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# Integrated Knowledge Creation – Basis for Helping Practice

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## Abstract

*The paper is aimed on agenda of integrated knowledge creation in social work, which is derived from reflexive basis of social work and from very specific connections between theory/research and practice within the mentioned discipline. The author describes some principal points for integrated knowledge creation based on collaboration of researchers with service providers, their users and with other key stakeholders operating in social field. She particularly deals with distinctive position of social workers in integrated research teams by mediating of various stakeholders' cooperation and by empowering social interventions' users to take active and equally valued part. Finally she brings information about European good practice how to involve civic society organisations of persons with disabilities into collaboration with researchers and academics to design and conduct disability and antidiscrimination related research work.*

## Key words

*Reflexivity of social work. Integrated knowledge creation. Users' empowerment. Good practice.*

## Abstrakt

*Príspevok sa zaoberá agendou integrovanej tvorby poznatkov v sociálnej práci, ktorá je odvodená z jej reflexívnej podstaty a z veľmi špecifického vzťahu medzi teóriou/výskumom a praxou v tejto disciplíne. Autorka popisuje základné princípy integrovanej tvorby poznatkov založenej na spolupráci výskumníkov/čok s poskytovateľmi služieb sociálnej práce, ich užívateľmi/lkami a inými kľúčovými aktérmi angažujúcimi sa v sociálnej oblasti. Zameriava svoju pozornosť na osobitosti úloh sociálnych pracovníkov a pracovníčok v integrovaných výskumných tímoch, dané predovšetkým ich mediátorskou pozíciou voči ostatným stranám a schopnosťou posilňovať užívateľov/lky sociálnej práce k aktívnej účasti. V závere prináša informáciu o európskej dobrej praxi zameranej na vťahovanie organizácií osôb so zdravotným postihnutím do spolupráce s výskumníkmi/čkami a akademickými pracovníkmi/čkami za účelom spoločne dizajnovať a uskutočňovať výskum zameraný na otázky zdravotného postihnutia a antidiskriminácie.*

**Kľúčové slová**

*Reflexivita v sociálnej práci. Integrovaná tvorba poznatkov. Posilnenie užívateľov/liek. Dobrá prax.*

**Introduction**

For helping disciplines, particularly for social work, various „inter-“, „multi-“ or „trans-“ positions and questions are typical. The premise of *interdisciplinary/multidisciplinary/transdisciplinary nature* of social work is one of the traditional ones. It can be found in the Slovak special literature legitimizing social work as an academic, practical and educational discipline, from the time of initial papers in the 80s of the last century up to the latest papers. According to Š. Strieženec (1999:41), „social work is characterized by an interdisciplinary approach to the regulation and management of social issues. It respects and uses knowledge of pedagogy (social pedagogy), sociology, psychology, economics, law, medicine, ecology, and other disciplines“. A. Tokárová (2002, in Tokárová et al., 2002) refers rather to a multidisciplinary, and/or transdisciplinarity of social work, resulting from the complexity of social dynamic and multifactor conditionality of practical problems that are the subject of studying social work, and at the same time its object as a professional activity. Based on transdisciplinarity, H. J. Göppner, J. Hämäläinen (2008) explain the action force and the responsibility of social work against the appearing social problems that exceed the borders of any methodologically limited discipline. According to the authors, „a transdisciplinary system of knowledge must be used to overcome practical issues“ (Göppner, Hämäläinen, 2008:46).

It also results from the above mentioned that inter-, multi-, or transdisciplinarity of social work is traditionally interpreted in the direction of other scientific disciplines and branches (inwards the scientific and research community) whose theories and knowledge are used by social work for building its own theoretical basis or professionalized performance. The paper focuses on a different (even though related) „inter-“ position of social work. It refers to the *process of creation, transfer and application of new knowledge* and new learning

provided through an integration of positions and interests of various players, often beyond the scientific and research community, or at the crossing of these two environments (it concerns a cooperation of scientists and researchers with users of social work services, with providers of social work services, or with policy makers at different levels). The intention of the paper is to conceptualize issues of an integrated approach to creation, transfer and application of new knowledge and learning in the field of social work; to describe their practical importance and special tasks of social workers in integrated teams. As an illustration, we present an example of good practice in building an integrated system of social knowledge, and of a research focused on issues of disabilities, equality, and antidiscrimination in Europe based on empowering the actors of citizens' sector for the cooperation with research (academic) institutions and with policy makers.

