Albanian Social Work as a Challenging Journey from Education to Profession

Nevila Koçollari (Furxhiu)[1], Fiona Todhri[2], Eris Dhamo[3], Majlinda Nesturi[4], Asunta Toromëni[5], Estela Ferko[6]

Abstract

Social workers play a vital role in providing social services and improving the lives of individuals and the community. Despite this, their professionalism in fulfilling this role is related to how the services are organized and their education level, qualifications after completing studies, and rewards. The study aims to further investigate the assessment of social workers who graduated in Albania and their preparation for the labour market to highlight the need for continuous education towards professional improvement. It applies a mixed research methodology with the application of three research instruments: a cross-sectional questionnaire (n=450), semi-structured interviews (n=10), and focus groups (n=7). The findings influence the expansion of capacities and improvement of current curricula by periodically reviewing and enriching with new insights gained through experience, helping advance the professionals who reported being trained from different sources but don't possess certified and accredited continuous qualifications. Participants evidenced more practice hours to help students feel more prepared to understand and provide social services, especially in the early stages of their careers. Also, they expressed a deep commitment to their profession despite challenges such as inadequate pay, the overwhelming workload and problematic infrastructure towards services, the challenge of being still unrecognized in their professional roles, and the necessity of being supervised in their work. A strong connection between academic institutions, evidence and the labour market will influence the career possibilities of social workers and the well-being of individuals and society.

Keywords: *Social Work, Albania, Challenge, Higher Education, Continuous Education, Perception Profession, Labour Market.*

INTRODUCTION

This study comes at a time when in Albania, only in the last three decades have been graduated social workers when there are still no specific restrictive requirements for employment in approved positions for social workers, and when the licensing for the profession has only been approved for more than a year (UPS, 2023). As an important profession, social work is situated in the middle of problems, pulled between the individual challenges and society development, the powerful policymakers and the excluded disadvantages groups, negotiating at any time in conflict with both (Lucy & Chisala, 2006). Besides the overall social structure of society and the legacy from the past, Social Work can't be developed outside the context of the education system on one side and the social protection and care system on the other (Ymeraj, 2018). Social work has undergone significant changes since the beginning, reflecting the country's broader social, political, and economic dynamics. The profession is increasingly recognized for its role in promoting human rights, social justice, and community empowerment, even though it still faces critical issues like limited resources and institutional support or difficulties for the professionals to be accommodated in the labour market, social worker burnout, turnover, and job loss (Yang et al., 2024), also considering the technology advances and using to ensure safe social services too, which need better incorporation of digital tools in education and practice. It becomes increasingly important for a more inclusive future (Karki, 2024). Employment opportunities and salary levels vary significantly from region to region, affecting the attractiveness of social work as a career in certain fields. Pull factors such as flexibility and independence (Shanks & Lundström, 2023) are important for social

[1] University of Tirana, Faculty of Social Science Department of Social Work and Social Policy. E-mail: nevila.kocollari@unitir.edu.al/nkocollari@gmail.com https://orcid.org/0009-0002-8389-0012

[2] University of Tirana, Faculty of Social Science Department of Social Work and Social Policy. E-mail: fiona.todhri@gmail.com

[3] University of Tirana, Faculty of Social Science Department of Social Work and Social Policy. E-MAIL: eris.dhamo@unitir.edu.al https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0294-7623

[4] UN Women Albania National Consultant on Gender Statistics. E-mail: majlindanesturi@gmail.com

[5] University of Tirana, Faculty of Social Science Department of Social Work and Social Policy. E-mail: toromani.asunta2@gmail.com

[6] University of Tirana Department of Social Work and Social Policy. E-MAIL: stelaferko@yahoo.com

