

## Wasted opportunity: Trends and changes of social pedagogy in the environment of the Department of Social Education, Faculty of Education, Masaryk University

*Lenka Gulová<sup>a</sup> & Martina Kurowski<sup>b</sup>*

<sup>a,b</sup> Masaryk University, Faculty of Education, Department of Social Education, Poříčí 538/31, 603 00 Brno, Czech Republic, e-mail: <sup>a</sup>gulova@ped.muni.cz, <sup>b</sup>kurowski@ped.muni.cz

Those interested in the field of study of social pedagogy at the Faculty of Education of Masaryk University in Brno have been able to apply since 1998, and since then, these fields, called study programmes today, have undergone a relatively significant transformation. There have been challenges from different eras, and the Department of Social Pedagogy (hereinafter the Department) has tried to tackle these challenges and respond to them responsibly. There have been challenges related to the development of society, to democratic processes, to complex social problems and the associated requirements for new professions, to a new concept of content, and even to forms or methods of teaching. It needs to be said that a very creative team has met at the Department, who has felt the need to remove various basic and introductory courses of so-called traditional subjects (pedagogy, methodology, psychology, leisure pedagogy, social work) from the education of social pedagogues, and to boldly step forward to what the profession of a social pedagogue represents.

A myth has been developing about social pedagogy, a myth unfortunately supported in the academic environment, that states social pedagogy cannot be conceived as an independent field and scientific discipline, but it must be based on various attributes, as there are concerns about the employment of graduates. **This uncertainty in the conception of social pedagogy can be very easily demonstrated by the example of a "wasted opportunity", when part of the Department tried to go against this stream and attempted to create a consecutive compact bachelor's, master's and doctoral studies of social pedagogy, as the Department was not afraid to teach this unique scientific discipline and, at the same time, offer it in a creative format so close to the very essence of social pedagogy.** It is a discipline that can respond to the transformation of society, as expressed in 2004 by the founder of the field at the Faculty of Education at Masaryk University, Milan Přádka, *"In social pedagogy, it is true, more than in any other pedagogical discipline, that its goals change with changes in society at a specific time and in a specific territory."* This definition, therefore, refers to social pedagogy as a living organism, where we look at the social pedagogue as one who partakes in the transformation of the individual and the whole society. His/her preparation requires more attention, receptivity and thoughtfulness about his/her role in today's society, and, thus, greater responsibility for his/her education.

### *The way it came about...*

The first significant changes in the field of study of social pedagogy, which was created rather intuitively in the early years, began in 2016. Study programmes underwent major revisions, such as a reduction of the number of subjects and specializations with a low credit burden, and at the same time, social pedagogy was accredited as a two-subject study. It was offered to those interested in tandem with fields at the Faculty of Social Studies, specifically with environmental studies or social work. The last, and fundamental, change in bachelor's studies took place in 2018, during the transformation of the field of study into a programme. It should be noted that this was a demanding process with endless discussions and negotiations among the staff of the Department, and from the beginning, there were obvious disagreements about the form of the study programme of social

pedagogy. Part of the team was more inclined towards cosmetic changes, while the other part tried to promote more significant innovations of the study programme of social pedagogy as a living organism, capable of absorbing the latest knowledge not only in content, but also in the form and methods of teaching. In the end, an innovated version was created, but there were still certain concessions that were apparent in the final form of the bachelor's study programme.

*What is the core of the innovated bachelor's degree?*

A large part of the subjects has a trans-disciplinary character, where there is a connection of knowledge and significant cooperation between teachers and between teachers and students. The former head of the Department, Lenka Gulová, based on her experience in solving numerous projects with the Department, suggested that the "connecting thread" of the entire study programme would be teamwork; students would create and implement unique projects over three years. This idea was eventually implemented. Throughout the innovated bachelor's degree, students go through the process of creating and implementing their own project plan and systematically work in teams. It is definitely worth noting that this way of working has successfully translated into an online form without any significant problems. During the third semester, students cooperate intensively with each other, also in virtual space, and fulfil the implementation of the project plan as a team. From the first semester, of course, students are engaged in practice, and even in this time of the hardest lockdown, a virtual practice that is creative and followable has managed to be implemented. At present, a virtual practice of a social pedagogue for schools in distance education is being prepared, since the social pedagogue's competencies are in great demand due to the social isolation of children and youth. This experience draws attention to social pedagogy as a discipline with great potential towards various social topics.

