

# THE PROFESSION OF SOCIAL WORK AND THE ROLE OF COMPETENCIES IN TRAINING SPECIALISTS

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**Abstract:** This paper is based on the results of a research made among social work graduates from Partium Christian University, Oradea. The main objectives of the research is related to graduates position on the labor market, their professional choices, further studies and the difficulties they have encountered. All this information can be useful in the development and improvement of university education in the social sciences. This paper presents some important aspect in the profession of social work and mention those competencies, abilities witch are important in the field of social work and in the prepare of the specialists. This paper presents a valuable feedback of the social work graduates about the problems they faced at the moment of entry the labor market and some of the suggestions made by them, in order to becoming a professional, and to help the University to develop the training process

**Keywords:** social work profession, competences, abilities, graduates.

## The profession of social work

In 1930, Venturia Manuilă, director of the School of Social Work “Princess Ileana” wrote the following about social work: “Social Assistance exists since the existence of humans. It was born out of the instinctive incentive to give a helping hand to the suffering neighbor ... It is the daily instinctive and unconscious, procedure to assist the needy” (Manuilă, 1930, p. 5).

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In the contemporary literature of specialty, Zamfir and Zamfir writing about social work and its role, define it as “the set of institutions, programs, measures, activities professionalized, specialized [...]” (Zamfir & Zamfir, 1995, p. 100), which provides access to a decent life, to care, to education, to a source of income, etc. for those who, on their own cannot meet the challenges of society to which they belong to and “can’t enjoy basic and rationale rights” (Roth-Szamosközi, 2003, p. 7).

Other authors define social assistance as “a response to the human needs and suffering and so, the social need and therefore the need for social assistance has been and will always exist” (Buzducea, 2005, p. 39).

During his activity the social assistant must permanently and consciously respect the values of its profession, which are: solidarity, equality, tolerance and justice. These values “affect how we see the world, the base pillars of our opinion of the world, by which we decide what is good or bad” (Buzducea, 2005).

Social worker's role is to create and ensure interaction between man and his environment. When these don't function naturally, or the operating mechanisms are deficient or insufficient, the need for professional help appears. To provide help to those around him, the social worker must have a well-developed personality and to know he's own personality, in order to be able to help himself, because otherwise, he cannot help others. The most important is that all these things can be learned and can be developed throughout life (Woods, 1994). At the same time, the social worker must be well prepared and needs to have a good theoretical knowledge which is completed and supplemented by practical experience. Pritchard and Taylor stressed that social assistance is a profession based on the work of several other fields (Pritchard & Taylor, 1978, 1993), which emphasizes the need and importance of well-depth and synthesized knowledge.

In their study published in 1989, Morales and Sheafor argues the importance and necessity of social work writing about the problems that surround us. They say that if the world were a perfect place, everyone would be satisfied and happy, and there would be no need for social assistance. Due to the fact that this is not possible, social workers help people who have difficulties and are unable to resolve their own problems through developed services.

“Social work is a dynamic profession, and in no case a static one, that permanently adapts to social changes. In the early twentieth century the existence of social assistance and the profession of social work was still in question, but now we can say that it is a profession in its own right. Social assistance is based on well-defined and formulated laws, on principles, trends, on a specific methodology that has become science” (Pásztor & Szűcs, 2014, p. 129).

Social worker status is regulated by Law no. 466 of 2004, which contains provisions regarding: the person, status, rights and obligations, relationships with other professionals, ethical principles, and the National College of Social Workers of Romania (CNASR). The College is a “professional organization, non-governmental, of public interest, apolitical, non-profit, with juridical personality,

autonomous and independent” [...] and “by its parts is the representative of social workers in Romania in relations with governmental and non-governmental authorities and institutions, internal and international” (The National College of Social Workers of Romania).

The National College of Social Workers of Romania (CNASR), based in Bucharest, has regional offices throughout the country, including Bihor County. It is closely connected with the universities around them, with local and central authorities and NGOs. County Branches goal is the same with the central one: “represents, defends and promotes the rights and interests of members locally, nationally and internationally, defends the honor, freedom and independence of professional social workers in the profession, ensure the fulfill the obligations that social workers have towards the beneficiaries, institutions and society, according to the professional ethics” (The National College of Social Workers of Romania).

