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Professional internship of social pedagogy students: new challenges and threats

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Abstract

The main objective of this study is to analyse the changes in social education professional internship for university students. We concentrated on identifying strengths and weaknesses of professional internship, and the opportunities and threats observed in the implementation of professional social education professional internship during the coronavirus crisis. We subsequently explain how the impacts of this extraordinary situation are reflected in the competency model of the future social educator. Due to the absence of specific research studies looking at the transformation of student professional internship during the coronavirus crisis period, we thought it seemed appropriate to investigate in detail one specific case, and use it to analyse the partial impacts of the pandemic in the implementation of the professional internship of specifically university students. Using a descriptive case study design, we analyze social education internships during the coronavirus period in the Czech Republic, utilizing student data (internship diary, facility assessment, self-assessment, and questionnaire) to identify changes in the internship system. We found many significant changes in the implementation of professional internship, which are fundamentally reflected in the competency model of Social Education graduate.

Keywords

social education; professional internship; higher education; COVID-19; professional preparation

Introduction

The Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has had a pervasive impact on the global tertiary education sector, and has created significant challenges for the worldwide community of university education providers. There have been different responses to these challenges by universities, “from having no response through to social isolation strategies on campus and rapid curriculum redevelopment for fully online offerings”.¹ The partial or complete closure of universities has had extensive individual, educational and organisational consequences for students, teachers and the educational institutions themselves. The extraordinary situation due to the pandemic has influenced teaching in and beyond the classroom to such an extent that almost overnight the forms and methods of teaching, communication and student assessment itself had to be changed. The COVID-19 pandemic has also had a major impact on the implementation of professional internship for students of universities, thus threatening the quality and quantity of experience students can acquire in partaking in such placements.

During these placements, the student is integrated into working tasks under real-life conditions and in the environment of their future profession. They find themselves in situations in which their theoretical preparedness is confronted with the practical reality of the profession, they can test how suited they are to the profession, and they can gain a relationship with their possible future profession, revealing its upsides and downsides.² The significance of professional internship for university students cannot be replaced, but in order to achieve the effect all involved parties need to be heard – students, schools and the facilities hosting the students on the placements. In particular, it is essential that the method for implementing the placement is underpinned by research if teaching beyond the classroom is to maintain high standards and be relevant for the future context of the graduate’s professional internship³. Nevertheless, professional internship is often only peripherally considered in the curriculum, or even directly marginalised.⁴ Rarely are placements considered the primary component of the education of fu-

¹ J. Crawford, K. Butler-Henderson, J. Rudolph, M. Glowatz, R. Burton, P.A. Magni, S. Lam, *COVID-19: 20 Countries’ Higher Education Intra-Period Digital Pedagogy Responses*, “Journal of Applied Learning & Teaching” 2020, 3(1), pp. 9–28.

² L. Rohlíková, J. Vejvodová, *Vyučovací metody na vysoké škole: praktický průvodce výukou v prezenční i distanční formě studia*, Praha 2012.

³ I. Zuchowski, C. Hudson, B. Bartlett, S. Diamandi, *Social Work Field Education in Australia: Sharing Practice Wisdom and Reflection*, *Advances*, “Social Work And Welfare Education” 2014, 16(1), pp. 67–80.

⁴ Ch. Morley, J. Dunstan, *Critical Reflection: A Response to Neoliberal Challenges to Field Education?*, “Social Work Education” 2013, 32(2), pp. 141–156.

ture professionals.⁵ At the current time, it is also much more difficult for universities to secure a stimulating learning environment for students, since many institutions, companies and facilities are dealing with a lack of resources (finances and personnel), manifested in a reduced ability to secure the supervision of the student by a qualified staff member, or even to host students at all.⁶ Truhlářová⁷ states that professional internship require the following tasks of education institutions:

- to find a suitable environment for learning outside the university environment;
- to bring together theoretical and practical education;
- to acquire high quality partners who will be involved in the education process;
- to set up a system of assessing placements in which the pedagogue does not directly take part;
- to bear professional responsibility for professional training.

It is definitely true that in terms of graduates' employability, in addition to acquiring knowledge in a particular field, high quality university education should also include developing the ability to apply this acquired knowledge in practice. Developing expertise is a long process, during which theoretical, practical and metacognitive elements of expertise are integrated into a coherent whole. It is important in tertiary education to support students in their learning and integrating theoretical knowledge in practice.⁸ Placements are a unique method of testing theoretical knowledge gained, through professional internship, students can test out their theoretical knowledge in a real life situation, verify the truth of information they have acquired and also test themselves whether they are ready to perform the profession they are studying. Students' stay in an actual working environment provides the opportunity for students to experience for themselves what they have learnt during their studies in lessons and during self-study.⁹ The aim is thus to integrate the theoretical and conceptual benefits of classroom learning with the practical world¹⁰, because learning is not just adaptation, but rather an active pro-

⁵ D. Gursansky, E. Le Sueur, *Conceptualising Field Education in the Twenty-First Century: Contradictions, Challenges and Opportunities*, "Social Work Education" 2011, 31(7), pp. 914–931.

