

Core Curriculum for Social Work Studies
A treatise by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Soziale Arbeit (DSGA / German Association for Social Work)ⁱ

I Preliminary remarks

Social work became established within the Federal Republic of Germany in the 1970s, as a result of the country's reform of higher education and, in particular, the associated creation of the Universities of Applied Sciences (Fachhochschulen). Its evolution continued to pick up steam throughout the 1990s, along a scientific and professional foundation of social work and the development of reflexive and actively intervening approaches of social work. Today, the demand for places on study courses continues to be as high as the demand for graduates of such courses. More recently, three significant events paved the way for further reforms of social work-based study programmes, and have served to create a sound foundation for teaching and research within this field. These were the theses put forward in 2000 by the German Council of Science and Humanities (Wissenschaftsrat)ⁱⁱ on the future development of Germany's scientific system, the recognition of social work as an independent scientific subject in 2001 by the German Rectors' Conference (Hochschulrektorenkonferenz)ⁱⁱⁱ and The Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the States in the Federal Republic of Germany (Kultusministerkonferenz)^{iv}, and the introduction in the same year of Bachelor's and Master's degree programmes in Germany.

Nevertheless, structural restrictions continue to limit both social work degree programmes and the further scientific development of the subject. For example, there is still no uniform higher education system in place that facilitates direct, consecutive progression from a basic degree in social work to a PhD programme – although this area has seen some development in recent years. The lack of such a system is especially apparent in a comparison of Germany with other countries, in many of which the majority of social work degree programmes are well established within universities. From this perspective, the integration of social work sciences into the German-speaking countries' tertiary education system appears to have fallen behind.

Nonetheless, these countries have also seen remarkable developments within social work-related teaching and research at their Universities and Universities of Applied Sciences over the past 40 years. And these developments, which have occurred primarily within social work and social work science, have been an important source of insights and momentum.

The Core Curriculum as a standard syllabus for teaching the scientific foundations of social work was developed and published in response to the degree diversification prompted by the Bologna reform.^v It is intended to serve as a framework, broadly regulating the study content covered by social work degree programmes.

The Core Curriculum is also intended to serve as a bridge to the Qualification Framework (Qualifikationsrahmen Soziale Arbeit) set forth by the Fachbereichstag Soziale Arbeit^{vi}, an alternative framework that caters to various competence levels of study. The Core Curriculum makes no qualitative differences between the various levels of study (bachelor's degrees, master's degrees, PhDs); it simply sets forth the central content to be covered by social work degree programmes. The DSGA is however clear on the fact that bachelor's degrees should cover the fundamentals of social work while master's degrees should delve into the subject in more depth. PhD programmes in turn should deepen the competences in analysing and comparing theories, methods and skills described in the Core Curriculum.

The Core Curriculum makes no recommendations with regard to the scope of the different degree programmes (number of semesters or trimesters), to the weighting of the individual modules (scope, teaching hours, awarding of ECTS points), to connecting social work study with social work practice (content, scope and location of projects/internships/practical study semesters in Germany or abroad), or to course work and examinations (type, amount, weighting, etc.). It also does not express any preferences with regard to specific theoretical, methodological or research approaches. It seeks, on the one hand, to give universities sufficient leeway to independently design individual course profiles and, on the other hand, to bind them to mandatory minimum standards as regards ensuring progression routes through different levels of social work study (undergraduate and postgraduate degrees).

On the whole, the scientific qualification process is designed to instil in students an academic mindset that enables them to critically reflect on the object of their work and on their role within the process of perceiving, explaining and acting. This is why, in social work study programmes, the training of self-reflective and reflexive competencies must always take precedence over the imparting or accumulation of knowledge.

In creating the Core Curriculum, the DSGA is seeking neither to canonise specific contents, theories or methods, nor to limit the variety of approaches, whether theoretical or practical, by which their subjects are taught. On the contrary, a Core Curriculum must allow for flexibility, vitality and development. It cannot therefore focus only on specific approaches and theoretical perspectives, but rather must ensure plurality in terms of how things are observed, evaluated and processed.

II Guidelines and principles

The DSGA sees social work as both an academic discipline and a profession, with both manifestations based on the theories and research on the one hand and self-reflexive practice on the other. The manifold traits of each need to converge to contribute continually to the field's ongoing evolution.

