at a certain degree of agreement on some points, and to agree on which aspects or dimensions of the problem are important and which are secondary. We based our study on the competencies proposed in the governmental document describing the legislation governing the university degree in Social Education & Pedagogy - *Libro Blanco del título de grado en Pedagogía y Educación Social*' (ANECA)<sup>3</sup> and applied this methodology in two rounds of questionnaires. This allowed us to come up with an initial list of competencies which was analysed by the teaching staff and led to the following list as our starting point:

<b>TRANSVERSAL COMPETENCIES</b>
<b>Operational</b>
1. Analysing and synthesising written information
2. Organizing and planning commitment to activities

<sup>3</sup> This document is an essential reference for the degree qualification, drawn up by representatives of various Spanish universities with the participation also of agents from the professional sector. This document proposes a list of competencies that are attributed to social educators in the whole of Spain.

3. Communicating orally and in writing with skill and fluency in the language of the professional environment
4. Communicating in a foreign language
5. Using IT and audiovisual media and resources in a learning and professional context
6. Information management
7. Problem solving and decision making in the area of professional intervention
<b>Interpersonal</b>
8. Critical analysis of one's own intervention and activity and that of other professionals
9. Working in groups at different levels and with other professionals and institutions related to educational intervention
10. Recognising diversity in all areas (social, cultural, psychological, etc.)
11. Establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships
12. Keeping an ethical commitment to the social educational intervention
<b>Systematic</b>
13. Autonomous lifelong learning
14. Adapting to new situations
15. Facing professional situations creatively
16. Leading groups, initiatives, projects and professional teams
17. Having a commitment to professional identity
18. Identifying and analysing specific personal, family and social situations
19. Managing processes of participation and community action
<b>PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCIES</b>
20. Intervening in situations of family and social crisis
21. Intervening in situations of social exclusion and discrimination
22. Organising and managing social education projects and services
23. Designing programmes and strategies for social education intervention
24. Applying programmes and strategies for social education intervention
25. Evaluating programmes and strategies for social education intervention in various areas of work
26. Collaborating in the development of research projects into the social and institutional environment where the intervention takes place
27. Reading up on and finding information that helps to stay up-to-date and further one's knowledge relating to educational work

**Phase 3. Analysing the professional competencies of social educators: identifying the components of these competencies (January to April, 2007).**

In this phase, the teaching staff analysed each of the competencies identified in Phase 2 and defined the knowledge, skills, attitudes and related values, establishing a consensus among the teaching staff about what each competency represented or signified. The breakdown of each competency would help to subsequently establish the sequencing of the teaching content and the proposals for the most suitable methodologies. This phase was to be carried out via the following sequence of tasks:

1. Analysis of each competency in order to establish the knowledge, skills

and attitudes related to it.

2. *Determining the basic structure of the curriculum.* Some of the elements of the basic structure are given by the definitions of the degree courses according to the state legislation. That is, the degree has to be organised in *four academic years*, to include a *professional placement and a final dissertation*. Along with these, an *undergraduate supervision programme (USP)* was included in the first two years. Previous experience in developing undergraduate supervision programme in the last three years has encouraged opting for the inclusion of a specific programme in the first two years of the course. The aims of the USP, among others, are to establish a stable system of communication between students and lecturers; to develop academic orientation activities for students; to stress the importance of learning transversal competencies related to autonomous learning and to develop the students' capacity for reflection, dialogue, autonomy and conflict resolution within the university, (Pallisera *et al*, 2006).
3. *Allocating the competencies to structural elements.* Initial basic sequencing of the content (knowledge, skills and attitudes) that make up each one of the competencies was carried out. The result of this work is a set of suggestions for the timing and positioning of each structural element (levels, professional placement, final dissertation, undergraduate supervision programme) where each component of the competencies can be worked on. Table 1 shows, as an example, the work carried out in a particular competency, (in this case "*problem solving and decision making in the professional environment*"). The first column indicates the different academic years; The second column includes the structural elements -notice that Year 3 includes Professional placement 3 (the professional placement scheduled for Year 3) and Year 4 also includes Teaching Modules and Professional placement 4. The components of the competency are assigned to the various scheduled structural elements.
4. *Analysing the competencies assigned to each academic year, the USP and the professional placement, in order to establish synergies among the different contents.* In this phase, three work groups working in parallel in a coordinated way that favoured information transfer were established. The first group was focused on analysing each academic year and defining specific teaching modules, the second group focused its activity on analysing the professional placement and the third group analyzed and defined the USP.

