# CRITICAL THINKING IN HIGHER EDUCATION STUDY PROGRAMS: CASE STUDY

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Abstract. Social work in its essence has direct relation with critical thinking what is expressed in the Global definition of social work. It is one of the professions which need immediate reaction to unexpected changes in uncertain situations; therefore, it is relevant to discuss critical thinking contribution to the development of social work profession and its presence in social work education. The aim of the article is to discuss importance of critical thinking in higher education and to present data of case study, which reveals how critical thinking is expressed in social work education. Case study was done in country's one university. Descriptions of all social work study programs subjects' descriptions were analysed using quantitative and qualitative content data analysis. The analysis of social work study programs at selected university revealed that critical thinking is more expressed in master level than bachelor level social work study programs and it is more described as domain- specific then domain-general, is mentioned in learning outcomes and assessment and very rarely – study methods. The case study identified the gap between formality and reality. Theoretically critical thinking should be part of social work study programs; however, it is wide possibilities for enhancing critical thinking manifestation in the reality of teaching and learning. *Keywords:* competences, critical thinking, higher education, social work study programs.

#### Introduction

Importance of critical thinking in higher education is emphasized in international and national policy documents (UNESCO, 2009; The European Higher Education Area, 2012; OECD, 2016; World Economic Forum, 2016; Council of the European Union, 2018; Lietuvos Respublikos Seimo nutarimas, 2012) and various research (Elen et al., 2019; Indrašiene et al., 2018; Indrašiene et al., 2019; Indrašiene et al., 2020; Kazlauske, 2020; Penkauskiene et al., 2020). In classical critical thinking theoretical approach, it is described as "a liberating force in education and a powerful resource in one's personal and civic life" (Facione, 1990, p.3).

Critical thinking becomes very important in dealing with complex, uncertain, evolving and urgent situations when rapid changes call for timely reactions which should be addressed by making sustainable decisions. Social work is one of the professions which need immediate reaction to unexpected changes in uncertain

situations; therefore, it is relevant to discuss critical thinking contribution to the development of social work profession and its presence in social work education.

The aim of the article is to discuss importance of critical thinking in higher education and to present data of case study, which reveals how critical thinking is expressed in social work education. Country's one university was chosen for case study. It was conceptualised and designed according to Elen & al. (2019) framework - one of the leading documents about critical thinking in higher education which declares that in order to support the development of critical thinking, it has to be a goal of education and to manifest at three levels: institutional, teaching program and course. The last two levels are presented in the article by discussing qualitative and quantitative data of descriptions of all social work study programs and study subjects at that university.

## Critical Thinking in Social Work Higher Education – Theoretical Approach

Emphasis on critical thinking and its expansion in research started from Delphi project when American Philosophical Association commissioned forty-six experts in critical thinking teaching, research, assessment in natural and social sciences, education, and philosophy to participate in the two years project. According to their consensus statement in executive summary, critical thinking is understood ,,to be purposeful, self-regulatory judgment which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, as well as explanation of the methodological, criteriological, evidential. conceptual, or contextual considerations upon which that judgment is based" (Facione, 1990, p. 3). Six cognitive core skills of critical thinking were defined in the document: interpretation, analysis, evaluation, inference, explanation and self-regulation. Later on, this initial consensus evolved, split in various approaches, perspectives, theoretical schools (Indrasiene et al., 2019), but always was defined as essential tool of inquiry.

Since Delphy project plenty of studies about critical thinking in higher education were done, mentioning chronologically few but not all most known: Siegel, 1988; Barnett, 1997; Halpern, 1998; Paul & Elder, 2001; Andrews, 2007; Badcock, Pattison & Harris, 2010; Lim, 2011; Ku, Ho, Hau & Lai, 2014; Liu, Frankel & Roohr, 2014; Davies, 2015; Loes & Pascarella, 2017. Connection of critical thinking and social work education was investigated at less extend but still various research could be named: Plath, English, Connors & Beveridge, 1999; Coleman, Rogers & King, 2002; Gibbons & Gray, 2004; Heron, 2006; Sheppard & Charles, 2014; Mathias 2015; Sharma 2015; Samson 2016; Sheppard, & Charles, 2017; Samson, 2018; Sheppard, Charles, Rees, Wheeler, & Williams, 2018. Investigations at national level (Gudzinskiene, 2006; Rimienė, 2006; Ubartaite-Vingiene, 2007; Tolutiene & Domarkiene, 2010; Penkauskiene, 2016; Indrašienė et al., 2018; Penkauskiene et al, 2020) analysed critical thinking on more general level, paying little attention specifically to the critical thinking in social work education.