The Core Curriculum, in keeping with this definition, is based on the following guidelines and principles:

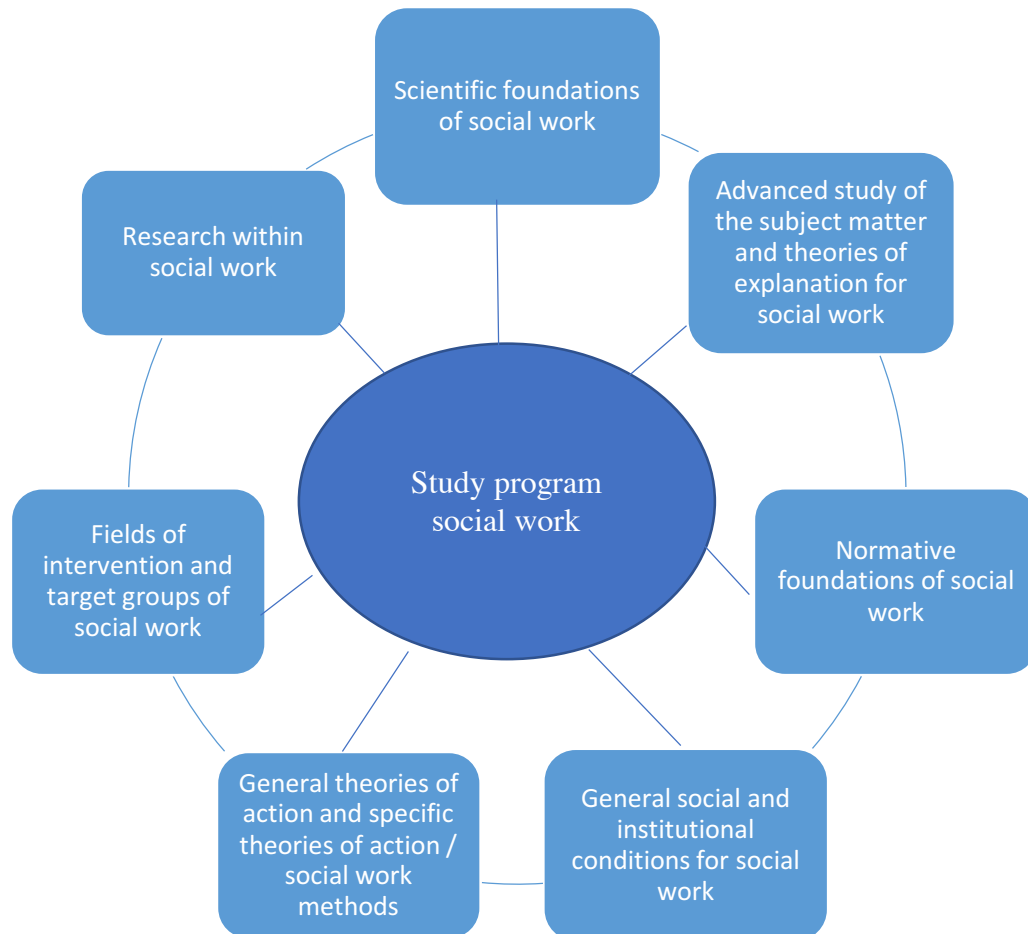
- The Core Curriculum shall provide an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary curriculum structure rigidly geared towards promoting the fundamental object of social work, which is to tackle and to prevent social problems that appear as unequal opportunities in life and in terms of participation in society, insufficient access to education, health, employment, income, social relations and other socially important resources.
- The Core Curriculum shall incorporate the many varied theoretical and action theory-based traditions from across the world, and shall be based on extensive research into socially relevant issues, taking into account both contextual and transcontextual aspects.
- The Core Curriculum shall promote a general understanding of what the social work profession is, namely a profession that – by using both direct means such as education and qualification measures, measures to ensure subsistence, and social support and self-help measures, and by using indirect means such as socio-political intervention, the management of social organisations, individual, family and group support work, and socio-spatial methods – supports people affected by social problems. This support consists in helping people to develop their own approaches, models, and ways of life and to analyse and draw attention to those social structures and dynamics that are at the root of the problems they experience.
- The Core Curriculum shall provide an academic structure that allows students of social work to progress from Bachelor's degrees through to Master's degrees and on to PhDs.