## **1 Social work as a reflexive discipline: a distinctive relation of theory and practice**

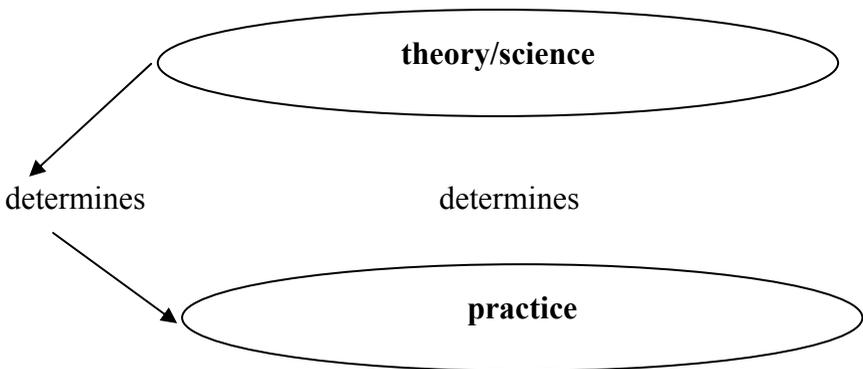
This paper is placed into the period when the experts' discussion about whether social work can be regarded as a scientific discipline is shifted to the discussion about the nature of scientific knowledge (learning, theory) comprising the main portfolio of social work, and how the new knowledge in this area is created, transferred and applied. Instead of an eternal search for and argumentation of a well-balanced, equal position of social work against other mainstream disciplines and social studies (e.g. sociology or psychology); instead of facing a position of a „newer“, „younger“, „less developed“ discipline (Parton, 2000:450), we want to focus on those distinctive aspects that create a added value of social work compared to other disciplines, and of social workers compared to other social players.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> We are of one mind with opinions of H.-J. Göppner, J. Hämäläinen (2008:9), that „the one who sets on a year-long discussion about science of social work has to face an opacity of controversial positions... For the one who search for an orientation there are only these two options left: either to look for and find positions to which they can consent, without bothering about everything else, or to feel more or less hopeless...“

According to H.-J. Göppner, J. Hämäläinen (2008:11) the distinctiveness (sometimes perceived as a complication) of creation of social work basics compared to classical science disciplines lies in that the latter are often focused on knowledge of itself, while the questions of application may be irrelevant at first. A transdisciplinary practical science, as social work is regarded to be, is however, as the authors claim, based on a „circular relation between theory/science and practice in getting a scientific basis having respect to the problems of explanation and action in social work“. The relation is shown in Figure No 1.

**Figure No 1:** Circular relation between theory/science and practice in getting a scientific basis having respect to the problems of explanation and action in social work



Source: H.-J. Göppner, J. Hämäläinen (2008:11)

According to the authors, the mutually conditional relation between theory and practice in social work lies in that theory determines how to proceed in practical activities. On the other hand, the practice itself (the nature of a problem, the subject of social work), determines which theoretical contexts are relevant to overcome a problem arisen. According to N. Parton (2000:449), the manner how theory (research) and practice in social work are closely interconnected is its unique characteristic. The interconnection of theory (scientific learning) and practice is given by the exclusive subject of social work, namely „everyday life“ /Alltagsansatz/. This is no exclusive segment of a reality on which the science of social

work could be based; on the contrary, it is a cipher for the character of social work as a complex performance...“ (Göppner, Hämäläinen, 2008:11) Similarly, S. Trevillion (2000:511) understands complexity as a basic attribute of social work, and defines research in social work as an „... intellectual discipline which can help those involved in practice to understand its complexities“.

The distinctive relation of theory and practice, and the distinctiveness of the process of creating knowledge in social work is attributed by M. Sheppard to its principally reflexive nature. According to the author (Sheppard, 1998:767) „... The notion of *reflexivity* emphasises the social worker (i) as an active thinker, able to assess, respond and initiate action and (ii) as a social actor, one who actually participates in the situation with which they are concerned in the conduct of their practice... and who is able to do so in relation to the nature and purposes of their practice“ (in Sheppard et al, 2000:471). Similarly, N. Parton (2000) can see a central and unique characteristic of social work in its reflexivity. According to the author, the discussion of principal ambivalence, complexity and uncertainty of social work is actually its most powerful aspect in terms of the ability of social workers to support a dialogue, understanding and interpretation, instead of mechanical cooperation with authorities only. We lean towards the ambitions of the author.

„... to consider the nature of knowledge for and in social work and in particular to argue that it is this theory/practice relationship which is worthy of our attention and which perhaps sets social work apart from the other social sciences“ (Parton, 2000:450).