⁶ I. Zuchowski, C. Hudson, B. Bartlett, S. Diamandi, *Social Work Field Education in Australia...*, *op. cit.*

⁷ Z. Truhlářová, *Odborné praxe v kontextu pregraduální přípravy sociálních pracovníků*, Hradec Králové 2015.

⁸ N. Katajavuori, S. Lindblom-Ylänne, J. Hirvonen, *The Significance of Practical Training in Linking Theoretical Studies with Practice*, "Higher Education" 2006, 51(3), pp. 439–464.

⁹ B.N. Baird, D. Mollen, *Internship, Practicum, and Field Placement Handbook*, New York 2019.

¹⁰ J. Ayala, J. Drolet, A. Fulton, J. Hewson, L. Letkemann, M. Baynton, G. Elliott, A. Judge-Stasiak, C. Blaug, A. Gérard Tétreault, E. Schweizer, *Field Education in Crisis: Experiences of Field Education Coordinators in Canada*, "Social Work Education" 2017, 37(3), pp. 281–293.

cess in which the individual acquires (masters, changes, adapts, etc.) something new to them. The outcome of such learning is actively formed personal hypotheses and meanings of reality.¹¹

Students' placements naturally represent the foundation stone and future successful practice for social educators. They are valuable in developing students' basic competencies and essential in preparing future professionals, and a fundamental component of the curriculum in so-called helping profession subjects. Professional internship programmes provide students with the opportunity to take part in social education work within the professional community environment, fulfilling students' academic needs and giving them the opportunity to synthesise knowledge, values and skills within social education. The experience that students gather during their placements is fundamental for their transition to professional practice.¹² Professional internship are compulsory for students of Social Education. The objective of these placements is to acquire experience of performing social education practice; build up a professional identity; to learn how to link theoretical knowledge with practice; to acquire, know how to use and further develop competencies necessary for performing the profession that the subject graduate can work in.¹³ Developing the student's competencies through professional internship in the helping professions is complex and requires a combination of procedural competencies such as knowledge and skills, and meta-competencies such as self-awareness and self-reflection.¹⁴ Students also need to develop their intercultural competencies, to learn to link theory with practice and to apply principles of social justice in working with clients.¹⁵ Work experience gives students the opportunity to acquire competencies, from the ability to understand work instructions, through emotional intelligence, communication, teamwork, to language skills and the ability to lead a team, make decisions and take responsibility. This is also confirmed in studies claiming that students who work in the so-called helping professions after graduation consider internship, practicums and field placement to be the most influential experiences of their professional careers.¹⁶

¹¹ G. Petty, *Moderní vyučování*, Praha 2013.

¹² D. Gursansky, E. Le Sueur, *Conceptualising Field Education in the Twenty-First Century...*, *op. cit.*

¹³ A. Hrdličková, *Odborná praxe v prostředí vysokého školství*, Brno 2013.

¹⁴ T. Kourgiantakis, K.M. Sewell, R. Hu, J. Logan, M. Bogo, *Simulation in Social Work Education: A Scoping Review*, "Research on Social Work Practice" 2020, 30(4), pp. 433–450.

¹⁵ T. Kourgiantakis, E. Lee, *Social Work Practice Education and Training during the Pandemic: Disruptions and Discoveries*, "International Social Work" 2020, 63(6), pp. 761–765.

¹⁶ B.N. Baird, D. Mollen, *Internship, Practicum, and Field Placement Handbook*, *op. cit.*

Competencies of a social educator and their application in practice

We produced below competency model for a social educator based on an analysis of profile cards for social educator careers in the Czech Republic, and from an analysis of the curriculum at individual universities. In creating this competency model, we have also based it on already existing models, and specifically on the key competencies model according to Ital and Knöferl¹⁷, the competency model for a social educator according to Kraus¹⁸, Bakošová's competency model¹⁹ and the competency model proposed by the International Association of Social Educators.²⁰