Thanks to legislative provisions and activities undertaken CNASR on 6 of March, 2008, appearing in the Official Gazette of Romania, Part I, NO.173, the act will be the basis and regulation of the profession of social work. Thus is published the Code of ethics of the profession of social worker: “Pursuant art. 27 letters a) of Law no. 466/2004 on the Statute of social worker and art. 7 paragraph. (2) letter g) of the Regulation of organization and functioning of the National College of Social Workers, National Council of National College of Social Workers has adopted this code of ethics of the profession of social worker” (Code of Ethics of Social Worker profession).

Code of Ethics includes provisions, general principles on liability and professional social worker, specialist obligations to the profession and to the beneficiaries. It also regulates the relationship between specialist and members of professional or vocational competence delineation steps, defining four stages (junior, practitioner, specialist and principal social worker). To assist social workers across the country, with relevant information on the criteria for the certificate and opinion to practice or passing a professional stage and on the code of ethics of the profession, can be found on the website of the National College of Social Workers of Romania (CNASR).

### **Competences and abilities in social work**

The concepts of competence is often mentioned in recent years and appear increasingly more studies, research, even at national level, which refers to it. Also often are mentioned the competence, the lack of skills, the difference between the required and actual skills. These are expressions used mostly in connection with the labor market, when hiring, so we felt it was important to talk about these concepts.

However, the definition of competence is not easy, because both in Romanian and in English but in other languages too, are often mentioned several terms as synonyms, or a complex of notions by which seeks to clarify, explain the terms of “competence”. Therefore, we must make reference to these terms that are often

used together with the concept of competence when it comes to the preparation, the default “baggage” of knowledge gained by those who enter the labor market in order to obtain a job. We refer to terms such as capacity, ability, and aptitude. These concepts are used during a selection process, then employability and they are essential in our case, especially as we refer to those who want “to dedicate their life” to the profession of social work. Whether we consider them separately or see them as a whole, these are all characteristics through which we can define what we want and what must have the social professionals.

The idea of competences and especially the “list” of social competences is a long one, diversified, which contains competences, abilities or skills from the general to those specific of the profession. We can talk about theoretical or practical terms about the human nature or those related to learning process thereby getting a specific of professional character.

There are also competences or basic skills, or abilities, without that is not possible the transition to a higher professional level (such as: reading, writing, the ability to speak - a language, but we can point out here as well, a most typical skill, for example those related to computer operating etc.).

If we analyze the activity of the social worker we see that it involves “a combination of skills and abilities transposing into practice certain theoretical knowledge and values” (Neamțu, 2003, p. 31). The author distinguishes individual skills and those methodological and professional. The first category of skills, is the individuals, which refers to “relationship skills” that we encounter in ordinary life, as part of the specialist abilities, components of the human person. We refer to skills such as: listening, communication, clarity, acceptance, criticism, etc. Regarding the category of professional skills we refer to identifying, assessing problems, information processing, development and application of alternatives, planning activities, teamwork, etc. (Neamțu, 2003).

In a study about competences published in 2010 with the title „From business skills- What is the competence”, the authors, Szakács and Bánfalvi, define the term capacity as „a potential to perform certain actions”, in other words, we can say that we are able to do something. Another concept, often used in the Romanian language is “abilitate” (in English “ability” or “capacity” in Hungarian is “kéesség<sup>2</sup>) that means that the individual has “the ability or potential to perform certain actions”, so we can say that he is capable of something. The authors mentioned that this refers to the existence of natural qualities (inborn qualities) (Szakács & Bánfalvi, 2010, p. 12). They believe that the competence is more than the ability, because it requires prowess and an authority in the field of work, which are essential from the point of view of that activity (Pásztor & Szűcs, 2014).

If we start from the definitions of these terms and considering their feature to be used as synonyms, we should mention some of the descriptions that we found in the scientific literature.

Nagy defines ability as “the capacity of something that can be developed through learning” and considers that the acquisition and formation of abilities can be

influenced by different rules. The author concludes his study capacity as something that can be developed, and ability as a process that can be learned (Nagy, 2000).

