

Development of Social Work Education in China in the Context of New Policy Initiatives: Issues and Challenges

Yuegen Xiong & Sibin Wang

Social work education in China has experienced a very rapid expansion in recent years. Top Chinese leaders have advocated strongly for social work and in 2006, the government launched a series of new social policy initiatives aimed at professionalizing social work. This has provided an opportunity for researchers and educators to think about the possible impact and future challenges confronting the civil affairs sector and social work educators. In this paper, the authors will provide an analysis of the recent development of social work education in China, and also highlight the major challenges that social work educators and the social services sectors will encounter in the context of the professionalization of social work.

Keywords: Social Work Education; Social Work; China; Professionalization

Introduction

The emergence of social work as a profession has been considered to be a symbol of organized professional intervention toward public issues and private troubles, which surfaced as an institutional response to changes in social structure and social needs (Parsons, 1939). In the West, the trajectories of social work education are rooted in the histories of charity organization societies and in informal helping activities during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, the history of social work education in China is very short. As one aspect of economic reform and modernization, Chinese social work education revived in the 1980s when four universities were initially approved by the Ministry of Education to establish the

Yuegen Xiong & Sibin Wang, Peking University, China.

Correspondence to: Dr Yuegen Xiong, Department of Sociology, Peking University, Beijing 100871, China. Tel: 0086-10-62757189 (Office); Fax: 0086-10-62768827; Email: yxiong@pku.edu.cn

baccalaureate programs—‘Social Work and Management’—designed to train social work students (Pearson & Phillips, 1994; Ngai, 1996). With market reform, China has since witnessed a drastic expansion of social work education programs in the past decade and the number of schools offering such programs has increased from 20 in 1994 to 200 in 2006 (China Association for Social Work Education, 2007). Currently, after the USA, China has probably the largest number of schools offering social work training at university level. In recent years, a growing number of papers have drawn attention to the phenomena of social work education development in China (Pearson & Phillips, 1994; Ngai, 1996; Yuen-Tsang & Wang, 2000; Chan & Chan, 2005; Yip, 2007). However, a robust analysis of the impact of such rapid growth in social work education programs and of the recent policy changes has so far not been available. In this paper, we aim to develop such an analysis.

As a socialist country, China has a very centralized administrative system with a government-led pool of civil affairs ‘cadres’, or workers who provide semi-professional social services to the most vulnerable people in society. Professional social work practice has been almost non-existent (Wang, 1995). Meanwhile, many social work schools have had difficulty designing curricula, training students and recruiting educators in the context of minimal professionalization. The link between university social work training and the real needs of social services was weak because there were insufficient professional positions to meet the needs of growing numbers of social work graduate students. With the expansion of social work schools, the China Association for Social Work Education (CASWE) has played a significant role in leading and promoting professional social work training and has had a profound influence both on formalizing the curriculum and improving the quality of social work teaching. Moreover, in recent years, Chinese social work educators have begun to respond positively to the needs of growing numbers of frail elderly, unemployed workers and street children, while central government has developed and implemented its policy of building a harmonious society.

Two decades ago, Chinese intellectuals embraced a ‘Spring of Sciences’ when government policy strengthened science and technology to meet the needs of modernization in the initial stage of economic reform. In the summer of 2006, the Ministry of Civil Affairs and the Ministry of Personnel issued a provocative document entitled ‘The Regulations on Evaluation of Social Work Professional Levels’, which publicized the government’s recognition of social work as a profession and set out rules for its regulation. This document provided a new opportunity for social work schools to develop their training programs and to motivate students to become equipped with professional knowledge and ethics. However, professional social services jobs remained inadequate. Months later, Chinese social work educators and civil affairs cadres warmly welcomed a ‘Spring of Social Work’ when the Sixth Plenary Meeting of the 16th Central Committee of the China Communist Party published an important document focusing on building a socialist harmonious society. Development of a powerful group of social work professionals is one of its central tasks in the future (Central Committee of China Communist Party, 2006). As the socio-political context in China changes, so does the direction of social work

practice and social work education. This new policy has fueled a heated discussion about the development of the social work profession and has also become a driving force to speed up its growth (Li, 2006; Wang, 2006).