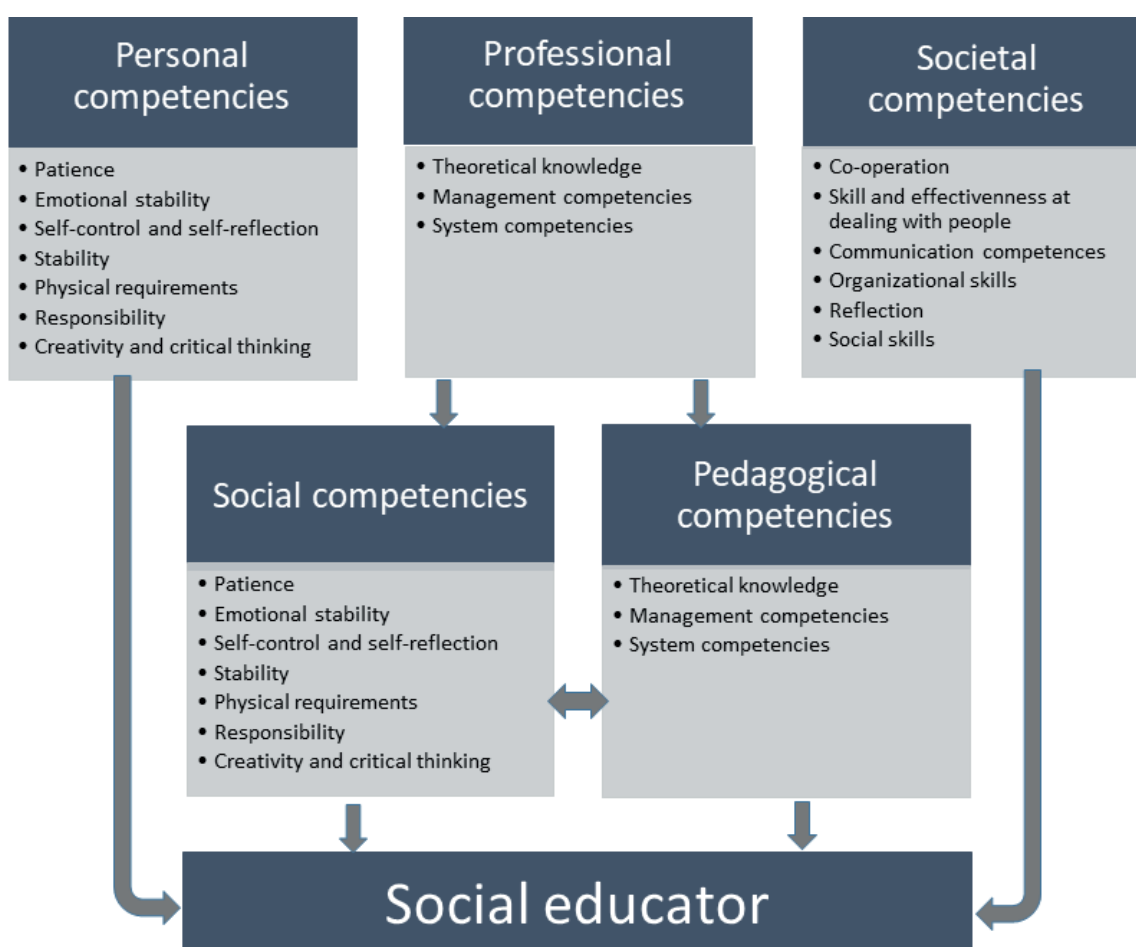


Figure 1. Social educator competency model

¹⁷ J. Veteška, M. Tureckiová, *Kompetence ve vzdělávání*, Praha 2008.

¹⁸ B. Kraus, V. Poláčková, *Člověk – prostředí – výchova: k otázkám sociální pedagogiky*, Brno 2001.

¹⁹ Z. Bakošová, *Sociální pedagog a jeho kompetence*, "Pedagogická revue" 2005, 57(1), pp. 12–21.

²⁰ European Bureau of the International Association of Social Educator, *A common platform for social educators in Europe*, "Child & Youth Care Forum" 2006, 35(5), pp. 375–389.

Graduates of Social Education can find work in various fields, from education to social services. Thus, social educators become “agents of socialisation”, and their role particularly involves helping people to help themselves.²¹ Extraordinary university student professional internship through working obligations during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the state of emergency in spring and autumn 2020, the Czech Republic drafted full-time students of social sector disciplines in colleges and universities to work in social services. These students helped in those social services where the epidemic had led to a lack of employees, subsequently threatening the quality of care provision to clients. Individual students were called upon to help regional administrations, with the extent and venue of work determined by a labour order from regional governors. Spring work duties lasted from 13 March until 10 May 2020, and autumn duties from 13 October to 16 December 2020. The above obligation to work order, however, did not impact the fulfilment of students’ educational work, and was not reflected in any way in the extent or content of obligatory placements as part of study.²²

Methodology

The primary objective of this research is to analyse social education professional internship during the period of the coronavirus pandemic in its first and second waves (March – May 2020 and October – December 2020) in the Czech Republic. A secondary objective is to reveal the changes that occurred within the social education placements system, and propose suitable measures based on the outcomes of the research findings.