The reflexive nature of social work, the particular interconnection between theory and practice in social work this inevitably lead to a cognition that „problems dealt with by social work are created discursively (in communication)“ (Göppner, Hämäläinen, 2008:13,51), which subsequently leads to a need to form the research in social work as a kind of network knowledge (Trevillion, 2000:513).

## **2 Network knowledge in social work**

According to N. Parton (2000:453), in spite of the efforts to develop precise, testable theories, it is still crucial for social work to keep the position of a discipline opened to moral, social and political dilemmas as „... real world problems do not come well-formed but on the contrary, present themselves as messy and indeterminate...“ This is also one of the reasons why the knowledge related to social work is often contained in a tacit (silent, unsaid)<sup>2</sup> and implicit manner of conduct and solution of practitioners (social workers). It is based on a dialogue with people about their situations within which it is possible to come to understanding of the uniqueness, the uncertainty and a potential value conflict leading to „a new theory of the unique situation/case“ resulting in an action. According to M. Sheppard et al. (2000), it is this characteristic which distinguishes social work and supporting practice from traditional academic disciplines: research in social work generates process knowledge rather than product knowledge. In addition to the fact that new knowledge in social work is developed „in action“ (i.e. it is reflexive, process-based), N. Parton (2000:455) points out its another characteristic which differentiates it from other disciplines, namely the ability of social workers to give up a formal dimension of their roles, and the willingness to cooperate with „common people“ in their natural environment, using informalities of their methods as a tool to negotiate solutions to, instead of describing problems in a grand manner (a free rewording of the author). For the research (knowledge) in social work it means, according to P. Beresford, C. Evans (1999), a deviation from approaches that rely on traditional research methods based on quantitative analyses, on comparisons with of experimental and control groups, or on professional/expert knowledge. It rather concerns some enforcement of the position of professionally interpreted and structured participation and feedback of beneficiaries of social interventions, when knowledge is

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<sup>2</sup> The importance of tacit knowledge in social work is emphasized also by J. Osmond (2006) in his studies and research work. According to the author, a large amount of knowledge in social work has a „tacit“ nature and is not used within its complex performance.

created in a process of continuous dialogue inside and between communities (Lyons, 2000).<sup>3</sup>

Special literature informs about various approaches to creation of integrated communities based on forming some new knowledge in social work. Ch. Labont-Roset (2005), for example, speaks about an inevitability to integrate questions of research into education (particularly at the level of higher studies) and preparation for performing social work. Emphasizing the need to build communities based on a unique triangle connection of theory (research), practical performance and education in social work is presented in papers by K. Lyons (2000), even though the author herself specializes further only to the relation of research and education spheres, pointing out the central task of educators (academic workers) in the area of research, and their duties in creating new knowledge and building a social work theory.

S. Karvinnen-Niinikoski (2005:259) focuses rather on cooperation between research and executive elements. According to the author, it is necessary to form „communities based on knowledge creation, where the knowledge creation within a routine professional practice is an integral part, the phenomenon of the research mindedness is thus extended by the phenomenon of the practice-research mindedness. B. Cooper (2001:722) uses term „viable culture of research, development and knowledge creation, where practitioners are integrated into the research process for the purpose of improving practical interventions.

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<sup>3</sup> These are also reasons why some authors doubt the *concept of evidence-based practice in social work*. According to S.A. Webb (2001), this concept was introduced into the system of social work and social services in connection with the fiscal and source crisis, in an effort to rationalize human resources in organizations, and to monitor financial effectiveness of public sources. According to the author, these practices may devaluate a traditional professional practice in social work, ignoring its complexity and reflexivity. However, there are also contrary interpretations of the concept of evidence-based policy and practice. According to S.M. Nutley et al. (2007), people and institutions may receive high-quality decisions related to programmes, projects and their whole life just because of the fact that evidence obtained through a research work becomes a basis for policies and their implementations.