This article discusses the recent development of the social work profession in the context of new policy initiatives in China and their impact on social work education, mainly focusing on its rapid development in the context of socio-political changes and the tensions and challenges that both government and educators confront in the course of developing social work as a profession. A major premise in this discussion is that development of social work education in China is not only associated with social changes and emerging social needs generated by economic reform, but it is also connected with a series of new policy initiatives implemented by the government. More importantly, external forces are becoming more influential in defining and shaping the content, nature and boundaries of the social work profession. We will also explore how Chinese social work educators can take advantage of these new policy initiatives to respond to emerging social needs, raise the status of social workers and strengthen the identity of the social work profession in China.

Rapid Development of Social Work Education in Reform China after the 1990s

China witnessed a phenomenal expansion of social work education after 1999. Bachelor degree programs mushroomed at the universities and colleges as a result of the market economy and social policy reform. Although there was a positive response by social work educators to professionalization, the sudden increase in social work education programs generated debate and discussion about this newly emerging discipline.

Increase of Training Programs

Historically, the development of social work education has been deeply influenced by several factors, namely, socio-economic changes, policy reform, technological innovations, and ideological shifts. In China, in the past decade, the trend of fast increasing social work education has been linked with economic reform and the revival of the social sciences. In particular, the re-introduction of sociology into the universities after 1979 provided an opportunity for an applied social science to play its role in economic reform and social development. Compared to the two mature disciplines of economics and law, the development of sociology in China took a relatively long time to become significant. However, its significance was acknowledged when it was categorized as a first-class discipline in the social sciences. Being considered as a branch of sociology, social work has been incorporated into sociology since the 1980s. According to Madam Lei Jieqiong, a distinguished sociologist at Peking University and also an influential stateswoman in Chinese politics who returned to China from the USA after her years of postgraduate study in the 1930s, civil affairs work is social work with Chinese characteristics (Lei, 1994). In addition, it was widely recognized that the services provided by the civil affairs sector are in

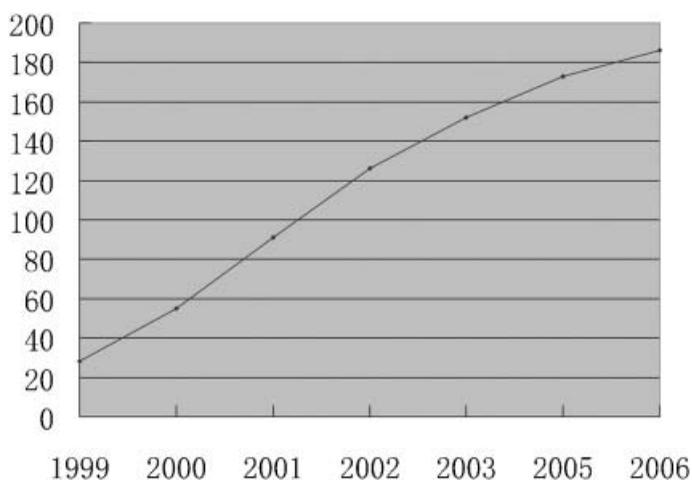
general similar to professional social work in Western countries, and may be considered as social work with Chinese characteristics.

In the first decade of economic reform, the Chinese government faced a series of challenges arising from reform of the state-owned enterprises, including for example, downsizing government, peasant migration to urban areas and an ageing population. The dismantling of government-led welfare provisions combined with increasing social needs created serious pressures on the marginalized social welfare system. Besides these internal forces, institutional and individual support from the international social work education community occurred in the 1980s and was a remarkably important source in accelerating the development of social work training in China. In 1988, the Asia-Pacific Association for Social Work Education (APASWE) collaborated with Peking University in organizing an international conference on social work education in Beijing. This was portrayed as an initial contact for Chinese social work educators with their Western counterparts. In 1993, the Chinese government adopted a policy of comprehensively promoting the market economy, including restructuring the social welfare system. From the mid-1990s, a growing number of universities began to establish social work training programs at baccalaureate level. In addition, some universities began to set up independent departments of social work. In 1999, only 24 universities and colleges had established social work training programs; by 2001, the number had increased to 36; in 2003, to 172; and by the end of 2006 there were in total 186 member schools (China Association for Social Work Education, 2006) (see Figure 1).