Due to the absence of specific research studies looking at the transformation of student professional internship during the coronavirus crisis period, we thought it seemed appropriate to investigate in detail one specific case, and use it to analyse the partial impacts of the pandemic in the implementation of the placements of specifically university students. We chose a descriptive single case study (as described by Yin²³), which basically involved a detailed study of the selected case in

²¹ P. Stephens, *Social Pedagogy: Heart and Head*, Bremen 2013.

²² *Usnesení Vlády České Republiky ze dne 12. října 2020 č. 1027, o zajištění poskytování péče v zařízeních sociálních služeb po dobu trvání nouzového stavu*, <https://www.vlada.cz/cz/epidemie-koronaviru/dulezite-informace/prehled-vladnich-usneseni-od-vyhlaseni-nouzoveho-stavu-180608/#brezen> [accessed: 29.08.2024]. *Usnesení Vlády České Republiky ze dne 13. března 2020 č. 207, o zajištění poskytování péče v zařízeních sociálních služeb po dobu trvání nouzového stavu*, <https://www.vlada.cz/cz/epidemie-koronaviru/dulezite-informace/prehled-vladnich-usneseni-od-vyhlaseni-nouzoveho-stavu-180608/#brezen> [accessed: 29.08.2024].

²³ R.K. Yin, *Case study research: Design and methods*, Los Angeles 2014.

order to apply the findings ascertained back within the area investigated, and to subsequently propose measures which a specific educational institution can make use of in the method, forms and curricula of professional internship.

Research Questions

1. How did university students' social education professional internship change during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the implementation of social education professional internship during the coronavirus crisis?
3. What opportunities and threats does the coronavirus crisis create for university students' social education professional internship?
4. How do students assess social education professional internship during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how do organisations assess it?

Data and sources of data

A pivotal phase of the case study is the selection of the specific case. Based on an analysis of professional internship in social education at Czech universities, we determined the following criteria for selecting a so-called average case:

Essential criteria

- Professional internship as part of a Social Education bachelor's degree, undertaken full-time.

Extra criteria

- Student practice is undertaken in the first year through an excursion;
- In the second and third year of bachelor's study, professional internship is implemented (in the chosen case, this represents an average extent of 80 hours placement / Year 2, and 160 hours / Year 3).

The basis for the selection of the case was the theoretical assumption that in a typical case (average case) of a professional internship within social education, common situations and problems related to students' practical profiling occur. Due to anonymization of the research investigation, we give a description of the case while ensuring it cannot be identified.

Description of case

The selected university in the Czech Republic has provided education in Social Education for full-time students since 2004. Within the portfolio of subjects, we can see a strong tradition of teaching educational work and social work methods, and also pedagogical methods. The social and pedagogical profiling of graduates has a significant impact on the implementation of placements and the competency model for students of the subject. The placements also respond to the above. Their specification for individual years is given below.

First year of full-time bachelor's degree

In the first year of full-time bachelor's study, students undertake excursions in four facilities. The objective of the excursion is that students form an overview of the activities of social facilities and educational institutions in their surroundings. This allows them to clarify their own profiling and focus towards a specific target group. After completing this particular subject, students are able to characterise the visited facility in terms of operation, personnel structure, target group of users and individual activities of the facility. The student also goes to lectures and seminars organised by the university which relate to opportunities for working as a social educator in practice, the description of a social educator's activities and the specificities of target groups. Following completion of a series of excursions and lectures, the student completes a practice diary at the end of the summer semester which contains assessments of the specific facilities, self-reflection and important information on the student's placement. The student's practice diary is submitted via an electronic system and they receive feedback on it from a pedagogue.

Second year of full-time bachelor's degree

In the second year, the student undertakes a placement in a facility of their own choice. The student can select the facility from a list of sites offered by the university. This list of sites comprises 781 facilities with which the university has an agreement on hosting students' placements. The student is also able to select a facility with which the university does not have an agreement, such as in their home town, or in line with a particular area of the subject they wish to choose. In this case, an individual agreement must be signed for the student. Each professional internship must have a signed agreement.