Also we must consider the relevance of the term of competence, mentioned and used by areas, such as pedagogy, educational policy or to describe the labor market processes (Vass, 2006; Pásztor & Szűcs, 2014).

The same authors (Szakács & Bánfalvi, 2010) concluded the definitions of competence totaling five components, such as science or knowledge that relates to the information we have (knowledge); ability or the talent to perform some tasks (skills); self assessment, social roles, values that we consider to be important (value), character traits that predestines, typify the responses (character); motivation that lead, guide, influence behavior toward certain goals (motivation) (Jakó, 2004; Szakács & Bánfalvi 2010, p. 17; Pásztor & Szűcs, 2014).

Considering that the social work profession is oriented to practice, the competencies have an important role. Besides acquiring theoretical knowledge, practical knowledge is essential acquisition. In both cases, the process of forming the individual can acquire and develop knowledge and skills, necessary to be a good professional. Regarding the development of competencies related to the social work profession, we recall as important factors: values, knowledge, training (Kozma, 2006).

We can also mention a number of other factors, that according to some authors (Patterson-Eisenberg, 1983) are relevant to a efficient activity of assistance: intellectual competence - appropriate preparation and continuous training, energy in everything we achieve flexibility in activities, benevolence, compassion, support, self-knowledge.

In a study published in 2008, István Budai writes about the main features competencies, as follows:

- “openness to others and trust
- applying existing knowledge (knowledge) in new situations
- ability to acquire new knowledge, creativity, intuition
- ability to see and solve problems
- ability to develop alternatives
- active action, capacity to build, reflective thinking,
- critical sense, etc.”

The same study referred to the social worker's competencies, which are:

- “trust, open, clear and authentic communication
- evaluation, description, multi-dimensional analysis of needs
- understanding and presentation of contexts, multi-dimensional thinking, critical reflection,
- development and implementation of alternatives in problem solving

- intervention and design of changes through an adequate theoretical, methodological and practical ways
- active cooperation with others, reasoning regarding the vocational issues, highlight the professionalism
- continuous development of personal, occupational and the offered professional activities
- application and development of professional values (justice, solidarity, autonomy, respect) and ethical representation etc.” (Budai, 2008, p. 43).

The Specifics of skills development and professional competencies depends and can be diversified depending on the intervention level of social work (individual level, familial, interpersonal or group and community) as they in turn requires the adaptation of different professional roles by the specialists (Roth-Szamosközi, 2003).

These roles provide different types of activity, which the social worker must address to provide the necessary support and help to the beneficiaries. These may be combined or used simultaneously depending on the needs and the specific of problems. The social worker can

The social worker can perform the roles of counselor (either individual work with families, or groups), lawyer of interests, connecting agent, coordinator, planner and administrator, researcher, expert, mediator, supervisor, trainer, negotiator, arbitrator or fundraiser, all these depending on the level of intervention (Roth-Szamosközi, 2003).

In order to become a good professional and be able to manage a proper and professional activity, the social workers need to learn those skills and competence to which reference was made above. However, above all, it is important that they have (to develop) their own style, which helps to combine the information and knowledge (whether theoretical or practical), learned, but also the values, skills with which can exercise the profession (Neamțu, 2003).

### **Research Objectives**

The main goal of the conducted research was to analyze how the social assistance training program at the Partium Christian University corresponds to the actual requirements and needs. For this, the following specific objectives were established:

- Identifying the career paths for the social assistance graduates: the extent at which the the social assistance graduates from the Partium Christian University in Oradea, have managed to integrate in the labor market; identifying the problems the graduates have encountered during their entry in the labor market; the orientation of the graduates on the labor market.

- Evaluation of the graduates training from the labor market perspective: assessing the level of individual university education from the labor market perspective; assessing potential employers regarding the training level of the graduates.

We also intended to collect information regarding opinions and suggestions the graduates have about the training of future specialists in the social assistance field and the competences they will need to have in order to become good professionals and last but not least, suggestions about ways to improve the training program.

### **About the research**

Between February 2013 and June 2014 we conducted a research among social work graduates, from Partium Christian University in Oradea, in order to have an overview of their situation in the labor market, identifying the problems faced when entering the labor market.