III Study areas

A Core Curriculum can only define the general content of degree programmes. Our Core Curriculum differentiates this content into certain study areas. The task of further differentiating these study areas according to the specific theoretical, methodological and research approaches applied by the respective university, and of connecting academic components with practical components, is to be performed at the professional decision of the university and its teaching staff. The curricular structure proposed here assumes that social work, as a discipline and a profession, is based on descriptions, explanations, evaluations and procedures that become relevant in specific social and organisational environments and in concrete problem situations and fields of practice. Moreover, as a profession, social work must establish distance of relative autonomy between its work and the expectations both of the social institutions in which it is provided and of the addressees of social services. Key to gain such professional distance are a scientific basis and a professional code of ethics. The contents of corresponding social work degree programmes should therefore cover the following areas:

- Study area “The scientific foundations of social work”
- Study area “Advanced study of the subject matter and theories of explanation for social work”

- Study area “The normative foundations of social work”
- Study area “General societal and institutional conditions for social work”
- Study area “General theories of action and specific theories of action/ social work methods”
- Study area “Fields of intervention and target groups of social work”
- Study area “Research within social work”



IV Content of the Core Curriculum for Social Work Studies

The study areas listed below collectively constitute the minimum standards in terms of the contents to be taught/learned. It needs to be emphasised, in this regard, that all the study areas specified are integral elements of social work science; it is therefore not possible to focus on a selected few only. Beyond this, the curriculum does not seek to standardise different epistemological, object theory-based or action theory-based traditions or approaches. The formulation of its content has been deliberately kept more general so as to allow for the inclusion of various theoretical, ethical and methodological approaches. It is however assumed that, when designing their individual curricula,

universities always ensure that their degree programmes cover the key characteristics both of social work as a discipline and as a profession. The question of what is to be considered a relevant cross-cutting content, for example the systematic inclusion of interculturality, gender or health, is again at the discretion of those professionals planning the respective curriculum, and will depend on context- and university policy-specific particularities.

Study area “The scientific foundations of social work”

This study area deals with the general aspects of both the discipline and the profession. It also covers the intellectual, theoretical and social history of helping and learning, the theoretical foundations of social work, and its professionalization. It focuses both on teaching students about these topics and encouraging critical reflection in them. The study area comprises the following subjects:

- Epistemology and the philosophy of science in the context of social work.
- The object and function of social work: Developing an integrative definition of the object and the occupational sphere of social work, and discussing the discrepancies between its own internal and the external perceptions of its role and functions (mandates, autonomy, professional status, etc.).
- The social and cultural history of social work, both in Germany and abroad; the organisational forms of help, historical and intercultural comparisons of extra-curricular education and of socio-spatial development; comparisons of social legislation and of help/service systems.
- The scientific analysis and justification of concepts, guidelines and methods for implementing social work in the face of increasing social problems and needs.
- The professionalisation of help and of educational activities in light of both older and more recent professionalisation theories; employment statistics and employment conditions within the social work field.
- Social work as a field of action caught between local, regional and federal policies, and between ongoing processes of internationalisation and transnationalisation.

Study area “Advanced study of the subject matter and theories of explanation for social work”

The transdisciplinary character of social work means that, to define and to pursue its objectives, the field needs to incorporate knowledge from a range of different disciplines (including, in alphabetical order: anthropology, biology, ethnology, gender studies, public health, cultural sciences, pedagogy, philosophy, psychology, political science, law, sociology, socioeconomics, communication and media science). Each of these scientific fields contributes, in its own way, to explaining, evaluating and changing various physical, psychological, social and cultural phenomena. They are all therefore important points of reference for the study areas. The decision

as to which of these disciplines to incorporate into the study areas will depend on the focal aspects of the respective study programme.

Social work, in its capacity both as a science and a profession, functions between the individual and society, that is to say, between the subject and the social systems. It is mainly concerned with the following:

- Processes and problems relating to growing up, learning, personal and social development and the leading of life, that come about in conditions connected with age, generation, health/illness, gender, social status, culture and socio-spatial circumstances.
- Social/psychosocial/biopsychosocial problems relating to interaction, cooperation and communication forms/networks between individuals and collective actors, and the individual contexts in which such problems emerge.
- Social/psychosocial/biopsychosocial problems relating to forms of social organisation; social systems – their emergence, structure, culture and dynamics.

