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INTEGRATION OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS INTO SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION: THE EXPERIENCE OF KAZAKHSTAN

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Abstract
The integration of the UN Sustainable Development Goals into social work education is of particular importance in the context of the institutionalization of the profession in Kazakhstan. Social work is directly linked to 70% of the indicators of the Sustainable Development Goals and plays a key role in overcoming poverty, reducing inequality, protecting the rights of vulnerable groups and strengthening social justice. In 2023, a content analysis of educational programs of Kazakhstan universities in the field of "Social work" was conducted from the standpoint of compliance with nine international professional competencies. The analysis showed fragmented integration of international standards and insufficient representation of such components as ethics, interagency cooperation, supervision, assessment and intervention. In addition, the results indicate the predominance of economic and administrative disciplines that do not reflect the essence of social work and the need to revise curricula. The article also discusses current government initiatives, including the skills.enbek digital platform and the development of industry-specific qualifications frameworks. Recommendations are presented on strengthening specialist training programs, taking into account global challenges and Sustainable Development Goals. The results obtained can be useful for the international community in order to compare and develop strategies for the transformation of education in the field of social work.

Keywords
Sustainable development goals, social work, institutionalization, human rights-based approach, educational programs, standards.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, sustainable development has become a key paradigm for international organizations, States and professional communities. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted in 2015, outlined 17 Sustainable Development Goals (hereinafter referred to as the SDGs), covering poverty eradication, inclusive education, gender equality, sustainable economic growth, health and well-being and building inclusive institutions. Social work as a profession focused on helping vulnerable groups, protecting human rights and social justice is directly related to the realization of these goals. According to international experts, it correlates with 117 of the 169 SDG indicators.

In the context of Kazakhstan, social work is a relatively new but rapidly developing professional field. Since the early 2000s, steps have been taken to institutionalize the profession, including the development of professional standards, the

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introduction of educational programs, the formation of national associations and joining international associations such as the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW). However, despite progress in regulatory and institutional design, issues of quality of training, compliance of curricula with international standards and integration of global agendas, including the SDGs, remain relevant.

Education in the field of social work plays a key role in the training of specialists capable of solving complex social problems, focusing on the principles of sustainable development, human rights and interdisciplinary interaction. International experience (Pandey & Kumar, 2018; Sanhueza *et al*., 2022; Marti Haidar *et al*., 2023) indicates the need to review educational programs taking into account global challenges, the social context and professional competencies documented in the CSWE and IASSW documents.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the degree of integration of Sustainable Development Goals into educational programs for social work in Kazakhstan, as well as to formulate recommendations for their improvement. The results of the content analysis of educational programs of 19 Kazakhstani universities conducted in 2023 using the model of 9 international competencies were used as an empirical basis. The paper also examines government initiatives in the field of social worker training, including digital tools and HR strategies.

The research aims to identify existing barriers and growth points, as well as to identify the potential of the Kazakhstan model of specialist training in an international comparative context.

Theoretical foundations. An analysis of the existing literature on the topic of integrating SDGs into social work education allows us to identify two key areas:

1) Research on the development and implementation of new educational programs based on the SDGs;

2) Comparative studies analyzing the transformation and compliance of existing programs with the global sustainable development agenda.

The first area focuses on the need to purposefully integrate sustainable development components into the training structure of social workers. The UNESCO report “Education Goals for Sustainable Development” (UNESCO, 2017) emphasizes that education should equip students with the knowledge, skills and values necessary to actively participate in the transformations aimed at achieving the SDGs. Researchers (Haider *et al*., 2023) emphasize the importance of developing programs focused on sustainability, supporting professional growth, developing networking and providing institutional and financial support. Similar ideas are expressed by Pandey and Kumar (2018), arguing that the integration of the SDGs requires an integrated approach from the inclusion of thematic components in the content of disciplines to the modernization of pedagogical strategies and the adaptation of programs to the socio-cultural context of a particular country.

An example of this approach is the Chilean model of “research and practice cores” (Sanhueza *et al*., 2022), in which students, teachers and representatives of organizations work together to solve local problems through the lens of the SDGs. This practice contributes to the development of sustainable thinking, research and professional skills.

