

Steering group Day: EBEs involvement in Unconventional Practice Placement at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore – Italy

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UNCONVENTIONAL PRACTICE PLACEMENTS IN THE ACADEMIC CONTEXT

Unconventional Practice Placement (UPPs) is a practice learning experience, introduced in Social work bachelor's and master's degree courses at Università Cattolica starting from the academic year 2008–2009.

Thanks to UPPs, social work students collaborate with a network of people, composed by professionals of public or private organisations, service users, caregivers and citizens, to create and implement interventions in social work field.

UPPs can be described according to three main characteristics: social innovation, autonomy and collaborative approach.

This learning experience is offered to social work students in the third year of the bachelor's programme and in the second year of the master's programme, with the main difference being the number of hours dedicated to field projects, as we can see in the slide.

UPPs	Hours	European Credits Transfer System	Choice for students
Bachelor degree (3rd year)	175 hours in the field + 40 hours in-classroom training	9 ECTS	+ 2 or 4 ETCS (50 or 100 hours)
Master degree (2nd year)	210 hours in the field + 40 hours in-classroom training	10 ECTS	+ 3 or 6 ETCS (75 or 150 hours)

UPP experiences are supported by a classroom workshop in which students engage in group work to help each other during their learning experiences. The group work of the students is facilitated by a social worker in the role of University tutor. Classroom workshops are very similar to self-help groups with the tutor assuming the role of facilitator. Furthermore, tutors are also available to students for individual supervision interviews to support them in their learning pathway.

UPPS step by step

UPPs are composed by three fundamental steps.

1. Community profile

UPPs start from the students' knowledge and understanding of a specific community, where they search for possible collaboration in planning and implementing a social project. Community profiling (Twelvetrees, 1991) allows students to meet community members, service users, practitioners, and other potential partners to discuss community resources, concerns, and/or desire for improvement.

2. Catalysation of the "steering group" and definition of the goals

Thanks to this preliminary phase, it is possible to catalyse the "steering group", which consists of a small group of people who know the community through their professional commitment or direct experience as members of the community. The guiding group helps the student to define a shared goal and identify other partners interested in coping with the problem.

3. Project implementation

The students and their collaborators continue in the participatory planning process, defining objectives and action strategies consistent with the shared goal. The project is conceived, implemented and monitored thanks to the partnership with professionals, active citizens and volunteers of associations and/or informal groups, current and former service's users, users' family members and carers.

At every stage of the process, UPPs are characterised by virtuous encounters between technical knowledge and experiential knowledge and an effort to promote the actual participation of the people involved in a specific problematic situation.

Over the last ten years, more than 600 UPPs have been carried out, involving more than 5,000 people (Raineri et al., 2022) both as partners in planning and implementing the projects and beneficiaries of the initiatives. In particular, the data collected through a survey online with students show that about 3,000 professionals and community members were motivated and interested in collaborating with students. Some categories of collaborators are prevalent, such as social workers, active citizens and volunteers of associations, and users' family members and caregivers.

Steering Group Day

In the last two years was introduced a Steering Group Day, where students are requested to invite the partners they worked with during the project.

Steering Group Day is a classroom workshop where collaborators take part at the educational activities and share their experiences in working together.

The structure of the day is the following: at the beginning there is a plenary session during which everyone introduces himself/herself; then the main group is divided into subgroups composed by maximum 20 people between students and project partners.

Each group is asked to reflect on 4 main topics:

- what the experience meant to them;
- which difficulties they met and faced;
- what they learnt;
- what's the added value of collaboration and participation in UPPs.

At the end of the group sessions, the participants return in the plenary session to present the poster they created together.

The aims are of this initiative are:

- to celebrate and to thank the experts by experience for sharing their knowledge with the students, offering them their contribution in planning and implementing UPPs;
- allow EBEs to know how the classroom workshops are organized and to meet the academic tutors, the other students and the other EBEs involved in the projects, so that they can share experiences and connect;
- to discuss and reflect on the learning experience from different points of view and on the value of the integration between experiential knowledge and technical knowledge.

The key outcomes emerged from these two first experiences can be summarized from three different perspectives.

- From EBEs' point of view: they shared the pride in planning projects in order to cope with community social problems;
- From academic tutors' point of view these days were the chance to underline the importance of valuing the different sources of knowledge;

- From social work students' point of view: they become more aware of what they learnt, and they increase the reflexivity on their experience and the value of reciprocity.

Considering the importance and the innovation brought by this experience, the Steering Group Day will be rearranged during the next academic year and a research activity will be carried out with the aim to further explore and analyze the outcomes.