

## **CAPABILITIES OF SOCIAL WORK IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE EUROPEAN QUALIFICATION FRAMEWORK (EQF)**

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**Abstract:** *Starting with an description of dimensions of professional capabilities in the European qualification framework (EQF) two comparisons are made: (1) On the basis of a international classification of objectives of study programs of social work these specific capabilities are related to the EQF. (2) The data of a survey with practitioners of social work are used to develop an empirical based model to link the EQF to capabilities relevant in practice. Conclusions refer to suggestions for the designing study programs.*

**Keywords:** *social work; qualification; european qualification framework; study program; international comparison; skills; responsibility; artistry; personality traits*

### **1 Introduction and framing of the problem**

Social work is an application-oriented science and a professional practice (International Federation of Social Work (IFSW)2014). Academic training in social work is therefore based on standards which, on the one hand, impart theoretical knowledge but also promote practical skills on the other. So when we talk about the capabilities that social workers are supposed to develop in their study and training, then both levels must always be taken into account.

In an academic course, it is undoubtedly important to acquire in-depth theoretical knowledge in order to be able to analyse and understand social and societal problems. Accordingly, concepts of work are based on this disciplinary knowledge and practical measures must be evaluated using scientific methods.

Professionalism of social work also means that social problems are not only understood, but also solved. When social workers act in practice, they cannot plan and justify their actions in advance in every situation. Rather, they must be able to act spontaneously and situationally in everyday life. Spontaneous actions are not rationally planned (Gigerenzer 2020), corresponding decisions often are guided by implicit rules of thumb (Moch 2015). Therefore knowledge and action have to be integrated in a way, that professional problem solving is a close and permanent interplay of cognitive-reflexive and actional processes according to the actual situation. In this perspective one can also speak of the artistry (Schön 1987; Dreyfus & Dreyfus 1996) of social work.

More than in many other professions, ethical principles also play a role in social work. Social workers need clear judgment on people's basic rights. They must develop a personal attitude (v. Spiegel 2013) with regard to social coexistence, the distribution of social resources and opportunities for participation.

In the context of the Europe-wide discussion on academically supported competences, there is also a corresponding effort in the field of social work to achieve common educational objectives (Campanini 2020; Lorenz 2006). It is clear that this education is taught not only at the university, but also in the context of practical activities in social institutions. The

following will examine (1) how the qualification objectives of a course of study in social work can be described and structured in an international context and (2) how they relate to the basic provisions as defined in the European Qualification Framework (EQF). In addition, it shows (3) how the practitioners of social work view and understand the skills they need in their everyday work.

## 2 The European Qualification Framework – Relevance for Social Work

In answering the question of which skills people particularly need in the very near future, the developments of globalization and a comprehensive technologicalization were increasingly taken into consideration: ‘To make sense of and function well in this world, individuals need for example to master changing technologies and to make sense of large amounts of available information. They also face collective challenges as societies – such as balancing economic growth with environmental sustainability, and prosperity with social equity. In these contexts, the competencies that individuals need to meet their goals have become more complex, requiring more than the mastery of certain narrowly defined skills.’ (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) 2005, p. 4) Accordingly, the acquisition of professional competences in academic studies plays a major role in European education policy. It has also had a multiple impact on the development of specific qualification frameworks in social work (Campanini 2020). In this context, the European Commission points out that ‘*qualification*’ means the formalised proof of a successful assessment process. It documents ‘that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards.’ (European Commission 2016, paragraph 2 of the recommendation) These ‘learning outcomes’ and the related ‘standards’ will be looked at in more detail below. ‘Learning outcomes are statements of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on completion of a learning process.’ (European Commission 2016, doc. 2, annex 2, footnote 1). These statements are linked to individual learning units as well as to entire study programmes. They are used to describe the level of a particular qualification in European and national qualifications frameworks.

In addition to the ability to understand on the base of knowledge, two aspects in the EU were also at the centre of attention. On the one hand, the appropriate assumption of individual responsibility and, on the other hand, the strengthening of autonomy in the management of professional demands for action. Consequently, as the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) was further developed, the European Commission redefined the key elements of the qualification definition. It now distinguishes between *knowledge, skills and competences* at each level of qualification (‘KSC’). (European Commission 2016; annex 2).

