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Specific competencies in social work higher education in the framework of the European higher education area: the perception of future professionals in the Spanish context

Las competencias específicas en los estudios universitarios de Trabajo Social en el marco del Espacio Europeo de Educación Superior: la percepción de los futuros profesionales en el contexto español

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ABSTRACT

We present the results of a study that aims to determine whether young future social work professionals value the specific competencies that they are taught as students and will put into practice as professionals. The study analyses how these students value the professional competencies taught in university social work programmes in Spain, which are under the auspices of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). We consider that this study can contribute to the review and improvement of the design of these university curricula. The study is descriptive and employs the survey method. The sample comprises 220 subjects who are university undergraduate students in social work. The findings indicate that undergraduate students express a high valuation of the specific competencies of the degree. Students' sociodemographic variables have little effect on their valuation of specific competencies, although we can nuance this conclusion with some partial results that show an influence of these sociodemographic variables on students' valuations.

RESUMEN

Presentamos los resultados de un estudio que ha pretendido saber si los jóvenes futuros profesionales del Trabajo Social se sienten concernidos por la propuesta de competencias específicas que como profesionales deberán poner en práctica. Se ha analizado cómo son valoradas las competencias profesionales específicas recogidas en los estudios universitarios de Trabajo Social en España, implantados al amparo del Espacio Europeo de Educación Superior (EEES). Consideramos que puede ser una contribución para la revisión y mejora de los procesos que han conducido al diseño de dichos estudios universitarios. El tipo de investigación ha sido descriptiva desarrollándose a través de un método de encuesta. La muestra ha estado compuesta por 220 sujetos, estudiantes universitarios del Grado en Trabajo Social. Se ha concluido

KEYWORDS

Social work; specific competencies; European higher education area; professional profile; university curriculum

PALABRAS CLAVE

Trabajo social; Competencias específicas; Espacio Europeo de Educación Superior; Perfil profesional; Currículo universitario

que los estudiantes de Grado expresan una alta valoración de las competencias específicas del título. Con respecto a la influencia de determinadas variables sociodemográficas de los estudiantes, la conclusión es que la valoración de las competencias específicas por parte de los futuros profesionales es resistente a los rasgos diferenciales de los estudiantes, aunque podamos matizar dicha conclusión con algunos resultados parciales, que muestran una relativa influencia de estas variables sociodemográficas sobre la valoración que los estudiantes atribuyen a las competencias.

Introduction

Our investigative project is centred on analysing how future social work professionals (current university students) value the specific competencies taught in their social work programme. Universities in both Europe and Spain (a country implicated since the beginning of the so-called Bologna Process¹) have adopted these competencies since the introduction of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). We present the results of a study that sought to determine how young aspiring social workers assess the specific competencies in which the university system aims to train them and that, as future professionals, they will put into practice.

We study how future social work professionals value the specific competencies they are taught in their university social work programme, which was born under the auspices of the convergence of higher education in Europe (González & Wagenaar, 2003), as well as the competencies they consider most important based on their perception of what the professional functions of these competencies will be.

The reform of the higher education system in Europe led to a dual structure of professionalising titles – i.e. undergraduate and master's – with the undergraduate title corresponding to the basic training required for entry into the labour force. In this context, university social work programmes are developed to provide social work students adequate training to develop their professional ability.

Within the framework of the higher education reform systematically performed by the European states (and some non-European states that voluntarily joined the project), attempts have been made to identify the meaning of social work with regard to the competencies that undergraduate programmes should cultivate in students to prepare them for the profession. In this sense, the directives of the Bologna Process have had a heterogeneous degree of implementation (De Rider, 2000; Lymbery, Charles, Christopherson, & Eadie, 2000; Sandström, 2007). Not only each state but also each university has had the autonomy to define its own programmes. These degree plans conform with the expectations of the EHEA. They always have the goal of offering future professionals an integrated training that addresses disciplinary, competency-based, and attitudinal components, and they have a view towards forming professionals who, in addition to knowing how to perform their function, understand the medium in which they work and know how to critically analyse organisations, the social context and their relationships.