The research was conducted among graduates of the 1991 – 2013 periods. During this time, 550 young people graduated the social work specialization, of which 439 were presented at the graduation exam, obtaining a BA degree. We must mention that in this period, the specialization of social work suffered structural changes, and also were implemented changes in the educational system. In these years, the university training of social workers has been gradually reduced from five years to three years (through introduction of the Bologna system) and has also been a change from the double specialization of Reformed Religious Education – Social Work to the single specialization of Social Work.

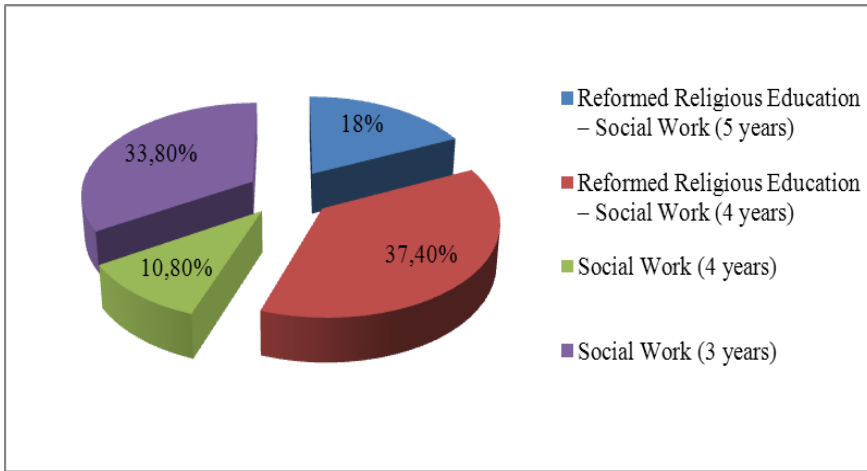
To obtain the desired information and data, we used an online survey among graduates in social work, about their insertion in the labor market, the level of satisfaction with their current job, their professional future projects. From the total number of graduates in quantitative research participated 334 of them.

### **Analyzing and interpreting results**

In order to achieve a quantitative investigation, we applied a questionnaire between the social assistance graduates, who graduated between 1991 and 2013 at the Partium Christian University. During these years, 439 students have obtained a license degree in the social assistance field, of which the sample has 334 subjects. Looking at the distribution of sexes, the research included 56 men (16.8%) and 278 women (83.2%).

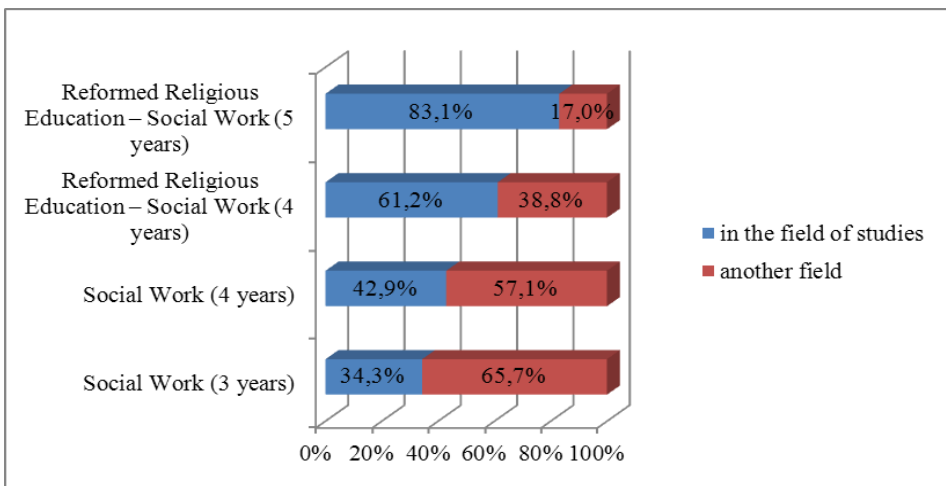
Regarding the respondents' home, 60.8% of the social assistance graduates come from big cities, and 18.9% have their residence in small towns. The majority of the respondents live and work in Romania, these representing 83.2% of the subjects, 10.2% of the graduates are established in Hungary and the rest 6.6% live in other countries like Germany (3 people), USA (2 people), or Austria, Italy, Israel, Greece, Spain and France.

