DLIS - Summary of Outcome 1

Context

In Europe, state services are becoming increasingly dematerialised, and becoming or being a vehicle for enhancing rights and access to essential services requires social workers to acquire solid digital knowledge. They need to develop reflexive skills specific to their professional field (Plantard & al., 2021). The DLIS European project (2021-2024) is part of the European Union's policies to develop the digitisation of society, and aims to redefine the contours of the professionalisation of social workers in the field of digital social mediation. Co-funded by the European Erasmus + fund, DLIS brings together six partners from five European countries, representing western, eastern and southern Europe, all involved in research, education and training in the field of social work. DLIS defends digital literacy and the fight against social inequalities.

As well as taking part in debates, discussions and new training initiatives to raise awareness of this issue among social work professionals, the aim of the European DLIS project is to guide the practices of social work professionals using appropriate learning methods. The core of the approach is to improve the quality of support for vulnerable people and those who are numerically and socially excluded. DLIS aims to

1. Draw up an inventory of training needs in the project countries by diagnosing the digital agility of social work students and professionals through the production of a digital agility index,
2. Identify the specific needs of professionals in order to train them and reduce the digital vulnerability of beneficiaries,
3. To model learning systems that meet the functional, ethical and legal needs of professionals, with a view to combating the inequalities resulting from the various digital divides experienced by people receiving support,
4. Produce transferable tools and practical guides for professionals in Europe.

The results contribute to the learning of digital social mediation as an emerging practice in social work teaching by designing learning tools: digital agility index, guide to ethical and deontological benchmarks and video clips.

This report, Output 1, presents an overview of European digitisation policies, their achievements and new training needs with regard to the digital agility of students and professionals. Within this perimeter, it focuses on the 5 European partner countries of DLIS: Belgium, France, Luxembourg, Greece and Romania. The dual aim of this first result is to

1- to highlight the inequalities of the national contexts and the realities of the digital divide: legislative framework, needs, tools and existing approaches by offering an overview of each partner country.
2- to identify the training needs of social workers and create a digital agility index.

Methods

Part 1 of this dossier identifies the contexts. It is based on a brief and synthetic review of the literature and documentary knowledge relating to the lines of development of EU policies on the digitisation of society and in which social transformations and transitions are taking place. We based ourselves on the original texts published by the EU, including factual documents, statistical data and academic references relating to the transformations in social work. We carried out a brief bibliographical search in the CAIRN platform databases.

Part 2 of the document, devoted to the design of a common digital agility tool, bases its approach on the collection of problem situations (accounts of practices) collected by learners in vocational training and/or initial training. In addition to the scientific and professional literature and the debates generated on the issue of digital agility and social work, this production is based on the analysis of 58 interviews conducted in France and Belgium, as well as 63 questionnaires sent to students and professionals.

Results

Our analysis highlights the conditions necessary for a successful digital transition for the most digitally vulnerable groups : the elderly, the poorest people on minimum social benefits, the least qualified, the least educated. These are among the target groups for social work support.

To construct the digital agility index, 442 students were asked to take part in various teaching activities: 247 students (BAC 1 - BAC2 and Master 2) and 195 BAC 3 students.

The research results revealed three major areas of concern:

- the need to build a common language around production objectives
- Negotiation to ensure that each partner has the necessary skills within a shared socio-technical framework,
- measuring the influence of the specific timeframes of each partner and their potential impact on production periods.

Our results highlight the difficulty of translating the digital skills and digital agility of social work students into a common language: it is ambitious, complex and rich to bring together 6 European partners from different countries, regions and functions. The territorial and socio-cultural roots are many and varied. With its limitations, this exercise of pooling resources to construct the digital agility index and analysing the results of the questionnaire revealed heterogeneous professional needs in terms of the nature of the learning to be acquired and the degree of urgency in training social work students in one subject or another.

In addition, the issue of cybersecurity of beneficiary data seems to be of paramount importance for some (France, Belgium, Greece) and less so for others, at this stage of dematerialisation of services.

In the end, this first deliverable will make it possible to formalise European recommendations addressed to the authorities and professionals for digital access that fights against social inequalities and the social divide (Brotcorne & Mariën, 2022).

The results gather and produce objective data for diagnosing the digital agility of social work students: the challenge is to characterise the digital strengths and weaknesses of students in this specific field of learning.

This diagnostic stage is used to support the production of tools designed to provide learning responses through systems designed and developed around the issues of digital uses in social work (results 2 and 3).

Discussion and outlook

To develop the digital agility index, the partners produced a digital diagnostic tool for students in their respective countries. The needs analysis carried out in the pre-project phase led the partners to the conclusion that there is not yet this type of tool for social workers and social work students, even though they are the real interfaces between civil society and the public authorities in terms of social emancipation and the promotion of social rights. While the construction of the indicator will initially be used for a transnational diagnostic stage, the index could subsequently be reused by training institutions. They will be able to use it in initial and continuing training, to prepare learners to assess their level of agility and raise their awareness of the many issues underlying the use of digital technologies in social work.

The aim of this tool is therefore to be duplicated: higher education establishments in social work and those involved in continuing social work education will be able to adapt it to their needs and to developments in access to essential rights and services. Training institutes will then be able to provide targeted support for their digital apprenticeships in relation to specific issues arising in their professional field.

In this sense, the creation of a digital agility index is an innovative approach with a high potential for transferability outside the project: to European training establishments that do not have this tool, to teachers, trainers, educational managers and student communities in social work training, as well as to social work professionals and the organisations that employ them and wish to assess their digital literacy. Until now, strategies for improving the digital skills of social workers have been the result of personal and/or organisational initiatives and have mainly provided 'case-by-case' responses. Because the effects of these strategies appear to be limited, a broader framework is needed to encompass support for vulnerable groups in all the complexity of the digital and dematerialised environment of today's society.