At level 6 the definitions are:

- knowledge: ‘advanced knowledge of a field of work or study, involving a critical understanding of theories and principles’
- skills: ‘advanced skills, demonstrating mastery and innovation, required to solve complex and unpredictable problems in a specialised field of work or study’
- competence: ‘manage complex technical or professional activities or projects, taking responsibility for decision-making in unpredictable work or study contexts; take responsibility for managing professional development of individuals and groups’

It was confirmed here that the primary objective should be to make use of knowledge and personal skills in solving social problems. In this context, ‘Competence’ means responsibility and autonomy: ‘Responsibility/Autonomy in the context of the EQF is the ability of the learner to apply knowledge and skills autonomously and with responsibility.’ (European Commission 2016; annex 2)

This understanding of academic education is very much in the way of social work. Because, as various studies have clearly shown (Moch, Meyer & Bense 2014; Moch 2013, 2018),

personality traits of the social worker make up a significant part of her/his professionalism. Theoretical knowledge and methodological skills must be used in such a way that they are appropriate to the problem and the situation. Concrete interventions must be made with personal responsibility. This requires the ability to make safe – even normative – judgments in complex problems and unforeseen situations and to weigh up different interests. These skills are all the more important because social work is involved in social conflicts in multicultural and diversity-driven contexts.

### **3 Preliminary work: Intentional comparison of profiles of qualifications**

An essential task of current efforts on educational processes that are appropriate for given and future social conditions and problems is to be seen in the formulation of concrete objectives for specific educational programmes. In this context, Klieme & Hartig (2008, p. 24) noted that ‘competences (can be assessed) only on the basis of a range of individual observations for different tasks or in varying situations’. It became clear that the concept of *competence* has to be critically questioned in terms of its importance in the context of education policy. A first step in this direction is therefore to speak more of ‘*competent action*’ (Löwisch 2000; Treptow 2011). When this term is applied to higher education, it points out that solving complex social problems with the help of scientifically proven knowledge is the essential goal of studying. Competent action is understood as a holistic qualification to use acquired skills in an autonomous manner.

In a previous study (Moch in press), five selected qualification profiles of social work programmes in Spain, Great Britain and Germany as well as the ‘Global Standards for Social Work Education and Training’ (IFSW 2020) were examined comparatively. The respective weighting of cognitive (knowledge), actional (skills) and affective-normative (autonomy and responsibility) qualifications was put at the centre. The similarities and differences in the learning objectives of these profiles have been developed. In order to avoid the need to differentiate the concept of competence (Löwisch 2000, p. 79ff.) the 286 items of the qualification profiles were examined using a content-analytical procedure. Thereby the terminology of learning objectives according to Bloom (Bloom, Engelhardt, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl 1956; Krathwohl, Bloom, & Masia 1973) was used. As a result of this analysis, the key messages of the profiles were differentiated according to the following categories:

A) *Theoretical knowledge and understanding* includes cognitive abilities such as (1) the remembering or recognizing of facts, symbols, theory-related propositions, knowledge of methods, legal provisions, then (2) the capture of connections between these aspects, the recognition of backgrounds, structures and the formation of abstractions, and the connection of experiences and theories.

B) The category *description, analysis and evaluation* includes skills for the verbal presentation of facts, the definition of problems and tasks, the use of one's own knowledge to assess new, unknown situations and the evaluation of measures.

C) *Planning and conception* includes skills to use one's own knowledge to develop strategies, prepare steps, assess opportunities and risks.

D) *Research, evaluation and research* shall include competences to acquire knowledge, develop sources, identify the effects of programmes and measures, and appropriately select and use research methods.

E) The complex of *professional, responsible and innovative action* refers to the manifold skills of professional action management: reflexive and rational approach, assumption of personal jurisdiction and responsibility, autonomous, independent, flexible and situational action, intuitive rules of thumb. It also includes: creativity, adaptability, bringing in and implementing new ideas and concepts.