workers. Effective field education and continuing professional development are critical to career advancement and job satisfaction. Anticipation competencies are related to the ability to possess the foresight to intercept future circumstances and conditions (Kozminski al., 2022). Social service work, in short, requires suitably selected and trained workers who are motivated, empathic, reflective, and skilled (Gvelesiani et al., 2023:p. 13). The curriculum of the social work program at the University of Tirana was largely modelled on Western social work programs, focusing on human rights, social justice, and evidence-based practices. This academic development was instrumental in creating a professional identity for social workers in Albania and served as a critical step toward the better recognition and institutionalization of the profession. NGOs have an important role in all these processes, contributing to the field of practice and training and the employment of social workers. Graduated students in social work in Albania can be employed in different institutions that offer or develop social services, such as the health sectors and services, hospitals, therapeutic centres for children with special needs, municipality and administrative units, residential care, daily centres for children, youth services as well as third age services, residential shelters for abused women and victims of trafficking, the justice system, psychosocial services in schools, NGOs who take care and offer services for special vulnerable groups, etc. The Order of Social Workers is considered a key instrument that would help social workers capture the labour market through licensing or independent professionals in service delivery. Social work is an international profession, but even as an example, The Bureau of Labor Statistics in U.S. report in "Occupational Outlook Handbook: Social Workers," providing data and a comprehensive understanding of employment projections for social workers, shows continued growth in demand due to growing healthcare needs and an ageing population; Albania doesn't have any evidence to have a clear and updated background about the social workers in the labour market, their real needs, perceptions, contributions due to fieldwork, challenges and so on.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social Work in Albania

The term "social work" appeared in 1992, when the first academic class and School of Social Work was opened, based on the decision of the Council of Ministers no. 348, dated 10. 08. 1992, at the University of Tirana, as the Faculty of Social Work in collaboration with the "Grand Valley State" University of Michigan, USA . Its history was deeply connected with the nation's political and socioeconomic transformations after the fall of the Berlin Wall, which marked a critical turning point in Albania`s transition to a market economy and democratic governance. Changes from one regime to another are accompanied by changes in life rhythm, changes in family structure, cultural differences, and perceptions of how things should be (Dhamo & Koçollari, 2014). Most of the changes were difficult to predict for Albanians, whose expectations of a better life at the outset of the transition from communism were enormous, characterized by a desire to become a country like the rest of Europe. Their expectations for the future were great, but the path to turning them into a reality was lined with much naive thinking (Koçollari, 2013). The beginning of the transition period was tough for Albania and all Albanians who found themselves on the road of so-called political and economic "shock therapy", living with unemployment and poverty because of closed factories and industries.

From that period till now, in the digital area, the profession has walked in paths of difficulties and challenges, especially at the academic and practical levels, initially to introduce, recognize, and accommodate "social work" as a profession positioned in the structures of service management and policy drafting (Dhamo & Canaj, 2024). The continued years signed other education structures and instruments openings in the University of Tirana during the early 2000s, such as the Post Graduate School in 2001(converted as Master of Science), in 2004 the doctoral studies in Social Work (reopened as a scientific research program in 2020, according to the education Albanian law), in 2008, 2011 the first master programs, as well as new Social Work study programs opened also in University "Aleksandër Xhuvani" of Elbasan (2004), in University "Luigj Gurakuqi" of Shkodër (2005), in non-public University "Marin Barleti" in Tirana (2016), in non-public College University "Logos" in Tirana (2022). Actually, the Department of Social Work and Social Policy, the biggest among the same on other universities, manage the 5 years accredited Bachelor program in Social Work, graduating generalist social workers and Professional Masters profiled in Health and Education (accredited for 5 years) and Master of Science in fields of "Social Work" profiled in "Clinic Social Work" and "Social Policy and Sustainable Development" as well as "Criminal justice", "Child and family issues" and "Communication for social and

behavioural change" having the greatest number of students compared to other universities. In 2014, the Department of Social Work and Social Policy, assisted by UNICEF Albania drafted the "Order of Social Worker" which was approved by Law No. 163/2014 "On the Order of Social Workers, amended , while in 2021 was held the First Assembly of the Order of Social Workers. Now this structure is the main institutional key which manage the licensing process of the social workers in Albania as well as other crucial instruments, rules and protocols including supervision, ethic code and behaviour, accredited continuous education and performance.

According to Law No. 163/2014 "On the Order of Social Workers (Article 8), no individual can practice the profession of social worker, in the public or private system in the Republic of Albania, without being a member of the Order of Social Workers and without being equipped with the license for individual practice of the profession issued by this organization. The members of the Order of Social Workers are all social workers Albanian citizens who possess a diploma of higher studies "Bachelor" in the field of social work and a second-level diploma "Scientific/Professional Master" in the same field, issued by institutions of higher education, at home or abroad, as well as recognized and unified in the Republic of Albania by the ministry responsible for education. There are two Types of licenses issued by the Order of Social Workers 1) Certificate of the professional practice of the practitioner 2)License for the individual exercise of the profession for the social worker.

