

# Filling the Gap? Romanian Social Workers' "Migration" Into the UK

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**Abstract.** *The recent past decades have seen an increased transnational mobility among internationally educated social workers. For example, the UK social work system has seen an increased level of social workers recruited from abroad in certain fields of practice, mainly due to the staff shortage. This opinion paper aims to draw attention to the challenges faced by internationally qualified social workers in their efforts to integrate and adapt their practice to the UK system, with a focus on Romanian social workers, identified as a numerically significant group of 'trained abroad' social workers. The paper also highlights the lack of research available to understand the factors contributing to the social work professional immigration into the UK and is examining the connection between professional acculturation and successful practice. The article aims to act as a call for research and collaboration between social work providers and professional regulatory bodies, both in Romania and UK, as well as employers in order to develop focused research and practice guidance in this area.*

**Keywords :** professional migration, international social workers, professional acculturation, cultural competence

## Setting the 'scene'

Five years ago, the first author of this paper, a social work practitioner in Romania at the time, has been recruited by a UK local authority, via an intermediary recruiting agency, along with a large number of social workers from countries across Eastern Europe. For her, this was the start of a complex journey aiming to achieve adaptation, on both professional and personal life. In this paper, the authors reflect on the language barriers, different cultural practices bringing variations in professional judgment, and not least different societal expectations in relation to the role of the social worker – being among the most significant difficulties encountered on this journey. Acquiring 'cultural affinity', as described by Kornbeck (2004), is a premise of successful professional practice in a profession based on workers' knowledge of cultural practices and understandings (in Hussein et al, 2011). Dealing with what Simpson (2009) identified as 'dialectical tension between the local and the global'

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(656), became a 'strategy' to overcome some of these challenges, as social workers in similar situations were advised by their managers.

This article was inspired by this experience but also prompted by the lack of research available on the 'push' and 'pull' factors in relationship to the social workers professional migration into the UK. The article will begin by briefly illustrating the on-going reality of social workers' shortage in the UK social work system which is arguably the basis for the increasing recruitment of international social workers. The article will explore the literature on professional migration in social work in the UK in order to highlight the opportunities and also signpost potential challenges faced by internationally qualified social workers working in the UK system – with focus on Romanian social workers – and also to invite for further exploration on this topic.

## **A 'snapshot' of practicing social work in the current UK context**

In recent years, the high turn-over of social work practitioners in the UK (Harlow, 2004 in Hussein et al, 2011), coupled with limited span of professionals' involvement in the field due to the high demands of this profession and negative public image of this profession (as a consequences of the tragic deaths of several children whilst being involved with social services) led to a chronic staff shortage. In piecing together this multifaceted reality, some of the causal factors already put forward include the decreasing number of 'domestically' trained social workers (Moriarty et al, 2011, 2012) or the ageing professional workforce in UK social work system „in the line with national demographics” (Lyons, Hanna, 2011, 7).

These factors, leading to a severe staff shortage in the UK social work system appear to be the main explanatory candidate forth rising tide of recruiting international social workers, as noted by Hussein et al (2011) and Hanna and Lyons (2011). Additional candidates to explanatory factors may also include: internationally qualified social workers' motivation for working in a system still associated with high performance and offering competitive salaries and financial security, in comparison with the professional and financial rewards available in their native countries, especially for the workers coming from Eastern Europe.

This reality has to be considered in tandem with the ascendant transnational mobility amongst internationally educated social workers in the last 2 decades as noted by Moriarty et al (2012) and Pullen-Sansfaçon and colleagues (2014). A particular turning point in the UK appears to be when in 2011, the Migration Advisory Committee decided to place social workers from children and family sector on the shortage occupation list (UK Border Agency, 2011), thus endorsing this 'niche' recruitment as a potential solution to the increasing difficulties in the social work arena.

The 'traditional' countries targeted by UK for recruiting social workers were the USA, Australia, Canada, Africa or India – seen as an expression of colonial links and exchanges UK had with the English-speaking and Commonwealth countries (Hussein, 2011). However, in the recent years the reappears to be a clear shift towards 'importing' social workers from Eastern Europe<sup>1</sup>, as a result of significant changes in EU immigration law and policy, also supported by the political transformation faced by Central and East European countries after the fall of communist regimes. In addition, East European social workers eligibility for obtaining professional registration in the UK was one of the supporting factors of this recent trend.