The length of the professional internship in the second year comes to 80 hours. During the course of the placement, the student should become familiar with the

specific facility in terms of its operation, personnel structure, composition of users and focus of services. The students apply their theoretical knowledge and skills to the practical operation of the selected facility, and get involved in communication with clients, staff and other organisations. During their placements, students become familiar with issues around a functioning non-profit sector, and issues linked to its funding, such as grant programmes and issues with fundraising in general. Students also have the opportunity to see in practice for themselves the conceptual and legislative framework for the operating of institutions in the social and pedagogical field.

Third year of full-time bachelor's degree

The final professional internship build from students' practice and placements in the first and second year of study. Students choose a facility or organisation within the social, social education or pedagogy spheres themselves. The chosen facility must correspond to the concept of social education studies in terms of the nature of services provided. The placement serves to bring together theoretical knowledge and practical experience so that at the end of their bachelor's degree, students have acquired a comprehensive overview of the practical activities and operation of social facilities and some school facilities. The placement should equip students with the necessary social education competencies. Through meeting the conditions of this practical subject, students consolidate their practical and communication skills in the operation of the chosen facility, and acquire an overview of the options for acquiring funds from grant programmes. They become familiar with legislative issues in the social and pedagogical fields in greater depth.

The length of the professional internship in the third year comes to 160 hours. Students attend placement for a period of one month, during which time they do not have lessons in the classroom. During their placement, there is a holistic development of students' competencies in social education (according to the above detailed competency model), with emphasis placed on the practical deepening of professional competencies. Thus students clarify the theoretical knowledge and skills which they have acquired during their study.

Data collection took place in 2019 and 2020. Different methods of data collection were combined, with placement diaries which the students wrote following completion of their placements analysed in the first place. Furthermore, assessment of the placements made by the organisation was undertaken, other documents were analysed, and there were also questionnaires and self-assessments of the placements by the students.

The following documents were collected from Social Education students, specifically from students in Years 1, 2 and 3 of the full-time bachelor's degree.

Table 1. Sources of data

Research tool	Number of respondents		Data analysis method
	Before coronavirus crisis (2019)	During coronavirus crisis (2020)	
Placement diary	170	157	Content analysis
Assessment by facility	170	157	SWOT analysis
Self-assessment by students	170	157	
Questionnaire	0	157	Descriptive statistics

Source: own studies.

In order to compare placements before the coronavirus crisis and during the coronavirus crisis in 2020, the listed documents from 2019 were also analysed.

Data analysis techniques

As detailed above, we used all documents related to the placements at the selected university in order to analyse the data. We proceeded in the analysis in the following steps:

- 1) analysis focused on the placement according to individual organisations;
- 2) placements as perceived by students and organisations;
- 3) SWOT analysis of changes in placements.

Results and Discussion

Analysis focused on placements

The first step was an analysis focused on placements according to individual organisations. We considered this primary analysis to be core. We used it to ascertain which facilities students attended for their placements in 2019 and 2020.

The selection of an organisation for undertaking a professional internship changed significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Mainly due to the closure of primary schools, students were unable to undertake placements as tutors within after-school clubs or as teaching assistants. Yet we consider social educators' work in primary and secondary schools to be crucial. As we have said in the introduction, there are currently calls for the position of social educator in primary schools

to be introduced as a distinct profession. The lack of opportunity to find a placement in this area is problematic for students, as they are unable to acquire competencies typical for the school environment, education and training competencies, competencies related to the organisation of work in and with school classrooms, diagnostic and assessment competencies, etc. Despite this, students did find a way to reach the most frequently chosen target group – children and young people. Due to the closure of the lower and upper levels of primary schools, students focused more on nursery schools in their selection, in which they are able to work as a teaching assistant (as a graduate of Social Education).

Table 2. Analysis of student placement facilities

Preferred placement facilities before coronavirus crisis	
2019	2020
Primary schools	Children 's homes
Children 's homes	Senior citizen care homes
Children 's centres	Nursery schools
Shelters	Care services
Senior citizen care homes	Help during coronavirus crisis (shopping for the elderly, tutoring, etc.)
Child protection bodies	
Employment offices	
Czech social security administration	

Source: own studies.

Another major change we identified compared to 2019 was students' focus on selecting institutional care facilities – children's homes or children's homes with a school. During the COVID-19 pandemic in the Czech Republic, these facilities faced a lack of staff. Due to the closure of primary schools (at lower and upper level), tutors in the children's homes were forced to take on the role of pupil teachers, tutoring them, practising the material with them and explaining aspects of the curriculum the pupils had not understood during online learning. In addition, in many elementary schools, there was no online teaching at all, with pupils merely receiving homework without the teacher explaining the course content to them in clear detail. It should be noted that within children's homes, one tutor is in charge of around 6 clients. As such, social education students were advised by the placement co-ordinator to undertake their professional internship within these facilities.