F) The category *communication, cooperation, interdisciplinarity* includes all skills for exchanging with colleagues within one's own profession as well as cooperations with members of other professions. Teamwork, establishing and maintaining contacts, using useful media, and mastering a foreign language are also included.

G) Under the category of *organisation, management, leadership* were subsumed the skills that characterize activities related to organizations: fulfilling specific roles and implementing rules, representing organisation and profession, representing the ability to assert and resistance to conflict in the agreement of different interests, guidance of other persons, ensuring the economics and efficiency of measures.

H) *Mindfulness regarding diversity and ethics* were chosen as a separate category to cover aspects of professional attitudes, in particular skills in dealing with concrete ethical issues: respecting and representing human rights and the rights of minorities, protecting vulnerable people from violence, implementing the participation of addressees in planning and measures, but also consciously dealing with overarching ethical issues such as peace and the protection of natural livelihoods were recorded here.

I) The *personality development* category refers to all those skills relating to individual learning, self-care, self-motivation, authenticity and quality awareness.

At a professional theoretical level, these categories can be summarized as follows: According to the considerations of Oevermann (2000) and Habermas (1995), we first distinguish between (1) primarily knowledge-oriented (A-D) and (2) primarily action-oriented (E-G) qualifications. Furthermore, we refer to the affective learning objectives according to Krathwohl et al. (1973), which we record as (3) normative-affective, i.e. value-related skills (H-I) and which have so far been neglected in discussions on competence development, but play an essential role in all fields of social work, both in studies and in further education.

In the following, it will be necessary to examine the extent to which this empirical model of qualifications can be combined with the conceptual model of the EQF.

#### **4 A model of international classification of capabilities in Social Work**

On the basis of the findings to date, the qualifications examined will be related to the EQF's overarching guidelines. It was assumed that cognitive, actional and normative-affective abilities must interlock in order to solve problems in fields of social work in a competent manner. Specific aspects such as expertise, analytical thinking and organisational skills may each make independent contributions. On the other hand, planning, evaluation and innovation are based on links between knowledge and skills. Communication is based not only on technical-action skills, but also on personal-social capabilities. Respecting diversity and ethical foundations requires both knowledge and personal readiness. According to the result of the item analysis, the core of social worker skills is professionally oriented, self-responsible and autonomous action, to which personality formation and individual willingness to learn play an essential part.

In this respect, the specifics of existing qualification profiles can be understood as a combination of the basic qualification dimensions mentioned in the EQF. This means not only that problem-solving skills are largely based on a close interlinking of knowledge-oriented and action-oriented qualifications, but above all that, to the core of social worker qualifications in modern societies, the aspects of 'communication and cooperation' are essential; 'Personality formation' as well as the 'attention of diversity and ethics'. In the following, an attempt is made to approximate the individual categories examined so far with the overarching qualification clusters of the EQF (knowledge, skills, competence). Parallels are drawn from the respective contents of the identified categories to these clusters (see Figure 1).

The ‘Knowledge’ cluster initially refers to purely cognitive abilities, i.e. the acquisition of knowledge and the understanding of abstract relationships independently of questions of practice or application. The assignment of *theoretical knowledge and understanding* (A) is relatively clear here. However, ‘knowledge’ is also significantly involved in *description and analysis* (B), because these skills are based on theoretical terms. *Evaluation and research* (D) also incorporate theoretical knowledge of scientific principles and methods. In addition, *self-responsible professional action* always draws on knowledge (E), especially since it is based on cross-problem *ethical principles* (H).

‘Skills’ identify practical capabilities in the handling of information (e.B. *reporting* (B) or *data analysis* (D)), but also in the practical view into the future (*planning and drafting concepts*, C). Skills, however, go far beyond an ‘application’ of knowledge, because appropriate problem solutions must always be adapted to specific situations. In this sense, for example, *organizing and management* (F) are largely based on an art in the handling of complex tasks under specific framework conditions. Skills for *cooperation and teamwork* (G) can only be developed if, in addition to technical skills, personal qualities such as *empathy* (I) and *respect* (H) towards other people are used.