The graph below shows the distribution of the social assistance graduates included in the research, according to their level of education.



**Figure 1.** *Situation of the graduates, according to the form of specialization obtained*

Speaking of graduates' professional route, after processing the data we can confirm that 44% of the graduates are employed in the social assistance field, 7.8% work as religion teachers, 43.1% work in a different field than the one studied, 2.7% of them have no job (most of which are in child rearing leave), and 2.4% are still students, following a different specialization (we will present these results in more detail in the following). In figure 2 we can see the results of employment in the field corresponding with the university studies, according to the form of training completed.



$p=0,000$ ,  $N=317$ ,  $\chi=40,2$

**Figure 2.** *Graduates' situation according to their field of employment*

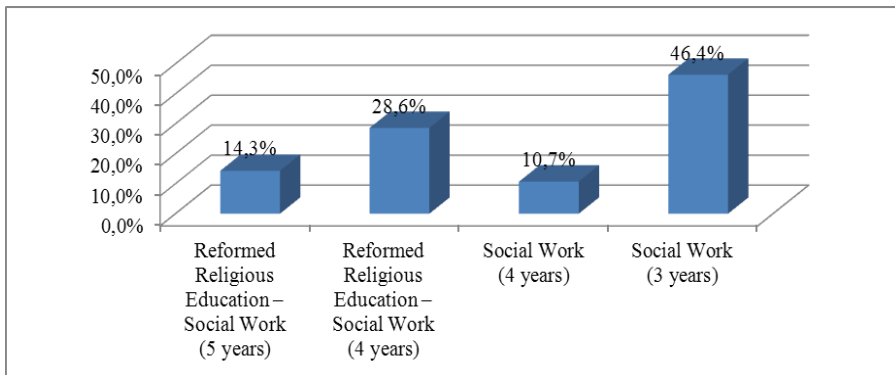


In the case of the graduates of the first two types of training, out of the total employed in the domain, we mention that

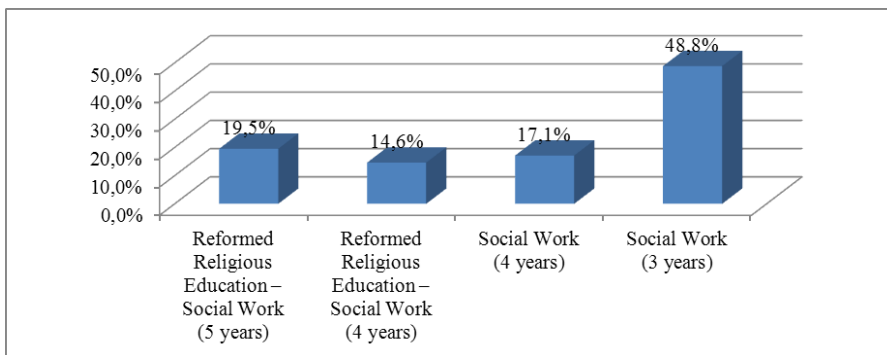
- Out of 83.1%, 67.8% work in the social assistance field and 15.4% as religion teachers (graduates of the double specialization with a duration of five years)
- Out of 61.2%, 47.1% work in the social assistance field and 14.0% as religion teachers (graduates of double specialization with duration of 4 years).

The majority of the graduates who work in the social assistance field, are employed both in public and in private institutions or churches, like: General Directorate of Social Assistance and Child Protection (Arad, Bihor, Satu Mare, Covasna and Harghita county), Caritas Catholic Organization (Bihor, Alba Iulia and Satu Mare county), Community Social Administration Oradea, Christian Foundation Diakonia – The Charity Organization of the Reformed Church in Romania (Bihor county), town halls, county hospitals.

Looking at further training and knowledge development, the situation of the graduates is seen in the graphs below.