Local authorities seem to be the main employers, although clear statistics are lacking. In the absence of such data, to illustrate this trend, below are two case examples (taken from

media) of local authorities' efforts in recruiting Romanian social workers as part of their workforce :

- Buckinghamshire County Council announced in June 2015 further plans to recruit another group of social workers from Romania. Although the county has been blamed for 'spending millions' recruiting international social workers, the argument is that these workforce will cost less than employing agency staff ([www.bucksfreepress.co.uk](http://www.bucksfreepress.co.uk))<sup>2</sup>.
- Herefordshire County Council is also moving towards 'increasing diversity' amongst their staff, recruiting internationally educated social workers ([www.herefordtimes.com](http://www.herefordtimes.com))<sup>3</sup>

It may be of relevance that in both cases, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED) grading for these local authorities was inadequate, both being concerned with staff recruitment and retention issues (especially in the child protection sector) over the previous years. Therefore, the recruitment of internationally qualified social workers could be seen as having a 'rescue' role: 'filling the gap' of staff shortage not only in these particular local authorities, but also across the UK. In the context of increasing numbers of safeguarding children issues or with the pressure of ageing population (Hussein et al, 2011), filling the gap by recruiting internationally qualified social workers seem to be a solution for the recruiting country. However, what is often neglected is the cost for the 'foreign' social worker in terms of their adaptation, and some of these aspects will be discussed further.

Hanna and Lyons (2011) as well as Hussein (2011) noted that a closer inspection of the General Social Care Council (GSCC)<sup>4</sup> statistics from August 2011 indicated that of a total 80,438 registered social workers, 6,946 – or approximately 8% – were social workers who qualified outside the UK. Although limited data is available, Romanian social workers occupy a distinctive place: between 2009-2010, the GSCC received 133 applications for registration from Romanian qualified social workers, this being the most significant number of internationally qualified social workers wanting to practice in the UK during that period (Hussein, 2011). No recent information is available from the current social workers' regulatory body, the Health and Council Professions (HCP), in respect to the numbers of internationally qualified social workers practicing in the UK, nor specifically on number of Romanian social workers part of the current British social work force, therefore, it is not possible to conclude if Romanian social workers' migration in the UK is still an ascendant trend but media reports – such as those highlighted above – suggest that this may be the case.

## **Practicing social work in a different cultural context**

Contrary to the idea of social work being one of the most „connected professions with a nation's specific profile” (Kornbeck, 2004, 27), there is a strong interest towards developing 'international forms of social work that transcend national borders' (Walsh, Wilson, O'Connor 2009, 1979), able to overcome the obstacle of cultural sensitivity (Simpson, 2009) and to create the favorable setting for exercising social work transferable skills. In this context, it becomes relevant to explore different approaches and motivations driving such set of actions, and to understand how the international workforce fits in the host country's landscape.

To explore these, it will be relevant to focus on examining 'foreign' social workers' motivation for working in the UK system and their practice models in the specific context of UK practice. The information we draw on below is anecdotal, comprising just a few personal accounts written by Romanian social workers recruited in the UK, testimonies that

are made via a recruitment site and available in the public domain. As such these do not support claims of being representative or enabling generalization, however in the context of the scarcity of such data, they are used below as illustrative examples to aid the building of the arguments, reinforcing the fact that empirical and objective data in this field is lacking, as also noted by Bădărău and Teodorescu (2014).

The testimonies below are made for recruitment purposes, so the obvious bias has to be acknowledged. However, the authors consider these quotes worthy of inclusion, as the candid message that comes clearly from such testimonies is that working in the UK social work sector is demanding but equally rewarding, enabling own professional development, as one Romanian social worker explains :

I am living a happy life, *not an easy one*, but happy. [...]. *I learned a lot* and I believe I became an appreciated practitioner, alongside many other Romanian social workers in the same Local Authority, through hard work, dedication, commitment and achievements<sup>5</sup>.

Another Romanian social worker concluded in her personal account : „If you work hard and demonstrate talent, UK is a country of opportunity”, reinforcing the idea of the opportunities afforded by her professional migration into the UK.

Among the specific challenges identified are : „it is not easy, because *everything is new, such as the policies, procedure and systems*, which are completely different from Romania”. These accounts are a clear acknowledgment of the challenges that these transcultural social workers face, part of ‘double culture shock’ in which culture comprises both cultural and national sides (Austin 2007 in Pullen-Sansfaçon, et al., 2012, 5). However, the gains seem to be perceived as more significant, being related with professional progression opportunities, as well as personal accomplishments. More research needs to identify how personal adaptation impacts on the professional adaptation and vice versa.

Another interesting fact that can be observed is that the Romanian social work regulatory body website allows British recruiters to advertise various opportunities to work as a social worker in the UK<sup>6</sup>. This may be seen as an endorsement for the opportunities that Romanian social workers can find in the British system, but also raises an obvious ethical dilemma in relationship with the stance of the Romanian regulatory body –should encouraging the professional migration be promoted by a regulatory professional body without being prejudicial for social work system in a particular country ?

Moreover, it is important to note that often the recruitment is done via ‘specialised’ recruitment agencies who act as „middleman” in such transactions who are gaining financial incentives.