The second area is related to the analysis and comparison of existing training programs for social workers. For example, Shatberashvili and Sadzaglishvili (2022), using the example of Georgia, show how student participation in social projects contributes to the promotion of the SDGs and the formation of social responsibility. The Lekamge study (2022) draws attention to the differences between the programs of the

Global South and the North, that despite the institutional advantages of northern universities, southern programs are often closer to social realities. The author suggests an interdisciplinary approach with the integration of knowledge from related fields such as ecology, economics, human rights and healthcare.

A comparative analysis of educational programs in Zimbabwe and Portugal conducted by Nhapi and Pinto (2024) shows that SDG topics are most often included in fragments and without deep study of practical application. The authors emphasize the need to develop critical reflection among students and teachers, as well as to include the SDGs as a cross-cutting topic at all levels of education. Albrithen et al. (2024), comparing bachelor's degree programs in the UAE and Palestine, come to the conclusion that it is necessary to adapt Western models to the local context and detail educational standards to ensure quality and successful accreditation.

Among modern pedagogical approaches, the active use of the case-study method in the international training of social workers is noted, contributing to the development of ethically sound decisions in contextual settings (Addo *et al*., 2022). Turkish researchers (Akinci *et al*., 2025) focus on the environmental dimension of social worker training and propose to strengthen the environmental orientation of programs by including themes of environmental justice, environmental advocacy and sustainable practices. Kaluga and Reno (2022) introduce the concept of systems science as an interdisciplinary and visual approach to learning in which students analyze the interrelationships between various Sustainable Development Goals. In turn, Mapp and Gatanio Gabel (2022) raise the issue of the need to move from an international to a global education framework that forms students' global thinking and intercultural competence.

In the Kazakhstani context, the discussion of the need to integrate SDGs into social work education is gaining momentum at the level of the professional community and the academic environment. The importance of reviewing educational programs, updating professional standards and developing competencies, taking into account the international agenda, is emphasized. However, despite efforts in this direction, there is still no systematic analysis of the degree of involvement of all 17 SDGs in the training of social workers in the domestic scientific literature. This gap underlines the relevance of conducting targeted research aimed at assessing the current state, identifying barriers and developing recommendations for the effective integration of sustainable development into educational practice.

2. Methodology

The present study is applied and analytical in nature and is aimed at identifying the degree of integration of the SDGs into bachelor's degree programs in Social Work in Kazakhstan. The main method used in the study is the analysis of open data on educational programs registered in the Unified Management System of Higher Education of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

The object of the analysis was 19 universities providing training in the educational program 6B114 - “Social work”. The study was conducted by the L.N. Gumilyov ENU research group with the support of UNICEF in 2023 and covered all the programs in force at that time, which are publicly available in the register of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan. To assess the quality and content structure of the programs, 9 professional competencies were used, developed by the Council on Accreditation of Education in Social Work in the USA (CSWE), which are a recognized international standard in the field of training social workers.

Each educational program was evaluated by the presence (or absence) of generated learning outcomes related to the specified nine competencies. The analysis was carried out on the basis of the descriptive part of the programs, the list of disciplines and the formulations of expected learning outcomes. The results were compared in a table that made it possible to classify universities according to the degree of compliance with international standards. Additionally, a critical assessment of the curriculum structure was conducted, with an emphasis on the availability of disciplines that directly contribute to the formation of students' sustainable thinking, interdepartmental skills and ethical responsibility.

Qualitative characteristics of the content of the disciplines were also analyzed: courses related to social justice, human rights, environmental and economic aspects of sustainable development, as well as disciplines that do not correspond to the professional profile of social work (for example, focused primarily on business and administrative management) were identified.

Thus, the research methodology is based on a systematic comparison of the content of Kazakhstani educational programs with international professional guidelines and the global SDG agenda. This approach makes it possible not only to identify gaps and strengths, but also to formulate proposals for reforming the training of social workers in the face of growing global demands.

3. Results

An analysis of educational programs in the field of Social Work conducted in 2023 revealed significant heterogeneity in the degree of compliance with nine international professional competencies adopted by the Council for Accreditation of Programs in the Field of Social Work. In total, the analysis included 19 universities in Kazakhstan, whose educational programs are publicly available on the platform of the Unified Higher Education Management System of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan. A comparative analysis showed that only four universities, namely L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University, Abai Myrzakhmetov Kokshetau University, M. Auezov South Kazakhstan University and the Central Kazakhstan Academy demonstrate compliance with all or almost all nine international competencies.