**Figure 3.** Distribution of the graduates who have other BA degrees, depending on the type of training obtained

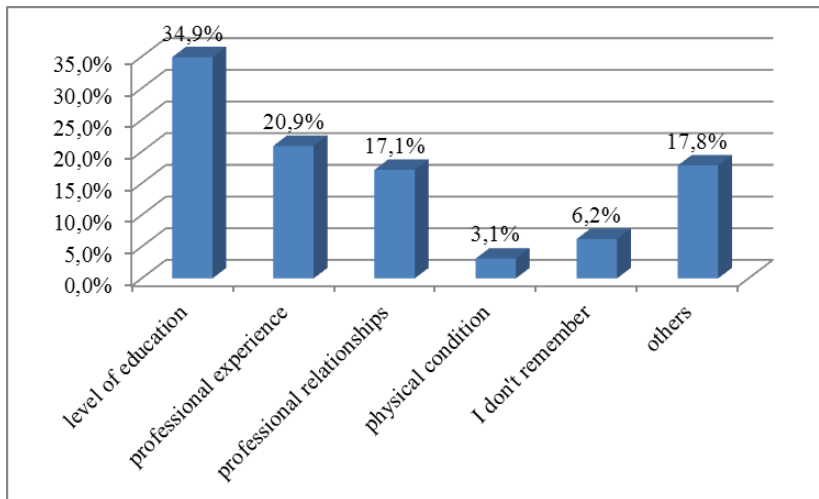


**Figure 4.** Distribution of the students who have MA degrees, according to the type of training completed

From the graphs presented, we see that the graduates within the Bologna system have pursued in a bigger number compared to graduates within other types of social assistance specializations in the Partium Christian University, a second specialization at a license degree (46.4%) besides social assistance and of course almost half of these have pursued master degree courses (48.8%).

This means that on the one hand they wished to finish their studies, respectively to improve them within the master course, on the other hand it indicates the tendency of late entry on the labor market by the young graduates.

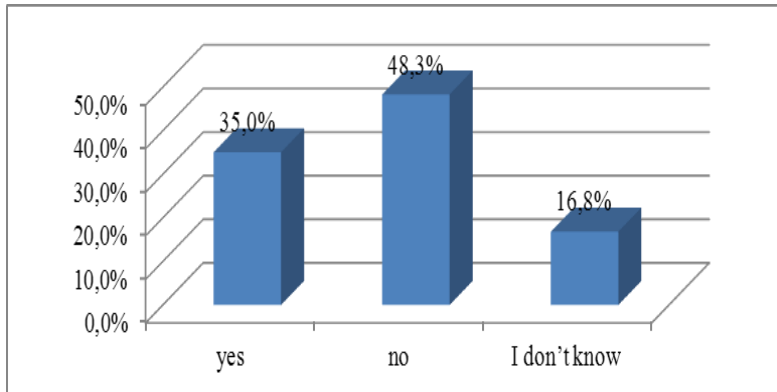
Looking at the important and maybe even decisive factors in finding a job, the graduates' opinions have been highlighted in figure 5.



**Figure 5.** *Decisive factors when applying to a job*

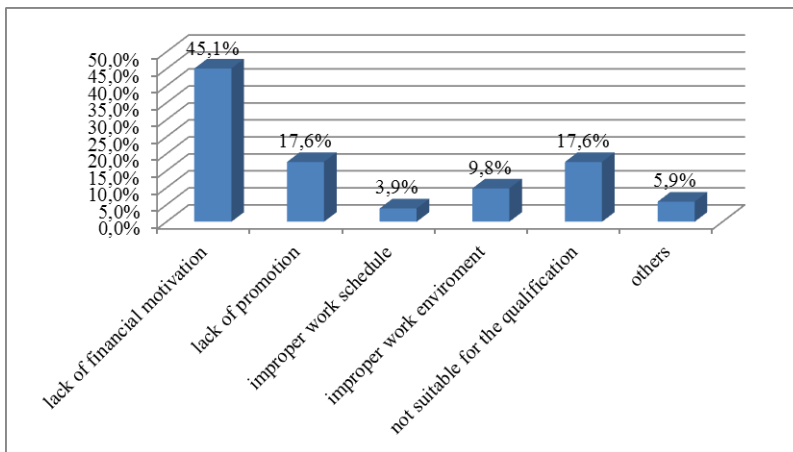
From the responses received, we are highlighting the importance of the level of studies (34.9%), professional experience (20.9%) respectively professional relationships (17.1%) (useful both in conducting professional activities, and in collaboration, and solving of professional problems). Among other factors, graduates have mentioned: good linguistic skills, communication skills, adaptability, dynamism, pleasant appearance, level of knowledge.