To that end, social work training considers the acquisition of knowledge and the development of the skills and attitudes that allow for the promotion of social change, problem solving in human relationships, and the strengthening and liberation of people to improve well-being (Hepworth, Rooney, Rooney, & Strom-Gottfried, 2016). The training is shaped by theories on human behaviour and social systems because social work intervenes in the way people interact with their environment. Thus, undergraduate degree programmes in social work focus on developing the competencies that prepare students for this type of professional environment (Dutton & Kholi, 1996; Northen & Kurland, 2013; Vázquez Aguado, 2005).

In the case of Spain, the White Book of university social work students (Agencia Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad y la Acreditación [ANECA], 2005) defines the professional competencies that

future social workers in Spain should develop, with the EHEA as a guide. This was expressed in the programmes that aim to train these professionals at university. This study identifies 25 specific competencies in the catalogue; they are enumerated in [Table 1](#). Our study takes this model as a starting point to identify and/or confirm how future social work professionals perceive the value of this competency profile.

Methodological notes

As noted above, the focus of the current study is how social work students value specific professional competencies that they are taught in their university training in Spain, which is shaped by the EHEA. This study can contribute to the review and improvement of the design of university curricula for training these professionals.

Our research questions are as follows: How do social work students value the specific competencies that they are taught in their undergraduate social work programme? Which competencies are perceived as more important based on students' perception their functions in the professional realm?

These questions lead to the following objectives: to learn the perceptions of students concerning the specific competencies taught in the bachelor's degree in social work and to determine whether these perceptions vary as a function of certain student traits or profiles. The aim is to provide student insight into the competency profile of university studies in social work.

The study current is descriptive and not experimental (Albert Gómez, 2007; Hernández Sampieri, Fernández Collado, & Baptista Lucio, 2014; McMillan & Schumacher, 2012; Pagano, 2011); it is conducted within the framework of respect for the natural setting and intervening agents in seeking the opinions, valuations, and attitudes of participants with regard to the objectives of our investigation. This study uses the survey method, which is commonly used in both the social sciences in general and in education in particular. McMillan and Schumacher (2012) attribute the popularity of the survey method to its versatility, efficiency, and generalisability.

Following Goetz and LeCompte (2010), the sample was drawn from various cohorts, including individuals from both the initial and final years, of a population of university students in the social work degree programme. The result was a convenience sampling (McMillan & Schumacher, 2012)

Table 1. Specific competencies in the curriculum for the undergraduate degree in social work.

-
1. Establishment of professional relationships
 2. Intervention with individuals and collectives to help them make decisions
 3. Orientation of an intervention strategy
 4. Crisis response
 5. Interaction with individuals and collectives to effect changes
 6. Preparation, production, implementation, and evaluation of intervention plans
 7. Support for the development of networks to meet needs
 8. Promotion of people's growth, development, and independence
 9. Work with risky behaviours
 10. Analysis and systematisation of information
 11. Conflict mediation
 12. Design, implementation, and evaluation of social intervention projects
 13. Defence of individuals and groups
 14. Preparation and participation in decision-making meetings
 15. Resolution of risky situations
 16. Minimising and managing risks
 17. Administrating and taking responsibility for one's own work
 18. Administrating resources and services
 19. Managing histories and social reports
 20. Efficient work within interdisciplinary and multi-organisational systems, networks, and teams
 21. Management and direction of social well-being entities
 22. Updating one's own knowledge about frameworks of the work
 23. Working within standards and ensuring one's own professional development
 24. Managing complex conflicts, dilemmas, and social problems
 25. Promoting social work best practices
-

that met the following criteria: students who were in the social work degree programme and were also accessible.

The sample included 220 subjects, students in social work, whose sociodemographic traits are described below.

Regarding the first sociodemographic variable, gender, the proportion of women was observably higher than that of men (76.8% women versus 23.2% men), which is concordant with the typical gender ratio in the profession (Bañez Tello, 2005; Berasaluce Correa, 2009; Green, 2015; Morales Villena, 2010; Roldán-García, Leyra-Fatou, & Contreras-Martínez, 2012). This ratio indicates evolution in comparison with earlier studies, such as Palacios Gómez (2007), who found that women comprised more than 82% of social workers in 2000 and 80% in 2006.

