

Report – International University Week – Leuven 2024

SocNet98

The International University Week (IUW) is an event organized by SocNet98, a network of European social work universities founded in 1998 (SocNet98, 2023). This network describes itself as "a vibrant and active European network that establishes joint activities to reflect on various social work-related topics, but also to develop and lead joint projects in the field of social work studies" (About Us - SocNet98, 2024). SocNet not only provides a platform for exchange between students and lecturers from various European universities, but also publishes professional books, holds international seminars, and has previously offered a European Master's degree in social work (Activities - SocNet98, 2023).

International University Week



The International University Week (IUW) contributes to the networking of future professionals, professors, and lecturers in social work. We were able to attend this event as part of a module within our study program. This year, it took place from April 22 to April 26 and was hosted by several universities, including University College

Leuven Limburg, College of Polytechnics Jihlava, and UCL University College in Odense (IUW - SocNet98, 2022). Each of these universities prepared a specific theme for the week: in Odense, the focus was on "Digitalization in Social Work with Vulnerable Citizens," in Jihlava, it was "Social Work in Mental Health Care," and in Leuven, the theme was "Human Rights and Social Professionals – A Never Ending Story" (IUW - SocNet98, 2022).

Participating Universities

Participants included students, professors, and lecturers from universities in various countries. From Germany, HSB Bremen, Hochschule Emden/Leer, and Ernst-Abbe-Hochschule Jena participated. Students and lecturers from FH Oberösterreich Linz and Fachhochschule Sankt Pölten provided insights into social work as practised in Austria. Hanzehogeschool Groningen participated from the Netherlands. The hosting institution for our group was University College Leuven-Limburg. Humanistinen Ammattikorkeakoulu Humak from Finland, Høgskolen i Sørøst-Norge Porsgrunn from Norway, and Universitat de Girona from Spain also brought interdisciplinary perspectives. The Czech Republic was represented by Vysoká škola polytechnická Jihlava, and the Slovak Republic by Konštantínova univerzita v Nitre.

Leuven

Leuven, also known as Löwen or Leuvain, is a bike-friendly university city in Belgium, not far from Brussels. It is renowned for the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven (KU Leuven), one of the oldest and most prestigious universities in Europe, founded in 1425. The city boasts a well-preserved old town with numerous historic buildings, including the Gothic Town Hall and St. Peter's Church (Wikipedia contributors, 2002). Leuven is also a hub of Belgian beer culture, home to the Stella Artois brewery and



numerous cozy pubs (Wikipedia contributors, 2002). With its vibrant student life, cultural events, and rich historical heritage, Leuven is a dynamic and visibly privileged city.

Themen

Monday: Introduction

At the beginning of the International University Week, each university group introduced their city and institution in various ways, including presentations and custom-made videos. We decided to present Jena and the Ernst-Abbe-Hochschule interactively using a Kahoot quiz. This proved to be an interesting choice as we were unsure of what to expect. Moreover, we learned during the presentation that the free version of Kahoot only allows for ten players. Therefore, we asked everyone to form teams and continued to introduce Jena and the university between the questions. This led us to exceed the time limit given to us.

At this point we were asked to choose the workshops and seminars in which we want to participate. The following only represents my choice, but it was only a part of the academic input offered.

Monday: Workshop „The profession of humanity: Social work and its fight against racism, discrimination, oppression and xenophobia: Roma in Slovakia“

The first day of the International University Week began for me with an impressive workshop on the role of social work in combating racism, discrimination, oppression, and xenophobia, particularly in the context of the Roma community in Slovakia. The seminar focused on upholding human rights in the face of oppression and anti-Gypsyism. In addition to theoretical foundations, the workshop presented the findings of field research conducted by doctoral candidate Michal Kosubic, who unfortunately was not present despite being listed. These findings shed light on the experiences of Roma communities. Special emphasis was placed on activities aimed

at anti-prejudice education, highlighting the significance of educational initiatives in social work.

Tuesday: Keynote „Social Work and Human Rights“

The second day began with an inspiring keynote session delivered by Elke Plovie, a lecturer and researcher in the field of social work as a human rights profession, together with students from UCLL. Plovie, who co-authored the book “Social Work as a Human Rights Profession” emphasized in her presentation that social workers are at the forefront of a human rights-oriented society, facing human rights violations on a daily basis. She highlighted that social workers have the opportunity to reverse unjust and degrading situations and contribute to the realization of human rights, stressing their special responsibility to seize these opportunities. Plovie discussed how the abstract principles of human rights can be translated into concrete practices, underscoring the significance of social work as a human rights profession.