## **Professional migration phenomena – is professional acculturation a necessary premise for success ?**

Continuing to focus on Romanian social workers practicing in the UK, the debate will encompass questions around how we understand the particular dynamics of fluctuating professional identity, the role such dynamics play in relation to rigor and spontaneity or relationship-based approach and procedural approach (Fargion, 2008). Shall employers be concerned about the foreign social workers’ ability to practice in a different country, assuming that social work is ‘heavily context dependent profession’ (Al-Krenawi, Graham 2008, cited

in Pullen-Sansfaçon et al, 2012)? Or shall they trust and rely on the idea that social work identity is independent from its specific context as argued by McDonald and his colleagues (2003 cited in Fargion 2008)? The international definition of social work<sup>7</sup> aims to universalize the base of social work across the world. However, there is a valid argument for maintaining awareness of the nature of social work and its variability in different countries and the professional judgment which will always be influenced by cultural and specific cultural-reference points (Simpson, 2009).

Building on this, the enquiry should explore whether international social workers are efficient and culturally competent to intervene in a different cultural context, or are their different cultural background influencing their approach in practice, and, if so, in which way? Little research has been carried out on understanding how employing international social workers will affect social work practice and will impact on the service users. The lack of knowledge in relation to this area is also highlighted by Welbourne, Harrison and Ford (2007). Acknowledging that there are only a small number of studies looking at the benefits and challenges of employing internationally educated social workers, these can be considered and relied on only as a base for further development. Hussein et al. (2011) share the same concerns, as in their opinion, little analysis has been completed on why employers seek to recruit outside the UK or what are the benefits and the costs of this recruitment. More, Hanna and Lyons (2011) as well as Moriarty et al (2011, 2012) concluded that there is a distinct lack of research on professional migration in social work. Although this geographical and professional mobility is supported by some statistics (see GSCC statistics mentioned before) there is no empirical research to evidence social workers' motivation to work in international settings. This is compounded by a limited understanding of social workers' professional adaptation and acculturation as a premise of successfully practicing (Pullen-Sansfaçon et al, 2012). For example, in a scoping exercise completed by Hussein et al in 2010, they identified 'less than a handful of small-scale studies or accounts' (1003) on professional migration, most of them related with the UK only. This highlights the lack of cross national studies on social workers migration and also on 'sending' and 'receiving' countries' perspectives.

## **Conclusion – need for further research and collaboration**

The matter of professional migration in social work is an under-researched area. There is no empirical data to evidence the motivation behind this cross-borders movement of professionals, as well as the incentives for social workers, the barriers and the satisfaction sources related with their new area of practicing. More, further research is needed in order to understand how and to what extent professional acculturation and adaption operates in the internationally qualified social worker practicing in the UK and how this impacts on the quality of their work and service users' satisfaction.

The authors hope that this paper will raise awareness of these issues among the social work education providers and social work professional regulatory bodies, both in Romania and UK. There is an imperative need for hot countries' social work employers to consider the relevance, importance and value of research in this area o better support their own workforces and ultimately, the service users.

## Note

1. Children and Young People 2015, „Council launches Romanian recruitment drive to fill social work vacancies” ; available at <http://www.cypnow.co.uk/cyp/news/1149878/council-launches-romanian-recruitment-drive-social-vacancies> (accessed 23/11/15)
2. Bucks Free Press 2015, ” Council accused of ‘hypocrisy’ over Romanian recruitment drive for social workers” ; available at [http://www.bucksfreepress.co.uk/news/13351215.Council\\_accused\\_of\\_hypocrisy\\_over\\_Romanian\\_recruitment\\_drive\\_for\\_social\\_workers](http://www.bucksfreepress.co.uk/news/13351215.Council_accused_of_hypocrisy_over_Romanian_recruitment_drive_for_social_workers) (accessed 10/09/15)
3. Hereford Times 2015, „Council’s continental search for social workers” ; available at [http://www.herefordtimes.com/news/11751635.Council\\_s\\_continental\\_search\\_for\\_social\\_workers/?ref=mr](http://www.herefordtimes.com/news/11751635.Council_s_continental_search_for_social_workers/?ref=mr)(accessed 10/09/15)
4. The former professional body responsible with social workers registration in England and Wales
5. „Helping Young, Professional Social Workers Change Their Lives for the Better.” Available : [http://www.eusocialworkers4uk.eu/Site/Some\\_Stories.html](http://www.eusocialworkers4uk.eu/Site/Some_Stories.html)[accessed 15 September 2015]
6. CNAS / Comunicate/Imagine / Noutati / Opportunities for Social Workers in the UK. N.p., n.d. Web. 22 Dec. 2015. Available : <http://www.cnasr.ro/documente-7-273-ro-Opportunities-for-Social-Workers-in-the-UK> [accessed 15 September 2015]
7. IFSW (2014): „Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing”

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