The second sociodemographic variable is the student's *year of study* at the time of survey completion. Subjects were designated to one of two groups: those who were still in the first half of the social work curriculum and those who were in the second half. Within the sample, 67.3% of students were in the 1st or 2nd year, 27.3% were in the 3rd or 4th year, and approximately 5.5% did not identify their year of study.

The third sociodemographic variable is *work*, which indicates whether the student worked in addition to being a student. We found that 65.9% were exclusively dedicated to their studies, and 33.6% who also worked, either full-time or part-time. This is in line with recent studies, such as Green (2015), in which the percentage of full-time students is similar. Notably, Palacios Gómez (2007) found almost opposite proportions: in their study, the number of students who worked was almost twice the number of students who did not work. Surely, the economic crisis that affected the European and global economic system helps explain this difference between the sample in Palacios Gómez (2007) and ours.

The fourth sociodemographic variable is *volunteer/NGO*, which indicates whether the student also volunteered through a non-governmental organisation (NGO). Among social work students, volunteering can be an expression of a particular tendency or position, and it can afford them strong professional connections with graduates of these institutions. We found that one in four students participated in volunteer work; 22.7% of them were actively connected to an NGO, and 74.5% were not. Continuing the comparative reference to Palacios Gómez (2007), in addition to the proportion of students who work, the proportion of volunteers has also evolved. Whereas we found that 22% of subjects volunteered, Palacios Gómez (2007) found that only 6% did. This evolution can have a similar economic explanation, in addition to other explanations related to greater social responsibility.

With respect to the data collection instrument, we used a survey (Hernández Sampieri et al., 2014) to gauge students' valuation of the 25 competencies taught in Spanish universities for the undergraduate degree in social work since the implementation of the EHEA. The survey was validated through a process supported *a priori* by a panel of experts (five researchers from the Departments of Education and Psychology of the University of Almería) and *a posteriori* with an internal consistency test. Cronbach's alpha was .95.

The experts had no influence over the presence of the 25 specific competencies (Table 1) assessed in the survey because these are the competencies that, as noted above, are required in social work training in Europe and Spain. Subjects performed their valuations using a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not at all important) to 4 (very important). Questions about the valuations of these 25 competencies were preceded by questions regarding sociodemographic traits, i.e. gender, year of study, work status, and volunteer/NGO involvement.

Tabulation and analysis of the data were performed using the statistical package SPSS. In relation to the assessment of the specific competencies of the students in the social work degree programme, descriptive statistics and possible relationships between the opinions of the students and sociodemographic variables were calculated, the latter through non-parametric tests.

Finally, the study was not submitted for ethical approval because for this type of research approval is not required by University of Almería, although the Code of Good Practices in Research at the

University of Almería (University Almería, 2011) was rigorously taken into account, highlighting that informed consent and confidentiality were guaranteed. First, to conduct the study, the relevant request was given to the responsible academics, who were informed of the purpose of the study and given an absolute guarantee of the anonymity of the responses of participating students. Subsequently, collaboration by professors in the degree programme was requested and obtained to use part of a class session to carry out the study. Once in the classroom, students were informed of the purpose of the study and the guarantee of anonymity and were given the option of not completing the questionnaire, if they so desired. The questionnaire was administered in paper form to students collectively in classrooms. Delivery and collection were carried out in the same session without pause, and there was no time limit (the approximate duration was 30 minutes). One of the researchers was physically present; the task was not delegated to a survey taker.

The aforementioned anonymity of the responses was guaranteed by placing a box in each classroom in which the questionnaire was administered. Students deposited the questionnaires in this box as they completed the questionnaires.

The most and least valued specific competencies

To construct the subgroup of specific competencies that we consider most valued by students, we included in this subgroup all competencies that were non-significantly different from the highest valued competencies, according to the *t-statistic* for a comparison of means in related samples. The competencies most valued by students are presented in Table 2.

Intervening and interacting with individuals, which students perceived as similar, were in the most valued group of competencies.

Following the same grouping procedure as for the most valued competencies, we configured the least valued group. The competencies least valued by students are presented in Table 3. A certain natural logic presiding over this perception of importance by students can be observed, given that several of these are identified with tasks that are less specific to social workers and more so are valued by people who do not yet have professional experience.