Theoretical Framework

The main reference theories applied to this part of the study were 1) the theory of labour market segmentation, 2) the theory of human capital, and 3) the theory of roles, but for the whole study, miother theories related to elements of the study have been reviewed and consulted.

Labour market segmentation theory

This theory posits that the labour market is divided into distinct segments with different characteristics and rules (Reich et al., 1973). Social workers can be found in primary (stable, well-paid jobs with benefits) and secondary (low-wage, less stable jobs). Also, changes in working conditions between public, private and non-profit sectors are considered, as well as sectors that allow atypical activity for professionals (Deakin, 2013), identification of barriers to mobility within the profession, job stability and career advancement opportunities for social workers.

2.2.2. Theory of Human Capital

It provides that human capital is the most important concept of economic development and it affects working capital in different ways (Smith, 1776: Mill, 1848; Schultz, 1961). This theory suggests that the economic value of individuals is based on their skills, education, adaptation and experience (Becker, 1962, 1964). It is in the interest of the economic operators in a society to increase the human capital of their companies, as much as to attract productive human capital. (Schultz, 1971). The level of education and specialized training affects employment opportunities and salary levels for social workers and administrators. Also, continuous professional development increases skills and career prospects. On the other hand, investing in education and training is essential for improving work performance and career advancement. Policies to support continuing education and professional development can increase the quality and retention of the workforce (Leoni, 2023).

2.2.3. Role Theory

Role theory examines how individuals fulfil the expectations of their social roles (Anglin et al., 2022). Social workers and administrators have distinct roles with specific societal and organizational expectations. Professionals' understanding of role stretch (difficulty in meeting role expectations) and conflict (competing demands from different roles) are vital in the multitude of expectations. Role clarity and support mechanisms can reduce burnout rates and increase job satisfaction.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The purpose of this study is to document the assessment of social workers who graduated in Albania on the education system and its preparation for the job market and on the needs and challenges in continuing education towards employment and profession for those who graduated in the last five years. The key question in this study is how they value the educational program and curriculum and how much it enables them to be professionals in providing social services. The research design is based on combining scientific research methods to study the research problem from different perspectives and provide the deepest and most extensive knowledge (Crotty, 1998; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Social science research embraces a mixed methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data to provide a more comprehensive analysis. Data collection methods include surveys and questionnaires aimed at social work professionals as well as interviews with key factors such as policymakers, NGO representatives and academic leaders, by applying a systematic guide through key "stages," "levels," and practical "tasks." (Luyt, 2012).

Both qualitative and quantitative research approaches were combined for triangulation between methods and the complementarity of multiple philosophical paradigms, research models, data collection, and analysis methods to gain a comprehensive understanding of supply-demand dynamics in the market of social work, to build sustainable development strategies of education programs (Denzin, 1978; Greene et al., 1989; Hesse-Biber, 2010). The essence of the triangle (questionnaire, interview, focus group) is the search for convergence and validation of the results of both research strategies, while complementarity aims at the use of quantitative and qualitative methods to measure distinct but overlapping aspects of social impacts in the labour market (Creswell, 2013; Mertens, 2015).

The target population of social workers was accessed using the Departments of Social Work and Social Policies databases for graduates from the last five years at the Universities of Tirana, Shkodra, Elbasan, and Korça. The population of interest comprises graduates in social work, totalling 3,181 individuals. A comprehensive sampling framework (Creswell, 2013) was developed by compiling a list of these graduates from academic data. A simple random sampling method was employed to select a sample of 450 graduates from the total population 3,181. This method ensures that each graduate has an equal probability of selection, minimizing bias.

For a population size (N) of 3181, the formula for sample size (n), for a 95% confidence level (Z ≈ 1.96) and 5% margin of error, the sample size should have been n=343.

$$n = \frac{N \cdot Z^2 \cdot p \cdot (1-p)}{(N-1) \cdot E^2 + Z^2 \cdot p \cdot (1-p)}$$

The resulting sample size was 450, which is significantly larger (118) than the calculated minimum of 343, so the sample is more than sufficient.