The third important change in terms of selecting a facility for undertaking social education professional internship was students' interest in senior care homes. These facilities and others like them became the social service whose clients were most impacted by the COVID-19 virus. Due to the average age of ser-

vice users, the consequences of the illness are more serious for them, and as such care for the user requires extensive help. Hospitals in the Czech Republic did not take COVID-19 patients (with mild symptoms) from senior care homes. Within care home facilities, so-called COVID zones began to be set up. In the first wave of the pandemic (March – May 2020), senior care homes acted very warily, minimising the options for social education students to undertake placements there, mainly over concern over coronavirus infection. With hindsight, and during the second wave of the pandemic (October – December 2020), however, these facilities began to feel the severe impact of the lack of care staff due to the continuous presence of the COVID-19 infection (amongst clients and employees), and they began to directly request placements from social education students. It should be noted, however, that these types of professional internship were only exceptionally approved by higher education institutions. (Looking at the competency model for a social educator, at the Social Services Act, Act no. 108/2006 Coll., and options for working as a social educator in senior care homes, it is evident that graduates of the field can only work in roles as social workers or activation workers. They can also work as carers, but this activity is no longer in line with the competency model and focus of Social Education studies.) Thus a dilemma arose of whether placements should be in strict accordance with the competency model of a social educator, or whether it should help organisations with a lack of staff and in securing standard care for users. This dilemma was subsequently resolved by a government decree on the working duties of students of the so-called helping professions, which also includes social education. Subsequently, students were contacted by an employee of the regional authority in which the educational institution was located asking them to take part in working duties in senior care homes. This involved the students performing direct personal care, serving clients meals, providing basic cleaning duties and other jobs which, as we have already noted, is outside the framework of competencies for a social education student. Students received a certain level of remuneration for their working duties, but it could not be included as part of the time requirements for undertaking the degree placement.

The final significant change in terms of selection of facilities for undertaking students' professional internship was caused by the government decree which restricted, or directly closed, many social services facilities in the Czech Republic. As such, students were unable to work in outpatient facilities, such as social therapeutic workshops, day care centres and low-threshold treatment centres. In this regard, we also see a large change in the portfolio of competencies acquired by future social educators. As a result of this situation, students are unable to integrate theoretical knowledge in this aspect of practice, although under normal circumstances (prior to the coronavirus crisis), variation in professional internship is required.

Opinions of students and facilities on implementation of placements

The second area analysed was the opinions of students and organisation of professional internship. Here, a source was the diary of their placements which all students submit at the end of the semester in which the placement takes place. Placement diaries contain: a description of the facility, staff structure, a description of the portfolio of services and activities offered, methods of working with clients, students' self-reflection and an assessment of the student by the organisation. Students' self-reflection assessments suggest that during the COVID-19 pandemic, they felt greater insecurity at their professional internship and needed an increased level of help from the organisation's staff. This help, however, was often not received due to a lack of staff. We believe that this situation has led to a need to increase the volume of activities undertaken by placement co-ordinators, who should visit the facilities more frequently to observe, and communicate with the students more while they are undertaking their placements. However, placement co-ordinators are often academic staff members who manage the placement in parallel with teaching other specialist subjects. The increased volume of their activities would take up a lot of time for them. We thus recommend setting up the position of placement officer, a person who would help students with common administrative problems during their placement. The current co-ordinator / supervisor would then help the students with specialist social education problems. It would also be a good idea to implement regular group supervision which students undertaking their placement in similarly-focused facilities would take part in. This would lead not just to the regular resolution of problems students encounter when undertaking their placements, but also consultation with other experts and the opportunity to resolve problems in a group or team and to acquire an insight into how other similar facilities deal with such problems. Another source of data was the questionnaires which students were given to fill in in 2019 and 2020, in which they assessed core areas of their implemented placement.

Two statements are marked in the table, for which we saw statistically significant differences in professional internship assessments for 2019 and 2020. A Student's t-test was used to verify this. Before its use, normality was assessed using a P-P plot and Fisher-Snedecor's F-test of homogeneity of variance. The data showed a normal distribution and we also met the condition of homoscedasticity.

During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, students felt a greater workload during their professional internship compared to the ordinary academic year of 2019. Students state this fact in their self-reflections. They often had to perform 12-hour shifts, or activities which required the assistance of a number of the facility's staff members. However, due to staff absence, the organisations were not able to secure this assistance. In this regard, the students also stated that when choosing

their subject of specialisation, they had not realised that the work of a social educator could be so difficult, and that the high demand placed on them during their placement had led them to consider the suitability of their chosen field.