Gender influence

In a profession with a high degree of feminisation, as observed in numerous studies (Bañez Tello, 2005; Berasaluce Correa, 2009; Hall, 2011; Morales Villena, 2010; Palacios Gómez, 2007; Roldán-García et al., 2012) and corroborated by our sample, it is interesting to analyse whether the valuation of the competencies has any difference as a function of the variable *gender*. Analysis using the χ^2 test (Pagano, 2011) finds that only competency 19 – *Managing histories and social reports* – presents distributions of responses across the four value categories that are significantly different between men and women, with a significant χ^2 of .05.

The non-parametric comparison test of ranges in independent groups, the Mann–Whitney U test (Ibid.), shows a somewhat higher mean range among women, 111.85, than among men, 103.75; however, this difference is non-significant, .39 (Table 4).

In its totality, the variable *gender* does not have a relevant influence on the valuation of the specific competencies of the degree, with the exception of the aforementioned management of reports, and in this case, it is relevant only in terms of the distribution of answers and the ranges in the two groups.

Table 2. Most valued competencies.

Specific competency	Order	\bar{X}
5. Interaction with individuals and collectives to effect changes	4	3.40639269
11. Conflict mediation	3	3.41552511
25. Promoting social work best practices	2	3.44292237
2. Intervention with individuals and collectives to help them make decisions	1	3.44748858

Table 3. Least valued competencies.

Specific competency	Order	\bar{X}
14. Preparation and participation in decision-making meetings	25	3.04090909
10. Analysis and systematisation of information	24	3.06422018
22. Updating one's own knowledge about frameworks of the work	23	3.10454545
16. Minimising and managing risks	22	3.10909091
23. Working within standards and ensuring one's own professional development	21	3.11818182
19. Managing histories and social reports	20	3.14155251
9. Work with risky behaviours	19	3.16972477

Year-of-study influence

After analysing the variable *gender*, we analysed the possible relationship between the students' year of study and their valuation of specific competencies. This involved analysing the possible differential valuation of the competencies as a function of having spent more or fewer years studying for the degree. The results reflected that only two competencies presented significant differences in the value of χ^2 , which indicated a relationship between the valuation of these competencies and the students' year of study. These competencies were

- 1². Establishment of professional relationships and
- 20. Efficient work within interdisciplinary and multi-organisational systems, networks, and teams.

With respect to competency 1. *Establishment of professional relationships*, we obtain a significant χ^2 value of .016, which indicates that the two *year-of-study* groups distribute their valuation in a significantly differential manner for this competency.

With respect to competency 20. *Efficient work within interdisciplinary and multi-organisational systems, networks, and teams*, we obtain an χ^2 value of .011, which similarly indicates that for this competency, there is a relationship between the valuation and the *year-of-study* variable.

The non-parametric Mann–Whitney U test (Table 5) for these two competencies revealed disparate results in the valuations of the two year-of-study subgroups. For *competency 20*, the mean range of the students closest to graduation was significantly (.004) higher than that of the students in the first half of training. However, the significant differences in the distribution of the valuations of the χ^2 value for *competency 1* between the two subgroups did not conform when comparing the mean ranges in the Mann–Whitney U test (.347).

Influence of holding a job while being a student

As with the previous variables, we analysed the possible relationship between students' valuation of specific competencies and their employment status (working or not working). There are significant

Table 4. Mann-Whitney U test: Influence of gender/competency 19.

	GEN	N	Mean range	Sum of ranges	Mann-Whitney U	Sig.
Competency 19	female	169	111.85	18902.50	3912.500	.394
	male	50	103.75	5187.50		

Table 5. Mann-Whitney U test: year of study*competencies (1; 20).

	Year of study	N	Mean range	Sum of ranges	Mann-Whitney U	Sig
Competency 20	1 st -2 nd year	146	96.43	14078.50	3347.500	.004
	3 rd -4 th year	60	120.71	7242.50		
Competency 1	1 st -2 nd year	146	105.79	15445.00	4046.000	.347
	3 rd -4 th year	60	97.93	5876.00		

Table 6. Mann-Whitney U test: work*competencies (10; 20).