Academic year	Structural elements	7. <i>Problem solving and decision making in the professional environment</i>		
		Knowledge	Skills	Attitudes and values
1 <sup>st</sup> Year	Teaching Modules	Techniques and strategies for group dynamics.	Communication skills.	Listening and empathy. Respecting people's points of view.
	USP 1			Listening and empathy. Respecting people's points of view. Interest in cooperating with people. Disposition towards non-violent resolution of conflicts.
2 <sup>nd</sup> Year	Teaching Modules			
	USP 2			Listening and empathy. Respecting people's points of view.

				Interest in cooperating with people. Disposition towards non-violent resolution of conflicts.
<b>3<sup>rd</sup> Year</b>	Teaching Modules	Conflicts: what they are, types and areas of conflict. Prevention of conflict. Strategies for conflict resolution. Mediation, conciliation, arbitration.	Interpersonal relationship skills. Capacity for dialogue. Using strategies of group dynamics for resolving conflicts.	
	<b>Professional placement 3</b>		Communication skills. Interpersonal relationship skills. Capacity for dialogue. Using strategies of group dynamics for resolving conflicts. Strategies for negotiation and obtaining agreements.	Listening and empathy. Respecting people's points of view. Interest in cooperating with people. Disposition towards non-violent resolution of conflicts.
<b>4<sup>th</sup> Year</b>	Teaching Modules	Models for mediation and conflict management. Mediation. Types of mediation and management in the social education sector. Family mediation. Intercultural, school and community mediation. Negotiation strategies. Decision making strategies.	Strategies for negotiation and obtaining agreements.	
	<b>Professional placement 4</b>		Communication skills. Interpersonal relationship skills. Capacity for dialogue. Using strategies of group dynamics for resolving conflicts. Strategies for negotiation and obtaining agreements.	Listening and empathy. Respecting people's points of view. Interest in cooperating with people. Disposition towards non-violent resolution of conflicts.
	<b>Final dissertation</b>			

Table 1. *Example of the distribution of the components of a particular competency in the learning blocks scheduled in the degree course.*

#### **Phase 4: Drawing up the proposals for basic orientation of the degree in Social Education (April to November, 2007)**

Once the framework document was established with all the competencies distributed throughout all structural elements, the last phase of our work was undertaken. Phase 4 consisted of designing the foundation or basic structure of the degree. In order to arrive at a definitive proposal, directives established in Spanish legislation concerning university degrees (pending approval)<sup>4</sup> had to be followed. These directives establish that: the degree course consists of 240 credits distributed over four academic years; a professional placement, with a maximum of 60 credits in total, has to be taken in the last two academic years of the course; a final dissertation with a maximum of 60 credits has to be presented, and; in the first two academic years of the course the curriculum has to include at least 60 credits from courses taken in related academic fields, that is, in the Social Sciences - in our

<sup>4</sup>*Proyecto de Real Decreto* (Royal Decree in project) issued by the State Council in which is established the regulations governing official university courses

case psychology, anthropology, sociology, law, information and communication technologies and English language.

From the work carried out thus far, a proposed curriculum based on the following decisions was established.

1. To establish modules integrating contents that will increase the possibility of interdisciplinary treatment. The modules are preferably sequential, of variable duration, although, in general, following a pattern of 12 credits per module.
2. To maximise USP as the methodological approach that facilitates the learning of the transversal competencies. These are involved, above all, in learning the attitudes which are of vital importance in the professional life of social educators. In the first and second years, two yearly modules that deal with this theme are proposed.
3. To propose a professional placement module of 12 credits in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year and a 30-credit professional placement in the 4<sup>th</sup> year, both of which shall be carried out intensively. The professional placement centres shall be distributed according to the complexity of the intervention in these two years.
4. To focus, in the first two years, on basic, foundation studies, establishing obligatory modules (60 credits). The optional courses shall focus on knowledge that will allow students to delve deeper into the areas of intervention, in the last two years of their training.