A questionnaire, which consists of 31 closed multiple-choice questions, was designed and posed according to the objectives of the Research. To validate the instrument's reliability, Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was used, which registered a value of 0.816, a result that denotes its internal consistency. Data collection began at the end of November 2023 and concluded at the end of April 2024, resulting in 476 responses. Data cleaning and excluding individuals who did not fit the criteria reduced the final count to 450 valid respondents, yielding a response rate of 94.5%. Nine social workers were selected via convenience sampling in their first year of full employment. Convenience sampling is based on the availability of participants who fit the characteristics sought by the researcher (Babbie, 2011).

For a qualitative tool of this study, purposive sampling was used for an in-depth understanding of the study phenomenon (Patton, 2015), so (7) focus group and (10) in-depth semi-structured interview sample emerged after saturation as an important indicator that a sample was appropriate for the phenomenon under study – that the data collected has captured the diversity, depth, and nuances of the issues under study – and thus demonstrates content validity (Francis et al., 2010). Achieving saturation has become a critical component of qualitative Research, helping data collection to be robust and valid (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013). "Qualitative data collected rigorously from small samples can essentially represent the full dimensionality of people's experiences"

(Young & Casey, 2019; Gill et al., 2008) and, therefore, should not be seen or presented as a limitation when the rigour of qualitative Research is assessed. Interviews were semi-structured (Bryman, 2008) to enable flexibility in the interviews to support the co-creation of data. Tracy (2020) also emphasizes the importance of purposive sampling: "Good qualitative researchers, at a minimum, engage in purposive sampling, meaning that they purposefully select data that fit the parameters of the questions, purposes, and research goals of the project". Several different qualitative approaches were used, with participants ranging from three to ten. For example, narrative research with three participants (Ntinda, 2018); four participant-narrative research (Bentley, 2021); five participants - narrative Research (Subedi, 2021); narrative research with seven participants (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022); narrative research with eight participants (Tiffany-Kinder, 2020); 10 participants- narrative research (Crawford, 2021; Bekele & Ago, 2022). The focus group took place during the same period of realizing interviews, after the qualification in the workplace for at least two years. The focus group aimed to gain the views of service provider for the education system and carer involvement: what had been useful and what could be improved from education curricula, what impact profession-experience had on their work, their evaluation of qualification amiable for their client and services and how much education affected their work. The criterion for selecting participants for the focus group and interview was that all participants had to have at least a Bachelor's degree in Social Work from a higher education institution in Albania and be employed in the social sector, either in public or non-public organizations. An interview guide (Nistor, 2024) was prepared in advance, including all topics relevant to the study and their possible relationships. An in-depth interview was applied with four main directions that focused deeply on the educational journey, the current and subsequent career, reflections on their education in social work and aspirations for themselves, and the field of social services in general in our country. The duration of interviews was approximately 28 to 63 minutes, with an average interview time of 46 min 40 seconds.

Analysis of data

The questionnaire's results were processed in an SPSS Statistics 22 database. The Pearson Chi-Square test was also used as a correlation measure, which allows for establishing the existence of a difference between categorical variables in the same population group. The significance value of the study corresponds to $p < .05$. Data collected from surveys of social workers were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

Thematic content analysis was used to analyze the data collected during the interviews and focus groups. This type of analysis was suitable for our study aim as a "method of identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The interview transcripts and the focus group materials were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. One of the researchers, before beginning the analysis process for the open-ended questions, created a list of starting codes (Monette et al., 2008), or themes that were expected to be evident in the transcripts based on literature review, theories, and hypothetical projections Next, 2 of the researchers conducted a series of first-level open coding of the responses to find recurring words and phrases that might represent common themes (Berg, 2009). At the end of the first round of coding, the third researcher conducted a second round of open coding to look for additional codes that might have been missed or not reflected based on the researchers' biases, noting only those predicted codes.
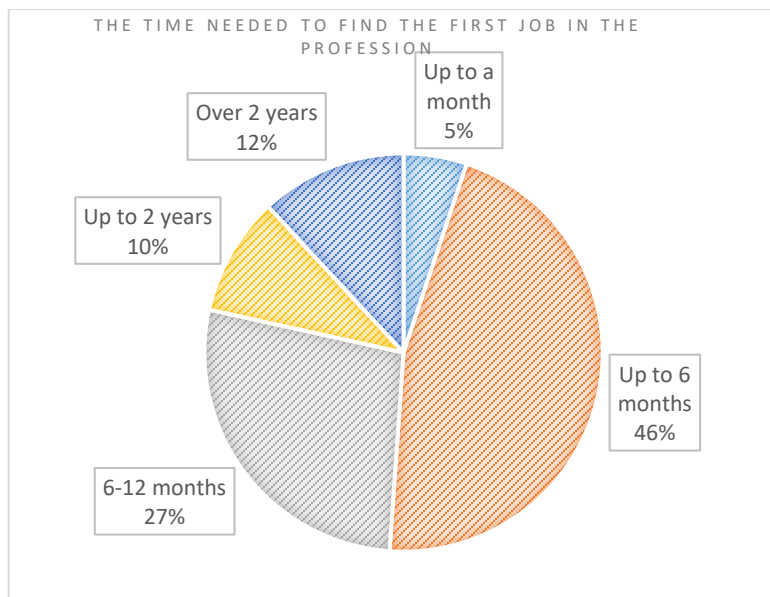
RESULTS