Table 3. Assessment of students' placements

Statement	Average in 2019	Average in 2020
The required workload was too high.	2.2	2.846
I have expanded by specialist competencies through my placement.	3	3
I have acquired new knowledge and skills during my placement.	2.3	1.292
The work duties of my placement related to my studied field.	3	2.969
During my placement I made use of knowledge gained during my studies.	2.85	2.985
I co-operated well with the employees of the organisation where I did my placement.	3	3
I received sufficient feedback at the end of the placement.	2.98	3
I knew where to find all the materials I needed for my placement.	2.9	2.938
My placement teacher/co-ordinator was willing to explain and give me advice about anything I needed in regard to the placement.	3	2.938
My placement helped me in terms of my specialist focus.	2.8	2.969
I would recommend this workplace for placements in the next academic year.	2.9	2.985

Key: 0 = strongly disagree, 1 = mostly disagree, 2 = mostly agree, 3 = strongly agree.

Source: own studies.

We identified a second significant difference, which we consider to be extremely alarming, in their assessment of the level of new knowledge and skills acquired while undertaking their placements. The average value fell from 2.3 to 1.3, i.e. by one full point. We can again attribute this reduction to a lack of staff in the organisations, and the already mentioned impact in the competency model of the Social Education student in terms of lower specialist profiling competencies.

We do not record any significant change in the facilities' assessment of professional internship. Nevertheless, we did see one significant appeal within organisation statements, in terms of improving mutual communication between the education institution – organisation – students. The organisations often do not know what particular competencies the students are supposed to acquire during their placement, and in what way the placement is supposed to be run. This shortcoming can be eliminated by creating a web portal in which the organisation can find all information needed in order to implement placements. Another detail

mentioned was that facilities could communicate directly with the placement coordinator at the university.

We used the placement diaries and assessments from facilities to set up a SWOT analysis table, which reflects the changes in the assessment of placements during the COVID-19 pandemic within social education in a holistic manner.

Table 4. SWOT analysis of placements during the COVID-19 pandemic

<p>Strengths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – online communication between students and facilities (speed, availability) – greater independence of students during placements – opportunity to become familiar with competencies of managing social services during a crisis – more frequent implementation of social education placements in senior care facilities and children’s homes 	<p>Weaknesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – in the event of a lack of online communication – difficult communication with facility – impossible or restricted implementation of placements in selected facilities (schools, low-threshold treatment facilities, etc.) – shortened period of undertaking placements (home office), – administrative focus of placements due to lack of clients in facility – reduced level of co-operation with other facility staff members – insecurity of students – lack of supervision and observation of placements
<p>Opportunities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – to develop co-operation between education institutions and social services facilities – response to facilities’ staff needs – to create supervision groups – to set up the position of placement officer – reduced administrative workload of the academic staff member 	<p>Threats</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – impossibility of implementing placements at selected positions (tutor, teaching assistant, leisure time teacher), – change of focus of placements → impact on competency model of social educator

Source: own studies.

The online form of communication between the student, university and organisations was assessed very positively. Students communicated with subjects during the pandemic much more through e-mail, chat and other apps: they could make use of video calls too, for example. Thus students could undertake those parts of their activities which did not require the student’s presence at the workplace within the home environment, thus eliminating the possibility of disease transmission. On the other hand, this also became a disadvantage with many organisations “artificially” creating activities for students just so they could undertake some activity during their placement. At home, students edited documents for the organisations, completed archives and set up fictive case studies which the organisation then assessed for them. In the end, however, placements undertook in this manner were

not recognised as meeting requirements for the students, because during them the student only undertook administrative activities, and did not work on other competencies.

The year 2020 also saw students become more independent when undertaking activities during their professional internship. Due to a lack of specialist staff at individual workplaces, students often took on positions as social workers, although a downside here was that they were insufficiently trained and familiar with activities they need to perform in the role. Students were forced to study intensively due to this situation, and ascertain matters for themselves, or contact the placement co-ordinator, who then responded to their queries in a video call, helping to resolve particular situations which had arisen.

Students also acquired many more competencies in management in the non-profit sector during an emergency situation, pandemic and subsequent society-wide crisis. We consider this to be a great advantage and a positive change in the structure of Social Education students' competencies structure. Graduates are now able to apply specific epidemiological directives in practice, are able to take part in crisis meetings within organisations and created methodologies adjusting the operation of facilities or employee activities at the workplace during emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

On the other hand, students experienced situations which complicated their work during the professional internship. They were often forced to change the facility they were working in while on their placement because it was closed or its services were significantly restricted. Students often had major problems in being able to undertake a placement, in particular during the first wave of the pandemic (March – May 2020). This situation was eliminated through the following measures:

- 1) the time by which students had to undertake their professional internship was extended until August 2020;
- 2) the educational institutions created a list of facilities which were asking for immediate assistance for students.