Significant gaps have been identified in other universities, especially in areas such as ethical and professional behavior, assessment and intervention in social work, interdepartmental cooperation and human rights protection and supervision. To assess the completeness of the integration of competencies, a binary approach was used, which assessed the presence or absence of each competence in the description of the educational programm.

The data were summarized in a comparative table, while in some cases competencies were formally mentioned, but not supported by meaningful content through relevant disciplines and practice-oriented modules. A structural analysis of the curricula revealed the predominance of disciplines that are not directly related to the profile of social work, such as “Economic Theory”, “Fundamentals of Family Business”, “Public Procurement” and “Business Communications”. At the same time, key components such as human rights, social justice, supervision and assessment practices are either fragmented or absent altogether. In some cases, there is a duplication of topics related to migration or gender policy and religious studies, which indicates an insufficient focus of curricula. Based on the identified imbalances, the working group proposed specific measures to modernize the content, namely the consolidation and optimization of

duplicate courses, the exclusion of irrelevant disciplines and the introduction of new modules reflecting international approaches, such as “Ethical principles and dilemmas of social work”, “Interdepartmental interaction”, “Family assessment and work with vulnerable groups”, “Introduction to supervision”, “Communication skills and counseling”.

Table 2. Correspondence of learning outcomes in existing educational programs with 9 social work competencies

No	Name of the Higher educational institution of the educational program	**Competence 1** Demonstrate ethical and professional behavior	**Competence 2** Putting diversity and difference into practice	**Competence 3** Promotion of human rights and social, economic and environmental justice	**Competence 4** Participate in practice-based research and research-based practice	**Competence 5** Participate in political practice	**Competence 6** Interacting with individuals, families, groups, organizations and communities	**Competence 7** Assessment of individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities	**Competence 8** Intervention in the affairs of individuals, families, groups, organizations and communities	**Competence 9** Evaluate practices with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities
1	L.N.Gumilyov Eurasian National University	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
2	Al-Farabi Kazakh National University	1	1				1	1	1	
3	E.A.Buketov Karaganda State University		1				1		1	
4	Esil University	1			1	1	1	1		1
5	Karaganda Economic University of Kazpotrebsoyuz	1			1	1		1	1	1
6	Kokshetau University named after Abai Myrzakhmetov	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	
7	South Kazakhstan State University named after M. Auezov	1	1	1		1	1	1	1	1
8	M.S. Narikbayev KAZGUU University				1	1	1			
9	Central Kazakhstan Academy	1			1	1	1	1	1	1
10	Kyzylorda State University named after “Korkyt-Ata”	1					1			
11	Narxoz University	1					1		1	1
12	East Kazakhstan State University named after C. Amanzholov	1		1	1	1	1	1		
13	Kazakh State Women's Pedagogical University	1			1	1	1			
14	Toraigyrov University	1		1	1	1	1			
15	Kazakh-Russian Medical University	1	1	1			1	1		
16	Kyzylorda Institute of Technology and Service	1				1	1			
17	Alikhan Bokeikhan University			1		1	1	1		1

18	M.Zhumabayev Higher College	1	1	1			1	1	1	
19	Kazakhstan Swiss-American College	1	1	1			1			

**1*- these are the available competencies, *0*- non-existing competencies

Special attention in the analysis was paid to the degree of integration (SDGs) into the content of educational programs. It turned out that despite the potential overlap with the themes of the SDGs, in particular, with SDG 1 (poverty eradication), SDG 3 (health and well-being), SDG 4 (quality education) and SDG 5 (gender equality), in most programs there is no direct mention of these goals and their links to the professional tasks of social workers. SDG 13 (combating climate change), SDG 16 (peace, justice and effective institutions) and SDG 17 (partnership for sustainable development) are practically not represented.

As a result, SDGs are most often integrated implicitly, without a systematic approach and without students developing relevant interdisciplinary competencies. Thus, the results of the analysis indicate the fragmented integration of both international professional standards and principles of sustainable development into the content of educational programs on social work in Kazakhstan. This indicates the need to review the structure and content of the educational program in order to bring them in line with global standards and the tasks of training professionals capable of effectively responding to modern social challenges.