Quantitate Results

In this study, graduates from all Albanian HEIs who have offered study programs in social work in the last five years are represented. The highest number of participants in the study belongs to graduates from the University of Tirana, with 42.4% of the entire sample, followed by other HEI as University of Elbasan "Aleksandr Xhuvani" with 21.4 %, University of Shkodra "Luigj Gurakuqi" 16.8 %, University of Korça "Fan Noli" 6, 3 % and University "Barleti" with less than 5 %.96% of the participants live in Albania, compared to 4% abroad. Only 10% of the participants in the study are men, a percentage that is significant but also expected by the researchers since the feminization of the profession has been discussed for a long time. It is worth mentioning the fact that the study population reflects the same percentage of graduation in this field for men and women. An element that the researchers want to touch on, but not to stop, is the fact that in today's studies, gender is

no longer a characteristic that should be part of the questionnaire, as it is sensitive mainly among young people, but this study did not reflect this aspect.

We emphasize that the study focuses on the employment of young graduates in social work as an important issue of graduation success and education in harmonization with the labour market. 55% of social work graduates were employed in social services, 26% were not employed in the graduation profile but worked in another field, and 19% were not employed in fixed work. The main reasons reported to have hindered finding a job are many, starting with lack of experience 65%; the lack of job positions available for the profession they own 44%; the lack of references to facilitate the connection with the employer and guarantee their employment by 32%, as well as the level of payment by 23%, which also does not serve as a motivating factor for employment. Other factors that are considered as hindering factors for the employment of graduates in this field are various personal reasons (13%), the convenience of working hours (7%), the location of work and its convenience (7%) and "the opportunities offered to work-oriented me in another direction" in (1%).

62% of respondents had difficulty finding their first job in social services. The main sector where social workers are employed is the public sector, where employment is mostly in the central government, at 37% and in the local government, at 32%. This field of service provision is still new and unknown enough, and the knowledge and skills of graduates are not yet in high demand by the entrepreneurial market, even though this sector in our country is relatively new since only 7% of them are employed in the profitable or business sector. Even the participation of the non-profit sector (NPO) is only 24%.

Difficulties in finding suitable work are evident in our study sample, showing that almost half of them (46%) needed a minimum period of up to six months to be employed; this difficulty is expected and considering the possibility of students' employment during the period of studies. Only 12% of them reported that it took more than 2 years to find their first job, which is a significant percentage but still below the unemployment rate of young people in our country.

THE TIME NEEDED TO FIND THE FIRST JOB IN THE PROFESSION

Up to a month 5%
Up to 6 months 46%
6-12 months 27%
Up to 2 years 10%
Over 2 years 12%

Difficulties in finding suitable work are evident in our study sample, showing that almost half of them needed a minimum period of up to six months to be employed (Fig.1); this difficulty is expected, and considering the possibility of students' employment during the period of studies. Only 12% of them report that it took more than 2 years to find their first job; this is a significant percentage but still below the unemployment rate (22%) (INSTAT, 2024) of young people in our country.

Only 2% of the study population have not been educated/qualified or have not followed continuous training programs during the last 2 years; this value is relatively negligible as it refers only to the last 2 years, and personal circumstances are sufficient to justify the value. The most attended programs were conferences (47%) and short

courses or workshops (41%). This data is important to understand the existence of opportunities for continuing education in the fields of social work and social administration, as well as to understand the readiness of graduates in these fields to follow and continue with education, even after graduation.