To understand the causes for this rapid development after the 1980s, two factors should be considered. First is that economic growth and social transitions generated a growing need for professional social services, in which social work education was expected to have a key role. Second, 'The Policy Agenda of Promoting Education in China: Towards the 21st Century' from 1999, the government policy of accelerating higher education, mainly designed and implemented by the Ministry of Education, has had a major impact. The government has tried to promote the development of higher education at the provincial level for the sake of reducing the budgetary burden and shifting the administrative power of some universities and colleges from central to local governments. Consequently, local governments have more power and freedom to plan the development of higher education.

Government policies of promoting a market economy at the same time as the emergence of new social problems (urban poverty, unemployment and aging) have all had a substantial impact on social work educators considering the future of social work in China. In 1991, under the leadership of the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the China Association of Social Workers was established in the People's Hall in Beijing and the government officially declared that social work as a helping profession was fundamental to socio-economic development and the social stability of the country. In 1994, under the leadership of the Ministry of Education, the China Association for Social Work Education was founded as the leading professional organization for schools of social work with the aim of standardizing training programs all over the country.

Chinese scholars have argued that the expansion of social work education in China could be considered as an asymmetrical situation between economic growth and



Source: China Association for Social Work Education, 2006.

Figure 1 Change of Social Work Schools in China during 1999–2006. Source: China Association for Social Work Education, 2006.

social development (Wang, 2004; Xiong, 2005). However, the development of social work education is closely related to economic growth in the different regions. The majority of social work training programs are concentrated in the economically developed regions (mainly eastern and central regions). Programs are still insufficient in western regions where the economy is obviously lagging behind (Xiong, 2005).

Looking back at the short history of social work education development in China during the 1980s and 1990s, we can summarize the fundamental features as follows. First is the inadequacy of professional training among Chinese social work educators, and the transfer of social work educators from the social sciences or the humanities to this new field. Second, most universities or colleges lack a systematic or standardized social work curriculum and the content of classroom teaching might be random due to the low level of educators' professional expertise. Third, social work educators confront the difficulty of obtaining appropriate textbooks and the majority of social work reference materials are unavailable. Fourth, social work schools have insufficient field placement resources. Fifth, an obvious gap between theory and practice exists. However, today, significant changes are now occurring due to the growing importance of the discipline and the increasing need for social services.

Curriculum Development

The curriculum is an essential nexus of social work education, which has a substantial impact on the quality of professional training both in the classroom and in the field. In the 1980s, before any Chinese social work educators received professional training,

they mainly developed their own curricula by importing ideas and training models from Hong Kong. At this stage, most educators had difficulty grasping the concepts, theories and practice models. In 1994, with the founding of CASWE, one of its main aims was to standardize curricula all over the country.

In 2004, CASWE published guidelines for teaching social work for all universities and colleges offering degree programs. Meanwhile, under the supervision of the Ministry of Education, CASWE established 10 social work foundation courses with the aim of standardizing curricula. These included: introduction to social work theory, casework, groupwork, community work, social administration, social policy, introduction to social security, and three sociology courses. These foundation courses have become a universal standard for social work teaching, providing a solid basis for curriculum design (The Ministry of Education, 2004). Meanwhile, CASWE also organized a series of workshops on the curriculum and course planning in order to further strengthen the standard of social work teaching. By combining Western social work theories, practice approaches and the Chinese characteristics of formal and informal helping, Chinese social work educators have recognized that strengthening the content of practice models is a crucial step in indigenization (Zhang, 1999; Yin, 2003; Tong, 2003).

As a big country with vastly distinctive social and economic conditions, China has to develop its own social work curriculum to reflect its diverse and changing culture, values and human needs. According to Yan & Tsang (2005), six factors influence the design of the social work curriculum in China: the rapid increase of new programs; the background of the universities or colleges; political ideologies; policy advocacy by educators; indigenization; and the balance between Western training and Chinese approaches. Curriculum design has to not only reflect the fundamental goal of increasing the competence of both students and teachers, but also to raise educators' cultural sensitivity and awareness.

Field Practice

Field education is at the heart of social work training and must enhance students' values, knowledge and skills in helping vulnerable people. However, one of the challenging difficulties confronting Chinese social work educators is the inadequacy of students' field practice either in agency settings or the community context. Students generally have high expectations of their field practicum experience, especially for their first placement, but although Chinese social work educators realized the significance of field practice, placements were not allocated credits for four reasons. First, social work schools did not have full-time field supervisors responsible for helping the students to identify the doubts, difficulties and emotional problems that they encountered during field practice. Usually, course instructors acted as part-time field supervisors and their time and energies were strictly limited. Second, placements in appropriate social services agencies or communities were not available. Third, a shortage of on-site supervisors meant that students found themselves not welcome or not given learning opportunities in their placements.