### **3 Integrated knowledge creation in social work**

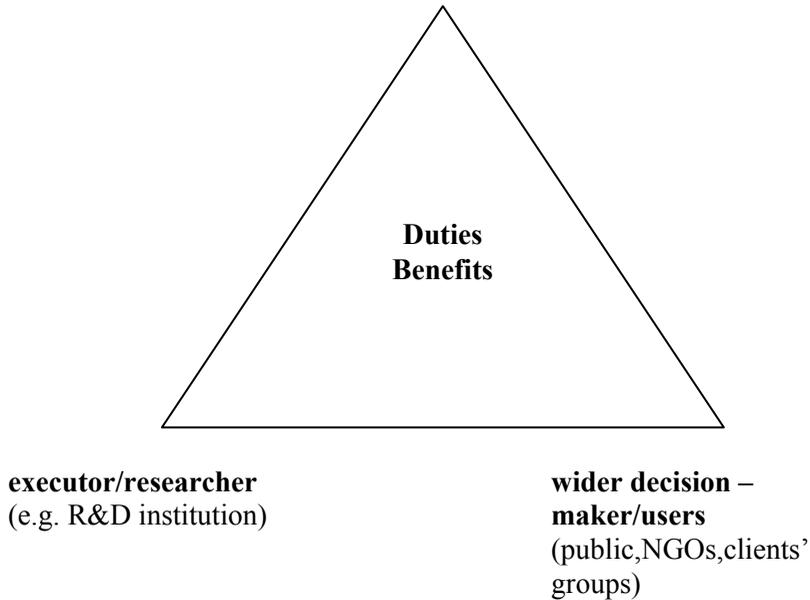
Before we define, for a working purpose, the term „integrated knowledge creation“ for the needs of social work, we believe it is necessary to mention that *knowledge creation* will not be understood only in the sense how new knowledge/learning comes into existence, but also how it is transferred among particular actors or groups of actors (knowledge transfer, transmission), and how it is applied in practice (knowledge application). In the so-called professional disciplines (we assume that in our perception it concerns applied disciplines), K. Lyons (2000) regards the integrated triangle *knowledge creation – knowledge transfer – knowledge application* as a key characteristic differing these disciplines from traditional, academic disciplines (we assume that in our perception it concerns basic disciplines), where according to the author there is often a bipolar relation between creation and knowledge transfer.<sup>4</sup>

For the purpose of this paper, we define *integrated knowledge creation* as a dynamic and iterative process of cooperation between various actors (sponsors, executors/researchers, users) engaged in the social area for the sake of initiating or achieving a mutually shared benefit (for example, it may refer to achieving a change). In another place (Authors' team, 2008:115), we illustrated a relation triangle of the integrated process of knowledge transfer as follows.

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<sup>4</sup> Definition of the so-called basic and applied researches in Slovakia also corresponds to this schematic division. It is typical for basic research that new knowledge is obtained without taking into account the possibilities of its direct practical application, while the key requirement of applied research is direct application of new knowledge in economic and social practice (Article 2 of Act No 172/2005 Coll. on organization of state support to research and development, as last amended).

**Figure No 2:** Relation triangle of knowledge transfer integrated process sponsor (narrower decision-maker, payer)



For the model of integrated knowledge creation, the following is essential:

- an objective need and a common interest in cooperation of various parties/types of actors,
- for the purpose of cooperation, various parties/types of actors establish project partnerships,
- each of the parties advocates a certain type of view/perspective and interests in the process of partnership cooperation,
- involved parties actively participate in all the stages of a research project (formulation of project ideas, setting of main questions to be solved by given project, decisions on methodology, data collection, results interpretation or results dissemination) on an equal basis (duties, benefits),

- partner cooperation helps achieve more valid, more generally applicable outputs taking into account needs and interests of various players.

(free rewording of Higham, 2001; authors' team, 2008; <http://www.cihr-irs.gc.ca/e/29418.html>.)

According to P. Beresford, C. Evans (1999), important impulses for building integrated communities where new knowledge is created in the area of social work were brought along by the period of the 70s and 80s in the last century, when a new paradigm of the so-called *collaborative knowledge/research in social work* started to be formulated. It was advocated by civic activists representing rights of various minority social groups, users of social services and services of social work (particularly representing, for example, a movement of the persons with disabilities as part of application of their rights to active participations in decision-makings of any important social issues). The requirement of integration and co-decision led to requirements of the so-called *emancipatory, user-led and user-controlled research* that instead of playing only a subsidiary position (evaluation, monitoring, legitimizing of political development) against social policy, it would initiate also possible changes and progress. In such a research design, the value of people's first-hand direct experience, instead of traditional research values of neutrality, objectivity and distance, becomes the basis of knowledge. Changes in the position of research, and inside the research relations become the main challenge:

- for professional researchers not to implement their research works only by searching on users of services, but rather by searching with them,
- for users to be insiders and engaged in any aspects of the research process where they both, order and perform the research itself, i.e. they define the basic research idea and the benefit of the research; they control its financing and design the research process and research dissemination.