Social Workers were asked about their perception related to the availability of social work continuing education programs in terms of their graduation, knowledge and ability needed to perform social worker tasks in practice, and only 14% of respondents rated it as not good at all, on the elements and characteristics of unavailability, needed in their work. Whereas, regarding the continuation of the qualification after graduation, continuing education, the existence of specific training according to the functions and tasks of social workers, services or client groups, the percentage of participants who do not rate the availability of programs as good at all, increases to 26%., as shown in Table 1. This coincides with the line of reasoning that focuses on the period during which they are profiled in the profession and the requirements for training, which are much more specific since they are related to specific work processes.

Availability of social work continuing education programs [Degree Program / After Graduation Programs]		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	Not good at all	64	14,2	14,2	14,2
	Very well	386	85,8	85,8	100
Availability of social work education programs that interest you? [Degree Program]	Total	450	100	100	
	Not good at all	118	26,2	26,2	26,2
	Very well	332	73,8	73,8	100
Availability of social work continuing education, after graduation programs/training that interest you? [After Graduation]	Total	450	100	100	

Remuneration is a stimulating element of the pursuit of qualification in the employment sector. However, only 10% of the employed report that they benefit from salaries over 61,000 (approximately 610 Euros) per month, and 90% have salaries lower than 60,000. All (approximately 600 Euros). Answer that confirms the social service provision sector as a generally undervalued and unattractive sector for the professionals employed in it. The results refer mainly to the sector of services in public institutions, according to the official categorization of the salary level and the sector of services provided by NGOs (Dhamo & Canaj, 2024).

The jobs available for graduates in social work are not available (40.4%), and this is an indicator that needs an in-depth analysis of the conditions when social problems, especially after the Covid-19 crisis, have undergone an increase and the number of clients, who have expressed a request for help and social support, has increased significantly. In many cases, difficulties in the employment market are also created by the attitude that employers hold from the first stages of recruiting specialists in the field and, without question, continuing their promotion and support. The participants in the study report that 40.4% of employers recruit individuals who do not have relevant degrees to fill vacancies for social workers. This is expected because the biggest employer for these graduates is the public sector, where the employment regulatory framework is correct.

Seeking new opportunities with a view to professional advancement (52%) was among the biggest career plans in the next two years, followed by having no plans other than to stay in one's current position (39%). Professional growth was another plan for the next two years, through attending training but not graduating (38%) and attending an additional degree in the same field (25%). Regarding employment in the European or world labor markets, the tendency for emigration did not escape even the respondents of this study, where 36% of the respondents aspired to be employed abroad. One in three professionals already part of the social services market in the country want to leave. However, as shown in Table 2, those social workers (44.6%) who are employed or have previously worked in the social services field do not see working abroad and emigration as an obstacle to their professional development.

		No, I did not work in the social field	I currently or previously work in the social field	Total
Plans to be employed abroad in the field of social services	No	86	201	287
	Yes	53	110	163
Total		139	311	450

Social workers report that they feel respected (67.8%) for the social services they provide in the agencies in which they are employed, they receive support and the necessary instructions from supervisors (67.3%), and they receive security and help for ethical work issues (63.8%).

Regarding employment in the territory, the tendency for emigration did not escape even the respondents of this study, where 36% of respondents aspired to be employed abroad.

One in three professionals already part of the country's social services market wants to leave.

The five most important factors that would influence a decision to change a current employment position would be a higher salary, in 89% of cases, followed by better benefits, which would be related to the country of a new job in 49% of cases, opportunities for training/education in (54%) of cases, as well as the most interesting work (45%) and personal reasons for (36%) of cases.

Qualitative Results

Qualitative data were audio-taped, recorded, transcribed, and analyzed by the study's investigative team. Recorded interviews were analyzed using a pile sorting technique for identifying themes in qualitative data to identify the main issues. Three main themes that emerged from analyses of data transcriptions were focused on 1) education, 2) practice, and 3) challenges, which can be explained at this moment. The profile of the participants in the qualitative Research, and specifically in the interviews and focus groups, included interviews n=10 (3 in Gjirokastër, 2 in Tiranë, 2 in Elbasan, 3 in Shkodër), and Focus Group n=7 (1 in Kukës, 1 in Vlorë, 2 in Tiranë, 2 in Elbasan, 1 in Shkodër). In total, n=17 participants, 16% of the participants in the qualitative research were male, and 84% were female.