Social work in its essence has direct relation with critical thinking what is expressed in the Global definition of social work. In its core mandate it is written that , the development of critical consciousness through reflecting on structural sources of oppression and/or privilege, on the basis of criteria such as race, class, language, religion, gender, disability, culture and sexual orientation, and developing action strategies towards addressing structural and personal barriers are central to emancipatory practice where the goals are the empowerment and people" (https://www.ifsw.org/what-is-social-work/globalliberation of definition-of-social-work/). And it is once more emphasized in Principles saying that "constructive confrontation, deconstruction and change may be facilitated through a tuning into, and an understanding of particular cultural values, beliefs and traditions and via critical and reflective dialogue with members of the cultural group vis-à-vis broader human rights issues" (https://www.ifsw.org/what-issocial-work/global-definition-of-social-work/). It is obvious then that social work education needs to include not only learning professional skills but also core cognitive critical thinking skills using information from different sources and respecting the dignity and diversity of vulnerable people (Samson, 2016). Sheppard & Charles (2017) add that professional social worker could successfully cope with challenging situations only using intellectual endeavors and critical thinking in searching for solutions in a complex and multifaceted environment.

### Methodology

Case study was chosen to use in research. Usually case study is described as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real time context (Rubin & Babbie, 1993) and is chosen in order to understand and explain specific cases, when case could be described as having clear boundaries (Creswell, 2014). Sampling university for inclusion in the case study these criteria were applied: social work study programs implemented at bachelor and master levels, social work study programs are suggested for full time and part time studies, study program description. At selected university at the moment of the research in 2020, there were four study programs awarding degree in social work: 1 bachelor (full-time and part time) and 3 master (1 full-time and 2 part-time) level (see Table 1).

Acronym	SWB	SWM	SWChRM	SWChYM
Level	Bachelor	Master	Master	Master
<b>Duration in years</b>	4 full/5part	2 part time	2 part time	1,5 full time
	time			
Study language	national	national	national	English
No of subjects	46	18	14	15

Table 1 Social Work Study Programs

Bachelor (SWB) and one master (SWM) level study programs were of generalist social work, two other master level study programs (SWChRM, SWChYM) were specialised and prepared graduates to work with specific vulnerable groups. One master level study program was taught in English, all the rest in national language.

In total there were 93 study subjects in all study programs: 46 in bachelor and 47 in master level study programs. Descriptions of all study subjects constituted the final array of sampling. Search key word "kritin\*" was applied for screening all study subjects' descriptions. Then descriptions were read by researcher for checking if "kritin\*" is used to describe critical thinking or another item. Only these study subjects' descriptions which had connection with critical thinking were left for analysis: 29 in bachelor and 31 in master study programs.

In the next step qualitative and quantitative content analysis were applied for the analysis of study subjects' descriptions. Quantitative content analysis aims to provide numerically based summary of a chosen message set, it summarizes rather than reports all details concerning a message set (Neuendorf, 2017) while qualitative content analysis allows to understand the meaning behind the data (Maxwell, 2008). In data analysis process, firstly, using quantitative content analysis, share of study subjects with critical thinking was calculated according to study years and semesters, obligatory and elective courses. Secondly, using qualitative content analysis, it was searched in what structural parts of study subject description and how (in what wording) critical thinking is mentioned.