	Work	N	Mean range	Sum of ranges	Mann-Whitney U	Sig
Competency 10	NO	144	102.38	14742.50	4302.50	.021
	YES	73	122.06	8910.50		
Competency 20	NO	144	102.20	14717.00	4277.00	.016
	YES	73	122.41	8936.00		

values in this U test (Table 6) and mean ranges that denote a greater valuation in these two competencies by the subgroup of students who have jobs:

- 10. Analysis and systematisation of information and
- 20. Efficient work within interdisciplinary and multi-organisational systems, networks, and teams.

Influence of volunteering

Finally, we examined whether dedication to *volunteer/NGO* activities was related to the valuation of the specific competencies. This analysis turned out to be interesting given the traditional characteristics of this degree and because one of the main fields of social work employment is NGOs and volunteer institutions. Additionally, as our study notes, this aspect has evolved with respect to previous data (Palacios Gómez, 2007).

The analysis revealed, when applying the χ^2 test, that the valuation of three competencies was significantly related to the *volunteer/NGO* variable. These competencies were

- Establishment of professional relationships,
- 7. Support for the development of networks to meet needs, and
- 12. Design, implementation, and evaluation of social intervention projects.

This evidence is corroborated with the data from the Mann-Whitney U test (Table 7), which, in comparing the valuation of these three competencies by the subgroups generated by the *volunteer/NGO* variable, obtains a significant value. The subgroup of students with *volunteer/NGO* ties values these three competencies more than those who do not volunteer, with a high significance in the comparison of the mean ranges.

Summary of differential valuations

This summary (Table 8) shows that competency 20. *Efficient work within interdisciplinary and multi-organisational systems, networks, and teams* is the most influenced by differential valuations. It is more valued by students in later years of study, by students who work, and by those with *volunteer/NGO* ties.

In addition, we find two other competencies, i.e. 7. *Support for the development of networks to meet needs* and 10. *Analysis and systematisation of information*, that are differentially valued based on two variables. Students in later years of study and those tied to NGOs value competency 7 highest,

Table 7. Mann-Whitney U test: NGO*competencies (01; 07; 12).

	NGO	N	Mean range	Sum of ranges	Mann-Whitney U	Sig.
ITEM011	NO	162	100.49	16280.00	3077.000	.005
	YES	50	125.96	6298.00		
ITEM071	NO	163	101.36	16522.00	3156.000	.009
	YES	50	125.38	6269.00		
ITEM121	NO	164	101.77	16691.00	3161.000	.007
	YES	50	126.28	6314.00		

Table 8. Summary of differential valuation of the competencies.

Variable		Valuation of competency + Valued
YEAR OF STUDY	1 st /2 nd 3 rd /4 th	7. Support for the development of networks to meet needs 20. Efficient work within interdisciplinary and multi-organisational systems, networks, and teams
WORK	NO WORK YES WORK	10. Analysis and systematisation of information. 20. Efficient work within interdisciplinary and multi-organisational systems, networks, and teams.
VOLUNTEER WORK	NO NGO YES NGO	1. Establishment of professional relationships. 7. Support for the development of networks to meet needs. 12. Design, implementation and evaluation of social intervention projects. 14. Preparation and participation in decision-making meetings 20. Efficient work within interdisciplinary and multi-organisational systems, networks, and teams

whereas those who most value competency 10 are those who work. There is no case of a significantly lower valuation.

Viewed from another perspective, the variable that generates the most differences in valuation is *volunteer/NGO* ties, although the influence of this variable is very modest (influencing only 20% of the competencies).

In summary, the valuation of 16 competencies (64%) was not affected by the purely demographic characteristics of gender, year of study, work, or volunteering.

Discussion and conclusions

At the beginning, we asked the following questions:

How do social work students value the specific competencies they are taught in their undergraduate social work programme? Which are considered more important based on students' perception of their functions in the professional realm?

Having addressed these questions, we can generally conclude that undergraduate students express a high valuation of the catalogue of 25 specific competencies for the degree, which are the same in all Spanish universities and due to the EHEA have a high degree of concordance with the entire realm of higher education in social work in Europe. We confirmed that the competencies that stand out in a global scenario of high valuations are distributed among the six capacities into which Vázquez-Aguado, Álvarez-Pérez, and Mora-Quñones (2011) *supracategorise* the 25 competencies of the degree (Table 9), without the valuation discernibly pointing towards any particular direction.