Even though according to P. Beresford (2000), engaging knowledge and perspectives of social work users in the creation of theoretical knowledge in social work occurs only at the beginnings, their personal or collective knowledge generated based on intensive contacts with policy makers or services providers brings along some key impulses into the

relation between theory and practice (this knowledge is often called *grey literature* which, according to Beresford, is not sufficiently taken into account in experts' discussions).

Also P.E. Higham (2001; the author alternatively refers to an *interactive approach to the research in social work*) conceptually devotes to applying an integrated approach in social work. According to the author, intensive relations between researchers, users of social work services and sponsors (often in the position of policy makers) in solving socially relevant problems are based on key values of social work, i.e. *users' empowerment and work in partnership*. He considers the interactive approach to be a distinctive characteristic of social work and research in social work, whereby he calls for its wider recognition (Higham, 2001:197,198). A great challenge for building a prestige of social work is a statement of the author of the mediation task of social workers against other research disciplines within interdisciplinary teams. In addition, he argues that a possible feeling of dependence of social work on basic knowledge of other social disciplines leading to some tension that they could overshadow its potential contribution to knowledge creation, should be replaced by knowledge that the research in social work is strong in its ability to cooperate with other disciplines (free rewording of Higham, 2001). According to N. Parton (2000), it is given by an ability of social workers to support a dialogue, and to understand and interpret various knowledge.

#### **4 Integrated knowledge creation and empowerment of civic society – good practice**

As mentioned above, the principle stimuli to introduce a cooperative (emancipatory, led and controlled by users) research in the social area have been coming from a civic sector since the 80s in the 20th; particularly from the sector of persons with various disabilities. Therefore, the key question was the question how to enhance various disadvantaged and minority groups of people so that they would become active players in social changes which would lead to positive impacts on their social positions and lives. Project **EuRADE (European Research**

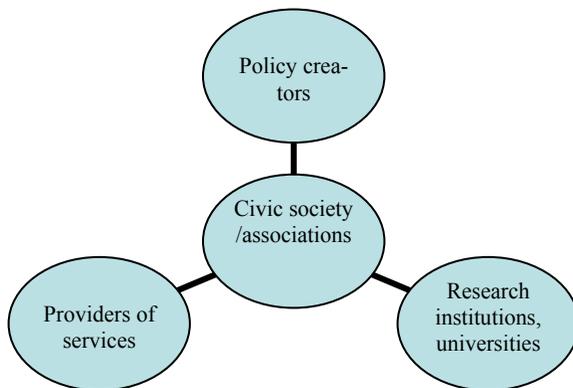
**Agendas for Disability Equality** – the agenda of the European research to achieve equality in the field of issues of disabilities) is a unique example of supporting building capacities, and enhancing representatives of a civic society as well as end users of services and initiators of social changes. It has been financed since 2007 within the 7th Framework program of the EU, „Science and Society“, focused on activities leading to building capacities of social organizations (civic associations), and to building cooperating research activities. Since its beginning, the project has been coordinated by the European Disability Forum, in cooperation with research institutions and universities, such as University of Leeds (Great Britain) and University of Maastricht (Netherland), significantly represented by experts from helping disciplines (social work, psychology). Establishment of this type of expertise consortium created conditions for achieving a balance in experience and skills that are prerequisite for supporting building capacities of organizations of disabled persons, so that these organizations could become partners for research institutions and universities in their researches focused on issues of equality and antidiscrimination. European Disability Forum, as an umbrella civic-based organization of disabled persons at the European level, became an ideal institution for facilitation of consultations, and for dissemination between organizations of disabled persons and the European Commission. Figure No 3 outlines the relations supporting the cooperative approach to research focused on issues of disability building up from the original experience of users of services, and of the civic society (the scheme is applicable also to other types of partnerships).

In summer 2008 (21 – 25 July 2008), **Research Summer School** took place in English Leeds as part of this project. The intention of this summer school was to mediate cooperation between representatives of research from various academic disciplines and European universities, and representatives of some selected organizations of disabled persons. The purpose was to support mutual learning leading to formulation of research ideas relevant for enforcement of disability equality and non-discrimination.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> I myself participated in the Research Summer School as a lecturer. I presented the implementation of a model of integrated creation and knowledge transfer in the research of disability under the circumstances of Slovakia, whereas the model was based on the cooperation of the Ministry of

**Figure No 3:** Cooperative approach to creating research-oriented partnerships based on the civic principle (freely processed by Repková)



Following this summer school and based on subsequent supporting activities, the umbrella organizations of disabled persons from various EU countries formulated factual research drafts which were later presented at a dissemination seminar in Brussels on 16 June 2009:

- Implementing the Rights of Disabled Air Passengers to Equal Treatment in Europe
- Capacity of the Psychosocially Disabled's Organisations in Europe
- Legal capacity and Human Rights of Persons with Disabilities
- Disability and Poverty
- Enhancing the Autonomy of the People with Intellectual Disability in Education through Assistive Relationships
- Comparative Perspectives on Independent Living for Disabled People in Europe

- Mapping the Barriers that Hard of Hearing People face in European Countries.