When redesigning the study programme, the team decided to offer the programme as major + minor studies, a study plan with both a major and a minor. We welcome combinations with other disciplines which at first sight may not be associated with social pedagogy, but in a deeper consideration of current social connections, prove to be extremely important (law, informatics, economics), etc. In the main study plan, graduates achieve the full qualifications of a social pedagogue, just like any other university major. However, they have a chance to add a minor, and study social pedagogy together with other study programmes.

*Why such excitement about studying a major + a minor?*

Some students of social pedagogy have always looked for further qualifications over the years, and studying parallel studies has proven to be very exhausting. Students may not want to spend years studying one field, but they will want their education to be more flexible not only towards the labour market, but towards the ever-increasing challenges of the growth associated with new professions in areas such as education, leisure time pedagogy, and also social work.

After the demanding process associated with the transformation of the bachelor's studies, the Department faced another great challenge, and that was the formation of the follow-up master's studies in Social Pedagogy. Radim Šíp was appointed the overseer of the study programme, and the Department began preparing for another challenging task. Before the discussion about the form of this study programme could even sufficiently develop, the Dean of the Faculty, Jiří Němec, who is also a member of the Department, stepped in and decided that two study programmes would be created. One of them would be the redesigned Social Pedagogy and the other one would be Leisure Time Pedagogy, first in the form of a proposal and then, after approval, in the form of a follow-up master's degree. Working on these two concepts offered both teams the opportunity to implement their own ideas about the form and content of the study programme. Unfortunately, the proposal for the follow-up master's degree, the Leisure Time Pedagogy, was formed over a relatively long time period, from February to October 2019, and in the end, this plan was not submitted to the Board of Internal Evaluation, because plans for new study programmes at MU were stopped in June 2019.

The follow-up master's degree, the Social Pedagogy programme, on the other hand, was formed in a relatively short time and follows a framework similar to that offered by the bachelor's studies, which is trans-disciplinary and incorporates internationalization, creativity and new trends in education. Innovations also appeared in managing projects, purely in the field of social enterprises. Thus, the follow-up master's degree had great ambitions to significantly follow up on the bachelor's studies, both in the form of major + minor studies, and also by offering subjects that assisted the development of highly creative students.

The study programme represented an innovated concept of studies which were naturally based on the lifetime experience of the department staff that they acquired during the development of theory and practice in connection with their projects. The programme was based on a carefully crafted profile of the graduate, and sought the overall compactness of the entire studies. New projects were created that responded to current trends in social pedagogy and other related fields such as the following: managing projects in social enterprises, social enterprises, mentoring in professional development, communication in difficult life situations, techniques of a social pedagogy worker, professional reflected social pedagogical practice, entrepreneurship in education, environmental education in relation to social pedagogy, social pedagogy in the digital age, etc. Core and specialisation subjects strongly emphasized various areas of social pedagogy in relation to pedagogy, sociology, philosophy, psychology, human rights, environmental studies, digital technologies and other areas and disciplines. The studies provided far more space for social pedagogy itself, which cut across all subjects.

The interconnectedness of subjects was also guaranteed by new teaching methods and approaches, including tandem teaching and short-term (three- to five-day) study internships for students and teachers of the Department with partner organizations. A significant piece of innovation was the concept of written seminar papers, which were to be composed across subjects and were to follow the research and project activities of students. Large space was also given to internationalization (establishing cooperation with foreign partners in the solution of projects and presenting results in English) and teamwork. Adding something novel to the study, students had to create a study and professional portfolio, which was one of the products of their studies. Final state exams were newly conceived; they were to determine not only the knowledge of students, but also their ability to apply theoretical knowledge in practice. So, students would have the opportunity to prove the competence of a social pedagogue. The prepared accreditation of the follow-up master's studies resembled the experience of other current follow-up master's studies, but it appeared far more coherent and more inclined toward social pedagogy itself.

During the evaluation meeting, which took place in June 2019, the programme was highly praised by the evaluator, an expert in the field of social pedagogy from Charles University, but it also encountered a negative opinion from part of the management of the Faculty of Education. Accreditation materials, therefore, underwent a demanding evaluation meeting; the overseer of the study programme had to deal with numerous comments from the Dean of the Faculty, and the study programme was ultimately approved by a majority in the Senate of the Faculty of Education at Masaryk University. Four days before the approval process at the Scientific Council, the Faculty management issued a declaration stating that the study programme was not prepared in accordance with the strategy of the Faculty.