Study area “The normative foundations of social work”

As an intervening science of action, social work needs to be based on basic normative assumptions, which it must continually reflect on. These assumptions constitute the basis of the profession’s code of ethics and conduct, and of its legal and human rights framework. In this respect, the question of the universalisation versus the contextual pluralisation of values, ethics and understandings of law will be analysed via the following topics:

- Problems and traditions in determining the values, ethics and morals upon which social work is based; using human rights as well as religious scientific, theological, philosophical, legal-philosophical and humanistic approaches to define such values, ethics and morals, and analysing the ideas of the human that these approaches convey.
- Welfare philosophy, social policies and social rights as a national legal basis.
- Using values, ethics and morals to define specific phenomena and situations as social problems.
- The legal foundations of social work (employment, family, health, social and administrative laws) and the legal assessment of socially and culturally problematic conditions.
- Ethical and moral dilemmas relating to individual and institutional problems encountered within intervening and acting social work (this includes dilemmas typically experienced within social work).
- Codes of professional ethics: their history and their applicability today.
- Mandates and roles within social work (vocational double mandate and professional triple mandate).

Study area “General societal and institutional conditions for social work”

The knowledge of the general conditions under which social work is conducted is essential to analysing not only the scope for action in specific circumstances, but also the need for changes to such conditions. This study area comprises the following subjects:

- Welfare philosophy, social policies and social rights as a national legal basis.
- A comparison of social legislation: local/national, European (European Human Rights Charter/Social Charter) and international; comparative analyses of the emergence and evolution of such legislation.
- Economic, educational and health policies and their significance for social work.
- Social welfare within the triangle of civil and social society / non-governmental organisations, the state / politics and economy; the structure and dynamics of the “third sector”.
- The politics of social work: The public sphere as a place for debate about needs, demands, rights and obligations; the organisational processes and the (self-) empowerment of the social work profession.

Study area “General theories of action and specific theories of action/ social work methods”

The previous study areas cover the fundamentals required to develop an understanding of what dealing professionally with social problems entails, and of the methodological and action theory-related competencies required for this. They can focus, on the one hand, on designing educational, learning, auxiliary, consulting, socio-politically activating, and organisational processes for individuals or for collectives, and on the other hand on restructuring the social and/or institutional environment of the person(s) receiving social assistance.

The most important criteria for selecting specific action theories/methods are a) their scientific basis, b) their direct connection with the structure of the respective problems, with the persons receiving social work, and with the action fields of social work, and c) their suitability in relation to the study program itself, or to the project or internship phase concerned. This study area comprises the following subjects:

- General normative action theory and theory of professions, as well as the scientific foundations of the concepts, guidelines and methods by which to implement social work.
- Understanding diagnostics within social work: Analysing and understanding, over a period of time, problems and resources in relation to individuals, families, communities, and organisations.
- Incorporating specific action theories/methods for particular problem types into psychosocial, social and cultural interventions (direct and indirect) with individuals, families, small groups, and providing this in and together with the community, social networks and socio-ecological, social, political and cultural environments.

- Self-reflexion and practical reflection, supervision, coaching, peer supervision and advice among colleagues.
- Social management including business administration, organisational and human resource development, project consulting and project management.
- Aesthetic communication and the use of media – approaches to public relations work and to the pedagogical or therapeutic use of aesthetic media.

Study area “Fields of intervention and target groups of social work” (as a study focus or study project)

This study area comprises the following subjects. The following differentiation criteria are relating to social work’s fields of intervention/practice and need to be analysed in the context of their interdependencies with other criteria (intersectionality).

- Differentiation according to life course.
- Differentiation according to physical, or psychological health or according to criteria of illness and disability.
- Gender-based differentiations, including diversity of gender positions and sexual orientations.
- Resource-related differentiation, e.g. social class, social status, socio-economic/socio-ecological insufficiencies, social marginalisation, deprivation.
- Functional differentiation: Social, health, educational, economy, e.g., occupational social work, social work within the health system, social work in schools.
- Socio-spatial differentiation, e.g., urban/rural differentiation, neighbourhood, district, municipality, nation, Europe, or world society; or e.g., extracurricular educational work in youth and leisure clubs; community work; involvement in national and international legislative processes, development work, peace work in crisis areas.
- Social system-based differentiation, e.g. family, small groups, organisations.
- Cultural, ethnic, religious and political differentiation, e.g. youth sub-cultures, ethnic groups, religious communities, right-wing extremism, organisation cultures, mass media.
- Differentiation according to direct intervention methods such as individual help, case management, community work, group work, clinical social work, counselling, social therapy, mediation, advocacy, empowerment.
- Differentiation according to indirect methods, e.g. supervision, social planning, social management, concept development and evaluation.