A similar situation occurs with the least valued competencies. In this case, always within a scenario of generally high valuation, the *cluster* constructed is broader, being composed of seven

Table 9. Supracategorical capacities.

- I. Capacity to work and value their needs and circumstances together with people, families, groups, organisations, and communities.
- II. Capacity to plan, implement, review, and evaluate the practise of social work together with people, families, groups, organisations, communities, and with other professionals.
- III. Capacity to support people to be able to manifest their needs, perspectives, and circumstances.
- IV. Capacity to act to resolve risky situations with people as well as for themselves and for their professional colleagues.
- V. Capacity to administrate and to be responsible, with supervision and support from the practice itself within the organisation.
- VI. Capacity to demonstrate professional competency in the practice of social work.

Created based on Vazquez Aguado et al. (2011)

competencies. Turning again to Vazquez Aguado, Álvarez Pérez, and Mora Quiñones (2011), we found that these are distributed among five of the six already cited capacities. The only capacity that remains outside of this subgroup is the capacity to work and value their needs and circumstances together with people, families, groups, organisations, and communities.

Both situations allow us to conclude that there is no area of competency that stands out in this scenario of high valuation. Nevertheless, evaluating both clusters together reveals that the competency area that shows a certain higher valuation is the competency area of work and valuing needs and circumstances together with people, families, groups, organisations, and communities, which is compatible with the idea of social work identified in diverse conceptual approaches (Balles-tero Izquierdo, Viscarret Garro, & Úriz Pemán, 2013; Conde Megías, 2009; Lima Fernández, 2013; Richmond, 2005).

However, we believe that the most relevant aspect of the review of curricula that universities should undertake to increase the significance students attribute to their training (Fink, 2013) is reflection on the current catalogue of competencies. We believe that reflection should aim to simplify the catalogue, so that, on the one hand, the teacher's task is made manageable, given a catalogue this broad and difficult, and on the other hand, it can be transmitted to future graduates relatively spontaneously and intuitively. Bear in mind that, based on the interpretation of our results, we believe that this simplification must revolve around the fundamental keys of the profession, as they are perceived and felt by the professionals themselves. It should also improve the contexts and training resources used to develop competencies, such as bureaucratic competencies, that may be important in the profile of a modern professional but that, in the current pedagogical environment of higher education, are not viewed by future professionals as key competencies of their professions, much less as skills that they might internalise functionally.

Meanwhile, although recent studies have examined social work students' attitudes (Duyan, Tuncay, Özdemir, & Duyan, 2016), the study by Vázquez Aguado (2005) remains the most ideal comparison for discussing our results, as this study also examines students' valuation of competencies. In that study, the results were obtained with a comparable instrument and design to ours and broadly coincide with ours.

Basically, we can conclude social work students from 2005 and now both value specific competencies very positively, although it is possible that students in Vázquez Aguado's sample value them more than the students in our study. In terms of mean points, in the study by Vázquez Aguado (2005), 21 of the 25 competencies generated mean points that were higher than in our study.

In the subgroup of the five most valued competencies in each study, only one – which is also the highest valued in absolute terms – overlapped in the two studies. This was competency 2. *Intervention with individuals and collectives to help them make decisions.*

In the subgroup of the five least valued competencies in each study, there were three that overlapped between the two studies. These were

- 14. Preparation and participation in decision-making meetings;
- 15. Resolution of risky situations; and
- 23. Working within standards and ensuring one's own professional development.

In addition to the fact that students generally value the specific competencies taught in this degree programme very positively, the results demonstrate that the highest valued competency is intervention with groups and people, which is the *quid* of social work, as noted by Vazquez Aguado et al. (2011).

Meanwhile, in the least valued competencies, we also find two overlaps, which are often viewed as *bureaucratic*. The persistence in valuing the resolution of risky situations poorly is not easily interpreted, as it conflicts with previously described archetypical idea of social work as a profession for acting in extreme situations.