Tuesday: Lecture “Public Spaces”

In the afternoon of the second day, we attended a fascinating lecture by Marjan Moris, a researcher at the AP University of Applied Sciences and Arts in Antwerp. Her presentation focused on the role of social work in urban renewal projects, using the example of the ring park in Antwerp. Through a research project, Moris investigated who can participate in and influence these processes. She identified obstacles to citizen participation, compared them with the results of other projects, and emphasized the existing problems, calling on the social work profession to assist in overcoming these challenges. The lecture was engaging and left me eager for the publication, projected for October 2024 earliest, although it required prior knowledge, which I wouldn't have possessed last year.

Tuesday: Workshop “Human Rights Education Through Drama”

The day concluded with an interactive workshop focusing on human rights education through dramatic methods. In this workshop, participants were encouraged to

empathize with different roles to better understand privilege and disadvantage. The goals of the workshop were to raise awareness of inequality of opportunities, develop imagination and critical thinking, and foster empathy. The event provided an opportunity to expand one's toolkit for working with children and youth groups in an open setting through self-experience.

Tuesday: International Market

In the evening, the so-called "International Market" took place, providing an opportunity for participants to bring specialities from their home countries and share them with others. This social event offered a wonderful opportunity to celebrate cultural diversity and exchange various culinary traditions. Within this informal setting, participants engaged in conversation, got to know each other better, and enjoyed the variety of foods and drinks offered.



Wednesday: Excursion to Brussels

On Wednesday, we embarked on an excursion to Brussels, just a 20-minute train ride away. Originally, a tour called "JES-walk: 'Contrasting Brussels'" was planned, but it was cancelled. Instead, we had the opportunity to gain insight into the challenges and obstacles faced by asylum seekers in Brussels from representatives of "VluchtelingenWerk" (Refugee Work). We learned about the paths asylum seekers must take to be recognized in Brussels and how they often endure months of homelessness. Equally, distressing was the account of how these individuals, labelled as "Sans-Papiers" (Sans, French = without; Papier, French = papers), are

discriminated against and, particularly in the construction industry, exploited due to the vulnerability of their situation, being paid inadequately and deprived of workers' rights before they are eventually – or not – recognized as refugees. This excursion provided us with a profound insight into the difficult reality faced by many people and underscored the importance of human rights not only in social work.

Following this enlightening excursion, we had a guided tour of Brussels. During this tour, we were able to visit some of the city's main landmarks and learn more about the history and culture of the Belgian capital, which our guide conveyed with more jokes than sentences. After the guided tour, we had the opportunity to continue exploring Brussels on our own. Many of us took advantage of this free time to enjoy the lively atmosphere of the city, sample local specialties (= Belgian waffles and Belgian beer), and discover more historical and cultural landmarks.



Thursday: Networking, Exploring and Partying

Thursday proved to be somewhat chaotic, as it was challenging to determine the locations of the planned events. In light of these organizational challenges, we instead used the time to continue networking and explore the city of Leuven. Some participants took advantage of this unplanned leisure time to discover the city's rich historical and cultural diversity. Leuven, renowned for its impressive architecture and vibrant student atmosphere, offered many opportunities for spontaneous discoveries and engaging conversations.



On Thursday, Mohamed Ridouani, the Mayor of Leuven, delivered a speech for us in a local, grandiose hall, emphasizing the importance of Social Work and human rights. Ridouani, who has been in office since March 18, 2019, and is affiliated with the socialdemocratic SP.A party, advocates for social justice, sustainable development, and the promotion of education and culture in Leuven. His address



underscores his interest in social issues and his appreciation for the significance of Social Work and human rights. This event was primarily utilized by the faculty members for networking purposes. The gathering also provided an opportunity to enjoy complimentary beer.

In the evening, an organized party took place. This event not only provided an opportunity to celebrate in a relaxed atmosphere but also led us to the Faculty of

Social Sciences bar. Here, amidst crowded surroundings, we were able to make connections and have fun.

Conclusion

The International University Week was an exciting experience that provided us with the opportunity to delve into various topics in social work. The workshops listed here were merely my selection, so there was always entertainment potential with participants' varied choices. The workshops and lectures were mostly both informative and inspiring. Particularly impressive was the excursion to Brussels, which brought us closer to the harsh realities faced by asylum seekers and underscored the importance of human rights work.

In addition to the academic content, the IUW was also a fantastic opportunity to forge new connections and network with students and professionals from different countries. Social events, such as the organized party on Thursday evening, contributed to strengthening the sense of community and forming friendships.

References

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