‘Competence’ in the EQF is understood as the general ability to make use of expertise and methodological approaches in a way that takes into account the personal responsibility of a professional within the framework of their autonomy. Professional action can therefore only be achieved by a specialist using her/his knowledge and methodological skills in a situation-oriented and problem-related manner. The professional must therefore be able to make technical judgments and assess the adequacy of her/his own intervention in each individual case.

In our model, *personality development* (I) is the center of this dimension. Social workers are encouraged to strive for emotional balance and to regulate their proximity to addressees appropriately. To do so, they must be aware of the *ethical basis and diversity relevance* (H) of their actions and have developed skills of appropriate ‘*communication*’ (G).

Overall, on the basis of the empirical analysis of qualification profiles, it can be found that *autonomous problem-solving skills* (E) are largely based on a close interlinking of knowledge-oriented and action-oriented qualifications. In addition, the aspects are of communication and cooperation; Personality formation as well as diversity-relevant and ethical attitudes contribute significantly to the core of social worker qualifications in modern societies.

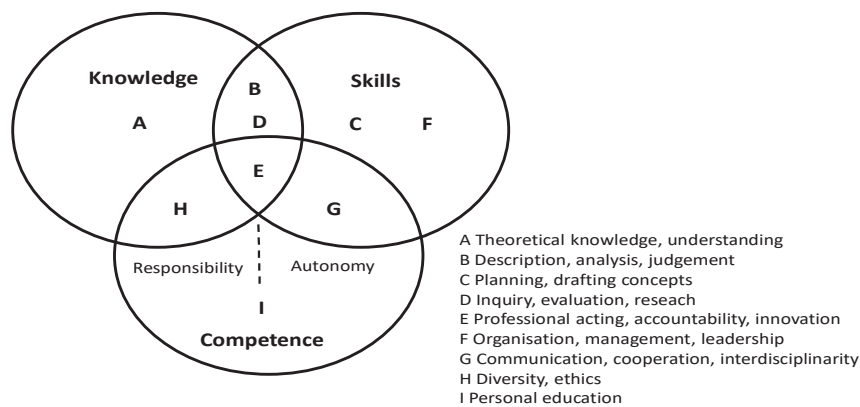


Figure1: Qualifications of Social Work und the European Qualification Framework (EQF) (see comments in the text) Legend. Autor’s own presentation

## 5 Empirical design of capability dimensions based on a survey of practitioners

Up to this point, some basic features of social work qualification profiles have been identified. This was based on academically defined learning objectives for the study of social work. It is easy to see that in this way the actual requirements in practical work can only be mapped very insufficiently. Here we see again the gap between an analytically structured learning context and a complex everyday world. It is obvious that a structural model based on abstract items can only represent very poorly the challenges that practitioners face in everyday work. By having to solve concrete problems, they experience in action that many different sub-capabilities interact directly in a situation-specific manner. One could say that individual abilities do not appear in the abstract, but are directly linked in solving concrete problems.

In the following, it will be examined how individual qualifications are linked in the experience of practitioners. Which skills have a close relationship, complement each other and thus form different dimensions of competent practical action? For this purpose, data were collected from 169 practitioners of social work in German institutions. The professionals answered a questionnaire and were asked to indicate, on 36 individual skills (on a 10-step scale), how important they consider this ability to act professionally in social work.

An appropriate methodological instrument for sizing individual aspects is factor analysis. It can be used to form patterns based on correlations of individual statements, which represent the interplay of individual properties on an abstract level. These patterns are represented in the form of ‘factors’. Each factor describes a proportion of the total variance that occurs in the total data collected.<sup>1</sup>

A factor analysis was carried out with the data of the described survey of 169 practitioners. The model was limited to the extraction of 9 factors, which together account for 63% of the total variance of the data corpus. The nature of the analysis method means that the former factors each show a clearer profile (with high loads) than the latter, which only contribute a small part to variance detection. Table 1 shows the highest loads of the most effective items (in part) on the nine factors. How can these ‘bundles of competences’ be described below?