Provision of comprehensive information about grant schemes within which it would be possible to submit intentions with application for a financial support was also one of forms how to enhance authors' research intentions. (For more information go to [www.eurade.eu](http://www.eurade.eu))

***Conclusions: Summary of key theses and a lesson learned from good practice***

It was not the intention of this paper to contribute to further edging of social work against other social sciences and disciplines. In our opinion, however, it is effective to sum up in the conclusion of this paper some distinctive characteristics of social work that bring added value to the integrated process of creation, transfer and implementation of new knowledge/learning relevant in the social area. We assume that based on this new knowledge/learning we will consequently be able to identify challenges for social work in a modern society in line with the basic mission of the conference.

**Selected key theses**

- ❖ For social work, inter-, multi- and trans- positions and questions are typical.
- ❖ The method how theory (research) and practice are connected in social work is its unique characteristic.
- ❖ The particularity of the connection of theory and practice in social work is given by its reflexive nature (the interconnection to the context of problems, and creation of new knowledge “in action“).
- ❖ The exclusive subject of social work includes disordered problems of everyday life that are difficult to predict; therefore, social work represents a complex performance.
- ❖ The key values of social work include users' empowerment and work in partnerships.
- ❖ Within the interdisciplinary and inter-sectoral partnerships, social workers often fulfil mediation tasks.

- ❖ Fulfilment of a mediation task in integrated partnerships lies in an ability of social workers to support a dialogue, understanding and interpretation of various information, knowledge and experience.
- ❖ For the purpose of supporting a dialogue, social workers apply methods of empowerment of participants, which is evidenced by examples of good practice.

### **A lesson learned from the current knowledge, good practice and challenges**

- In helping disciplines, integrated knowledge creation is primarily *an issue of human rights* regulated at the highest level by human rights conventions<sup>6</sup>, rather than an issue of good will and enthusiasm of individuals.
- The particular nature of the research in social work and its interconnection to social practice *does not mean non-existence or a low existence of the need of a scientific and research activity in social work*. It should not excuse the relatively weak interest of students graduating in social work to perform this highly specialized activity, or it should not weaken the efforts of academic and other educational institutions to train experts in this field and to promote their professional growth.
- *Integrated and multi-perspective design* is the basis of scientific and research activities in social work. From the start, sponsors (payers) in the position of narrower users, scientific and research workers and end users (clients' organizations or providers of services) should cooperate in designing a specific scientific and research project.

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<sup>6</sup> According to Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits. This main principle providing for „the right freely to participate“ was further developed in international and national documents (particular UN conventions, European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, European Social Charter, recommendations of the Council of Europe for individual areas, constitutions of individual countries, or, at the lowest level, material and legal provisions related to the performance of helping activities in various areas of social and other protections).

- To provide for an integrated and multi-perspective design, the so-called *institutionalization of users* (authors' team, 2008) is inevitable. It means a selection of representative organizations that advocate interests of a wider group of persons, potential beneficiaries of partial as well as total results of a research project, and that have a sufficient influence on achieving social changes.
- For the purpose of fulfilling an *initiation function of research* in social work, it is necessary to comprehensively and systematically train students in various issues of social policy in its multiple-level contexts (world, European, national, regional, local), in issues of communal planning and project management so that they would understand the embedding their research work in the social reality and people's needs.
- Establishment of integrated partnerships and empowerment of users of social work services to participate in them, or to initiate research projects by users' sphere, does not constitute their research professionalization/specialization. Within the fulfilment of *mediation function* in these partnerships, social workers should support the shared structure of a competency model of project partnership, which is unique/prestigious, and on its basis to defend the relevance of research project against general public.
- For the purpose of increasing the *prestige of the research* in social work, and its *sustainability* in the structure of socially beneficial activities, it is inevitable to systematically train students of social work in the area of communication of science and scientific communication, including lobbying (authors' team, 2008).

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