Continued Experience and Qualification

Social work is a profession that determines continuous learning and adaptation, so one key consideration is the long-term impact of education. As social workers encounter new challenges, their expertise must remain relevant across different institutions and long into the future. It requires social workers to stay updated on the latest research, legislation, and practices, ensuring they can meet the changing needs of the communities they serve. The curricula of Social Work programs have a significant impact on the professional and personal development of students, ensuring a strong status in higher education and preparing them for the job market. They enhance the necessary knowledge and skills for success

 "… We need continuous education to remain in the labor market as long as we can. The institution trains us, but we need a certified diploma in long-term value…" (S.).

Licensing is anticipated to play an important role in enhancing the job market for social workers. The Order of Social Workers is interested in a very safe and healthy process of licensing and qualification for all professionals. Interviews and focus group discussions with social service providers reveal two parallel attitudes toward licensing:1) those who believe that **licensing can** strengthen the job security; 2) those more confused, considering the licensing as a massive benefit for professionals rather than important for their job security.

"…The license is professional dignity and protection in the workplace." (E.) *"…I think, it`s a necessity to have a license of profession in state institutions for professional practice. It doesen`t produce quality as well" (M.). "….We need certified and credited training. We need to know about the duration of the course, its cost, its importance, and its value for us. We must know if*

continuous education is valuable for us now and in the future, not just training for 1-2 days. In the institution, we are not free to choose what kind of training to get, according to our needs and future objectives." (G.) *"… Faculty is not ready yet, to offer training modules to gain the license in order to work in a specialized field as social worker."(S.)*

Practical Experience as Key for Developing Skills and Applying Knowledge in Real Work Environments

The university cIIurricula of the social work programs continue to play a crucial role in shaping professionals who are supposed to be well-prepared to address the needs of both society and the labor market. The respondents highlighted the need for continuous improvement of academic curricula in terms of the practice space and internship programs stimulation of critical thinking and also a stronger link between university and social service institutions. Coordinating theoretical subjects with practical training was highlighted as a key issue to be a "good social worker".

"…University education provides a solid foundation, but real-world experience is crucial to address the complexities we face in professional settings." (E.). *"…Combining theory with practice is a critical component in preparing students for the social work profession…"* (B.). *"…Encountering real-world cases during studies helps students to manage professional challenges more easily once they enter the workforce"* (P.). *"…Hands-on experience during education provides a smoother transition to professional roles. This has been a difficulty in my beginning."* (D.). *"…The university has given us a strong theoretical foundation, but this is not enough to face the real problems encountered at work,"* says one professional (F.).

Expanding internships and practical projects is essential for social work students to develop concrete skills and adapt to the demands of the labor market and face the challenges after graduation. The current practical experience, opportunities for volunteer work and structured internships throughout the studies according to them, should be adapted to the economic and social developments in the country.

"Practical cases during studies give students an advantage to face the real situations in the labor market," says one focus group participant (E.). *"….Building stronger practical skills in advance, I think, maybe an actual challenge for our ex-faculty professors."(M.)*

"More participation in practical activities would have helped us a lot in preparing ourselves for clients and community working and facing better the challenges of the labor market", said a former student (A.). *"Practical cases during studies give students an advantage to face the real situations in the labor market,"* says one focus group participant (E.). *"….Building stronger practical skills in advance, I think, maybe an actual challenge for our ex-faculty professors."(M.)*

Many social workers reported that during their studies (more during the *bachelor)* have been felt excluded or underutilized during internships because institutions failed to offer meaningful roles or relevant training. Although inter-institutional agreements exist, many institutions do not fully engage in these partnerships, leading to missed opportunities for student development.

"….As professionals we need to create a spirit of cooperation that helps shape students becoming successful professionals" emphasizes a social worker (F.) *"…The lack of involvement left us feeling disconnected from our future profession…"* (B.). *"While there are inter-institutional agreements for the development of practices, their implementation not always following the required standards." (D.)*

The Challenges and the role of Social Workers

There is still a low perception of job market segmentation among social workers when they express their opinion of "inequity within the profession" revealing discrepancies in salaries between those who working in healthcare, especially in hospitals, and those providing psychosocial services in schools. Maintaining a balance between workload and reward is crucial for encouraging and valuing these professionals.