Fourth, the majority of social work schools generally lacked tools to assess students' field practice. When social work education emerged as a new field, many social work educators at that time underestimated the importance of students' transferring classroom knowledge into their field placement. Thus, field education still cannot meet a requirement for 800 hours practical training.

Field practice is usually competing with classroom teaching in terms of adaptability, efficiency and efficacy. This situation highlights the gaps between the curriculum and the needs of our clients. Field instructors are expected to bridge these gaps in their course teaching (Valentine, 2004). After more than a decade of exploring and piloting experiments in field education by strengthening the connections between schools and agencies or communities, the majority of schools now strive to build their own field practicum bases for student placements. With the sponsorship of CASWE, member schools have developed shared field practicum bases for students from different schools. Also, CASWE invited professional field instructors from Hong Kong to organize field practice training workshops for inexperienced field instructors.

Chinese social work educators need to refine their own knowledge for equipping students with the necessary skills and techniques. Before introducing knowledge of social work theories and practice models to students, educators must consider whether this teaching matches what students really need for problem-solving in their placement. As has been intensively discussed, field education is the opportunity to consider the integration of theory with practice (Lam, 2004; Valentine, 2004; Edmond *et al.*, 2006). For Chinese social work educators, there is still much room for improvement in developing an evidence-based and field-focused training model to fit China's unique system of culture, polity and economy. In particular, it is essential for educators to locate social work practice within cultural sensitivity and awareness (Chau, 1995). In addition, social work schools need to formalize and develop their field criteria for placements so as to improve professional training for those students whose minds are full of concepts, theories and models.

Professional Development of Social Work Educators

As a new discipline and a very late-comer to social work, social work in China has been the focus of debates about the quality of professional education. Social work education emerged in the late-1980s in the absence of a mature professional training system and a shortage of qualified educators. In many universities offering social work training, especially in those schools where social work training programs have recently been established, a high proportion of educators lack systematic training. Although many of them hold masters or even doctoral degrees in social sciences, their knowledge base of social work theories and practice is meager. Therefore, it is not uncommon for teachers to begin teaching social work when they have only just grasped knowledge of the field themselves. The rapid growth of social work schools and the absence of higher degrees in China are the two main factors in explaining the current structure and level of educators (Guan, 2003; Xiong, 2001).

In the past five years, however, two key developments have begun to change the situation. First, since 2002, CASWE has implemented a long-term project of training programs for educators, providing a series of intensive courses for new faculty who have little formal social work training. Usually senior and experienced faculty members from Mainland China, and sometimes from Hong Kong, were invited to give lectures. Second, a joint Masters program in social work run by Hong Kong Polytechnic University and Peking University was introduced in 2000, when the first batch of 16 social work educators from different universities in China was accepted to learn social work theories and practice models using an interactive and reflective model of teaching. Currently, more than 100 graduates from this program play influential roles in advancing social work education in various universities. CASWE will make continuing efforts in future to strengthen its training programs by adopting a method of training the trainers and reaching educators whose background is irrelevant to social work.

Impact of New Social Policy Initiatives on Social Work Education in China

In the twenty-first century, in a knowledge-based economy, social work is continuing to develop its professional identity and raise its professional status, having a substantial impact on economic and social policies. There is a widely held consensus that addressing social problems and responding to emerging social needs has been a vital focus for social work since the late nineteenth century when scholars argued that influencing social policy should be part of social work (Schneider & Netting, 1999). Social work education has not only to reflect changing social needs, but also to respond positively to changing policies and changing socio-economic development.

In the past two decades of economic reform, the Chinese government has taken serious measures to reshape the bureaucratic structure and change government from being the controller of everything to being the main regulator of economic activities and the social policy decision-maker. Social work has emerged in China as a new occupation within the civil affairs sector. Professionalization was experimented with first in Shanghai City in 2003. Since then, and particularly after 2006, two major policy initiatives related to the development of the social work profession have had an enormous impact on the quality of life and social needs of Chinese citizens, as well as on the professional development of social work.