4. Discussion

The results of the analysis of educational programs in the field of “Social work” in Kazakhstan indicate fragmentation in the integration of international professional competencies and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Despite individual examples of universities demonstrating a high level of compliance with the nine CSWE competencies, in general, the structure and content of programs remain unbalanced and poorly coordinated with global trends in the training of social workers.

This situation correlates with the results of international research. For example, Nhapi and Pinto (2024) show that even in countries with different levels of socio-economic development, such as Zimbabwe and Portugal, the integration of the SDGs is often fragmented, declarative and not supported by practice-oriented components. Similarly, the study by Sanhueza et al. (2022) highlights the importance of implementing models of interaction between universities and communities in order to provide students with real-world experience in implementing the principles of sustainable development. In the Kazakh context, such forms are still rarely or absent.

The results of the analysis also demonstrated an imbalance between the stated objectives of educational programs and the actual content of curricula. The predominance of disciplines not directly related to social work, as well as the lack of courses on ethics, supervision, interagency interaction and practical skills, reduces the potential of programs to train specialists who are able to work effectively in accordance with international standards and SDG objectives. This confirms the conclusions of Pandey and Kumar (2018), who state that successful integration of the SDGs requires not only the formal inclusion of new topics, but also the transformation of pedagogical strategies, an interdisciplinary approach and institutional support.

The integration of the SDGs is particularly relevant in the context of social work, as the profession is directly linked to the achievement of goals such as poverty reduction (SDG 1), health and well-being (SDG 3), gender equality (SDG 5), reducing inequality (SDG 10) and partnership development (SDG 17). However, not only these key SDGs are poorly represented in the educational programs of Kazakhstani universities, but especially those related to environmental sustainability (SDG 13), peace and justice (SDG 16) and integrated intersectoral interactions (SDG 17). This is also consistent with the observations of Akinci et al. (2025), which highlight the lack of environmental sensitivity of social work programs, even on a global scale.

The data obtained indicate the need for institutional reforms in the training of social workers in Kazakhstan. This includes updating educational standards with a focus on the SDGs, developing new training courses, providing methodological support to teachers and creating practice-oriented learning formats. In addition, there is a need to strengthen the dialogue between the academic community, professional associations and government agencies aimed at coordinating standards, goals and approaches for training personnel in the social sphere.

Thus, the discussion of the revealed results in the context of international research highlights the systemic nature of the challenges facing social education and the need for a deeper and more targeted transformation of educational programs in accordance with the principles of sustainable development and international professional guidelines.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of educational programs on social work in Kazakhstan revealed the fragmented integration of both international professional competencies and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), despite the growing interest in the topic at the level of the academic community and professional associations.

The results of the study show that many universities lack a systematic approach to the formation of key components of social worker training: ethics, interdepartmental interaction, supervision, assessment and intervention. The curriculum structure often includes disciplines that are not directly related to the professional profile of social work, while critical modules are poorly presented or declarative in nature. In addition, the integration of the principles of sustainable development is mainly limited to mentioning individual Goals in missions and program descriptions, but is not reflected in the content of courses and the formation of professional competencies.

Comparison with international approaches confirms that effective training of social workers in the face of global challenges requires the introduction of interdisciplinary strategies, practice-oriented forms of education and an emphasis on human rights and sustainable development. In the context of Kazakhstan, this is especially relevant, taking into account the tasks related to the implementation of national priorities in the field of social protection, health, inclusion and family policy. In order to eliminate the identified imbalances and improve the compliance of programs with international standards, it is advisable to review state educational standards, including components reflecting the nine professional competencies of the CSWE and the SDGs as a cross-cutting pedagogical line. It is also recommended to optimize the curriculum structure by replacing irrelevant disciplines with specialized modules on assessment, supervision, interagency cooperation and sustainable development. Systematic support for teachers is needed through professional development programs, the development of interuniversity cooperation and the creation of pilot programs with full integration of the SDGs. In

addition, a national mechanism for monitoring and evaluating the quality of social worker training should be developed from the perspective of the global sustainable development agenda. The implementation of these steps will enhance the professionalism of future social workers and ensure their contribution to achieving the SDGs in Kazakhstan.

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