Table 1: Factor-loadings of the most effective items, theoretical categories and amounts of explained variance

Item <sup>2</sup>	Factor	Cat										
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	
... knows in interdisciplinary contexts his/her specific role as a social pedagogue/social worker, brings in appropriate specialist expertise.	G	ego	,724									
... can describe and analyse specific problems/situations and assess their possible consequences.	B		,679									
... can identify specific tasks as such and link them to appropriate interventions.	B		,652									
... uses the existing legal, institutional and organisational structures to achieve technical objectives.	E		,628						,355			
... is able to use theoretical concepts and models and to justify appropriate approaches to action.	B		,603									

<sup>1</sup> In the methodological approach, we are guided here by the work of Esteban et al. (2007), which applied this procedure to courses of social pedagogy in Spain.

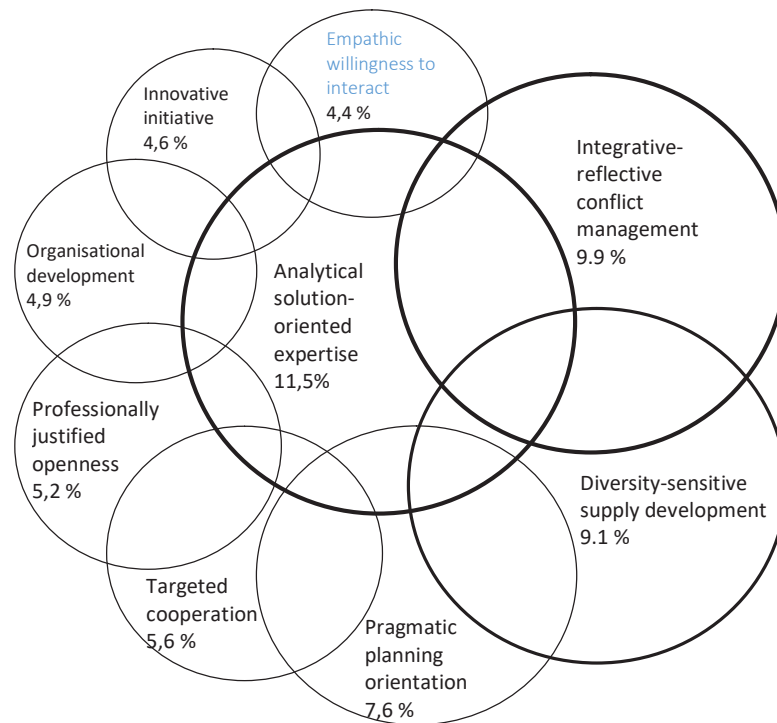
<sup>2</sup> All original items were shortened in this table.; Autor's own presentation on the basis of own data

... is able to withstand conflicts and manage them through consistent and trusting action.	F	,546			
... can manage proximity and distance to addressees well and ensure your own emotional balance.	I	,526			,268
... is aware of their strengths, weaknesses and personal values and promotes one's own self-reflection.	I	,507			
... respects the individuality and legal claims of the addressee regardless of class and culture	H	,410			
... motivates others and is committed to integrating different points of view.	F	,401			
... realizes power relations and framework conditions and advocates for autonomy of addressees.	H	,633	-		,402
... contributes concepts to the further development of offers and strengthens the influence on social change	C	,448		,254	,432
... is aware of the ethical foundations of social work, takes it into account when making decisions with diversity relevance	H	,384			,363
... can describe causes and backgrounds of social inequality, classify their importance for social work	A	,283		,486	
... can tap and use resources for implementation through professional research and argumentation.	F	,263	,258		,523
... can develop concepts and plan new measures flexibly and situationally.	C		,665		
... can work goal-oriented and effectively in the planning and implementation of projects	C		,380	,358	
... uses appropriate strategies to evaluate effects, and results of social work	D		-		,327
... knows the most important theories of social work, can name their central questions	A			,495	
... when planning and implementing concepts, takes into account the aspects of cost-effectiveness.	C		,257		,296
... is aware of the importance of global problems and cooperates with other disciplines	G		,263	,335	,325
... knows values, habits and language from other cultures and is aware of their importance for work	H		,262	-	-
... ensures personal development through continuous professional training	I			,238	
... is able to team work, can establish participatory contacts with colleagues as well as with addressees	G			,215	
... knows the supply, communication and decision-making structures of your own organization.	G				,441
... knows sources for obtaining scientific information and uses it for planning	D				-
					,402





Figure 2: Bundles of qualifications as results of factor analysis (schematic representation) (main component analysis, varimax-rotation; proportion of explained variance; N = 169)



Legend: Autor's own presentation on the basis of own data

The focus of practice-oriented skills is the *Profession-specific and targeted problem analysis*. Compared to the EQF (Figure 1), this set of capabilities touches on the aspects of description, analysis and assessment (B), professional-responsible action (E) and interdisciplinary cooperation (G). Apparently, the practitioners focus their weights on the intersection between the dimensions 'skills' and 'knowledge'. However, they see their discipline in clear cooperation with other disciplines.