Regarding identify problems during the hiring process, graduates have mentioned aspects like: lack of experience, of certain competences, like linguistic ones or those related to legislative knowledge. Looking at the orientation on the labor market, one third of the graduates intend to change their job.



**Figure 6.** *Intention of changing the current job*

The reasons underlying the base of this intention are shown in the graph below:



**Figure 7.** *The reasons that underlies the intention of changing the current job*

The main reasons that underlie the intention of changing the current job are lack of financial motivation followed by lack of promotion.

The last aspects of the research are about collecting different information's regarding opinion and graduates' suggestions about the training of future specialists in the social assistance field and the competences that they will need to obtained in order to become good professionals.

The results obtained from the research point out the importance of assimilating linguistic competences whether they are related to the Romanian language or other spoken language. The graduates are aware and reckon the necessity of assimilating linguistic competences that can be useful both in activities undertaken with clients

or college and in fundraising activities that have a real importance in the social assistance field.

Others have stressed the importance of skills and relationships that can be accumulated or created through the apprenticeship periods in different types of specialized institutions. Graduates encourage students to familiarize themselves with as many areas of social assistance activity, for a diversified experience and to have the opportunity to create their own professional network.

The last part of the research contains suggestions and recommendations formulated by graduates, regarding the development and diversification of the social assistance training program to facilitate the hiring of graduates:

- increasing practical activities
- increasing collaboration with social assistance institutions (especially with international ones),
- ensuring and maintaining relations with social assistants from specialized institutions (organizing discussions with professionals from the field or potential employers, regarding the requirements on the labor market and to share the experience accumulated by the professionals).

## Conclusions

The purpose of the research was to have an overview of the situation of graduates in the labor market, identifying the problems faced in the hiring process, and also to collect some information to improve the educational process. The data obtained from the research offers a complex image about the situation of social work graduates on the labor market.

The result shows that the social work graduates must have certain theoretical and practical knowledge without which they can not enter the labor market or remain employed. 44% of graduates are employed in the field of social work. We found that no matter the year and duration of absolved specialization, all graduates have emphasized the need to diversify specialized practice and the institutions that can perform these practical activities, and even if it is not a specific problem only to those who graduated in the Bologna system, but in their case is an often made suggestion.

According to graduates at the moment of entry on the labor market the following competences, skills are important: the existence of a degree and the level of education (34.9%), the existence of professional experience (20.9%), employment relations with other specialists (17.1%), physical state (3.1%). They also mentioned other factors, such as good language skills, communication skills, adaptability, dynamism, pleasant appearance, level of knowledge. The graduates considered to be important the financial motivation (45.1%) and the opportunity of professional advancing, making a career (17.6%). Problems identified in the hiring process, were due to lack of experience, lack or inadequacy of linguistic or legislation competence. As a positive aspect, we can mention the applicability of knowledge

gained during academic training in professional and daily activities, regardless of the duration of the absolved specialization. The responses showed that the graduates considered to being helpful in hiring process: to learn all the theoretical staff, and participating to the courses and extra curricular events; to be involved in voluntary work; to try getting more professional experience; to develop the communication skills and also to carry out further trainings after graduating.

Graduates suggested curriculum development by introducing new disciplines and subject areas (such as communication exercises, case studies and solutions). They also proposed the development of the practice / field work, by increasing the number of hours allocated to practice. Also in this direction would be benefic the diversification of partnerships. In their opinion it is also the important in finding a job, the existence and development of general or specific skills such as: language skills, communication skills, adaptability, dynamism, professional experience, good theoretical knowledge, and good relations with other specialists, charity, humility and empathy. So in order to provide good theoretical and practical training for the graduates of social work specialization, all these aspects can be taken into account during the training process.

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