Changes from Within

With the development of the market economy and changes in government function, there was a growing need to restructure the social welfare and social service system by professionalizing the work of civil affairs. The wave of developing community services advocated by the Ministry of Civil Affairs and supported by other key governmental sectors has reflected the intention to bring professional social services back into society rather than into the work-units associated with the Party (Wang, 2006).

However, from the mid-1980s to the end of the 1990s, social work as a profession did not have a smooth path within government, partly because of competition for recognition by social work academics and the civil affairs sector, and partly due to the absence of government support (Yan & Tsang, 2005; Wang, 2006). After China's successful entry into the World Trade Organization, trends in internationalization and modernization speeded up and this also had a big effect on the development of social administration within the framework of civil affairs. One striking example is that in 2000, the Ministry of Civil Affairs advocated the necessity of establishing professional social work positions in nursing homes for the elderly, which both raised the importance of social work practice in enhancing the quality of services for elderly people and improved the management of these institutions. Moreover, the experimental projects in Shanghai City of employing professional social workers in hospitals, community centers and schools produced positive outcomes and this further encouraged the Ministry of Civil Affairs to promote the development of the social work profession nationally. The 'Shanghai model of developing social work' was soon regarded as an exemplar for the design and implementation of professional social work. Despite the lack of an agreed view of social work as a core profession, the Ministry of Civil Affairs is very determined to go ahead and stimulate the development of professional social work.

As discussed earlier in this paper, in the second half of 2006, the Ministry of Civil Affairs published two highly provocative and influential documents jointly with the Ministry of Personnel, 'Temporary Regulations on the Evaluation of Professional Standards of Social Workers', and 'Regulations on the Examination of Professional Standards for the Assistant Social Worker and the Social Worker'. Additionally, in 2007, a statement published during the Sixth Plenary Meeting of the 16th Central Committee of China Communist Party, shows the Party seeking to establish a high powered advisory group of social work professionals, seeing this as a crucial task in achieving the goal of building a harmonious society. The professionalization of social work in modern China, especially after the 1990s, is an outcome of collaboration and dialogue between the civil affairs sector and social work academics (Wang, 2006).

Currently, almost every government sector within the Party-State is attempting to consolidate its power and mobilize its resources by emphasizing its role in building a corpus of professional social workers as advocated by the top Chinese leaders. One unexpected and unwelcome outcome of this scenario is that each government sector is using this new policy initiative to expand their administrative power without clear thinking about what a social work 'profession' truly means. While much time, energy and resources are being spent on promoting the social work profession, there are also concerns shared by educators and some top civil affairs cadres. Although the term 'social work profession' is suddenly becoming popular and frequently occurs in various government reports, a widely agreed definition of what social work is and what social workers do is missing.

Positively, the Ministry of Civil Affairs and the Ministry of Education, the two key players influencing the path of social work education, are undertaking a rational and objective analysis of the fundamental issues for social work by organizing a series of

training workshops and lectures. The main goal is to promote a widely recognized definition of social work and a general understanding of the profession. The Ministry of Civil Affairs is launching several investigations into the potential for social work services in China. It is carrying out field studies of the establishment of social work posts within its different service units. Other government sectors will also follow this strategy of developing social work posts within their own service sectors. Needless to say, these attempts will enhance the job market for social work students in the future. The link between social work schools and relevant government sectors will be strengthened.

Tensions between Professional Practice and Indigenous Institutions

As discussed earlier, there is a broad range of views about what constitutes professional social work and no agreed definition (Yuen-Tsang & Wang, 2002). Yet, social work academics in China insist that a professional standard of practice must be introduced into the civil affairs sectors to improve the quality of social services.

Meanwhile, there is also a tension between social work training in the universities and the increasing demand for professional social workers, indicating a gap between the social work curriculum and demands for social services. The growing demand for professional social workers will certainly encourage the universities and colleges to follow professional standards, and this will have an impact on curriculum design and field practice.

Furthermore, one could hardly ignore the tension between Westernized concepts and models of social work practice and the established system of indigenous social services mainly provided by the semi-professional civil affairs cadres. After two decades of dialogue and collaboration between social work academics and the civil affairs sector, the tensions in defining social work have been largely reduced. In the winter of 2006, the Ministry of Civil Affairs formed the Expert Committee of Professional Evaluation of National Social Workers, a think-tank to guide and consult the future development of the social work profession in China. The majority of committee members are social work professors from different universities and colleges. This event symbolizes a consensus and common understanding between Chinese government and social work academics on the meaning of professional social work. Certainly both will negotiate and discuss the design and implementation of an evaluation system.