In this respect, it should be noted that, although it is reasonable to expect students in the social work degree programme to offer strong assessments of the specific competencies the degree develops, it is noteworthy that we find significant differences among those assessments and that they do not form a homogeneous and unitary whole. As previously indicated (Table 2), the four competencies given the highest assessments designate invariants of the profession, such as intervention, mediation and/or personal interaction. This leads us to believe that we should not forget that the original, basic elements that define the profession of social work continue to be the most important ones in the minds of future graduates. It is also notable that a key concept of the subgroup with the highest assessment is the notion of best practices, which is crucial in proposals for professional improvement and a universal concept in any quality professional activity.

On the other hand, other competencies, such as bureaucratic work, tasks away from the field and people, are given significantly lower assessments. These, together with the lack of professional motivation they usually generate, can be influenced by the less-than-ideal context of teaching and learning about them in a university classroom.

With regard to the influence of specific sociodemographic variables, the general conclusion is that the valuation of the specific competencies is resistant to these variables. However, we can still nuance this conclusion with some partial results that show an influence of these sociodemographic variables on students' valuation of the competencies.

Thus, it is striking that, despite the traditional feminisation of the profession mentioned throughout our article, the variable of gender is not reflected in differential assessments of competencies and professional functions. This demonstrates that the new cohorts of graduates, which still contain large numbers of women compared to men, do not provide evidence favourable to the hypotheses of Bañez Tello (2005) or Turner and Maschi (2015), who propose that the strong feminisation of the social work profession is reflected in different conceptions of the profession. Recent studies of attitudes among university students in social work, such as Green (2015), have not examined the influence of gender.

The *year-of-study* variable has a very limited impact on students' differential valuation of the competencies, affecting only two of them. This finding does not prevent a line of questioning: progress through the training curriculum does not appear to produce differentially relevant valuations in students, a fact that warrants reflection on the role of training in the perception of the value of the professional competencies, there are similarities between this study and the previously cited study of Green (2015), which also focuses, though not as directly as ours, on the possible relationship between the educational process and the attitudes and perceptions of social work students. However, this author obtained conclusive results.

The *work* variable also has a very limited impact on the differential valuation of the competencies by the students, affecting only two of them. The subgroup of students who work produces the highest differential valuations, and the subgroup of students who do not work does not value any competency higher. To this, we can add our finding that the two competencies to which students that combine work and study offer a higher assessment than those who do not work are generic rather than specific to the profession. Thus, information management or the capacity to work interdisciplinarily or in a network, which are specific competencies in the degree programme's catalogue, can also be found in a large number of professional profiles. This may be unsurprising, as social work students are employed in highly diverse jobs that are often not related to their future professions. This result is in some degree congruent with studies such as Csikai (2000) that indeed find an impact of the professional activities of social workers on certain ethical aspects of the profession. However, the noted professional activity was developed in their own employment contexts.

Finally, the *volunteer/NGO* variable has a partially relevant impact on the differential valuation of competencies by students, affecting 3 of them. The subgroup of students who are connected to volunteering presents all of the differentially higher valuations. No competency is valued higher by the subgroup that is not engaged in volunteer activities.

We can conclude that, in the three competencies in which there were significant differences between students involved in volunteer work and those who were not involved in such work, a difference emerges that is compatible with a certain logic; establishing professional relationships, the formation of networks and the development of intervention projects are key elements in the activities of volunteer organisations. Thus, it appears reasonable that students who already have relationships with these organisations should assess these competencies more highly than students who lack such relationships. In this regard, our study approaches this relationship in a novel way, as we do not find other articles that analyse the impact of students' dedication to volunteer work on their perceptions of professional competencies in social work. Some authors, such as Ortiz (2013), analyse precisely the inverse perception, namely, the attitudes of university students towards volunteer work or other activities indirectly related to volunteer work (Nandan & London, 2013; Yubero & Larrañaga, 2002; Yubero Jiménez, Larrañaga Rubio, & Río Toledo, 2011). They find some differences in the concepts or values of social work students who volunteer versus those who do not, although none of these articles directly addresses the assessment of the profession from a competencies perspective.

Notes

1. This is the lay term for the European Higher Education Area reform process
2. The identification with a cardinal number is only for the purposes of this study because although the 25 competencies are identical in different study plans from different universities, their numeration and/or order is varied.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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