Next a scheme of the curriculum design is presented:

1<sup>st</sup> Academic Year

<p><b>Social educators and socioeducational intervention. (12 credits)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Principal areas and sectors of intervention for social education.</li> <li>• Analysis and reflection on social reality.</li> <li>• Critical analysis of information.</li> <li>• Evolution and characteristics of social structures.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Contemporary educational thought (6 credits)</b></p> <p><b>Education psychology in informal contexts (6 credits)</b></p>	<p><b>Studying the contact cultures (6 credits)</b></p> <p><b>Basic psychology for intervention in at different stages throughout life (6 credits)</b></p>	<p><b>Basic intervention strategies (12 credits)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Concept of community, social networks, community development.</li> <li>• Analysis of social reality and social diagnosis. Techniques and resources for designing social programmes.</li> <li>• Group dynamics.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Self study by university student 1 (6 credits) (Undergraduate Supervision Program 1)</b>          The university: structure, services, organisation. The Faculty of Education and Psychology: courses, how it works. Student participation.          Self study strategies. Optimizing learning. Responsibility for your own learning, motivation for improvement.</p>			

Management and organisation of work in groups. Empathy.

**Information and Communication Technologies ITC (6 credits.)**

Communicative languages. Applications (didactic, organisational and administrative) of these technologies in different social education environments.

The information society and the social, cultural and economic repercussions. Finding information using ITC. Applying criteria for selecting suitable information. Synthesising, analysing, choosing and communicating information.

**2<sup>nd</sup> Academic Year**

<p><b>Social Policy and legislation applied to social education collectives (6 credits.)</b></p> <p><b>Sociology (6 credits)</b></p>	<p><b>Intervention in the context of daily life (12 credits)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family &amp; socioeducational intervention. The family as a context for development.</li> <li>• Education/Training and work as a context for development.</li> <li>• Elements that are possible risk factors in educational/training or work environments.</li> <li>• Free time and leisure as a context for development.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Teamwork, leadership &amp; professional commitment (12 credits)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interdisciplinary and interprofessional work: organisational models. Teamwork skills and attitudes. Work in networks.</li> <li>• Ethics and deontology for the social educator. Differences and concordance of one's own morality with legislation and basic rules.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Programme design as a tool for socio-educational intervention (12 credits.)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Designing programmes applied to collectives intervening in social education.</li> <li>• Current models of socioeducational intervention.</li> <li>• Recognition of various programmes and strategies for socioeducational intervention.</li> <li>• Characteristics of recipients of resources.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Self study by university student 2 (6 credits.) (Undergraduate Supervision Program 2)</b></p> <p>Communication: Interpersonal relationship skills and capacity for dialogue. Active listening and empathy. Managing emotions. Disposition towards non-violent resolution of conflicts. Change and innovation as something normal and healthy.</p> <p><b>English (6 credits.)</b></p>			

**3<sup>rd</sup> Academic Year**

<p><b>Organisation and management of projects, programmes and services. (12 credits)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Organisation and management of socioeducational projects. Dealing with conflict in organisations. Coordinating meetings and work groups. Leadership.</li> <li>• Evaluating socioeducational projects, programmes and services.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Intervention in processes of exclusion and discrimination (12 credits)</b></p>	<p><b>Professional placement 3 (12 credits)</b></p> <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analysis of professional</li> </ul>	<p><b>Optional 1 (6 credits)<sup>5</sup></b></p>
	<p><b>Professional identity and interpersonal relationships. (12 credits)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mediation, conciliation. Educational and communicative relations.</li> </ul>		<p><b>Optional 2 (6 credits)</b></p>

<sup>5</sup> Optional courses should be focused on specific areas of intervention that will enable the student to gain a deeper knowledge of the strategies of socioeducational action on a particular speciality, either in terms of the field or environment of the intervention or in terms of the collective that works in that field.

		practice. Professional identity. Managing emotions.	
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#### 4<sup>th</sup> Academic Year

Professional placement: 30 credits. (24 for the professional placement + 6 for the analysis and reflection on educative practice)	End of degree project (6 credits)
	Opt. 3 (6 credits)
	Opt. 4 (6 credits)
	Opt. 5 (6 credits)
	Opt. 6 (6 credits)

## Conclusions

The work procedure followed has enabled us to design a curriculum for the degree in Social Education built on professional competencies, providing a body of conceptual knowledge and also bears in mind skills, attitudes and values based on the capabilities that social educators need in their professional life.

Attention to the students is strengthened via the undergraduate supervision programme established in the first two academic years, while in the final two years of the course more emphasis is placed on the professional placement.

The professional placement and the undergraduate supervision programme represent the strong points of our training project, vital elements for working on the transversal competencies and the content relating to values and attitudes, crucial elements for the social educators of the future.

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