The Challenge for Social Work Education in China

After two decades of rapid economic growth, China still maintains its record of economic achievement. According to the State Bureau of Statistics, the annual growth rate of the Chinese economy in 2006 remains high at 9.6% (The State Bureau of Statistics, 2007). Meanwhile, the Chinese government has shifted its policy of emphasizing economic growth to balancing economic development and social development, responding to the emergence of social inequalities and social conflicts in society. The recent development of the social work profession and social work education emerges from this context.

The new policy initiatives aimed at professionalizing social work encourage social work schools to strengthen their training programs by developing curriculum design, empowering faculty members in teaching and research, and standardizing field practice. In the second five-year plan prepared by CASWE, its main objectives are to improve the quality of social work teaching, enhance scientific research based on evidence of social work practice in China, and strengthen the quality of regulation of field practice.

The professionalization of social work will have a profound effect both on social development and on social welfare institutions in China, while nearly 200 social work schools are facing challenges and opportunities in terms of the pace of program development and related resource mobilization. Social work education in China will confront a series of challenges in the future. We now go on to summarize what these will be.

Firstly, social work schools must respond to the requirements for professionalization by strengthening curricula, raising the quality of educators, and enhancing the link between schools and government social service agencies. The challenge for educators, however, is how to merge academic qualities and professional needs, while developing relevant theories for social work practice (Midgeley, 1999; Parton, 2000). Chinese educators must consider on the one hand the transfer of Westernized social work theories and practice models into Chinese society, and on the other hand the indigenization of conceptual frameworks and practice approaches in a Chinese context.

Second, the two main actors in promoting professional social work, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Civil Affairs, need to coordinate and collaborate in sharing responsibility for guaranteeing the quality of social services. One of the serious challenges facing the two government sectors lies in their different understanding of the standards and classification of social work training at different levels. Currently, the Ministry of Education has sole responsibility for higher education, and universities or colleges previously run by other government sectors have been transferred to local educational sectors. However, there is a huge demand for social work training among the civil affairs cadres who have no formal training, but those vocational colleges attached to the Ministry of Civil Affairs, or local bureau of civil affairs, are not entitled to offer degree training in social work.

Third, the challenge is to define the roles of the professional organizations, including the China Association of Social Workers and the China Association for Social Work Education to respond to the emerging needs of professional training and social services.

Conclusion

In seeking to identify the issues and challenges confronting social work education in China in the context of new policy initiatives, this paper has focused on the causes of the rapid development of social work education after the 1990s, and examined the tensions and opportunities that social work educators now face, particularly since 2006 and government advocacy of social work as a profession.

In discussing the rapid growth of social work training programs, the authors have emphasized that the decentralization of higher education policy implemented after 1999, and the emergence of professional social services in Chinese society, are the main factors in stimulating the phenomenal expansion of training programs all over the country in the past five years. However, there is still a gap between the educational package of professional social work and the application of social work theory and practice models to Chinese society. The related tensions between social work academics and government social services sectors suggest there will be ongoing pressures on the future development of social work education. The challenges ahead are multifaceted when social work education is currently at the nexus of new social policy initiatives aimed at building a harmonious socialist society. These include the challenge of reaching a common understanding and definition of social work between the civil affairs sectors and other related government sectors, the challenge of the overall advancement of training programs, and the challenge of the roles of professional social work organizations in providing quality social services and standardizing training programs all over the country.

The direction of social work education development in China now and in the future will not only be affected by the socio-economic and political environment, but also by the development of the higher education system and the changing relationship between the civil affairs sector and other responsible sectors. Social work is emerging as a profession in China, and there is still a long way to go to fulfill the objectives of professionalization. Chinese social work educators must seriously bear in mind that the challenge is a real one before they take advantage of the various opportunities in the field of serving and training. Now is the time for social work educators in China to formulate a systematic and standardized curriculum, to search for new paradigms of social development that implement social policies, and to prepare students with sufficient knowledge, skills and ideological thinking for the forthcoming challenge of the professionalization of social work.

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