### **Critical Thinking in Social Work Study Programs' Descriptions – Findings**

Quantitative data analysis of bachelor level study program shows that the biggest share of study subjects with critical thinking is in the 4<sup>th</sup> study year (70.00%), the lowest – in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year (46.15%). The 1<sup>st</sup> and the 3<sup>rd</sup> years are similar, having 53.33% and 57.14% respectively. Looking more specifically to subjects' share in semesters, the critical thinking is most often found in the seventh (83.33%), the fifth (62.50%) and the first (54.14%) semesters. It could be assumed that critical thinking in the seventh semester as final semester before writing thesis, and in the first semester which includes more general then

professional study subjects, could be reasonable. However, there is no clear explanation why the fifth semester has so strong emphasis on critical thinking. Further research interviewing program's developers, teachers and students would probably clarify the situation. Another finding is that critical thinking is more expressed in the obligatory (56.52%) then in the elective (37.50%) more general education courses what leads to the assumption that critical thinking in social work study program manifests more as domain-specific then domain-general what supports ideas of McPeck (1990), Garside (1996), Moore (2011), Tiruneh et al. (2016) who assume that critical thinking better could be learnt in the context of a specific study field.

Qualitative data analysis showed that critical thinking is expressed in learning outcomes, study methods and assessment (Table 2).

Critical thinking is mentioned in assessment (in 15 study subjects) and learning outcomes (in 11 study subjects) more often than in study methods (in 8 study subjects), however, there is difference in describing learning outcomes and assessment or study methods. If learning outcomes encompass more content information, critical thinking in assessment and study methods is described in standard stencil way. Assessment of making critical remarks is the main choice of study subject descriptions' developers. Assessment of the formulation of critical comments and insights, self-critical approach is mentioned episodically. In all except one study subjects where critical thinking is mentioned in study methods - critical thinking stimulating study methods – is used. The exception is one study subject which applies the method of critical analysis of intolerance.

Presentations of learning outcomes provide more understanding about critical thinking. The most prevailing critical thinking competence is evaluation (of the phenomena of reality, scientific and philosophical thought, social discourses, knowledge, theoretical approaches and their strengths and weaknesses, real practical situations, goals and measures of welfare policy) what is close to Ennis (1987), Beyer (1987) definitions which emphasis the evaluation of assumptions, causes and opinions. Then follows analysis (of situations, critical processes', scientific information) which is described in Facione (1990), Halpern (1998), Beyer (1987), Siegel (1988) sense. Reasoning is mentioned in one study subject's description. There are several cases in which critical thinking as such ability to think critically - is mentioned. In all learning outcomes critical thinking is defined as cognitive skills in its classical understanding (Facione, 1990).

No.	Description	Туре
	To develop the ability to critically evaluate the phenomena of	Learning outcomes
	reality, scientific and philosophical thought, social discourses,	
1.	knowledge.	
	The method of critical analysis of intolerance is applied	Study methods
	The provision of critical remarks is assessed.	Assessment
2.	To evaluate critically social work theoretical approaches, their	Learning outcomes
	strengths and weaknesses	
3.	Ability to reason/to think critically	Learning outcomes
	To critically evaluate the theoretical approaches of social	Learning outcomes
4.	work, their strengths and weaknesses, to evaluate the	
	provision of critical remarks	
5.	Critically and constructively identify, analyse and solve	Learning outcomes
	situations of legal and social significance, critically evaluate	
	and correctly solve real practical situations in social work	
6.	The aim is to develop the student's critical thinking	Learning outcomes
7.	The ability to critically evaluate the goals and measures of	Learning outcomes
	welfare policy	
8.	Development of critical analytical thinking	Learning outcomes
9.	Critical processes' analysis	Learning outcomes
10.	Ability to think critically	Learning outcomes
11.	Ability to analyse critically	Learning outcomes
12.	Critical analysis of scientific information.	Learning outcomes
	Methods that stimulate critical thinking are applied.	Study methods
13.	Critical thinking stimulating study methods are used	Study methods
14.	Critical thinking stimulating study methods are used	Study methods
15.	Critical thinking stimulating study methods are used	Study methods
16.	Critical thinking stimulating study methods are used	Study methods
	Making critical remarks	Assessment
	Students are given critical thinking stimulating tasks.	Study methods
17.	The formulation of critical comments, the formulation of	Assessment
	critical insights, making critical remarks.	
18.	Critical thinking stimulating study methods are used	Study methods
	Making critical remarks	Assessment
19-29	Making critical remarks	Assessment