The second almost equally important set of skills has a completely different focus: an inclusive and conflict-prone personality with leadership skills. In the sense of *Inclusive-reflexive conflict management*, social workers recognize the need to conduct their actions reflexively (I) and to take a leading role in conflict resolution (F). 'Skills' are thus closely linked to reflexive personality traits.

The third skill bundle *Diversity-sensitive supply development* establishes a link between the diversity-critical mission (H) and its conceptual (C) and justified implementation (A; F). This is where the complexity of the technical requirement is most evident: knowledge must be combined with planning competence in such a way that normative goals can be achieved.

The fourth skill set *Pragmatic planning orientation* is a follow-up to planning capabilities (C), but weights innovation and flexibility more than an explicitly advocatorial mission. Obviously, in contrast to the previous pattern, there is a contrast between a political-normative and a pragmatic orientation.

By analyzing these four capability bundles described so far, 38% of the total variance could be clarified. The emphasis on artistry in analysis, planning and responsible implementation

has become clear. The other factors also emphasize professional cooperation (C; G) as well as organizational (G) and empathic-reflexive (I) skills. Overall, it is noticeable that items with purely theoretical reference (A) are rarely significant in this model.

## 6 Conclusions

At the beginning of this analysis, the questions were raised, (1) how the concrete learning objectives are defined in the study program of social work and (2) which relationships can be established with the EQF (level 6). Despite some differences between European countries, it has been shown that a concrete range of necessary capabilities can be defined as the goals of studying. However, it is insufficient to consider these abstract learning objectives as separate skills. An understanding of professional action makes it necessary to focus on the artful solving of social problems.

This means that in concrete situations of action, knowledge, skills and attitudes always work together in the sense of a whole. An abstraction of individual skills may be important and appropriate for an academic definition of study objectives. However, when practitioners are asked about concrete necessary skills, they set completely different priorities: They confirm the need to make a wide range of capabilities available in everyday life in an inclusive and situation-appropriate manner. What concrete conclusions can we draw from this study?

(1) The EQF provides an appropriate framework for structuring qualification objectives for the study program of social work. However, the dimensions of 'KSC' must be specified for social work. Our results show that it is possible to assign specific capabilities to the EQF dimensions.

(2) The focus of skills as defined by practitioners is primarily emphasised on skills in the field of professional analysis and intervention planning. The skills for integrative conflict management and diversity-sensitive supply development are almost balanced. With regard to the EQF, this means a very close link between methodological and personal skills.

(3) The Competence dimension in the EQF is particularly important for social work. Responsibility and autonomy means here the ability to make independent judgments on normative issues and to act accordingly. This is only possible if social workers are emotionally balanced, manage their proximity and distance to clients well and critically reflect their own actions.

(4) If we transfer these findings to the study of social work, it means that the objectives of the study program cannot be oriented solely towards cognitive and technical-methodological objectives. Exercises in which attitudes are developed, which form guidelines for action, play a significant part in the training of professional qualifications. This also includes the training of the volitional aspect, to implement these attitudes also in one's own actions.

(5) In the end, the integration of these capabilities in the sense of a competent action can only be learned in close connection with practice. Of course, there are certain conditions for being able to act effectively in practice. This includes expertise and methodological and technical skills that can be acquired in the seminar room. In addition, one's own life experiences play a role in dealing with ethical-normative problems. But how these different forms of knowledge and skills can be implemented in fields of social work has to be experienced through own practical action. This means that studying social work can only achieve its goals if academic learning and professional action are already be combined, integrated and reflected in the process of training.

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