"…Our colleagues who work in the health sector and hospitals, are better paid, compared to us, social workers in schools. We have discussed many times among colleagues the idea that the Order of the Social Worker must refer by the ministry and government the necessity of an instrument to the right measured and evaluation of our contribution on the field."(M.) "I face every day with many kinds of difficulties, but I love the profession and here I am." (B.)

Social workers in schools report dissatisfaction not only regarding their pay but also the lack of infrastructure, distance between schools, a great number of students per social worker, and insufficient essential materials. However, the majority of participants reported an overwhelming workload, including weekends, especially those who work in municipalities.

"We have difficulty moving and managing cases out of the institution, because of infrastructure lack. We are forced to use our cars and money to complete our everyday duties. It doesn`t seem fair and normal, but we need to work."(O.)"Working during the night with the children on the road is even risky."(D.) "We have no fixed working hours, because of the cases emergency. We work even during the weekend with the same salary" (D.) "We very often cover work-related expenses out of our pockets due to inadequate compensation, resulting in financial strain. And we have family too."(N.) "… The pay levels do not adequately reflect the complexities and challenges of our everyday roles. It leaves us feeling undervalued and overloaded in the efforts to provide essential services to the clients and communities." (L.) "The physical exhaustion, stress, and emotional toll faced by us, as social service providers, especially those working with vulnerable or in-risk populations, make our work challenging and sometimes insecure."(O.)

Another aspect reported by the participants connected to the challenge of after two decades filling still "in dark" in their professional roles, being often referred to merely as psychologists leading to a widespread misperception among the public and even among other service providers made it difficult for them to establish their identity in the labor market.

"It seems paradoxical that still people are confused about our role and position. We are not psychologists. This situation needs to be changed not only by the Order of Social Worker, but by and with us altogether." (G.)

Capacity building according to the fieldwork needs supervision. Social workers in Albania have a generalist approach to supervision from the academic knowledge but it never has been met in their everyday practice and job.

"We are exhausted and not very well professionally oriented in case managing, because

we are not supervised." (M.)

CONCLUSIONS

This paper contributes to the Albanian social worker literature by developing national Research on the social work profession, combining education with the practice of the profession, to identify education evaluation and its challenges in employment. Considering the analysis, set in a rapidly evolving environment with people increasingly dependent on social services, it can be concluded that it is of crucial importance for both future and current professionals to develop, improve, and constantly update their skills, not only the basic ones but also specific ones, due to the field they operate. The challenge for the social worker is to increase the effectiveness of service delivery by growing professionally, but the education system must better provide these opportunities. A strong connection between academic institutions and the job market is necessary to increase the well-being of individuals and society. While social workers are integral to delivering essential services, challenges related to job recognition, licensing, and compensation must be addressed. Understanding and appreciating their contributions is vital for expanding employment opportunities and improving overall job satisfaction. Social work professionals have difficulty identifying what specific skills, values, or knowledge a social worker has that make them competent in social work related to the specific tasks they perform for the specific age group of the beneficiaries of the services. Licensing of social workers is an important step towards improving the job market for this profession. While some see it as a support and strengthening of their positions, others perceive it as an obstacle to their professional development. This division of positions underscores the need for discussions and relevant policies to address all groups' concerns. Maintaining a balance between workload and reward is crucial for encouraging and valuing these professionals. Regular reviews of salaries and incentives are necessary to align them with workers' needs and the job market's demands. In general, there is a consensus that cooperation between educational institutions and those providing social services should be improved to ensure students have more meaningful practical experiences and help shape future generations of social workers and administrators. Continuing training cycles and the demand for certified knowledge are essential for raising the level of professionals. Creating spaces for specific continuing education programs is a necessity for professional development. Despite the low wages and difficult conditions, most

social workers express confidence in their profession. This shows the need for increased awareness of the importance of social work, the administration of social policies and services, and the necessity of developing appropriate mechanisms and opportunities for career advancement. There is a need for greater awareness and collaboration among institutions to ensure that future social workers are adequately prepared to serve society's needs. Further Research is recommended to better emphasize and promote the knowledge, skills, and practices necessary to guarantee success in a profession in the contexts in which we live and learn today. More should be done from education and curriculum in practical and professional contexts to enable easily accessible qualifications for all professionals, protect these assets from consumption, which are at risk in this environment, and reward them more.

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Author Contributions

All authors have agreed on the final version and meet at least one of the following criteria:

• substantial contributions to conception and design, acquisition of data, or analysis and interpretation of data.

• drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content.

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