Table 2 Critical Thinking in Bachelor Study Subjects' Descriptions

Differences in critical thinking description in learning outcomes, study methods and assessment partly could be explained by structure and requirements of template. Study subject description usually has a standardised template and there is no much freedom of wording, however, choosing and including critical thinking in assessment and study methods should be reasoned and justified. There are very few study subjects which include combination of study methods and assessment or study methods and learning outcomes and only one which demonstrates cohesion of learning outcomes, study methods and assessment. Quantitative data of master level study programs is presented in Table 3.

	SWM	SWChRM	SWChYM
1 year	81.82	66.67	75.00
2 year	57.14	40.00	100.00
1 semester	100.00	60.00	100.00
2 semester	50.00	75.00	57.14
3 semester	66.67	50.00	100.00
4 semester	0.00	0.00	Not applicable
Obligatory courses	66.67	Not applicable	75.00
Elective courses	83.33	Not applicable	66.67

Table 3 Share of Subjects with Critical Thinking (%)

Research data shows that bigger share of study subjects with critical thinking is in the 1<sup>st</sup> study year (SWM – 81.82%, SWChRM – 66.67%) in the study programs taught in national language. Master level social work study program taught in English put bigger emphasis on critical thinking in the 2<sup>nd</sup> year – all study subjects (100.00%) include critical thinking. Such situation could be explained by different duration of studies as study program in English is more intense and is implemented in 1.5 years. Data shows that study program taught in English by local and foreign teachers for national and international students in itself has a bigger emphasis on critical thinking thus allowing to assume that international dimension is a stronger prerequisite for critical thinking then local national context. The difference also is seen in the obligatory and the elective courses' shares. There are more elective study subjects with critical thinking in study program taught in national language (83.33%), but more obligatory study subjects with critical thinking in study program taught in English language (75.00%).

The same as in bachelor level study program data analysis showed that critical thinking in master level study program is expressed in learning outcomes, study methods and assessment differently. Critical thinking in relation with study methods is mentioned only once in the study subjects of all three programs. Critical thinking in assessment is included much more often in study programs taught in national language and only in rare cases in study program taught in English which contrary to others put a very big emphasis on critical thinking in learning outcomes.

Out of six cognitive skills defined in Delphy report (Facione, 1990) two of them are mentioned in all three programs. The most dominating skill is analysis, at less extend but also in all programs evaluation skill is included. Interpretation, inference, explanation and self-regulation are absent in study subjects' descriptions. As was said earlier, teachers should follow template, however, examples of qualitative data show that teachers could describe and emphasise critical thinking in specific sentences in outcomes (for ex., critically analyze modern social work theories theories), study methods (for ex., stimulating critical thinking) and assessments (for ex., the provision of critical comments is assessed). In comparison with bachelor level study program in master level study programs critical thinking is more often mentioned in assessment then learning outcomes.

In summary, content analysis of social work study programs at selected university revealed that critical thinking is more expressed in master level than bachelor level social work study programs and it is more described as domainspecific then domain-general. It is mentioned in learning outcomes and assessment and very rarely – study methods. Analysis and evaluation as cognitive critical thinking skills are clearly inscribed in learning outcomes: evaluation dominates in bachelor and analysis in master level study programs. Assessment usually is presented in very general and abstract terms. Inconsistency of the content in study subjects' descriptions allows assuming that including critical thinking in social work study programs is more coincident then conscious endeavour.

#### Conclusions

Even the importance of critical thinking is emphasised in international and national education policy documents, however its manifestation in study programmes is not so obvious.

The case study identified the gap between formality and reality. At the study program level there is no clear description of critical thinking as integral part of the studies. At the course level there are some descriptions of critical thinking as an important learning outcome, however, more vaguely explaining how they can be realized. Further investigation is needed for the discussion about critical thinking at the institutional level – is there a clear mission statement recognising critical thinking as an important goal.

Theoretically critical thinking should be part of social work study programs; however, there are wide possibilities for enhancing critical thinking manifestation in the reality of teaching and learning.

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