Study area “Research within social work”

This study area focuses on independent research conducted within social work; it examines specific issues, the conditions in which such issues arise, and consequences they have for those they afflict, for society and for the social work profession:

- Epistemology and philosophy of science in the context of social work research, methodology, methods, scientific ethics.
- (Quality) criteria for scientific research (e.g. communicative validation, procedural transparency, intersubjective traceability, errors in perception, observation, measurement; operationalisation of problems, etc.)
- Research planning and the creation of expertise (qualitative and quantitative research designs, research concepts, etc.)
- Research objects (includes: case trajectories and educational careers, the emergence, development, stabilisation and change of social problems within socio-cultural contexts, social interpretation patterns and the consequences for the public/legal or private/privatised processing thereof, interaction between the recipients of social assistance and professionals, help systems, social welfare activities in national and international contexts)
- Qualitative and quantitative research methods for data collection and analysis (hermeneutic methods such as biography research, reconstructive studies, participatory observation, interactional, organisational and socio-spatial analyses; communication, media and discourse analyses; content-analytical methods such as grounded theory; non-directive procedures such as document and file analyses, quantifying and statistical procedures such as surveys, panels, social indicator research, social reporting, single-system designs, evaluation and effectiveness research, and the like).
- Interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity within research (includes areas such as care research, action research, health research, gender research, life course research, social indicator research, accompanying research, evaluation and effectiveness research, and the like).

ⁱ The final version was approved on 29 April 2016 by the annual assembly of members. The text is largely based on a draft compiled in 2005 by a working group belonging to the “Theory and Scientific Development in Social Work” unit of the DSGA. The members of this group were Ernst Engelke, Manuela Leideritz, Konrad Maier, Richard Sorg, and Silvia Staub-Bernasconi. Said draft was however never officially approved by the DSGA until now; this paper constitutes its official approval. The text takes into account the feedback arising from discussions within the DSGA and is based on a version written by the DGSA board members incumbent at that time (Stefan Bormann, Gudrun Ehlert, Michaela Köttig, Dieter Röh, Sabine Stövesand, Christian Spatscheck, Barbara Thiessen).

ⁱⁱ The German “Wissenschaftsrat” is an association of academics that were appointed by scientific associations, by governments and ministries and that are public figures that advice the federal government and the state governments of Germany in issues of the development of the universities, science and research.

ⁱⁱⁱ The “Hochschulrektorenkonferenz” is the association of public and government-recognized universities in Germany.

^{iv} The “Kultusministerkonferenz” is a consortium of ministers responsible for education and schooling, institutes of higher education and research and cultural affairs, and in this capacity, formulates the joint interests and objectives of all 16 federal states.

^v As studies conducted by Stefan Bormann (2013) have shown, the “uncontrolled proliferation and arbitrariness of degree content that was regularly assumed would occur has not come about. It may well exist in individual courses, but it is not discernible in the study models, curricula and modules currently in place. Rather, if we compare social work degree programmes, we can recognise that they all share a common core. This is apparent both in their course content and in their degree structure. Of course, their specific design can differ considerably from university to university, although applicants will often need to read through the course descriptions twice to notice where such differences lie. These tend to relate to the method by which certain competencies are to be taught (not to the competencies themselves), and to the concrete contents of individual lessons, not to the overall content of the degree

or its modules. Indeed, the degree structures and the modules that constitute them exhibit more similarities than differences.”

The DGSA nevertheless considers it important to, by approving a Core Curriculum, provide formal guidance in terms of how to structure social work degree programmes and, in doing so, prevent excessive diversification.

^{vi} The German “Fachbereichstag Soziale Arbeit” is an association representing all the social work faculties at state and church-affiliated schools of higher education in Germany. With its publication “Schlüsselkompetenzen” (Key Competencies) (2008), the DBSH (Deutscher Berufsverband für Soziale Arbeit e.V./German Professional Association for Social Work), too, made an attempt to define the skills key to professional social work.