Thanks to these steps from the university, all students were able to successfully complete their placements. Another identified weakness in the implementation of professional internship was the low level of communication between organisation staff members and students, and also a drop in the level of co-operation. By creating the necessary conditions leading to eliminating contact between individual staff members or organisational divisions at non-profit organisation workplaces, options and forms of co-operation were minimised. In senior care homes, for example, entire single floors were closed, subsequently operating as a separate section. Employees were not allowed to visit other departments, or go to other parts of the building. Thus students did not have the opportunity to become familiar with the operation of some organisation departments.

We have already noted above the greater focus on administration in professional internship. On the one hand, this is certainly positive in that students acquired more administrative competencies for a social educator, and gained experience of creating methodologies, user documents and creating informative materials for service users or employees on procedures at the workplace. On the other hand, in many cases the placements were less focused on the client. We consider this to be a serious shortcoming in terms of the competencies which students should acquire during their placements. We believe that working with the client, or tutored individual, and learning social or social educational work and techniques linked to this, is the foundation stone of working in social educational placements.

In the SWOT analysis, we also described the opportunities and threats in the implementation of placements under an emergency situation, such as the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. A major threat which we identified was the dissonance in undertaking the placement versus the theoretical portfolio of study within Social Education. This fact is subsequently significantly reflected in the profile of the graduate, with a changed set of competencies which they should have. Specifically, there is a reduced amount of acquired specialist competencies in terms of both quantity and quality. This threat should not be overlooked, and it must be responded to. If the work undertaken during placements is not in line with the graduate profile, it is essential that co-ordinators or supervisors of the placement consider its assessment. The placement of a student who has undertaken activities in a facility which are not in line with the curriculum of placements for the specific field should be assessed as unfulfilled. Individual activities are given in the report of activities which is a component of the placement diary and so it is not difficult to assess to what extent they are in line with the curriculum, or not. However, it should not be just the student who is sanctioned. Current measures should also be specified, or new measures introduced in order to expand communication between the university and facility so that it is evident what the social education student's placement work should involve, and what the educational institution requires from the organisation. We consider developing high quality and effective communication between the university and facility to be an opportunity which should not be squandered.

Conclusion

In this article, we have analysed the average case of placement implementation within Social Education courses at universities in the Czech Republic. We have aimed to capture the changes in professional internship over the course of 2020 as

a result of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. The comparison year for us was 2019, which we perceive to be an ordinary academic year. We have ascertained that many significant changes took place in the implementation of placements, reflected in the competency model of the Social Education graduate. Another significant identified area of change is communication between the university and the organisations in which students undertake their placements.

Considering these changes, we think it is of the utmost importance to create a web portal, which would deepen communication between the entities listed and make it more effective. The proposed portal for communication between the student, university and organisations would aim to work as a communication channel between these parties, specifically in the following points:

- to create a comprehensive list of facilities where students can undertake professional internship, including a description of the activities performed during placements;
- to identify people in the facilities who are responsible for managing students during their placement, and for communication between the organisation and university;
- to create a calendar (schedule) for placements, where the student / organisation would record the presence of the student in the particular facility;
- to reduce the administrative burden involved in implementing placements for the organisation and facility, and for the students themselves (availability of all forms and documents – contracts, assessments and placement diaries are part of the portal);
- to provide greater and more specific information on placements for organisations and facilities;
- to identify the needs of organisations and facilities in terms of placements;
- to allow statistical analysis of professional internship implementations and other outcomes, create databases and determine parameters for more effective decision-making in regard to the implementation of placements for university students.

The option of creating appeals for organisations and facilities in which students are already undertaking placements, or for institutions, which are considering adding their names to the database of current institutions. The portal would be continuously updated and specified according to the needs of a student, university and specific organisations and facilities. Its modification would be based on current settings and the situation in social services, schools and other facilities during economic, medical or society-wide crises. The purpose of the portal would be to eliminate the risk of the impact of changes as a result of emergencies, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, on the implementation of placements for university stu-

dents, and as a result to minimise negative changes to the competency model for graduates of Social Education. The aim would be to provide assistance to students in fully integrating theoretical and practical experiences and acquiring all competencies which are essential for subsequent work in the field, increasing competition within the labour market.

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