

The Way of Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training in Latvia: 2020-2025

Dr. Liesma Ose's brief note reflects on three interconnected processes in social work macro-practice between 2020 and 2025: updating national standards for the social work profession, evaluating the quality of social work education, and translating and mainstreaming the Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training.

Using Momentum: Personal Angle

Social work educators often focus on proper training for micro-practice, a common trend that few questions. However, I have always had doubts. My idea of translating the Global Standards stemmed from my experience in the NGO sector, where I worked for 11 years to make democracy in Latvia agile and raise awareness about Human Rights, particularly for marginalized populations like Roma, LGBTIQ+ persons, migrants, and ethnic minorities. Balancing two jobs—teaching Social Work at the Higher School of Social Work and Social Pedagogy "Attistiba" (Development in English) and activism at Soros Foundation – Latvia—I merged my diverse professional roles into a "social change agent." This is how I perceive social workers and strive to be one myself. Later, I had the privilege of working for the government in the Ministry of Education and Science and the Ministry of Welfare, where I focused on professional development programs for in-service social workers and advancing social work education in Latvia. These challenging and exclusive duties were immensely fulfilling.

Factual Storyline

In summer 2020, the update of the social work profession standard coincided with the publication of the Global Standards by IASSW and IFSW. The Latvian updated standard for social work profession was nearly finalized, but it was fortunate that two university lecturers in the working group were familiar with the Global Standards and proactively incorporated their principles into the social work bachelor and master study programs.

The standards for the social work profession were successfully designed, reflecting a modern understanding of social work practice. They harmonize with the global definition of social work, structure the three levels of social work practice, and emphasize professional ethics, research, and competence development. These standards serve as a basis for developing social work studies and organizing the study process. New highlights include tasks for community social workers, socio-pedagogical work, and the distinct role of the social worker-client advocate.

While working at the Ministry of Welfare, I supervised a study on the quality assessment of social work study programs at Latvian universities. This study aimed to provide evidence-based quantitative and qualitative information on the quality of social work education. It covered all social work education programs at six universities and two colleges, with 457 respondents. The evaluation found that universities and colleges use various study methods, including innovative and digitally based methods. However, there is a lack of socio-psychological training in communication and cooperation skills, reflecting superficial skills in these components of professional social work practice. Higher education institutions face human resources problems in providing quality theory and practice, insufficient knowledge in developing social work theories and methods, and community social work.

There are difficulties in attracting lecturers, both in terms of formal staff requirements and teaching qualifications and practical experience. Universities struggle to organize internships and develop students' skills due to a lack of qualified, motivated internship supervisors and unclear aims and objectives of internships. Bachelor study programs often lack key courses that develop skills needed in the labor market, such as social work with families, supervision in social work, social problems, and community social work.

In my address at the presentation of the evaluation study, I emphasized that the Latvian social work education community must update study program content for regular accreditation, considering the study's findings and incorporating Global Standards principles. I translated the standards in summer 2021, with editorial suggestions from my colleague, social worker Maija Muceniece.

In my opinion, overcoming the fragmentation of education and practice was crucial by preparing students to understand the interconnectedness of practice at all levels—individual, family, group, organization, community, etc. Equal cognitive and affective development of students in the study process is essential, ensuring they become critical, ethical, and competent practitioners. Basic knowledge, processes, values, and skills of the profession must be applied flexibly in specific contexts in real-life situations. Both social work student-interns and graduates should use evidence-based practice methods that promote human dignity and respect.

Since Autumn Semester of 2021, I have worked independently to realize these ideals. In the Bachelor of Social Work program at the University of Latvia, I teach Social Entrepreneurship and Human Rights Principles in Social Work, informing students about the current approach to human rights issues reflected in the Global Standards. Since 2024, I have also taught Social Gerontology, Volunteer Management, Social Work Project Management, Leadership Theories and Diversity Management, and Community Social Work.

Current Status

The theme of Global Standards "Social Work in Context" is well-developed in all bachelor programs of social work in Latvia (University of Latvia, Riga Stradiņš University, RTU Rezekne, and Riga Technical University Liepāja Academy). Students learn how political, social law, cultural, and historical trends have influenced social work in their first and second years. The teaching and

learning of skills and competencies relevant to the Global Standards theme "Social Work in Practice" are still developing. Students learn about bio-psycho-social human development, developing healthy and non-dominating relationships in social work practice, integrating theory, ethics, research, and knowledge, and practical skills in assessment, intervention, and evaluation.

In line with Global Standards, advanced internships have developed over the last two years. Permanent teams of competent internship supervisors have been established, representing local government social services agencies and non-governmental organizations. There is consistent and thorough preparation for internships, support during internships, and regular feedback to student interns. The final common events of internship evaluation are open and mutually enriching for students.

Students are informed about assessment, course objectives and structure, learning outcomes, attendance, examination procedures, and appeal procedures. The learning process provides opportunities to develop awareness of personal and cultural values, beliefs, traditions, and prejudices or predispositions and their impact on their ability to relate to people and work with diverse groups. Students learn social work ethics early in their studies. At the University of Latvia, they create a code of ethics for their study group based on social work values. I emphasize these issues in my study courses, in the context of human diversity.

Both theoretical courses and internships increasingly plan the place and role of service users in the learning process. However, work must continue following the Global Standards call to include the representation of service users' rights, views, and interests and wider communities, including their involvement in designing and implementing study programs. Proactive strategies must be developed to promote service user involvement in all aspects of curriculum design, planning, and delivery, ensuring reasonable adjustments to support service user involvement.

Conclusion

We are in a phase of slow ascent of the profession and the formulation and acquisition of collective professional integrity. After the global economic crisis of 2008-2011, which hit social work professionals hard worldwide, but in Latvia turned them from service planners and providers into benefit organizers, we have recovered, methodologically stronger and more competent, also younger and more energetic. Every year, universities together provide Latvia with about 100 new graduates of social work study programs. However, work is ongoing to fully meet Global Standards requirements, mainly in strengthening human resources and educational work with service users.

I have a dream...

I envision Latvia as a country with strong, diverse, and solidary communities where social workers lead community development processes as compassionate and inclusive leaders, where service users are self-aware, assertive, and supportive of others. Social work lecturers and students work together on research and put the results into practice, fostering a climate of mutual learning in social work education.