The declaration of the Faculty management classified the follow-up master's degree as a programme that did not seek to fulfil the profiling and qualification framework for the purpose of a social worker. It was, therefore, not responsible for applicants who chose this study programme in order to become professionals in social work. Furthermore, the declaration of the Faculty management stated that the presented programme deviated significantly from the contemporary concept of the field of Social Pedagogy, which has a primarily pedagogical focus that prepares students to work with disadvantaged groups in schools and social institutions, or in the non-profit sector. The newly proposed concept emphasized social entrepreneurship and environmental issues, and significantly shifted the prospective employment of graduates towards managerial and project positions. The Faculty management considered the composition of the subjects and their content as inadequate in relation

to the work for which the Faculty of Education prepares graduates. They used the subject "Pedagogy in the digital era" as their proof, criticizing it for being too broad, containing issues such as: Is chemotaxis a manifestation of intelligence? or What is the essence of techno-humanity?

As is apparent from the description of events, at the end of 2019, the transformation of the master's degree into the Social Pedagogy programme was interrupted during the defence at the Scientific Council. According to the opinion of the implementation team that created the accreditation programme, **there was a cessation of the development of the study programme Social Pedagogy which, in this sense, would follow up on all the positive things that had happened within social pedagogy in all departments. From our point of view the opportunity to conceive the study programme of Social Pedagogy without any compromises and in accordance with current trends was wasted.** The completely prepared study programme was not used and can be offered with all the know-how to those potentially interested in it. The transformation of the master's degree was subsequently taken over by the Dean of the Faculty, Jiří Němec. At present, the master's study programme is undergoing an accreditation process, where the field of study is being transferred into a single-subject study plan, and the first applicants for the studies could start in 2022.

Another wasted opportunity associated with trends in social pedagogy is the fact that part of the Department's team from 2019 to 2020, under the leadership of Radim Šíp and Denisa Denglerová, participated in an innovating and progressive concept of the Social Pedagogy doctoral study programme. This prepared concept of the doctoral studies of Social Pedagogy was created in cooperation with various Czech and foreign experts, and despite its interesting concept that responded to trends in the design of doctoral studies, it was also not used. The programme was not created as a set of subjects aimed at verifying the "knowledge" of doctoral students, but as a sovereign concept involving doctoral students as future researchers who would be able to perform excellent scientific work in Czech and foreign teams over time. As well as the follow-up master's degree accreditation, this concept of doctoral studies is also available to those potentially interested in it.

The follow-up master's degree was rejected by the Faculty management, and the doctoral study programme could not be implemented as it related to a departure of the programme overseer to another workplace. Both programmes could be discussed more widely and could be an inspiration for other workplaces where study programmes of social pedagogy are being developed. The team of implementers believe that both programmes correspond with current trends, and at the same, they have a timeless character which is also appreciated by students of social pedagogy, the same students whose opinions served as one of the inspirations for the creators of the accreditation.

Regarding the current situation in the doctoral studies of Social Pedagogy at the Faculty of Education at Masaryk University, Dušan Klapko was entrusted with the transformation of the Czech and English variants. It needs to be said that this is a great responsibility regarding the content and form of this doctoral study programme, which is the only one in the Czech Republic.

*We perceive the potential of social pedagogy as multi-layered and constantly evolving. It is visible how big a role universities play in its development, where social pedagogues are educated, and social pedagogy is shaped as a scientific discipline and profession. Hence, the question arises; can these workplaces use this potential and turn it into a benefit for society as a whole and humanity in general? Will these workplaces associated with non-traditional fields such as social pedagogy receive support from the management of faculties and universities? Will we continue to be forced to squander opportunities in the development of study programmes?*

"Reflecting this story of wasted opportunities, we have a surprising parallel between the fates of people in difficult life situations and progressive teachers who want to prepare future social educators to succeed in their professions both today and in the future. Both groups get into trouble because they do not fit into the current institutional system, and instead of the leaders asking how we should change the system to meet the challenges of this time, they try to "tame" the others. However, such behaviour is socially irresponsible and short-sighted."



Mgr. Lenka Gulová, Ph.D. is social pedagogue, guarantor of the bachelor's study program Social Pedagogy and Leisure time at the Faculty of Education, Masaryk University, assistant professor and researcher of Czech and international projects. She deals with subjects related to social pedagogy, social work, gerontology, andragogy and multicultural education. Her research focuses on the areas of inclusion in the school and society.



Mgr. et Mgr. Martina Kurowski, Ph.D. is social pedagogue, assistant professor and organizer of community projects. Within the field of research, she is interested in the topics of inclusion of children from socially disadvantaged environments, implementation of social pedagogues in schools and the problematics of diversity in society. At the Department of Social Pedagogy (Faculty of Education, Masaryk University) she teaches intercultural education, project processes and non-hierarchical communication.